

The Wounded Healer

Sample and Synopsis

Chapter 1

A hand moves across my chest, clammy and pale. Fingers curl around my ankle. A third hand grasps my thigh. I struggle but the hands tighten their grip. There are screams directed at me. I shout and a fist is pushed into my mouth. I can't move. Bound and powerless, mute, I'm pulled down into the earth, through dirt and bedrock, passing worms and stones, falling into caverns of fire.

I land on my back on a stone slab. Hands still hold me, arms slither over me. This is when I normally wake up. But something is different tonight.

Shadowed figures approach, their voices distinct above the chorus of hate.

- Can you see it?

- No

- What about here?

My left arm is pulled behind my head. It feels like something wants to drag me from the stone slab but the hands stop them. My shoulder pops as the bone is torn from its socket. My cry is stifled by the fist as tendons tear and muscles rip. An electric blue flash fills my mind obliterating all thoughts except one: I want to wake up.

But I am dead and this is Hell, with no escape for sinners.

The severed arm is held over me, its warm blood dripping onto my chest. The skin is peeled, each muscle stripped away, and all is thrown into a bubbling pot until only the bones remain.

- Is it there?

They are looking for something. I pray to all the gods I know that they find it. Soon.

What did I do to deserve this?

- No.

I confess.

- Is it there?

I confess to every shameful moment.

The bones are tossed into the pot. A shaft of dark metal lances my right leg, sending more electric bursts into my brain. Hands pull at the edges of the wound, widening it. The skin is stripped back, exposed flesh sifted and separated. The lance is withdrawn and the skeletal leg wrenched from its socket.

- No.

I confess to each unintended slight.

- Maybe there.

Lances pierce my torso, ringing when they hit the slab beneath. A butterfly pinned while fingers burrow, ribs snap, and the chest is exposed. I feel a terrible pity for my beating heart, my airless lungs. It drives me to one last desperate prayer, to confess the smallest, pettiest things. I empty myself.

Still they persist.

Each organ, each part, is lifted, examined, rejected, and thrown into the pot, until only the head remains – barely conscious.

- Is it there?

- No.

Fingers scoop out the eyes, yet I still see, my jaw removed, my tongue torn away, my skull cracked open and the brain squeezed out.

A hand finds something, something small, and holds it between thumb and forefinger.

- Is this it?

- Yes. Put it back.

Like a film in reverse, my body is put back together. Vessels, lymph nodes, nerves, tendons, veins, muscles, fat, skin, all gathered from the pot, clean. Dislocated limbs sewn back together, organs replaced. Last of all the small bone, glinting in the flames, is forced back into my head through my nose. A final agony, then nothing.

Chapter 2

The tent arches above me. I sit up, breath steaming. Grey day leaks through the nylon flaps. I feel like crying. Perhaps my prayers were answered after all.

Thankfully morning has come. I am empty, shallow, hollow, fragile.

From within the warm cocoon of my sleeping bag I grab at my clothes, dress quickly and crawl out into the bright, grey day.

As usual, I'm one of the first to rise. I stretch, breathing in the cold air. All around me, the sea of tents stretches – canvas and nylon, of many colours and hues, billow and flex with the thin breeze. From makeshift drying lines, left-out clothing hangs stiff, rimed with frost.

I shiver and stoop back inside, pull on a jumper and coat, find my wash things and head across the grass, avoiding guy lines. As I pass between the giant Victorian greenhouses on my way to the toilet block at the back of the Botanic Gardens, only the yap of Janice's wee dog, protecting its owner and her stuff, breaks the silence.

I wash and shave in icy water, and brush my teeth. We're lucky to have any kind of facilities at all, but just the same I long for a hot shower, to stand in there until my skin wrinkles, until I've washed the ache out of my joints, until I can feel the ends of my toes again.

The smell of espresso and the warmth of the café are adequate compensation. I slide into my usual seat just as Sindi appears to take my order.

"Howdy stranger." Sindi runs her fingers down her pen, before flipping it over and starting again. "How you?" Her Northern Irish accent could dent metal, which might explain the piercings – shards of shrapnel.

"Not bad." I look up at her pretty, disfigured face. "How's work?"

“Things are picking up again. You’re here, for a change.”

I smile. “I’ve got some time, and some cash.”

“Sure, you look like you could do with a good feed. What can I get you?” Her pen is poised over the pad.

I wonder what I can afford. “I’ll have a bacon roll and mug of tea, please.”

“That’ll be a tenner.”

Fuck. “Really?” But my stomach groans.

“Sorry. New management policy. We’ve had too many runners.”

I find my phone and swipe it in front of Sindi’s terminal.

“I’ll be right back now.” A few moments later scalding tea is banged down on the table along with a chipped plate holding a morning roll stacked with bacon – sunshine yellow oozing out of it like a cartoon gunshot wound. The breakfast of kings.

“Charlie was feeling generous,” she says. “Since you’re a regular.”

I smile wide and it infects Sindi, but she leaves as soon as some customers with real money come in. I wolf the roll, wash it down with the tea sugared until there are no packets left in the little ceramic pot. I glance at the time and run out of the café, wiping yolk from my face.

Chapter 3

I check each server core. All the lights are blinking a comforting fluorescent green. I could stay in like everyone else, read my diagnostics or sit in a nearby pub or hotel and start a new set of simulations using a borrowed Wi-Fi link. But I prefer the comfort of routine, and the cooled server room is still warmer than outside.

