

## The Problem of the Panelled Room: Part 2 (05/06/91)

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There are, of course, other things I should be focussing on. There are articles to write, people to call, interviews to arrange. Deadlines for far more lucrative commissions crowd around my typewriter with growing impatience. So why is it that I'm once again writing about Andrew Paris and the curse of the Hungry Corpse?

Because healthy, happy men do not suddenly shoot themselves in the stomach, that's why. And yet that's exactly what Andrew appeared to have done.

As any journalist will tell you, if something doesn't look right then it almost always warrants further investigation. And so it was that on Sunday 2nd June, once daylight had returned to White Gate and the shock of Andrew's accident lost some of its rawness, I naively thought I could play detective. I spent the morning finding out what I could from the others present – Andrew's niece Lisa Gardner and her husband Jared, his long-time friend and former police detective Brian Docherty, and anthropologist Charlie Woolham – in the vain hope that I might be able to explain the curious events that took place in the panelled room. Two intriguing points emerged from the morning's enquiries. First, a few minutes before the shots were fired, someone or something knocked over a wine glass in the dining room. Lisa, who had been unable to sleep, heard the smash and went down to investigate – hence the torch in her dressing gown pocket, for those of you who (like me) considered that suspicious. Second, the first bullet fired by Andrew that night lodged itself not in his stomach but in the skirting board of the panelled room; only the second bullet wounded him.

Needless to say, neither of these discoveries has helped unravel the riddle of the panelled room. An optimist might call them clues, but I was always under the impression that a clue pointed you towards a solution. The twin puzzles of the broken glass and the stray bullet, on the other hand, served only to make the whole affair infinitely more mystifying.

Again and again I found myself asking: what could have made Andrew Paris shoot himself in that room? A room, moreover, in which his brother had also shot himself – this time fatally – in almost the exact same circumstances nearly eighteen years ago? In the hopes of shedding some sanity on the situation – and working under the mistaken assumption that this case couldn't possibly get weirder – I wrote down the four competing explanations variously offered by Lisa, Jared, Brian, Charlie and myself.

The first, and perhaps most immediate explanation, is that it was a botched suicide attempt. Andrew Paris stepped into the panelled room and within the space of an hour lost both the will to live and the ability to aim a gun. He picked up his brother's old Colt Viper, which he knew was still in the desk in that room, and decided to use it to kill himself. On his first attempt, however, he somehow managed to miss his body entirely, embedding a bullet in the skirting board instead. On his second attempt he was at least able to point the gun in the right direction, but rather than aim for the head – the obvious target for such an operation – he instead chose to shoot himself in the stomach, an act not known for its swift and painless conclusion. Even if we ignore the fact that Andrew gave no indication of being tired of life – on the contrary, he seemed to be the only person enjoying the evening's dinner party by the end – the whole scenario seems too ham-fisted to credit.

The second explanation insists that it was an accident, pure and simple. Andrew Paris, having locked himself in a small room for the entire night, is struck not by depression but boredom. Out of idle curiosity he took his brother's pistol out of the desk, perhaps unaware that it was still loaded. (This, at least, is in character: the man has an inquisitive, fidgeting mind, and would frequently break off conversations to show people one of the many curios packed into his home.) However, after the pistol accidentally fired a bullet into the skirting board, we then have to believe that Andrew, who could hardly be described as dim-witted, not only proceeded to continue fiddling with the loaded gun, but did so with the muzzle now pointing towards him. Once again it stretches credulity.

Both of these theories, by the way, also fail to offer any insight into the state the panelled room was in when we found Andrew. It was, you may recall, a complete mess: the heavy, solid-wood desk had been pushed across the study until it was barring the door. Its drawers had been opened and its papers and folders flung across the room. A number of books had likewise been pulled from their bookcases and thrown to the floor. The leather armchair had been knocked onto its side. Assuming (unless we accept theory number four, below) that no-one but Andrew was in that room until Lisa and I broke in through the window, then we have to swallow the unpleasant conclusion that it was Andrew himself who created this unholy mess. And whatever possessed him to do it doesn't seem to me to be in line with suicide or boredom. Indeed, my first thought when I clambered through that window was that it looked like the actions of a madman.

