

The Harrowed Garden

Sample and Synopsis

Chapter 1

The last thing I remember my sister saying was that man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.

We were travelling north on our summer holiday. It was August. The sun was high in the blue sky, with only a few wisps of cloud. It was a nice change; it had rained all the previous week as we had prepared to drive from Glasgow to Inverness. Now we were heading up the side of Loch Lomond, my Dad singing along to the Eighties classics on the stereo.

I was gazing out over the fish scale water while Jo was practising her manifesto on me for when she got back to primary school. Most girls want to grow up to be a princess. Jo wanted to be the leader of the revolution.

The car swerved. We were tossed to one side and then back again.

My Dad swore, excusing his erratic driving.

Mum turned around in her seat and looked at us. "Don't listen to your father's language," she said. "Everything is fine, nothing to worry about."

"Sorry," Dad said.

Until then I hadn't even considered anything to be wrong. Jo continued her recital from the top.

Again Dad swerved to avoid something. This time we hit something soft. Dad swore again. Mum was too shocked to scold him. We came to a sudden halt but our seat belts held us tight.

Loosening my belt, I sat up to look over Dad's shoulder. A large mass of earth flowed over the road as though someone had spilt a giant chocolate milkshake. It started to push the car toward the loch. The mud rose up the passenger side and our sideways movement increased as the cliff edge approached. Only the crash barrier stood in the way of a long plummet down.

Inside the car, Mum was trying to keep us calm, while Dad tried to call the police. It seemed fun to me, and Jo carried on reciting her Communist mantra, a socialist ward against evil.

The car was soon wedged against the barrier and I took off my seatbelt so that I could kneel on the back seat and get a better look. Behind us, several other cars were also trapped.

Metal complained in a high-pitched squeal as the pressure of the earth squeezed our car into the barrier. Rocks, plants and mud formed a wall along the passenger side of the car. I could see a worm wiggling behind my sister's head and I was about to bring this to her

attention when the windows behind her and Mum shattered. Wet earth flooded into the car covering us in thick, sticky mud. The blue sky turned brown.

I struggled to breathe, entombed in the earth. I heard the metal protest weaken and felt a sickening tumble in my stomach as the car was finally pushed over the edge.

I awoke, alone, in the glare of a sterile room in a hospital. My left leg and arm were broken and plastered. Somehow, I was still alive.

A doctor came to check on me after a few hours of fussing nurses.

"How are you?" he said.

I wasn't convinced he cared. "I'm okay. How did I get here?"

"You were found on the edge of a mudslide at the foot of a cliff. I guess you must have fallen out of the car at some point," said the doctor.

The theory was that I had been carried along, an errant boulder in a brown glacier, with the other flotsam, before being spewed out, a broken whale on a beach. In what must be a first, not wearing my seatbelt in a car saved my life.

"You're lucky," the doctor said. "I'm afraid your family didn't make it."

I discovered that my parents and my sister drowned, if you can drown in mud and stones. Either that or they were crushed to a pulp within the fist of nature. I felt strangely calm about it. The medication helped. The newspaper pictures, that I dug up some time later, showed that the car had been completely crushed, the husk from a scrap-heap recycling machine.

As the weeks went by and I passed the time playing games with other kids in the ward a suspicion began to creep up on me. No one had come to see me. Not one relative. Had they forgotten about me? Had I meant so little to them? As I had gotten older the presents and cards had dried up.

“What about Uncle James?” I asked the nurse. “He lives in Sunderland.” She just shook her head and gave me a flat smile. I was getting used to this look.

I tried to remember someone, anyone, that I had some vague recollection of meeting, perhaps at a wedding. There was probably a distant cousin out there somewhere, but my immediate family had all died.

This was presenting a bigger problem than I realised. Behind the scenes, nurses and doctors struggled to decide what to do with me. So long as I remained in the hospital with my limbs wrapped in plaster the decision could be delayed.

A committee of Glasgow City Council, that usually decided the fate of children who had committed crimes, resolved the matter.

“I just want to go home,” I said to the committee, crowded into a beige conference room, all of whom had perfected that hollow smile. I had grown to recognise the early signs even before it dawned, a distant look in the eye, an attempt to convey humanity while trying not to get the shit that comes with it on your shoe.

“We can’t let you do that, you’re too young,” said a grey woman, called Edith. “You need a guardian to look after your concerns, until we can find a living relative of yours.” *Living* was said in such a way as to imply I had personally gone out of my way to kill all my known family and cause this inconvenience to myself, and thus the committee, who would therefore find a suitable means of redressing this slight. I was guilty of survival and for this I was to be punished. “A foster family will be found and your family home and assets will be managed on your behalf by the Council,” Edith said.

I was left behind in this awful world. My family had gone on to a better place. Why was I being punished? What had I done to deserve this? I wanted to scream, but I swallowed it down and my anger sat in my belly, black and warm.

Chapter 2

My first foster home was not as bad as I had expected. Looking back I did the Montgomery family a severe disservice; they genuinely tried to care for me. However, I didn't wish to be cared for.

"This is Fiona and Alan," said Edith.

They were wholesome people, slightly overweight, with matching Aran sweaters and warm smiles. I think they even had similar styled blonde hair.

Fiona and Alan lived in a large townhouse in the West End, just near the Botanic Gardens. There was a girl, Jeanette, who they were also fostering and their own kids, twins, Barbara and Robert. We were all close in age, Jeanette was the eldest at 14, Barbara and Robert were 13, like me.

Jeanette had been taken away from her junkie mother, who had been living in a squat in Possil with her boyfriend. One of them anyway. When the boyfriend managed to kill himself by falling off the roof and becoming impaled on some fence railings, the ambulance, police and social services all showed up, and Jeanette was taken away. So she said.

I thought she spoke rather too well, and knew a little too much, to have spent as long out of school as she claimed. But I liked her. She talked to me like I was a human being, and I think she was the first girl I fancied, so I probably gave her the benefit of the doubt. We used to have a laugh together, two bedraggled cats rescued from the bag in the canal, usually at the twin's expense.