I miss putting on my suit every day, tearing away the protective film from a freshly laundered shirt. It felt like being a superhero leaving behind a secret identity, showing my true face to the world. But I have nowhere to keep a suit now and no access to an iron. And anyway wearing my civvies protects me too. Would people be as kind if they knew what I had done?

I used to dig out information, analyse the data, understand what was and predict what could be, and ended up inventing, purely as a side effect, new ways of assessing risks. Someone else packaged that risk, turned it into a product. It was too abstract for the salespeople who simply sold another way to make money out of other money. They didn't know it could take just one guy defaulting on a payment for the whole house of cards to come crashing down.

I was one of the lucky ones. I got a new job, in a smaller firm, doing what I do best – even if it's only for a third what I made before. And I live in a tent. It's odd that the stains on the pavement outside the old offices never seem to wash away.

I gather data and make models. But that kind of work requires a number of powerful machines, dedicated iron, and with everyone else working from home someone needs to keep the systems running.

I sit down at the only desk the company owns, surrounded by black and grey, plastic and glass, the hum of hard drives and cooling fans, and enter a password – data might want to be free, but sometimes it needs help escaping its prison.

The view of the Clyde is always impressive. I get lost looking at the steel waters lapping against the walls. Dr Reynolds coughs to gain my attention.

“How are you getting on?”

These sessions have been an unexpected benefit of my severance package.

“I had the dream again.” The couch creaks beneath me. I avoid eye contact. “It was much worse this time.”

“In what way?”

I try my best to explain. As I speak, Reynolds scribbles in her notebook. What is so important? I turn my head and she finds my eyes.

“What do you think accounts for the change?” she says.

“It’s been the same since I was a teenager. But never like this.”

“So what then?” Her eyes focus on me. “What do you think it could be?”

“I was eviscerated last night.” I tear my eyes away. “It has fuck all to do with a guilty conscience.”

“Maybe you should think about that. I’m sorry this will be our last time, it looks like we were just starting to make some progress.”

I walk home. It’s already dark. Am I really torturing myself to make up for my past actions? Absurd, but I have to consider it. It’s weird thinking I don’t have to go back to see Dr Reynolds. It felt like a millstone, but it was also good to have someone to talk to.

A car horn blares, shocks me out of my stupor. I grin like an idiot and half-wave an apology, then watch as the Merc speeds off towards Park Circus. I used to have one just like it.

Along Woodlands Road, a grey squirrel, which probably ought to be hibernating, crosses the path in front of me, darts up a tree and then, clinging to the trunk, tries to pretend it isn't there. The camouflage might work were it not for the nervous micro-movements of ear and eye.

A shadow swoops down, sending the squirrel scurrying higher into the tree, and a bloody great crow lands on the pavement in front of me. I step back, then feel like an idiot. It's huge, it might be a raven. It's looking right at me, its head tilted slightly, with a dark empty eye. I stare back. No bird is going to better me in a staring contest. Only when the bird shifts its feet, do I realise that I can see through it.

There's a haze around the bird so that its outline is ill-defined. It appears to be made of thorns – tangled, twisted, barbed. A multitude of spines stick out from its body, making it look like an intricate statue made from coat hangers.

This isn't possible. It's a trick of the winter light.

It walks towards me. Fixes me again with its eye. "Hi. Nikolai Munro?"

Did it really speak? I try walking around it, but the bird blocks my path, causing me to stop and change direction. I want to kick it. "Get out of my way."

The crow flaps its wings and moves out of leg reach. "Go on then, walk on by. I just wanna talk."

I've not had alcohol or drugs in a long time, so it can't be that. I've not eaten in a while, so maybe I'm hallucinating. I cross the road.

The crow, with an easy flap of its wings, glides over the road, and is soon alongside me. “Look, Niky - can I call you that? You think this is your imagination. I get that. But I’m not – well, technically I am. But whatever way you look at it, I’m here. I’m not going away, so you’d be better off accepting that.”

Its voice is rough, like it’s been smoking forty a day since it was a kid. A Noo Yoik accent. If my subconscious is talking to me, it’s chosen a weird way to express itself. It’s like being in a Disney cartoon. I don’t want to end up dancing with animated candlesticks, but I decide to play along. “If you’re my friend, then what’s your name?”

“Corbie.”

“Of course. Twa corbies sittin on a wa. So what do you want?”

The crow cocks its head to one side, like it can’t believe what it’s hearing. “I’m here to train you.”

“For what? The London Marathon?”

“Good one. Not bad. You were chosen. They found the shaman’s bone in you, man.”

The small metal thing is shoved back into my head. There is pain between my eyes. The fear of the nightmare returns in full force. I’m going to be sick.

I understand now that my mum was right – all my life I’ve been called. I don’t want her to be right.

I walk past the bird, aiming a kick that it easily avoids. “Piss off and leave me alone.”

Chapter 4

For the first time in as long as I can remember the alarm wakes me up. Not just a signal to get out of bed. I slept right through the night. No dreams. Some sort of miracle. Yet I still feel shattered.

I get myself together and leave the tent. There's a commotion a few rows over, near the road. Someone probably tripped on a guy line and woke people up. But it's Albert's tent they're standing round and something wrong wafts its way towards me.

Out of all of us Albert shouldn't be here – he's seventy odd and should be enjoying retirement. Instead he's putting in who knows how many hours at the local supermarket and still finds time to help people out.

The sweet foul stench grows as I get closer to his tent.

Janice is in tears, and there's no sign of her yappy wee Jack Russell, which is odd. Big Malky is comforting her but it looks more like he's trying to cop a feel. Young Silk, skinny and pale is on his knees looking through the tent flaps. He stands up when he hears me coming. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could spit him.