Which brings me to the third explanation, as endorsed by Lisa and Jared: the mask of the Hungry Corpse, which was in the panelled room with Andrew the whole time, really is evil, and really is capable of killing people with its dark voodoo powers. Quite how it goes about doing this, however, seems a little unclear. By some accounts it drives its victim mad with terror until they try, like Andrew, to put themselves out of their own misery. Alternatively, the Hungry Corpse is granted the power of telekinesis and accused of dismembering the room and shooting Andrew itself. In a way the mechanics don't matter, because, while they nicely explain the state of the room, they all require us to accept the existence of magic. And as friable as reality looks right now, this is something I'm not yet prepared to accept. Especially as Andrew was very clear, just hours before he sealed himself up in that panelled tomb, that the sinister legends attached to the mask were nothing more than fiction – his brother's fiction, to be precise, as John Paris was apparently in the habit of larding his books with myths and monsters in order to help them slip off the shelves faster. This confession was supported by Dr Charlie Woolham, an expert on masks and folklore, who could find no mention of any 'curse of the Hungry Corpse' outside of John Paris' 1968 book *Adventures in the Southern Hemisphere*.

And so we arrive, by process of elimination, at the fourth and final explanation: that Andrew Paris *didn't* shoot himself that night, but was instead the victim of an attempted murder. As a theory, a struggle with an armed assailant could perhaps explain the dishevelled state of the room – with the desk across the door possibly being Andrew's initial attempt to block the intruder – and doesn't require any violent shift in Andrew's state of mind. It does, however, suffer from just as fatal a flaw as any of the other theories: namely, the rather obvious fact that Andrew was in a hermetically sealed room when the shots were fired. So while this explanation doesn't ask us to believe in cursed masks, it does need us to accept the

existence of a culprit who is clever enough to enter a locked room, shoot a man and then vanish all without leaving so much as a footprint – which, granted, is as feeble as saying it was magic. And then there are other, more mundane negations to consider. How is it that this master assassin, having successfully materialised in the panelled room, was unable to kill Andrew? Why stop after firing just two bullets? If they meant it to look like suicide, why not leave a note? And where was the motive? Andrew Paris may have had a certain genius for offending his detractors, but none of his family and acquaintances that I’ve spoken to believe there was anyone out there who hated him so much that they wanted him dead.

Back at my flat I weighed up these thoughts with increasing desperation. If it was suicide, it made no sense; if it was murder, it was physically impossible. There had to be another explanation for what happened that night – one that didn’t require me to believe in cursed masks or a person who can walk through walls. I dredged through my notes and letters in the hope that one of them might yield something. Hours dragged by. Quarts of tea were consumed. Nothing. Drained by frustration and fatigue, I was just about ready to move on with my life and consign the fate of Andrew Paris to the bin of history’s insoluble mysteries, along with Lord Lucan, the Bermuda Triangle and the plot of *Twin Peaks*. And then the phone rang.

“Hello?” asked the uncertain voice on the other end, as if I had called them.

“Hello? This is Karen Yu.”

“Yes.” It was man’s voice.

“Who is this?”

“Oh, sorry – it’s Charlie, Charlie Woolham. The anthropologist at Andrew Paris’ – ah – accident. We met?”

“Right,” I replied, relaxing. “Of course. I’m not likely to forget that night in a hurry. Although I can’t say I was expecting to hear from you. Everything OK? Don’t tell me something else has happened?”

“Oh, God no,” answered Charlie, panicking at the very thought. “Well, not that I know of. I just – well, I thought you might be interested.”

“In what?” Was he always this roundabout?

“I have an idea. About what happened to Andrew Paris in that room.”

My attention, which had just begun to wander, snapped back to the phone. I noticed I was no longer slouching. “Go on.”

“OK, but bear with me,” warned Charlie. A slight pause. “What if the mask really is responsible?”

“Oh, Charlie,” I lamented, sinking back into my chair. “Not you too? I thought you were one of the sane ones.”

“No, no,” he spluttered. “No magic, I promise.”

I considered for a moment. “OK then. But if you so much as mention negative energy I’m hanging up.”