Barbara and Robert were a little freaky. Not only were they identical, but they were some strange morphed amalgamation of their parents. This left the impression of two parents with two miniature replicas. Like their parents, they were as good as gold, always

did the right thing and looked out for other people. You know – mowed lawns and helped grannies with their shopping. This wholesomeness was the problem. The family weren't god-botherers. They just had a simple community ideal at heart. Perhaps some of it rubbed off on me, but not so you'd notice it at the time.

Jeanette and I couldn't help but take the piss. We'd go from feigning injury, in order to get the twins to do our share of work on the weekly rota, to mercilessly teasing them for their good manners and proper ways. Of course there was a rota. Alan organised it for months at a time, full of equal shares of work-units.

I still don't understand how I slipped so fast from being such a well-behaved child, not too different to the twins, to their co-tormentor. Maybe the black bile in the bottom of my stomach leaked out into my brain, tainting me. Maybe I was always like this and just needed the opportunity for my true nature to reveal itself. After all, they weren't my real parents.

It got to the point where I just wanted to trash my room as no more than an antidote to the sheer banal niceness of living in the Montgomery household. I wanted someone to shout at me for being badly behaved. I didn't want to be reasoned with. I wanted something to help externalise the pent up anger and injustice. Instead, I was smothered with kindness.

So Jeanette and I formed an escape committee.

The first time was quite easy. No one was expecting it. And why should they? For all my internal rebellion, on the surface I had been cooperative, if a little cruel sometimes. As a consequence there were no barriers, locked doors or nightly checks I was still in bed. I was trusted.

The night was late November. It was starting to get cooler, but the nip in the air that used to start almost on the first of October hadn't shown itself yet. Nevertheless, I was

wrapped up warm. Jeanette seemed to think her fake snakeskin cowboy boots, fishnet tights, and a miniskirt were a good idea.

“What you wearing that for?”

“What are you? My Dad?” Jeanette said.

“I just don’t think that’s the most practical thing you could wear.”

“I don’t have time to go back and get changed now,” she said.

“Okay. Let’s go then.”

It was midnight. Being Wednesday, a school night, everyone was tucked up in bed. To be sure, we had stayed up late the night before and not heard anyone so much as murmur.

The backdoor was locked, but the key stuck out of the lock. It was begging us to turn it. I hesitated too long.

“Scared?” Jeanette said.

“No.”

“Then unlock the door. Let’s go.”

I reached out and turned the key. I grasped the handle and bent it down. I pulled the door open. The cold night air hit us.

“Jesus,” Jeanette said. “It’s cold out there.”

“Told you,” I said.

“I’ll be alright,” she said. “We going or not?”

I stepped over the threshold, a small step for mankind and a giant leap for a boy.

Jeanette swung the door shut and locked it in one swift movement. I spun round to see her, through the window, stifling her giggles. I caught a glimpse of my cracked face reflected in the glass. Triumph turned to the deep disappointment of betrayal.

“Open the door,” I said.

“You wanted to run away. You have now. Go on. It’s either that or wake the whole house.”

She didn’t actually expect me to run. I decided to turn the tables on her. Adjusting the small backpack slung over my shoulder, I walked off into the night.

Climbing over the larch-lap fence at the bottom of the garden, I thought I saw Jeanette open the kitchen door. Then I was gone.

It was a long walk to the Southside from the West End. Down Byres Road it was busy with people coming out of pubs. I drifted along Dumbarton Road towards the Kelvin Hall. No one noticed a thirteen year old out on the streets. No sirens rang out and no police cars glided by on patrol.

I was beginning to feel the relief of freedom. I was my own man again, go where I wanted to, do what I pleased. Each cold breath was a victory.

Walking down along the River Kelvin, I followed it to the Clyde, passing under the railway and finding the Expressway blocking my progress. A car whipped past me, barely slowing for the roundabout. For a little thrill I decided to just run across the road.

Putting my backpack tight across both shoulders, I readied myself to run. I lowered myself, not quite into a sprinter’s start, but ready to cut through the wind. A large truck rumbled by and I caught the slipstream. As the rush of air filled the gap I leapt forward, careering through to the roundabout and clambering up its short steep slope. One rush done, another ahead, giddy on adrenalin, I staggered to the other side of the roundabout. I could see a large lorry coming towards me, and readied myself again. The cab rushed past, the driver turning to see me standing, king of my hill. The trailer swung behind; again the air

sucked at me and pulled me in. I leapt down the incline and onto the road. A horn shattered me awake from my trance and the car, obscured by the trailer, squealed and swerved.

I dashed out of the way, and made it to the other side. The car took my position as king of the roundabout. Without looking back, I ran towards the towering Ziggurats that lined the waterfront.

My legs nearly gave out as the shock hit me, my mouth, already tasting metallic, was dry and I almost threw up my dinner. Cold sweat stuck my t-shirt to my back. I slung down and cowered in a doorway. Ten minutes later, I regained my composure. Each cold breath was a victory.

I crossed over the footbridge, by the SECC, to the BBC building. I had lost track of time. My phone was switched off in case someone called, or worse, tracked me down. It was, despite my exertion, starting to get cold, and I was less certain of how to get home from here.

Along the waterfront I passed large studios, gleaming glass offices, and more buildings that would have been at home in fabled Babylon. I found myself at a cinema and leisure complex, hulking beneath the Kingston Bridge.

Coming over the river had proved fairly easy, but I had no idea where to go. I had hung the keys to my family home around my neck, a talisman against further misfortune. I took them out and held the keys in the flat of my hand. I hoped they would act like a compass and lead me in the right direction. I felt a tug towards the southwest, and chose to follow this instinct, tucking the keys, now cold, back beside my skin.

I wandered round a small industrial estate on Paisley Road West and under another part of the motorway, finally trudging up Shields Road, past the Underground. I found my way to Pollokshields and began to recognise the wide streets and the large detached

sandstone houses on the right hand side of the road. The houses on the left appeared to be a warren of tenements, typical of most of Glasgow. I was pretty sure I lived round here, somewhere.

At the top of Shields Road, once leafy trees were beginning to look threadbare, their precious gold cast to the floor, forming dunes for me to trudge through with satisfaction.