"He's deid," he says, confirming what I had already guessed. He shifts from one foot to the next, his red-rimmed eyes look for exits. "Janice said that Brutus wouldnae leave the tent alane. Me an Malky couldnae reach him so we opened it up... Jeesus, the smell."

He hunches over, hands on his knees and dry wretches.

"Anyone called an ambulance?" I take my phone out and catch a flicker of appraisal from Silk.

Malky shrugs. "He's deid. An ambulance is nae use. Besides none ae us could afford one."

“Where’s Brutus now?” I say to Janice.

“I tied him up outside the park.” She points in the direction of Queen Margaret Drive. “He wouldnae shut up.”

Albert must have died a few days ago, when it was colder. I didn’t notice his absence. Today it’s warmer, so the natural processes must have hit his corpse hungry.

I look out over the tent village. “We need to find somewhere else.” Then I start dialling, even though Malky is right, this is hardly an emergency. “Otherwise none of us will make it through January.”

I wait for the police to arrive mostly so no one borrows anything from Albert. I call Kathryn to tell her I’m running late. We discuss a feeble excuse to give the kids, one that won’t spook them – though Lucas would probably find it cool and Samantha would be indifferent. Kathryn needs to protect her illusion of their innocence and it’s easier to play along.

It’s nearly eleven by the time I get there, making me regret stopping to help out. I have my own illusions – that our tent city is a community.

Fiona opens the door. “You made it then?” I always thought we got along, but then things went south and I knew better.

“I couldn’t just leave.”

“The living are more important than the dead.” Fiona had high hopes once, that didn’t involve shouldering the burden of her daughter and grandchildren.

She leads me through to the kitchen. The kids are upstairs in gadget oblivion. Kathryn sits at the round table, hands wrapped around a mug of tea. A look passes between the two women and Fiona disappears. I take a seat opposite Kathryn and get my excuses in early.

"It's not that." Kathryn puts down her mug and looks me in the eye. "I can't go on like this. This weird twilight life."

"I'll get back on my feet again soon. They say things are looking up."

"When did you last eat?" Her tone softens. It isn't an accusation.

I shrug, I can't think of anything worth saying, so the silence lengthens. "I want to move on," Kathryn says.

"What? You mean you've met someone?" I can't believe it. I'm struggling to pay for us all, literally freezing my ass off, and she's out playing.

"It's not like that." Kathryn takes a sip of tea.

"So what is it like?" I can't sit. I need air. I slide open the patio doors.

"Niky. It's cold."

"Really? I barely notice it anymore."

"My lean wolf-man." She smiles. "I'm sorry it's come to this, but I want a divorce."

"You know I can't afford that."

"Mum will give me the money."

"That is exactly why I'm in a tent and not living here."

"That is exactly why I'm asking for the divorce. Don't drag this out for another year out of spite."

"Have you told the kids?"

"Of course not. There's nothing to tell them, yet."

Everything I thought I was working towards is slipping away from me. My pride kept us from living together, but I thought we still loved each other, that we had an understanding – as soon as I had the means we'd be back together again. I can't recall the

last time I stayed over, though. A year already since we left the old house? Who am I fooling here? "Okay," I say. "If that's what you want."

"I'll get the papers drawn up for next time. Nothing else will change, I promise." She gets up. "Here's some money." When I don't take the notes she puts them on the table. "And the car keys." She drops them on top of the money. "Take them to McDonalds and the cinema. I'll see you later."

Kathryn leaves the room. I stare at the space she filled just a moment before.

Chapter 5

Back at the tent city there are a lot of people hanging out by Albert's tent, which has been sealed up with police tape. There are a number of yellow rectangles around it, like death has crept into the grass. No one had come to take the body away and the wait has turned into a vigil. People have been coming to pay their respects all day, telling stories. A small shrine has formed, with meagre offerings.

I join them. Maybe it will help me with my own loss. Silk and Malky aren't here, but Janice is about. Brutus must still be chained up elsewhere. A half-bottle of rough vodka is being passed from hand to hand. I think twice then take a mouthful.

A woman standing next to me says, "Did you know him?" She brushes a stray hair back behind her ear. It has become a ritual invitation. It's no surprise to see a stranger. The tent city has a core, but some people come and go.

"We used to say hello to one another," I say. "He helped me out. More than I ever thanked him for."

"Do you know where they took the body?" She wrinkles her nose.

I thought everyone knew by now. "That's why we're here. Waiting for someone to come for it."

"Jesus Christ." She shakes her head. "The whole fucking system is falling down."

I nod. "I live in one of these tents. You don't need to tell me."

"The police called, told me to come and get his stuff. I didn't even know he was living here."

The penny drops. "You're his daughter?"

"Granddaughter."

"Sorry. He never said. We all figured he was like us."

"Too pig headed and proud."

"That too." I didn't have to sleep here before. Now I do. "I'm Nik," I say, and offer her the bottle.

"Rachael." She takes a swig.

A flutter of dark wings and a *crawk*, and the crow of thorns glides in and lands on the roof of Albert's tent. An estate vehicle painted white drives slowly towards us. People make way for it but no one tries to shoo the crow away. I decide to ignore it like everyone else, then I realise that I'm the only one who can see it.

Something is really wrong with me, something that can't be blamed on an empty stomach or the vodka. So much for therapy.

"It's alright, Boss." The crow turns its head to one side, dark eye catching the headlights of the car. "The sooner you accept this, the easier it will be."