I heard Charlie take a breath before beginning. “Fair enough. Well, I – ah – I was thinking of what you said about the state of the room Andrew Paris was in – how none of it made any sense. The desk, the chair, the extra bullet, you know. But then I thought: maybe that’s the point? Maybe it’s not supposed to make any sense? What if he really did lose his

mind last night?" My silence was unimpressed. "Now, I'm not saying the mask is cursed or anything like that. But people don't need curses to go mad. They do it all the time."

"And you're telling me that the sight of that mask was enough to tip Andrew Paris into insanity?"

"Not the sight. The smell."

At first I thought I must have misheard him. "Sorry, did you say the smell? Charlie, you're losing me."

"But didn't you say the room smelled funny that night? A sort of sharp, unpleasant odour?" That at least was true, I conceded; I noticed it as soon as I clambered in through the window. "Well, I've been doing some research on ceremonial masks and their construction. And it turns out a number of tribes coated their masks in toxic substances, either intentionally or otherwise. Remember what I was saying about the *maksishi* masks?"

"No."

"It used to be said that anyone who touched them or even went near them would become sick. Aches, pains, fever, even hallucinations and manic episodes. Now, this was all considered superstition by anthropologists—" from the other end I could hear the rummaging and rustling of papers "—until just a few years ago, when it was discovered that the wood these masks were made from contained a powerful neuroactive mycotoxin – a fungal toxin, that is – which, if touched or inhaled, could trigger intense fever and hallucinations. The symptoms of the toxin aligned perfectly with the symptoms of touching the mask. Hence the legend that they were cursed."

I was intrigued. "Go on."

"Now, what if Andrew's mask also had some toxic substance on it? Exposure to that toxin might have given Andrew hallucinations and made him act like he did."

"Hold on, Charlie. All of us were in close proximity to that mask at some point or another on Saturday night. Andrew's lived with it for decades. If it really were toxic then how come none of us have been affected?"

"But Andrew *lit a fire* on Saturday night. Remember? Maybe the heat of the fire somehow activated whatever toxins were on the mask?" Again the sound of scuffling paper filled the line. "I looked into this too, and it turns out that a number of fungal spores are activated by heat. So they can lie dormant for weeks, months – years even – only to spring to life when there's an increase in temperature."

The idea was starting to make a lot sense. "And those toxic spores were what made him act strangely. A powerful enough hallucinogen could explain the state of the room that night." Maybe I would call this piece *The Masked Assassin*? "And by the time I'd entered the room the window had been opened, clearing the air."

"Right," chimed Charlie enthusiastically. "Now, it's just a hypothesis, of course—"

"But we can test it out, surely?"

"How do you mean?" Uncertainty had crept back into his voice.

"Well, if we can get hold of the mask you can send it to the lab for testing."

Another pause. "The lab?"

"Yeah. You're a scientist, surely you know someone in a lab?"

"Well—"

“Charlie, when are you free? Tomorrow?” Something about having to arrange lectures, but I wasn’t really listening. “Let’s head back to White Gate tomorrow and test this out. I’ll pick you up on the way. Say midday? Where is it you work?”

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After more than a few wrong turns and dead ends I eventually found the small office of Dr Charles Woolham deep in the brutalist rabbit warren that is the Stratford University Social Science department. With its bedlam of papers, books and journals, his workspace was as slapdash as his dress sense (today’s wardrobe: mustard yellow shirt with matching mustard stain, stubby blue tie knotted in a manner unknown to science, together with a suit that was simultaneously too tight and too baggy). Charlie looked up from his desktop computer in muffled surprise, and I had the sneaking suspicion that he had forgotten our plan.

“Ready to put your theory to the test, Dr Woolham?”

Charlie looked at me slightly dumbfounded. “Right, yes. We’re going now? Right.” Once again he seemed blindsided by the obvious.

“Well, yeah,” I replied, a little dumbfounded myself. “What did you think we’d be doing?” I checked my watch. “And we’d better get a move on, because that definitely wasn’t my name painted on the space I parked in.”

“Right, yes. Just – ah – just let me get my keys,” he said, his large hands flapping like fish across his paper-strewn desk as he searched.

I picked up a tea-stained magazine holder off the floor. “You know, this might be the first office I’ve been to where the filing system actually adds to the chaos.”

“Ah, yes – sorry about the mess,” came the embarrassed reply.

“There’s a sandwich in your out-tray.”