It seemed to me, lost and yet so close to home, that I had forgotten where I had lived, only a few months before. Like the past had gone away already, my family faded from sight and so from mind. I began to get angry with myself; I was determined not to forget them. But I didn't even have a photograph or piece of video to remember them with. Everything was locked up in my home. And now even that seemed elusive and out of reach.

Deep within the anger a small sliver of recollection rose up, and I knew I had to turn right, and then, like some urban fairy tale, there would be a castle with minarets, and I lived near there. And sure enough, after another twenty minutes or so along the winding road, crossing at traffic lights, I finally saw the red sandstone castle, a hotel. And a few feet up the hill was the red sandstone home in which I lived, the upper half of a much larger building.

I traversed the gravel driveway with caution; crunching too loudly might wake the neighbours. The Naughties were an elderly couple, swimming around even in half of one of these buildings, but they also seemed incredibly alert to any infraction me or my sister could make of the rules of who owned what in the garden.

The staircase on the side of the house was one last barrier to climb. I had been walking for hours and now, as I slowed down, my legs felt weak and cold. Weary, I climbed the stairs, taking them one at a time, as old as the Naughties.

I removed my keys once more from beneath the warm layers and fumbled them into the locks, first the Yale, then the Chubb. The door swung open and I knew, like a raider of

tombs, I had moments to leap inside and shut down the traps that lay in wait. Sliding into the hall, I opened the cupboard and reaching up I stabbed out the code, just as the beeps reached a high pitch of panic. The alarm went back to sleep and I paused for a few minutes, fearing the Naughties had heard me. They always complained that we sounded like an elephant herd overhead.

I crept into the front room.

And found it empty.

And my parent's bedroom.

Any my sister's room.

And my room.

The next morning, they found me broken, asleep in my cupboard, a discarded doll. I was hungry and cold and, in some respects, only too glad to be returned to my bed in the Montgomery household.

I think I stayed in a quiet, shocked, walking coma for nearly a week. Finally, Jeanette lost patience trying to get me to respond to her and punched me on the arm. I exploded into a fury of blows. She was bigger, older, and proved more streetwise than me. A knee between my legs, led to an explosion of copper in my mouth, and when the ringing in my ears passed, I picked myself off the floor and apologised. Jeanette just shrugged.

I should have apologised to the Montgomerys, but I felt they were responsible for my home being emptied out; all my things packed and stored, somewhere. It could have been worse; people could have already moved in. My keys were taken from me and, typically, instead of being punished I was smothered with comfort and support.

After Christmas, Jeanette was allowed to return to her mother who was living in special accommodation. I had no one to turn to who could understand my situation and my blind cruelty towards the twins began to turn from verbal to physical.

Robert got the worst of it. One day, I finally goaded him into a fight. His two panda eyes, blooming purple and yellow as the days passed, were the final straw for the Montgomerys.

Chapter 3

I was passed from pillar to post, no one really wanted to hold on to me, especially if they had kids already. So slowly I made my way down the ladder, creating my own hell. After everyone else had finally given up on me, Edith introduced me to Chris and Geena Crowley.

Chris was a corpulent man, and beside Geena he looked like a mountain. Geena was the wife who only ate lean. A whip of a woman, her voice always set my teeth on edge. They lived alone in an old council house, semi-detached, roughcast walls, and a steep bank of grass, out on the edge of Maryhill. It was a house that always smelled of frying, even if we didn't eat fried food everyday. They also smoked, a couple of packs between them. I'd never met anyone who smoked before.

My room was comfortable, if bare. A single bed, that looked like it had been handed down from an elderly relative, joined an equally ancient wooden set of drawers and wardrobe, and a small desk and chair. The desk had a strange plastic material bonded to the surface, decorated with flowers that had now faded.

I'm not sure how the next events came about. I was nearly fourteen and should have known better, I guess. But for all my middle class rebellion, I was still naïve, and hadn't been in school as much as I should have been. My recollection is weak; whether through time, or distortion, I honestly couldn't say anymore.

I remember that for all Chris' faults, he was a good guy. Always helpful and kind. When Geena went out to see her pals, we would watch TV, and he would let me stay up late watching horror films and comedy programmes I didn't really understand, but everyone talked about the next day. If I went to school that day. Now and again he'd let me have a bottle of beer or my own cigarette.

Then one of these nights, he asked me to help him with something. It seemed okay, although I was surprised when we went into the upstairs bathroom and Chris locked the door. He took his dick out, a squat fat fleshy thing like himself, and asked me to stroke it for him. I must have hesitated, as he got angry, and this shocked me, as he never usually got angry. This unknown quantity was more threatening than anything else he said. Feeling close to throwing up, I began to stroke back and forth and it swelled up in my hand. After a while thick yellow spunk spurted over my hand and it took me all I could not to vomit. Chris just grunted. Then, after telling me not to say anything to Geena or he'd kill me, he went back downstairs. The stuff just wouldn't come off my hand.

I can't recall if this happened again or how often. I don't know why I didn't do something about it. It wasn't like there were ties of family involved. I guess I had been subverted, as the very next day I became complicit, even accepting of it. It was the next day I became a whore.

Chris came home from his day driving buses with a brand new game for my games system. The system was all I had left of my family that was tangible; there was little pocket money for me to buy anything new. I had played Deadly Obsidian a million times. The joy of the new outweighed any thought that acceptance of this unexpected gift was really a contract between us.

Geena was a little surprised at this largesse, and Chris was more circumspect in the future, or at least made sure she got a share of the spoils too. It's either that or she knew what was going on. One incident, in particular, remains forged in my mind in a way that makes me believe she did, or she was more stupid than I thought.

I only have the tableau left to me: This night Chris has contrived for me to be bent over my bed, while he attempts to penetrate me from behind. Geena has come home

unexpectedly and is standing in the doorway. Chris mutters some lame excuse for how my shorts are round my knees and since Geena accepts this, or doesn't want to see what is in front of her, the matter passes.

This moment was another turning point. Chris must have felt he was caught *in flagrante*, as a consequence he stopped molesting me and instead my experience, in the face of his frustration, turned to torture.