"That's easy for you to say."

Rachael frowns "What? I didn't say anything."

"Sorry." I try for a smile, just about manage it. "I was just running through a conversation in my head and that popped out. My wife asked me for a divorce today."

"She lives here too?"

"No, at her mother's. We've been separated since I started living here. You know how it is. Pig-headed and proud."

Rachael nods her head. "Look, I know this is kind of random, given we've just met. But would you come with me to the morgue or wherever they're taking him?"

She looks over my shoulder as a stretcher is taken out of the back of the estate, wheels concertina-ing onto the grass. Two men begin to get into bunny suits and masks.

“Okay... sure.” Clearly I’m non-threatening. Corbie takes flight as one of the men cuts into the tent and it collapses. “Look this isn’t going to be good. You can sit in my tent for a few minutes while they work. We can pick up Albert’s stuff later, at the morgue.”

“Okay.” Rachael looks green. She takes another swig of vodka and passes it back to me. I try to wash away the sweet rot clinging to the top of my palette. We need a stronger solvent. I pass the bottle back to the crowd then we walk away, Corbie gliding after us over the eaves.

I unzip the flaps and hold out a hand. Rachael stoops and crawls in.

“You got all the mod cons here.” She waves a hand toward my small pile of stuff.

“The tent was a gift from a charity. There are solar cells built into the fabric, even a crude heat pump in the floor that gives enough power for some light, or even a battery recharge in an emergency. Washing and other toiletries are reserved for the executive en suite bathroom. Sometimes, in summer, it even reaches above freezing. We’re lucky, though, they used to lock the toilet block at night when they shut the park.”

Rachael sits down on top of my sleeping bag. “How can you live like this? Aren’t there homeless shelters or something?”

I crawl in next to her. It’s a two-man tent but we’re still close. Her perfume reminds me of fresh apples and summer grass. “They’re all full. So are the hostels. From what I hear they’re worse than this – sleep with your back to the wall kinds of places. I had benefit for a while, but there’s a cap on claims after the first year. In any case the money went to feed and clothe my two kids. I had to sell my house, my cars, and ninety-nine per cent of my stuff to pay my debts. I refused to go bankrupt. The silver lining... I now have a job, no debts, I support my family, and I live here. No rent, no facilities.”

“But why stay here at all? You could have stayed with your family. No need to be a hero.” She’s angry and her eyes are moist.

“There’s no way I can give you a satisfying answer. I’ve tried.” Her glare challenges me to try again. I dig deep, ignoring the nonsense about pride, about wanting to stand on my own feet, to fix what I broke myself, or even something feeble about the mother-in-law. I shrug. “Shame, mostly. Cowardice. Humiliation. I couldn’t look in my wife’s eyes, my kid’s, without seeing a judgement, an accusation of failure. This is my punishment.”

“Idiot. Didn’t you realise that you’ve been punishing them too?”

Something dislodges inside me, like a heavy weight shifting. “I used to have bad insomnia. I was afraid I would lose everything. One day someone told me the only cure was to think through the worst that could happen. So what if you lose your job, you’ll still have your health – that kind of thing. I never for one minute thought it would be like this. But you’re right. I shouldn’t be here. None of us should.”

I cough, catch my breath and cough again. Must be the bad air.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Guess something went down the wrong way. Let’s get you to the morgue.”

We hail a taxi from the top of Byres Road to the Saltmarket. Rachael winces when she looks at the meter, but she pays anyway.

“I have a car, but it’s sitting dry since what was left in the tank got siphoned out. Couldn’t afford to put petrol in it anyway.”

“What do you do?” I say, pulling my coat tight against the thin wind coming off the Clyde.

“Primary teacher.” She shrugs.

I clear some phlegm from the back of my throat and lead her to the wooden door. I'd heard they had planned a new mortuary at the Southern General. Guess it didn't work out. This place has been used for centuries. People were hung on the Green over the road, a short journey from the old High Court next door. I ring the bell and we wait in silence.

The door opens and a woman wearing blues nods and invites us in. She shows us to a small waiting area where there are only four seats. "We'll be ready for you in a minute." She brushes hair behind her ear, smiles briefly and leaves.

We wait for nearly twenty. I'm about to go and find someone when the woman returns.

"Sorry about that. They brought everything in the tent for some reason. We had to check it all, just in case." She looks how I feel. A bone-deep weariness has crawled into me.

"Just in case of what?" Rachael stands up.

"If it had turned out to be a suspicious death something in there may have been relevant to the enquiry. Are you ready to formally identify the body?" Her tone is soft, unthreatening. I forgot the people who work here are trained doctors. Good bedside manner for the dead.

"So what was it?" Rachael says.

"What was what?" the doctor says.

"If it wasn't suspicious, what did he die from?"

"Oh, right. We're putting it down to hyperthermia."

We follow her down the hall and into a side room. There's a large pane of glass between us and the steel slab. On top of the slab is a body draped in a green sheet. A man with a white beard and glasses walks over to the body and angles something hanging from a large light.

"If you look at the monitor, please." The woman indicates an ancient CRT TV bolted up high in our room. It shows the covered face. The man pulls back the sheet to show a skull with a thin veneer of flesh that just about looks like Albert. "Do you recognise this person?"

Rachael stares at the monitor. "He's so thin." Her voice breaks. "Yes. That's my Grandfather, Albert Morrison." Her composure starts to slip. I pass her my unused hanky.