“That’s supposed to be there.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

Charlie eventually found his keys (in his pocket, not on his desk) and we were able to leave. My car had once again escaped being clamped or towed and in little over an hour we had crawled out of London and onto the M40. “So,” I opened, glancing at my passenger, “tell me about yourself, Charlie.”

From the corner of my vision I could see him eyeing me doubtfully. “This isn’t another interrogation, is it?”

“For the last time, it was an interview,” I huffed. “And no. Do you see a Dictaphone here?” I was banking on him not checking my backpack. “I’m just curious about you, that’s all. You seemed desperate to forget the whole affair on Sunday morning, and yet two days later you call me with a possible solution.” I considered my words. “I suppose I didn’t expect that from you.”

Charlie fidgeted with his seat. “Well, I like to think I’m a scientist, of sorts. I’m an ologist, at the very least. How do you push this seat back? So before I accept any conclusion, I need to see the evidence. And I’m yet to see any evidence that Andrew was attacked by some magical force.”

“I’m glad it’s not just me, then.”

“So I tried to think what logical explanations there could be for someone acting out of character. And I just so happened to remember the paper by Carlson and Brown about the traces of mycotoxins in *maksishi* masks. Is this seat meant to do this?”

“And how confident are you that your theory will work?”

“Well, remember it’s a hypothesis, not a theory,” he replied, transforming for a second into Dr Woolham, Lecturer in Anthropology. “Which means it’s nothing more than an idea–”

“That’s still more than anyone else has right now.”

Charlie shifted uncomfortably. “But it could be demolished if we find a single piece of contradictory evidence.” He looked across at me. “Don’t get your hopes up, is what I’m trying to say. Also, I think I’ve broken your seat. Sorry.”

I glanced again at the anthropologist. “I suppose it fits,” I pondered aloud.

“What fits?” queried Charlie suspiciously.

“That you should be the one to solve the case. You know, of all the people caught up in the story.” I motioned towards him in between gear changes. “The messy hair, the haphazard dress sense, the arcane knowledge: you’re the eccentric amateur every mystery needs.”

“Haphazard – ?”

“Lisa and Jared are out of the question, of course. They probably think Aum Shinrikyo is a yoga retreat. And Brian’s technically the fuzz, so he’s surely here just to bag clues and look bewildered.”

A note of humour warmed Charlie’s voice. “And what about you?”

I gave a theatrical sigh. “I’m your Boswell, Dr Woolham. Your Watson. I’ll follow you around as you make your deductions, take notes and write up your brilliant solution.” I throw him a look. “So don’t let me down.”

“You’re the one getting excited here,” he protested.

Eventually the greys and browns gave way to yellows and greens as we burrowed into the bucolic countryside. Villages with misshapen houses and antediluvian names dotted the route like toadstools. Brightwell Baldwin. Christmas Common. Berrick Salome. I had never been enamoured with the myth of Middle England – after all, it had never been enamoured with me – but I had to admit it could be rather pretty part of the world when it wanted to. Especially on a summer’s day like that today, when the hedgerows seemed to burst with green exuberance and thick sunlight streamed in through the open windows. A bird of prey glided high overhead. Somewhere an ice cream van tinkled. Even Cher’s retrograde shoopshooing over the radio couldn’t spoil the afternoon.

A series of ever smaller and bumpier roads brought us once again to the imposing drive of White Gate. In the summer sunlight the home of Andrew Paris was repeating its trick of looking like an innocent building. But I was no longer fooled.

“I’m beginning to make a habit of this,” I muttered as Charlie and I climbed out of my car and crunched across the gravel towards the imposing front door.

“So,” asked Charlie anxiously, “what’s the plan?”

“The plan?” I parroted as I thumped the brass knocker. “I hadn’t got that far. I suppose we just ask them if we can take the mask? Andrew did promise you it, after all.”

Panic detonated in his baby blue eyes. “What? You don’t have a plan?”

No response from inside the house. I knocked again, louder. “Are you always this scared, Charlie? We’re entering renovated vicarage, not the Forbidden City.” Still no response from within. “Perhaps they’re in the garden,” I suggested, and ambled off round to the back of the house.

“You’re just going to walk into their garden?” he flapped, as if I’d just announced my intention of skipping across a minefield. “What if they’re in?”