Living close to school I came home at lunchtimes and, depending on his shift, Chris was often there too. In some ways it was a regime to help ensure I wasn't truanting, as if the tracking chip read at the start of each class wasn't enough. It was also an opportunity for a catalogue of horrors to be enacted like the living room was a dictator's twisted pleasure dome. Beaten with a slipper because my homework handwriting wasn't neat enough for his liking. I had a dog, from god knows where, Geena hated dogs, licking my balls. Strangled until I passed out. Actually, those brief moments of oblivion were something I liked. Somehow Chris knew how not to leave a mark, not on my skin.

I'm sure you're wondering by now how I can relate this to you so easily? It was so long ago, and in such another place, and with everything that happened since, it feels like it happened to another person. I don't relive any of it. What I can recall from the fractured memory of a child. I don't particular want to. They're more like moments I walk through, the cool observer, detached. Even then, I often felt like I was an inch behind myself. Whatever happened wasn't really happening to me.

Of course this took its toll on me, in ways I can't really concretely convey, as I wasn't such an observer of this effect. I had no one at home on to whom I could pass on my building anger at my humiliation and pain. So this was reserved for the people at school who

had unwittingly decided to be my friends. Even today, my friends still bear some of this taint within me.

At school I got into fights, over nothing in particular, with people who were trying to be my pal. One guy got a black eye in PE three weeks running. The PE teachers laughed it off. Only our Home Economics teacher seemed concerned.

Then there was my sarcastic 'wit'. I was able to delve into the neurosis of my classmates and bring up the nuggets that were buried so deeply. Perhaps, living in that cave myself, I had learnt to see in the dark. I doubt that I did anything more than touch on easily fraught teenage nerves and surface level growing pains. Then it seemed like a magical power. The mystic put-down, a devastating verbal wrestle. Cruelty, passed on from victim to victim like a disease.

It is quite surprising, and perhaps testament to the casual cruelty of children, that I still retained some friends, who, whether out of loyalty or fear of having no friends at all, were free from my attacks.

Ever since I had lost anywhere to run to, I had given up on the idea of running away. But one night of pain and humiliation I had had enough. I no longer cared where I went to; Glasgow was big enough to get lost in, and failing that there was always London, the artificial light so many lost moths confused for the moon.

I was on my own. My school friends were oblivious, and quite likely indifferent, to the cause of my caustic behaviour, so there was little point telling them of my intentions. As in all secret plans, the more people who knew, the thinner the veil became.

Slowly I drew my plans, plans which gave me strength. And within that strength grew defiance. I began to resist Chris. I began to bite back. At first, this caused more pain, but then increasing caution, if only for a renewed level of assault later. I also put on a spurt of

growth as I passed my fourteenth birthday. My puppy fat dissolved into lean muscle, as I grew taller and broader. Chris was less able to threaten me physically, but I was still a child and I still knew fear. Sometimes knowing what you face is far worse than fear borne of ignorance.

I decided to leave during the summer holidays. Not only would I not be missed at school, but also considerably more kids would be on the streets during the day.

One morning I packed some essentials in my school backpack, stuffed in as much food from the kitchen as I could find that wouldn't go off or need cooking, and walked out of the front door. I didn't look back.

I don't know what happened to Geena or Chris. I never saw them again, not even at the inquest. Part of me wishes them well, as without them I wouldn't have become who I am today. Part of me would like to blow their brains out. I fully expect them to be dead already, victims of their own lifestyle.

Chapter 4

My first day on the run and I had headed straight to the city centre to keep my cover. The city centre in June is a lot of fun. American tourists mingle with pickpockets on Buchanan Street. Sauchiehall Street remains a poor run-down second thought for shoppers.

I drifted through the throngs, stopping for window shopping, dreaming of wallpaper TVs, computer games, and all the chocolate I could eat. My head was filled with fantasy and freedom.

As the day wore on, I grew tired and my shoulders hurt from carrying a stuffed backpack. Few places were happy to see a kid on their premises. I even tried to go into the Museum of Modern Art, a place I'd never been, but was barred by the security man. I had nowhere else to go except George Square, a flat expanse of red concrete, disturbed by the occasional statue or small flowerbed.

Today the square was filled with some kind of promotion involving skateboards and an Internet music station. I became dizzy watching twenty-somethings slip down a u-shape, built from board and scaffolding, before somersaulting in the air and coming back into the concave curve, before flipping up the other side to return again like a human pendulum with an invisible string. As more and more joined in, their back and forth gained rhythm, paced by the pulse of pounding BPM. I began to be drawn in, hypnotised.

I wanted to eat. Hunger grumbled in my belly and I knew I needed feeding. Here was the first difficulty of running off. With only a few pounds I needed to make my money last. Despite my depredations I had not been starved. Today I would join millions of unsung others whose bellies remained empty for days at a time.

I returned to watching the skateboarders. Like a lizard, I took my warmth from the afternoon sun.

By evening, the sun was sinking lower in the sky, the shadows stretched longer, and George square, enclosed by tall buildings, grew colder. I slunk off to find shelter for the night rather than watch roadies load lorries with scaffolding and amplifiers.

Finding somewhere secure on the streets of Glasgow is no mean feat. This should have been my first task that day, rather than the last. I was fortunate that the light lasted for longer at this time of year. Back alleys seemed less sinister in the lingering summer sun. I found a good spot near some warm-air vents in a lane between Hope Street and Renfield Street. I got out my sleeping bag and, unsure if I should take my shoes off, climbed inside. Each ripple in the textured concrete could be felt beneath me. But I was only too grateful for the extra warmth of the sleeping bag. I had still not eaten and had been shivering in the shadows. Using my pack as a pillow, I settled down for the night.

But I couldn't sleep.

I didn't feel safe here. I was exposed and open, naked to the city. I could almost feel it breathe as it held me to its bosom. Each city sound, each drunken stumble at the end of the alley, each spat out curse, each pack of Harpies laughing, rang through me. I was so tired that each noise was a physical blow, like I was a bell being struck and resonating afterward.

The icing on the cake was when a drunk tumbled towards my spot, each stagger an elegant micro-management of gravity. Blind to my presence, no doubt disguised as garbage, she squatted down in front of me, jeans and panties hastily pushed down. I barely had a moment to realise my sleeping bag would be seeping with piss before I pulled away. I stumbled upright, cocooned in the sleeping bag. I would have to find another spot to bed down – somewhere less public than this alley.