"Thank you. Let me take you back to the waiting area. I'll get you the completed death certificate and your grandfather's personal effects. Can I get you some tea while you wait?"

Another hour seems to pass. I don't know what to say and Rachael stares at the mauve wall ahead of her, hanky in one hand, Styrofoam cup in the other.

"If it hadn't been for you, he wouldn't be dead," she says.

"I don't see what I have to do with it." I'm know I'm not responsible for the collapse of the finance sector, or her grandfather choosing to live in a tent in a park, but I feel a stab of guilt anyway.

"You let him stay there. You should have told him to go home. You could have checked up on him." Her eyes are hot while her cheeks are wet.

"Maybe I should go."

"And run out on your mess? Seems like a regular habit."

I push down my anger, stand up and open the door as the doctor comes in carrying two large carrier bags and a backpack. "Sorry, I didn't see you there," she says, as I brush past her and out into the cold. The raven is sitting on a railing waiting for me. "And you can piss off too," I shout. The night air hits my chest. I double over and cough up a large radioactive glob into the gutter. This isn't good.

I don't wait for Rachael. I'm not running away. I just don't feel like being a relative stranger's punching bag.

I walk home and can sense the bird gliding along in my wake, but I don't care anymore. I'm too tired and cold to care.

Back in my tent I think about calling Kathryn. It's late. Maybe I should leave it until tomorrow. I call anyway, and tell her I'm sorry, that I've been a fool, that I'll move back in. We don't need to do this. We can be a family again. The answering machine cuts me off.

Between fits of coughing I manage to fall asleep.

Sweat has soaked through my t-shirt and my sleeping bag feels damp. I have a raging thirst. My head is pounding and I can't breathe through my nose. My chest feels like a huge stone has been placed on it. I fumble around for some water, but the bottle is empty.

I put on some clothes and immediately start shivering. I make my way to the toilet block and need to cool down again. I've had the flu before, but never like this.

In a pained blur I go down to the Byres Road supermarket. I wait outside for it to open, like a junkie. Once inside, even the cheapest paracetamol is barely affordable. I dry-swallow two on my way round the aisles. I get enough dried soup for a couple of days, but I've almost no money left. I'll have to risk the water from the taps in the toilets. Maybe a little lead might help kill the bugs running through my body. My limbs already feel like they're made from it – alternating between molten and cold.

My tent is more welcome than ever. I listen to the radio on my laptop and drift in and out of sleep, in and out of sweat. I'm sure the crow is in here with me, talking, but I can't make out what it's saying. Through the fog in my head it sounds like, "You're dyin."

"It's just the flu."

Is this what really took Albert, not the cold? I hadn't heard of any bugs going around. He's the first to get sick here. How long since anyone got typhus or cholera in Glasgow. Maybe it's bird flu from my new friend. I almost laugh, but it's more a gurgle in the back of my throat.

"No. You have pneumonia."

"You're not a doctor. How do you know?"

The bird stands on my chest, talons like little pin pricks, and says, "I'm a shaman. You will be too, if you want to live."

Chapter 6

I'm standing, fully clothed. At first I think I've wandered out of the tent in a fever, looking for water – I'm so thirsty I could drain a river and still not be satisfied. A mist covers everything, and there's no sound. Is this another dream?

I take a few steps but the fog is so thick I worry about walking off into someone's tent, or into traffic, or off the edge of a cliff. Something tells me I'm not in tent city, and this isn't a dream.

"Where am I?"

"Think of somewhere memorable, somewhere relaxin." Corbie's rough caw sounds like he's on my shoulder, but he's nowhere to be seen.

The mist begins to clear, burned off by the noon-day sun. I'm on a rough beach next to a huge weathered tree trunk. Worn stones and broken shells cover the ground. Just ahead, a thick bar of fly-blown seaweed marks high tide. I turn around to where the dry grass starts and look to the top of the tall thin pines. The blue sky has a few light clouds and several distant gulls circle. The air is fresh, the sun is warm. I feel a smile growing.

Corbie lands on the trunk beside me. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere near Fort William. I think that's it, over the water." On the other side of the loch are houses, Ben Nevis towering over them.

"Childhood holiday?"

"Aye. We spent a week here in a wee cottage just up the road. I found a paperback of *Ice Station Zebra*." I pick up a stick and prod at the ashes of someone's fire – the black soot ringed by burnt stones. "Why are we here? And how do you know about the pneumonia?"

“I told you. I’m a shaman. I could tell just by lookin at your soul. In order to get better you’ll have to begin your trainin. The Great Spirits are getting impatient with you, so they’ve made you ill.”

“Great recruitment scheme they’ve got there. Conform or die.”

“If it is any comfort it happens to most of us. No one volunteers for this.”

“I feel really special. Just when I thought I was at the bottom, turns out I wasn’t.”

The raven makes a thick throaty sound and I realise it’s laughing. “You’re nowhere near bottom, yet.”

I sit on the log and watch the water on the shore. The rhythmic lapping is calming. The light sparkles across the waves. “I’m a man of silicon and cities. These ‘Great Spirits’, who are they?”

Corbie lifts his wings up a bit – some kind of bird shrug.

I’m shocked. “You don’t know? You’re taking orders from them and you don’t even know who they are?”

“Why should I? They’re ancient, subtle, alien. I’ve never met them. Archetypes would define them too strictly. Demean them even. We could call them Bear, Stag, Anansi, Odin, Tenjin and it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“Subtle as a brick if you ask me. What do you mean alien? Are they ETs? Am I an abductee?”