“Isn’t that what we want?” I replied. “Besides, Lisa seems to think we’re best friends. She’ll welcome us with open arms.”

And that’s exactly what she did, breaking off her outdoor tai chi to give me and Charlie another scented, jewelled embrace. “What brings you back here?” she asked. The tone was enthusiastic, but something like apprehension clouded her face. “Has something happened to Uncle Andrew?”

“Oh no,” I reassured her, letting her hands linger on my shoulders. “I know as much as you there. As it happens, Charlie and I just wanted to see how you and Jared were coping.” Was she buying it? I steeled myself. “And I thought I’d take you up on that offer of a yoga session.”

Pride and delight blossomed in Lisa’s eyes. “I knew you would,” she divined, beaming at me. “I knew we shared a connection, Karen! And is Dr Woolham joining us too?”

I was very, very tempted to say yes, but as I glanced over at pale, frightened face a chord of pity prevented me. “Actually, Charlie was hoping to catch up with Jared – you know, in a more relaxed setting than Saturday night.” I scanned the otherwise empty garden. “Where *is* Jared?”

“Oh, he’s packing our things up,” came the breezy answer.

“You’re leaving?”

Lisa looked a little perplexed at the question. “Of course, Karen. You really thought we’d stay in this place after what happened? With that horrible mask still there? There’s just too much bad energy.” She regarded the house with displeasure, and for once I understood what she meant. “We’re going to stay with friends in London for the rest of our trip.”

“I suppose that makes sense. You know, speaking of that mask–” I peered over my shoulder at Charlie, still loitering nervously a few feet away from us “–Charlie was thinking he would take up your uncle’s offer of borrowing it. For research. Anthropology, et cetera. What do you say?”

Lisa scrunched her face up. “I don’t know, Karen. Did Andrew say that?” She looked at the pair of us. “As much as I hate the thing, I think it’s best if we leave it alone for the time being. It’s not something we want to be messing around with, right? You understand.” We might need a new plan, I cogitated. “More importantly,” continued Lisa with a renewed smile, “let’s get started on that yoga you were so keen on, Karen.” She cast her beam over Charlie. “Dr Woolham, would you be so kind as to help Jared with the packing? He should be in the bedroom. Bless you.” Charlie nodded obediently and drifted over to the house in a slightly dazed fashion. Lisa turned back to me and eyed my jeans and checked shirt with kindly reproach. “You could have picked more appropriate clothes, Karen. But never mind.”

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My clothes were not merely inappropriate, it turned out, they were positively sadistic. My jeans turned to sandpaper and my shirt clung like a vacuum wrap. Over the next thirty minutes pain coursed through body parts I didn't even know I had; I discovered several new muscles, ligaments, tendons and perhaps even organs in this way. After fifteen minutes I was openly willing the Hungry Corpse to hurl a harpoon through my midriff and put me out of my misery.

"How do you feel?" grinned the yogi when the ordeal was finally over, not a drop of sweat on her tanned face.

Were I still able to move my arms I could have thumped her. "A little like Stretch Armstrong," I managed to pant. "How is it that someone so small should be so inflexible?"

Lisa returned my incarnadine glare with a reproving smile. "Just give your body a few minutes to relax into it and you'll be fine," she urged with an indulgent tut. "How about I make us some tea? That should help." Scooping up the warped remains of my body, I followed Lisa back to the house, my newly elasticated limbs launching me in unpredictable directions as they flailed out before me.

Lisa had just set down a cup of tea (camomile, I discovered with disappointment) on the patio table when I heard Charlie and Jared descend the stairs. They appeared in the kitchen, each with a large suitcase. "Lisa's really been putting you through the paces, hey, Karen?" grinned Jared as he caught sight of me, his charm curdling into gall before my eyes. I spared him a response. Still smiling, he gazed out across the expansive garden, its overgrown trees and hedges resplendent in the dappled sunlight of a warm June afternoon. "Beautiful day today. I was saying to Charlie, almost seems like a shame to leave." I caught the tail-end of a glare from Lisa. "But, of course, no sense in staying," he added hastily. "Lisa, which bag did you want to put your books in? There's still some stuff upstairs to sort."