The woman saw me through the haze in her head as she stood up, restoring her clothes to their rightful position. “Sorry pet, ah dinna see you there. Get a good gander, you dirty wee bastard?” Then she laughed before tottering onward.

I stuffed the sleeping bag back into my rucksack. Shivering, I walked up to the proper roads, forsaking the back lanes, and drifted West despite my fear of heading too far that way and getting returned to the Crowley household.

Walking up the hill to Blythswood Square, I found a gap in the fence and was pleased to find the small park quiet and uninhabited. A couple of bushes could form a small roof over my head and kept me out of sight. The night’s murmurs and my stomach’s grumbles still kept me awake, but eventually I dozed off, free.

The next morning I awoke, slightly damp from the dew that clung to me, my bag and the bushes and grass, like tiny crystal grapes waiting to be plucked. I wondered what sort of wine would be pressed from such berries.

A rumbling in my stomach, and the weakness in my limbs, reminded me of my basic needs. Adam’s Ale would sustain me little without bread.

The waking city, on a cool summer morning, was full of the sounds of backing up lorries and muffled footsteps. It was still too early for the majority of office workers to begin marching to their meetings. The air was light and thin, the chill before the sun warmed the streets leaving a light mist in the air. The city seemed magical – a fairy kingdom of sandstone and better smiles.

A loud beeping, followed by the deep, satisfying sound of exhausting steam, startled me. The dragon’s minions spread out and returned with tithes to feed its gaping maw.

I had to be quick and find food amongst last night’s leftovers before the bin lorry swallowed it all. I left my sleeping bag and rucksack in the bushes to dry when the sun rose.

Heading down to Sauchiehall Street, I sought the bins near the fish and chip shops and takeaways. Trails of chips led me, like Hansel and Gretel, to the leavings of the late-night crowd.

All my instincts and the remnants of my upbringing warred within me. How could I do this? I was almost sickened by the thought. But I was feeling shaky as all the energy was draining out of me from the effort to get here and forage. The trembling in my limbs and hollowness in my stomach was of more pressing need than pride. Then something snapped and I ferreted a chip out of a pool of green-brown goo held in a wan Styrofoam clamshell container. I put it in my mouth, the way I'd seen celebrities eat jungle worms. And I chewed. It was ecstasy.

Cold chips in congealed curry sauce, half finished bottles of Irn Bru, even something more substantial like battered sausage or pizza, all preserved in bins, or on the street. A feast, discarded.

The looks of passers-by mattered little to me. I had already crossed another line and was eating from the pavement. The opinion of a tight skirt and high heels mattered little to me. My hunger was being satisfied and my shakes subsided.

The flush of warmth that spread through me was overwhelming. I had to take off my jumper and jacket. I smelled bad. Where could I get a wash, or even go to the loo? I remembered seeing a burger restaurant and thought I'd try my luck in there. I was a little crumpled, but still presentable.

Washing in the sink of a fast food restroom, which is designed for only washing your hands, is a bit of a challenge. Jets of water have to be captured and applied, the odd foaming excuse for soap, even the itchy rough paper towels (assuming you don't have to

hop in front of a hot air dryer) all add to the excitement. Afterwards, clean but smelling not yourself, you still feel soiled.

Full and freshened, I was ready for the day. My first order of business was to find a better place to sleep.

Chapter 5

My second day, I walked the length and breadth of the city centre, seeking a new, more permanent, shelter. Everywhere, within the circle of the M8 motorway to the West and North, High Street to the East, and the River Clyde to the South, was looked over and explored.

Disused industrial units to the North were strong possibilities, until I spied the cameras staring at me, the razor wire ringing weak points and the guards watching over empty space.

At the junction of George Street and High Street was a short lane of abandoned houses standing behind an ancient pub. The last survivors of the local transformation into a Science Park they looked like a secure opportunity. The three houses were an eyesore amongst a splendid estate of steel and glass. How anyone forgot to knock them down I don't know. They looked like three old men jostling to get through a narrow doorway together. They had once been whitewashed with black wooden beams. Now they had green and black stains covering most of the whitewash, particularly beneath the sunken sills. The roofs had wide holes and in places I could see the beams forming the eaves. The first floor windows were all jagged and broken, while at ground height they were boarded over. The doors looked sturdy but had planks of wood nailed across them in a way that seemed more to keep someone in than out. Round the back were tall grasses and monstrous weeds. A dry, grey fence kept the casual trespasser from entering the back gardens. The gaps between the planks acted as steps to climb the barrier. Between the narrow gardens had been red-brick walls which were now crumbled and fallen, and could never have been high enough to do

anything more than designate the boundary between dwellings. Moss and lichen, small plants and the other levelling powers of nature had done a good job.

The doors and windows were firmly boarded and nailed shut and while the houses may have made suitable squatting I needed tools to get in. For the moment these places would have to wait. I kicked the fence and threw bricks at it. It shouldered my attacks stoically as they all bounced off.

The day was wearing on as I walked down High Street, towards the river. The Trongate tower told me it was two o'clock. My stomach told me it was well past feeding time. Ignoring the food problem, I walked into the Merchant City. I got the sense of being watched but the only people I saw were a few business suits, students and a couple of kids. No one seemed to be paying me any attention. I shrugged it off as paranoia.

I found what I took at first to be some abandoned warehouses. Examining the archaeology of old signage, they had once been large shops. A narrow alleyway went from the main road round to the fire escapes at the back. Out of sight, this area gave me a much better opportunity to find a way in. The bottom flight of steps on the fire escape had rusted off. It lay in ruins, steel decaying at my feet.

One of those big plastic dumpster bins, stood like a lame bison over against the back wall of the next building. A wheel was missing, the others were wonky, but I moved it over to the fire escape and clambered on top of the lid. A fetid stew sloshed about when I moved the bin and I risked the lid collapsing inward plunging me into it, but it held my weight.

I grasped the bottom step of ruined steel, wary of metal splinters sticking into my hands, and began to pull myself up. Straining my muscles, with no fuel to work them, I got myself onto the flight of steps.