“Maybe I should have said other.” A cold breeze runs up the loch, ruffling the bird’s feathers. “We should get started. We don’t have much time.”

“Make a start on what?”

“Find what’s makin you sick. Usually there’s a part of your soul missin. Maybe it got snagged somewhere. Or somewhen.”

I laugh. "Now I know I'm really sick. Not only am being commanded by spirits, I'm hunting parts of my soul. This is some fever dream." I mark ashen circles on the rocks with the stick.

"If this was a dream you'd have little understandin and even less control."

Walking down to the water's edge, I stare at the stones at my feet. Picking up a perfect flat one, I turn it over a few times, feel its smoothness. Then I hunch down and skim it out over the loch. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven skips and it sinks down – a record. Never had more than five before.

Great Spirits. I laugh to myself. Having rejected all that religious crap when I was thirteen, I hadn't given it much time since. When the dreams started Mum insisted I was a shaman. She and my dad had blazing rows about it. He was a down to earth engineer; it was all in my head. No spiritual reality for him intruding into his son's consciousness. I just needed a good head doctor. Maybe he was right. But they looked hard enough, tried all the therapies they could think of. Still the dreams would come. Until last night.

Hallucination or not, perhaps this is just my body speaking to me, finding the mechanism to heal itself. "How do we find a piece of soul?" I say. "What does that look like?"

"You're going to hate this, but you'll know it when you see it."

"I always find things in the last place I look. Maybe I'll find it there."

Corbie blinks. "That's smart thinkin, but a bit too smart."

"Well maybe if you stopped being so fucking obscure that might help."

The bird flaps its wings, glides onto my shoulder, and whispers in my ear. "I'm not tryin to be obscure. I'm tryin to help you work things out for yourself. There's no Internet here to help you find the answers."

“Isn’t there?” This is my dream, isn’t it? “Computer, where will I find a lost soul?” To my surprise, a window opens up before me with a list of search engine results running down the pane. My mind is doing a good job of improvising. The Island of Lost Souls, The Bell of Lost Souls, Lost Souls the movie, the band, the game, the book, the album, some porno site with Goth girls – the list goes on. None of it very useful in itself, but it triggers the right connections. “The Land of the Dead. Where else?”

“Well done.”

“Gee, thanks. How do I get there without, you know, actually dying?”

“It’s also called the Underworld for a reason.”

Feeling like a bit of an eejit, but not humiliated, I start looking around for somewhere to go down. Orpheus went in through a cave I think, but there was a dog and a ferry-man. In my pockets I have 30 pence, not bad for dream change. That wouldn’t even get me through the turnstile for the toilets at Central Station. “I don’t think I have enough coins for Chiron.”

“That’s okay. The route we’ll take you won’t be needin it. Just have to cross the hair bridge,” Corbie says. “If you can’t find a path on land, maybe there’s one beneath the waves?”

At the edge of the loch, the salt water laps against my boots. Despite the sun, the water is slate-coloured and opaque. It looks cold. But I remember that childhood summer, disturbing crabs that lurked under the seaweed, and in and out of the water all day. I wade in. The water rises up over my boots, running inside, wicking up my trousers. It’s cool and clingy and I shiver. I force myself to keep going. I may live in a tent, but I’ve grown up a soft city-dweller. The water rises up to my knees, my thighs, my hips and I go under. Full immersion. The salt stings my eyes, the water is cloudy with silt, but I can see well enough to find my way. Hopefully there are no conger eels or other large beasties lurking out here.

A few meters out there's a hole where the raised beach falls off into the fjord. Clumsy in my clothes, I swim over to it and it looks like I can squeeze in. I look around for Corbie, but can't see him. I know what I have to do. I break the surface and take a deep breath then plunge down into the tunnel. Going in deep, my shoulders occasionally scrape the rock and then I realise I have no idea how far I need to go. The rock seems to push in on me and I have to hold in the air I have left. I push on, close to panic and then there is light up above. I kick upward, desperate. Bursting through the surface, I gasp for air. It is a few moments before I take in my surroundings. I am in a cave, a hole in the roof opens it up to the sky. A full moon hangs there perfectly illuminating the cave.

I pull myself out of the pool, water streaming down me, clothes a second wetter skin. The air is cool in here. I wring some of the water out of my shirt and trousers before peeling them back on again.

On the wall there are images, drawn in silver by the moonlight. Most of them are diamond shapes or the outlines of hands where paint has been blown over them. There are herds of bison. One or two are more complicated; a man appears to have been lanced by several spears, another has bird wings, a third has human rear legs, the body and tail of a deer, the arms and head of a human, but the face looks like an owl and antlers emerge from the head. All of them are done with perspective, like the Lascaux cave paintings. They look very real, rather than representative. Reflections from the pool almost seem to bring them to life.

Absorbed in these pictures, my clothes have dried, when I hear a scuffling noise. Could it be an animal coming home, or looking for a drink? I've not seen any bedding or bones. Maybe there are other people here, people trying to find their lost souls. I don't know what to expect, friend or foe.

Edging towards the slope leading up to the cave entrance, I feel nervous and afraid. I follow it up to the hole in the roof and poke my head out. The landscape is flat, empty except for a few weathered rocks and spiny bushes. Desolate is the word that comes to mind. Far in the distance mountains rise up, capped with snow. I'm almost glad that I can't see any dead people. Nothing is moving, except curls of dust, so I emerge feeling a little more confident. How could anything live here anyway? I must have heard the wind eroding rock or some loose stones finally losing to gravity.