I waited until they were climbing the stairs before scuttling over to Charlie. "OK, plan B," I explained furtively, pushing him back into the kitchen, "let's just get the mask and get out of here. Before she suggests we take a colon cleanse together."

Charlie looked scandalised. "Are we breaking and entering now?" he hissed, eyes darting towards the hallway and the stairs. "What is this, the Gardner Museum heist?"

"Oh, grow up. It wouldn't even be the first time I've broken into this house this week." I listened to the footsteps creak along the corridor above us. "Right. Let's go." We scampered across the hallway, Charlie displaying a lack of stealth that was almost miraculous, and paused outside the panelled room. The door was ajar; no sound came from inside. "It's empty. Come on." I pushed the door open and we crept in. There, staring right at us, stood Brian Docherty.

"What's empty?" he asked pleasantly, scratching his bald head.

"Brian," I uttered blankly. Was there a plan C? "We – I thought this room was empty," I answered. "Have you been here the whole time?"

Brian checked his watch. "About an hour or so, I'd say. The front door was open. Have either of you seen Lisa?"

"Yeah, she's – around," I replied vacantly, peering around the room. Someone had attempted to tidy up the mess from Saturday night: the desk and chair were back in their



proper place, and the books and letters that had littered the floor were piled up next to John's old typewriter. A stuffed plastic bag sat next to them on the desk. "Brian, what are you doing here?"

"Losing my mind, I think," he chuckled. "And you two?"

I let out a breath. What the hell. "We're trying to work out what happened to Andrew."

Brian's expression remained amicable. "That makes three of us." He regarded the pair of us curiously. "But why the hugger-mugger?"

From the corner of my eye I could see the Hungry Corpse grimacing at us. "We're trying to get hold of the mask," I admitted after a pause. "And Lisa isn't too keen on that. But Charlie has a theory—"

"Hypothesis," he corrected.

"A *hypothesis* that Andrew may have been poisoned by the mask."

Brian looked at us as if I'd just announced that Charlie could fly. Nevertheless, he listened without interrupting as Charlie once again expounded his idea. I couldn't tell if the mute reception was one of confusion or interest or just politeness. Perhaps all three.

Once Charlie had finished Brian turned to observe the Hungry Corpse, one hand propping up his chin. "So you reckon he shot himself?" he eventually asked, still facing the mask.

Charlie nodded. "Well, yes. I mean, he must have?"

Brian gave another chuckle, only this time there was no humour. "That's a fine theory, Dr William—"

"Woolham."

"But I'm afraid the evidence doesn't support it." He turned back to face us. "As far as I'm concerned you can take that mask, but I don't think you're going to find much."

I searched his furrowed face. Something was troubling him. "What is it you're not telling us, Brian?"

The old detective deflated with a helpless shrug. "Remember what I said Saturday night about evidence?" he asked. "Well there's bugger all here. There are no discernible footprints in the room, no fingerprints on the gun. No photos. No recordings." He looked towards the desk with a scowl. "And the only piece of evidence I've been able to find here makes absolutely no sense." He shook his head. "The one thing I can touch I can't trust. I've never known anything like it."

"Wait, what are you saying?" I questioned, pulse quickening. "You've found something?"

"Oh yes," replied Brian bitterly. "But I'm afraid it doesn't help us one bit. In fact, it makes the whole thing much worse."

"Well?"

"I heard back from the boys at the station this morning. By the way," he added, pointing briefly to the splintered hole near the fireplace, "the bullet in the skirting board definitely came from the Colt. But I think we already knew that. It's the other thing I can't get my head around." Brian plodded over to the desk and fished out Andrew's blood-stained cardigan from the plastic bag. "Is this the cardigan you took off Andrew the night you found

him?" I nodded, trying not to remember too clearly. "Well, whenever a gun is fired," continued Brian, "the blast sends out a cloud of residue – chemicals from the bullet. In particular we're looking for lead, barium and antimony. And this cloud will settle on whatever happens to me nearby – typically the shooter's hands, the victim's clothes, and maybe other things within a few feet of the gunshot. Furniture, say. And by studying how these chemicals have settled on various surfaces we're able to work out a fair bit about how and where the gun was fired. With me?" Brian took a breath. "So, if Andrew shot himself in the stomach then I'd expect to find a decent amount of residue on his cardigan, even after a few days, and even with half of it covered in blood. That's a very close-range shot, in a sealed room with no strong air currents. This cardigan should be covered in it." I wondered joylessly where this was going. "And?"