I surveyed my surroundings. Looking up to see where I had to get to from here, I felt a slight movement, as though the top of the fire escape got further away. I was just dizzy from my exertion. Then I felt it again. This time with a sinking feeling.

The whole fire escape came away from the wall. I still remember it in slow motion. The top section lurched away from the building, then, as one, we dropped down. I jumped, backwards. In unison the steel staircase and I fell, drawn towards the earth. I landed on the lid of the bin and as it dipped under my weight, I sprung backwards. The fire escape crashed into the ground, riven into spikes and rotten beams. Red dust clouded up. The noise of screaming metal put me back into my parents' car before it plummeted over the cliff. I landed badly, jarring my leg, but otherwise I was unhurt. The bin was studded with ugly metal shards.

I was about to get into a lot of trouble. I limped past the strewn wreckage and along the alley, as fast as I could go. Windows were opened in nearby buildings. I'm sure even car alarms had been set off. Narrowly I escaped the arrival of authority.

Wounded pride and injured confidence led me to the riverfront. I walked down by the Clyde, along the wide cycle path. Stopping near the footbridge to watch the world pass, I considered my next move. Near the waterfront there were many empty buildings; pubs, former boutiques and the whole of a place called the Briggait, a palace of Victorian glass and iron, which stood derelict and unloved. I hoped someone had been considerate enough to unlock a door, or leave a window open for me.

The sense of being watched returned to me as I gazed out over the slate of water. I tried not to be obvious this time and thought I saw an odd man watching me from the roadside. His clothes reminded me of pictures of gentleman during the eighteenth century – stockings, breeches, a long brocaded coat and a wig. When I turned round to get a better

look he was gone. Curiosity grabbed me and I climbed the stairs to see him. The man had vanished, a phantom blown away by the breeze along the Clyde. Instead of being spooked, I took this oddity as a good omen, and went to the Briggait to find a way inside.

Crossing the road, I walked past a bar, a church and an hotel, crossed Glassford Street and along by another bar. Down the side of the Briggait was a narrow path. All I had to do was scale a fence made of vertical bars, but the gate had a lock on it that I could use as a foothold. The fall on the other side jarred my injured leg again, but the pain soon subsided. Pushing past overgrown weeds and a tree I found a vent just above head height.

This time decay was on my side and the cowling was loose. I pulled it off the wall and had a way inside. The venting was narrow, but I was still small enough to squeeze along, if I held my shoulders at an odd angle. I worked my way along until I came to another vent grill on the inside of the building. It wouldn't budge and I couldn't turn around to kick it out. I was forced to wriggle back to the entrance and enter feet first. The inner grill kicked off easily and, covered in grey dust, I had a new home to explore.

Brushing myself down, I looked around. I was on the ground floor underneath an iron stairway. Around the outside of the building, on both floors, were small shops with glass windows and doors. In the centre was a large courtyard with pillars of iron stretching up to the glass roof that reminded me of Central Station. On the second floor was a balcony with wrought iron railings.

I tried all the shop doors, but they were locked shut. I discovered some flushing toilets that still had some rolls of toilet paper and took care of some business. At the back of the building I found a wooden door that had been left unlocked. It went through to a couple of offices. Like some modern day Marie Celeste, the offices appeared to have simply been left. A bar heater stood on the floor and a small kitchen area had a mug with a tea bag and

sugar in it. I knew the water was working, so I filled the kettle. I was surprised to find the power was on. That was one of the best cuppas I have ever had.

After my tea, I went back to get my sleeping bag and rucksack, marching triumphantly up to Blythwood Square. I rummaged around under the bush I had left them under. A stone fell in my stomach.

They were gone.

Triumph turned to tragedy. What little I had was now lost. I searched the other bushes, the whole park, and couldn't find them. Cursing myself for my stupidity, I checked in my nest of bushes once more and spotted a yellowed piece of paper. I had missed it before, as it resembled so much other rubbish around the park. Sitting down, feeling sorry for myself, I could see that however old the paper was, the writing was fresh. It was impossible to tell if it was written in ink or oil, and the words were barely legible. It was a summons.

Get your stuff back

Central Station

7pm

I had no idea what time it was now, but it was late. I ran, my leg hindering me, to the nearest parking meter – 18:57. I ran down the hill, gravity adding to my momentum, my pain forgotten. I dodged cars and straggling office workers. As I ran I got angrier. Why would anyone want to do this to me?

I skidded to a halt, chest heaving, next to the tarnished brass statue of a gas-masked fireman. The statue looked more like a cartoon character than a serious tribute. It was a wonder no one had thought it worth nicking.

Central Station covers a large area. I had no idea where I was supposed to meet the thief. But I knew I was fed up being fucked about. My fingers curled up into fists. I stormed

in through the main entrance. On the main concourse, I dodged through the crowd, to stand under the old clock, half-blocked by a large concession stand. The large hand moved to show it was 7.01. I whirled round, close to tears, not seeing anyone who appeared to have my stuff. Was I too late? Was it just a joke? Perhaps the note was just a coincidence?

“Hey!” a small voice said from behind.

I spun round. A kid, younger than myself, stood with my rucksack under his arm. He had thick black hair, cut badly and roughly. His clothes were trendy, but caked in mud and oil. His skin was a curious colour, a dark tanned brown, but with a redness to it like a deep shade of terracotta. His round face had a wide, white grin. He seemed a lot like Mowgli from a cartoon of The Jungle Book that I’d seen in another lifetime.

I resisted the urge to smash his teeth and instead lunged for my rucksack.

He stepped back laughing. There was no malice, just fun. This put me off guard and I stopped trying to grab him as he danced away from me mingling with home goers.

Noticing I no longer pursued him, he stopped. “Follow me,” he said. Not really a command, more an offer. Hearing him speak more words, I realised that besides his unusual appearance, he also spoke with an odd inflection.

“Who are you?” I said.

“Ikud,” he said.

“Ikud?”

“Yes. Like ‘I could’,” Ikud said. “Follow me.”