There are no clues to which way I need to go, no river to follow, no handy signs. I start to miss Corbie. Where has the little bastard gone to? At least he knew what was going on. I must have been desperate or deluded to agree to this.

My body must have been found by now, given some antibiotics. I'll be better soon, come round. So who found me? Albert, who looked out for us in a way we clearly didn't look out for him, is in the mortuary or more likely a funeral home. Depends what day it is. He'll not notice anyone missing their routine now. What about Kathryn? She'll call me back, get worried when I don't pick up, come looking for me. Kathryn who's divorcing me. Moving on. Loyalty all used up, squandered while I slept in a park. There is no one at work. They'll only notice me gone if a server goes down and stays down. Maybe Sindi in the café? Sure, like she's going to miss a light tipper. This is my own mess, and I'll have to do it myself.

I follow my nose. It picks a mountain and I start heading towards it. I have no idea how much time is passing. The stars don't move and the constellations are unknown to me. If it wasn't for the moon I'd wonder if I was on an imaginary Earth at all. Come to think of it, the moon hasn't moved either. Its full face beams down at me, dumb, smug and benign. I look back and can't make out the cave I crawled from. The mountain is just as far away. It's like walking through a painting. I don't feel tired. I don't feel thirsty. More than anything I'm

plain bored of stubbing my toes on rocks and my legs being stabbed by the thorny bushes. I sit down just to have a break from the act of walking. Closing my eyes, I try to wake up in the real world, in my tent. When I open them again I'm still in the desert, and nothing has changed. I feel angry. This is so stupid. I'm trapped in my head – hidden in a dream.

A dream. My dream. Who's in charge here? I've dreamed I'm naked at school. I've flown. Sometimes I'm naked then too. Dreams are never this...concrete, but it's all in my head.

I rise up into the air. Just an inch, then two. I move forward in the air, a millimetre, an inch, a foot, a metre. And then back again. I levitate higher. If I fall I'll either die or wake.

I conjure a ball of fire in my left hand, a sword in my right. I keep my clothes on. You never know who you'll meet.

Corbie said something about a hairy bridge. It sounds unpleasant – a matted nest of grease and lice, rather than shampoo and silky.

Rising up into the air, higher and higher, my horizon recedes away. There is a cleft far off, almost beyond my sight. So far off that I can't be certain it isn't just a fault in the landscape.

Flying towards it, slower than walking, I feel slightly sick, like I used to in the backseat of the car when dad was driving. It passes and I try moving faster and faster. I'm at running speed, sprinting, and then flat out cycling. No bugs here to fly into my eyes and mouth.

The cleft broadens as I get closer. And deeper. It isn't a cleft. It's the wall on the far side of a canyon. A Grand Canyon. The far side is several miles away.

I fly over the edge. Then my support is kicked out from under me. I fall.

The edge slips past.

A long, thick root rushes toward me.

I hit it, hard. I slide off, and fall again.

My hands grasp it and hold.

My shoulders creak and my back muscles strain. But I hold on.

My heart is racing, my breathing heavy.

Looking down would be a bad idea. I know there is a clear mile or more to the bottom. My arms send me messages in pain. I ask more of them as I pull myself up onto the root. I straddle it and lie flat, resting for a moment.

The root tears grey soil from the canyon wall.

Slithering along it, I get up onto my feet as it comes away. Smaller roots stick out and I grab hold of them, pulling myself up towards the edge of the cliff bit by bit. My hands slip. My feet scramble for purchase. My grip is strained. I haul myself over the lip and stay there face down in the dust.

Eventually the pains in my arms, my chest, my back, all fade into the background. My breathing returns to normal. I sit up and try to wipe the dirt from my face using a hand caked in earth.

“What took you so long?” Corbie is perched on a large stake beaten into the ground.

I throw a clod of earth at him. It misses by miles and falls into the abyss.

“You need some anger management lessons,” Corbie says.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“Right here, at the hair bridge.”

“I can’t see any bridge.”

“Look closer.”

I look around, but the only object here is the stake. A thread is wound around the top, and then a single fine fibre stretches out from the stake and across the chasm. "What the hell kind of creature has a hair long enough to cross over a canyon?"

Corbie just gives his Gallic shrug.

"Since I can't fly over, I'm guessing I have to do some kind of high wire act on the hair." It can't be done. A hair that fine will snap as soon as I put my weight on it.

The bird just looks at me.

I get up, feeling stiff and raw. There's about two metres of hair before it passes over the edge and out across the wide canyon. Lifting my left foot onto the hair, I push down with some of my weight. Any moment I expect it to break and Corbie to rawk with laughter at his practical joke. The hair shifts a little but takes the weight I put on it. I increase my weight and to my surprise it appears to support me. Lifting my right foot I try to balance on the slender thread. I put my right foot down onto the hair and shift my weight forward. So far, so good. But I can still fall off onto dry earth. Moving my left in front of my right, my leg quivers as it tries to keep me upright. I put my arms out into a T-shape. I cross another foot over and come near to the cliff edge. The hair starts to give a little as it stretches under my weight.

While I want to jump off right now, I want to reach the other side and I know that it will be easier if I keep moving. Corbie jumps up onto my shoulder. I rock from side to side as I compensate for his weight and the surprise of him jumping on me. "Don't look down," he says. His thorns pass close to my ear, scratching the air beside it.

"I'll do my best not to." I would have batted him off, but I know it would only lead to me falling. Moving forward again, one foot is over the air. My breathing quickens. Sweat

breaks out on my forehead. My back and armpits are wet and my shirt sticks to my body. I struggle to regain control.