Brian looked at me and Charlie. His clear grey eyes appeared, for the first time, utterly lost. "There's nothing," he eventually answered. "Not a single speck of residue. Nothing but dust and threads. This was definitely the cardigan?" I nodded again. Brian shook his head again. "Well, I can't believe I'm saying this. But there's no other conclusion we can draw: Andrew Paris could *not* have fired that shot the other night. It would have been impossible for him to do so and not get at least some residue on himself. You can take that as absolute, scientific fact."

The dizziness from Saturday night had begun to swirl around my head again. "No," I insisted. "That can't be right. This room was locked from the inside that night. The door and the windows. Right, Charlie?"

"Right," echoed Charlie, as if in a haze.

"And apart from Andrew this room was empty when we found it on Friday night," I persisted, looking around the panelled room with increasing alarm. "There's no way anyone could have got in, shot him, and then escaped again. It's impossible. It's—" I paused and caught my breath. The dizziness, I noticed, was subsiding in the wake of a new emotion: irritation. Titanic, volcanic irritation. I was suddenly reminded of my fifth birthday, when my sister Helen put on a magic show for me. I was so infuriated when she wouldn't tell me how the cup and ball trick worked I threw my Beach Time Sindy doll at her. Standing in the panelled room I recognised that same primal anger rising up in me again. Someone had just pulled off an incredible trick, and they weren't telling me how it was done. Mentally, I reached for my Sindy doll.

"Andrew definitely didn't fire that gun?" I confirmed.

"No. Absolutely not. At least, not the shot that hit him. He *might* have fired the other bullet, if he held the gun far enough away from him, but I can't say for certain."

"And the door and windows were definitely closed?"

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

I drifted over to the sheaf of papers piled on the desk and began idly picking through them. Typewritten manuscripts, mostly, along with a few pencilled notes in a looping, grandiose hand that could only have been John's. "Did anyone ever check for residue after John was shot?"

Brian paused for a moment. “No. We didn’t. But you’ve got to understand,” he appealed, “it seemed like such a clear case of suicide. I had no idea anything like that would happen again.”

A yellowed letter addressed to Evelyn Paris, Santa Barbara, California caught my eye. Lisa’s mother, I think? Why was it never sent? “Does Lisa know about this – about the residue?” I asked, slipping the letter into my back pocket.

Brian’s rumpled face looked pained. “No. I was hoping I’d bump into her. Although I’m not sure it’s going to help her state of mind.”

“Did someone say my name?” called Lisa, jangling into the room. Her smile faded when she saw the three of us. “Brian? I didn’t know you were here. You – you’re all in here,” she observed, growing wary. “What’s going on?”

Brian poked the shag rug with the tip of his scuffed shoe. I couldn’t help noticing the bloodstain on the rug. “Lisa,” he sighed, “I – I have to tell you something. About Andrew.” Lisa’s long frame stiffened. A breeze from the broken pane animated the waves of her blonde hair. “It looks like he didn’t shoot himself,” resumed Brian. “I had some old colleagues look the cardigan he was wearing and, well, it shows without a doubt that he couldn’t have been holding that gun when it fired.”

Lisa’s hazel eyes darted to the Hungry Corpse. “I warned him,” she muttered. “Didn’t I warn him?” She glanced around the room as if she had only just realised where she was. “We shouldn’t be in here. We – please, it’s not safe. Where’s the key for this room?” she added, rushing back into the hallway.

Brian nodded with resignation and shuffled out, offering me another shrug as he did so. I sidled up to Charlie. “These are my car keys. Get that mask, head out through the front door and put it in the boot, before she locks this room. Do it, “ I urged, cutting off another nascent protest from Britain’s most nervous man, “or you don’t get a lift home.”

Brian attempted a laugh as I joined him in the hallway. “You know, maybe Lisa was right after all. Maybe it was that jungle mask. Moving things with its mind, or however it goes.” I peered into the panelled room, where Charlie was lifting the shrieking face of the Hungry Corpse off the wall with cumbersome delicacy. For a second I thought I could see a flash of victory in its cloudy eyes.