Feeling like a dumb tourist in a Middle Eastern airport, whose baggage had already been picked up, I followed my guide. We left by the side entrance onto Hope Street then followed the road down towards Argyle Street. Halfway there, we went into the station’s car park entrance.

A few feet along, Ikud pulled open a protesting steel door. For the second time that day the howl of metal disturbed me. He walked along the concrete corridor, lit by little yellow lamps, before descending a dusty staircase.

Chapter 6

I followed Ikud deeper into the gloom. There were fewer lamps the further down we went.

We moved from the land of light and into a dark hell.

The stairwell was a mixture of damp, mouldy patches, with disturbing fungal growths clinging to the wall, and dry, arid regions duned with dust. Both of them made my nose itch and I fought the urge to sneeze. I didn't want to breathe in whatever might be floating in the air. Spiders, with tiny bodies and long legs that made them as big as my hand, skittered over the deserts, while fat, anaemic slugs writhed amongst the mildew. I imagined a war between these two forms of decay and prey. Dry rot versus wet corruption.

I don't know, now, if I realised that same war was waging within me.

Ikud said nothing during our descent. But when we reached the bottom, having passed numerous doors of ever increasing age, he became quite chatty, as though he had been attempting to avoid catching the notice of something.

"Hurry up. There's a whole world to show you," Ikud said.

"Just a sec," I said, wanting a moment to rest. My run had taken a lot of energy out of me and I'd not eaten since the morning.

"Sek?" Ikud said.

"Yeah, I'll be with you in a moment," I said. "Just want to catch my breath, eh?"

Although there were no obvious sources of light down here, in the gloom I could make out dark square shapes. A warm wind whisked up the stairwell like smoke up a chimney.

Ikud tired of waiting. "Sek, Sek," he said, beckoning me to follow him. He shifted from foot to foot and moved my rucksack around.

“Okay, okay,” I said. His repeating of the word was beginning to irritate me.

Ikud led me into the gloom. And the shapes turned out to be shops. Ancient shops underneath the railway station; narrow buildings, huddled together. Old peaked roofs covered with slates. What once were whitewashed plaster fascias and black wooden beams. Faded signs still swung in the gusts of air rising from even lower levels. We passed a butcher, a milliner and three pubs before coming to a larger building on the right hand side of a cobbled road. A broad triangle was supported on four columns, making the front of the building look like the entrance to a Greek temple. The walls of the building rose up behind the portico. I could see alcoves filled with statues. On the portico I could just make out letters cut into the stone – Alston Theatre.

There was a whole town down here.

Ikud urged me to follow him into the old building. It seems to me now that the façade, which was Victorian, was incongruous with the Georgian interior. Then, I had no idea anything was wrong and that the theatre was supposed to have been burnt down in 1780.

We walked up the short flight of stone steps to four sets of tall double-doors with arches above them. The wooden doors and arches were made up of glass, thick with black dirt. There was light coming from deep within the building, but the grime was blocking it from beaming out into the street.

Ikud opened one of the doors and while its hinges protested, the door opened smoothly. Small candles burnt behind the old gas light glasses. The floor was once covered in a thick red carpet that had now become matted and turned the colour of dried blood by age, wear and ground-in dirt. There was a small ticket office on the left – two empty glass windows with a counter underneath. On the right was a wooden counter with shelves on

the wall behind it. In front of us, a short flight of steps spanned the breadth of the entrance to the main foyer. At the back of the foyer, staircases spiralled away to the left and right, leading to the gallery overhead. In front a short corridor ended in double doors.

Ikud led me through the double doors, which opened into the main auditorium. This large room was dimly lit by thousands of candles. They sat on the balconies and boxes, in the old gaslights, and all along the front of the stage. A thick crust of molten wax supported them, marbled with swirls of colour.

In front of the stage was a pit, with rows of benches. A narrow set of steps led down into it. Around the outside of the pit were a number of boxes, each with an ornate wreath design made from plaster on the front. There was a similar arrangement on the gallery overhead.

I followed Ikud down into the pit, making our way over the benches, and clambered up a step ladder onto the narrow stage. A number of crude dwellings had been erected here – part tepee, part lean-to. They had been cobbled together from canvas, the large advertising banners they hung outside buildings on scaffolding, plastic sheets, wooden beams, steel scaffold poles, cardboard boxes and yards of frayed rope in a variety of colours. It was hard to tell exactly how many distinct areas there were in this camp, it all seemed to flow from one space to another.

“Hey!” shouted Ikud, breaking the silence. Young faces, difficult to determine clearly in the candlelight, less than ten of them, peeked out of their hiding places, even though I was the newcomer and they lived here. Then, one by one, they emerged crawling on hands and knees, those on the left moved over to the right crossing the path of those moving the opposite way from right to left. Moving in an angular, almost bestial fashion, that unnerved me while at the same time looking absurdly ridiculous, they circled Ikud and me. This must

be some form of ritual and I prepared myself for the worst. I half expected, given my luck so far, to find myself a human sacrifice to a bunch of under-age urban cannibals.

A skinny girl, maybe 12 or 13, emerged last, walking upright. She was wearing a white silk dress covered in a red rose print that looked like a much older woman should have worn it. I say white. It might have been white once. Now it was covered with dark, sooty grime and oily stains. Her bedraggled hair was long and turning to dreadlocks in places. When she came to the front of the stage I could see that she had a narrow face and dark shiny eyes, big front teeth and a weak chin. It isn't fair, but it is accurate, to say she looked a lot like a rat. She was carrying something in her hands, held in front of her, palm up, a cushion for something made of paper.

"Ikud, who's this you've brung with you?" the girl said in a broad Glasgow accent. I glanced round the circle and realised that most of the children had foreign appearances. Foreign to me anyway – I'd not been to the most multi-cultural of schools.

"Sek," said Ikud.

"Sek, you've been brought into our Family. Do you accept your membership?" the girl said.

"My name's Ian," I said. "And I just want my sleeping bag back." I really didn't want to be a part of a family. My family was dead and I was fleeing all other families. I didn't want to run with a gang either. Although this bunch didn't look like they could stab their way out of a wet paper bag.

"Look, dae you wanna stay here or up on the streets? We're doin you a favour, believe me," the girl said.

"I've found a good place," I said. "I'll be alright." I wanted to assert my newly won independence.

“You dinnae even know what you’re up against. You’re safe here and nowhere else.”

So I could be what, raped by a paedophile, beaten up by a gang of drunk neds, stabbed by a junkie and put out of my misery? You’ll forgive me if they hardly seemed threats worth avoiding – the black bile rose up and I was hit by a wave of nihilism.

“I accept,” I said.

“Grand,” the girl said. “Take this and keep it.” She stepped towards me offering the paper thing balanced on her palms. I reached out and took it from her. It was an origami rose made from red paper with white Rennie Mackintosh roses on it. “Keep it with you, always,” she said. I saw fear in her eyes.

“I will,” I said. What was worrying her? It wasn’t me she was afraid of. “Now, can I get my sleeping bag back?” I took my rucksack back from Ikud.

“Come and get it,” the girl said, gesturing me to follow her.

The others stood up, the ritual ending abruptly and without any further ceremony. They crowded round me, some of them looked happy to see me and welcomed me, most seemed disinterested.

I followed the girl to the back of the stage. As we made our way through the camp, I tripped over scattered bric-a-brac, folds of advertising posters and the odd disfigured doll. She stopped in front of a tepee made from an advert for contact lenses draped over a number of thick poles. She pulled a heavy flap to one side and ducked into the tepee, emerging a moment later with my sleeping bag.

“Here you go,” she said, thrusting the bag into my arms. “I’m Kirsty by the way.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Do I need to make my own place?” I said.

“No right now. Peter has some space, but you can find plenty of stuff back here when you want to.”

“Thanks. Who’s Peter?”

“I am,” said a tall, dark haired boy, with skin that looked black in this light. I’d not noticed him at the ritual. Peter emerged from what appeared to be a heap of boxes. He seemed a lot older than most of the others, maybe 15 or 16. A wispy moustache was attached to his top lip. I found him a bit intimidating, as he was clearly bigger than me, more like a man than one of the kids. He wore a dirty blue t-shirt and a scrappy pair of designer jeans.

“If it’s all the same, I’ll pass thanks,” I said. I had what I came for.

Peter just shrugged. I turned and headed back through the camp.

“You’re one ae us now,” Kirsty said. “You’ll be back soon.”

I walked out of the theatre and onto Alston Street. No one tried to stop me. I’d reached the foot of the stairs back to the real world above before Ikud caught up with me.

“Sek, Sek,” Ikud said, pulling at my coat. “Come back. If you want to live.”

I shrugged him off and climbed up and out.

The air of the city was dirty, but it was fresh and free of the pervading damp of down below. I put the bag into my pack and returned to my bolthole in the Briggait under the night sky.

The Harrowed Garden – Synopsis

Sek is orphaned when his family die in a holiday accident. Angry and resentful he runs away from an abusive foster home onto the streets of Glasgow. He meets a group of street kids living in an old town under the main railway station, but rejects their help. Squatting in an abandoned market he is attacked by a crying woman, an horrific, blood-stained creature, which he barely escapes, running back to the Alston Street Irregulars. Kirsty, the gang's shaman, tells him the Crying Woman is fighting with Satan to control Hell - the world we live in - and when each kid reaches sixteen She takes them for her army.

One of the kids, Davey, pressures Sek into posing as a rent boy to steal money. At first the plan works until Sek is attacked and his client is ripped apart by the Crying Woman. Sek is seen fleeing the hotel. He is wanted for the murder of the Chief of Police. Before they retreat to a new hideaway, the gang is attacked by an anti-terror squad, who in turn are killed by the Crying Woman. Sek is caught fleeing. Awaiting trial Sek turns sixteen, but She doesn't come for him. Sek is acquitted and is free.

He finishes school and studies architecture at the Art School where he is adopted by some of his classmates. After their exams, Sek explains that some cities have Egyptian obelisks and he intends to explore them over the summer. Julia jumps at the chance to go with him. In New York they find a 'dead' obelisk, and Julia admits she wants to be more than friends. Sek agrees to see how it goes, but is consumed by jealousy when she is chatted up in a Parisian bar. The obelisk in Paris, like the ones in Glasgow and London, is buzzing with life and Sek concludes each city's layout, and the placement of the obelisks, is part of some plan. Back in the UK, Sek's obsession with this plan leads to Julia cheating on him and his failing his studies.

Sek starts a design studio that applies all the things he's learnt to media and marketing projects, but when the going gets tough he runs away to Southern Italy. Only looking to walk along the beach he gets involved with a local girl Angelina. She is bitten by a spider, starting her ritual passing into womanhood – the Tarantata. Sek discovers the town worships the Crying Woman, and is given a pendant. Sek returns home, his nightmare come back, to find his luck has changed. The company wins a big contract and Sek meets the woman of his dreams, the punk queen Kitten Uzi.

Things go well, until Kitten notices the pendant, leading Sek to question if his success is his or granted him by The Crying Woman. He takes off the pendant and starts seeing the ghosts of kids from Alston Street, and a man in period costume. Sek's erratic behaviour gets him fired, and Kitten urges him to get help. When she leaves for a job he thinks she has left for good. Sek tries to get some answers to who the Crying Woman is and she attacks him on the Underground. In despair he returns to Alston Street, beneath Central Station, seeing suicide as his only chance for control of his life.

But death is not the end. Sek wakes in an empty city built with architecture from every time period. A guardian lion statue tells him he is in Adocentyn, the city of God. In its centre is a huge obelisk with a shining beacon, and someone is alive there. This is the Comte de St Germain, a man who has been following Sek all his life. The Comte explains he is in Heaven, The Crying Woman is one of ten Caretakers, left behind by humanity when it chose to live on Earth, and they won't let anyone back in. They need to destroy Heaven.

Sek asks The Comte to get his friends from Alston Street to help him free the Caretakers' armies. But they still have to fight these grotesque beings to get back inside the obelisk and use the beacon to raze the city. Sek throws The Crying Woman from the top of the obelisk into the burning city below.

Sek awakens in Glasgow at the foot of the obelisk. His work isn't done. He must create a new heaven, first here on earth by finishing the perfect city. No man, anywhere, should live in chains.