Slowly my breathing returns to normal. My legs feel weak already. There's still a long way to go. I've haven't done anything like this since PE in primary school. It's fair to say I was more interested in PCs.

I put another foot in front of the other, leaving the safety of the earth behind. I put another in front, and another. I start to gain confidence as I get some rhythm to my movement. Another foot and another. Another foot and another.

"Eyes front soldier." Corbie seems to sense my desire to turn my head to see how far I've gone. "Don't look down. Don't look left. Just look ahead."

"Yes, sir!" I keep on shuffling forward, feeling the empty space around me. It's like when I was flying, except I don't feel in control. I laugh. Is this a lesson or am I just seeing parallels?

"What's so funny?" says Corbie.

"I realised just how much we depend on things we can't see, we forget they're there. Like this bridge." I keep putting one foot in front of another. The soles of my feet are starting to hurt. The trembling in my legs is almost uncontrollable. I feel like I've been walking for an hour. "How much further?"

"I think you're about halfway."

"Great." A drop of sweat drips down off my nose. I can't help it. My eyes follow it. I look down. Just for a moment. There's no bottom to the canyon. It really is an abyss. It stretches down forever. No end, just darkness. Are there stars? It pulls me down.

A savage pain rips across my ear. I snap back. And lose my balance.

I stagger forward and back trying to right myself. I sway to the left and the right.

Corbie swings out like bullion in the back of a bus, before hopping across me to help me correct myself. I finally regain control but my legs are stiff rubber. Blood trickles down my ear onto my shoulder where Corbie slashed me.

Slowly I put one foot in front of another. My arms are heavy. My shoulders ache. Moving forward is the only way. One more step brings me one more step closer to the far side. The long line across my sight nears.

I try to lift my foot, but it won't come up. My legs are tired but not that worn down. I pull as hard as I can risk without overcompensating. It's like my shoes are stuck to the hair. The other one is the same. I risk a quick glance down. The hair is like a fine cheese wire. It has cut into the soles of my shoes. Turning my feet slightly helps me move forward, but makes balancing harder. Only a few more steps and the hair cuts through the soles again.

I reckon I'm about three quarters of the way there. The fine wire starts to slice into the soles of my feet. Each step is slippery, each footstep tricky, as I negotiate the lattice of existing incisions on the soles of my shoes, bearing the pain as I shift my weight, and then must try and get the ruins of my shoe loose again.

The far side is clear to me now. I can make out the stake the hair is suspended from on this side. It looks hauntingly familiar. For a moment it feels like I have gotten turned around and returned to where I came from. I almost let myself fall out of despair. But a small red ribbon whips out from around the stake.

I wish I could run the last few steps, but reaching the far side soon resembles Xeno's Paradox as I weakly make smaller and smaller forward movements. As it causes the hair to slip deeper into my calloused soles, I try not to slide my feet.

My final step is onto land which takes my whole weight. The dry dust sucks up the blood drips. I pitch forward as my leg collapses under me. Corbie flaps off. I don't even have the strength to turn over. Once more I just lie there breathing dirt.

Something jabs at my face and I bat it away lazily with my hand. Scorpion! I turn over and shuffle back. Only it's Corbie standing next to where I was lying. "I'd strangle you if I could hold onto your neck."

"We need to go," Corbie says. "You're dyin, remember? No time for lyin around nappin."

The Wounded Healer - Synopsis

Nik Munro is a former financial worker. Too proud to live with his family and mother in law, he lives in a tent city. He has the same nightmare every night. Until now. Now shadowy figures find the Shaman's Bone in his innards. Now, Corbie, a crow made of thorns, tells him the Great Spirits have chosen him to become a shaman.

Nik refuses to listen and carries on as normal, visiting his family. His wife asks him for a divorce and Nik reluctantly agrees. Returning home he finds that a fellow resident's dead body has still to be removed by the authorities and meets the man's granddaughter, Rachael. Taking Rachael to the morgue Nik starts to feel sick and the next night finds himself with Corbie in a trance state. Corbie tells him he needs to retrieve his soul from the Underworld or die from pneumonia.

Corbie takes Nik through his first steps to become a shaman. Nik crosses the challenge of the hair bridge to get into the Underworld, charms Cerberus, and outwits the Chairman of the City of the Dead. Returning to the Living World, Nik wakes in hospital and faces a far greater threat, moving in with his mum.

Returning to the tent city, he finds his space is gone and so he makes a new home in the disused railway tunnels underneath the park – a place much warmer now winter is beginning to bite. Corbie starts training Nik properly. He makes a drum from a fox's skin and a shaman's costume. Now he is able to journey to the spirit worlds. First he visits the Lower World, a riot of nature, and meets Midori, a seductive plant spirit who sees an opportunity in allying with a new shaman. Then Nik visits the upper world of ideas by climbing to the top of the Tree of Life.

Meanwhile Nik tries to balance his new life with his old, continuing to work, meeting up with Rachael, but still trying to get his marriage back. When a vagrant with a brain tumour, Stevie, stumbles into Nik's camp he realises that if he is to truly heal someone he needs to take his shamanic work seriously. Receiving only abuse from spirits in the upper world and making the mistake of sleeping with Midori, Nik is failing to make any progress. Finding that Corbie has a revolutionary agenda leads him to work on his own. Nik discovers another spirit realm of knowledge and information where alien beings agree to help him, for a price.

The alien spirits manifest in the Living World, causing a media frenzy to fall on Nik, but helping heal Stevie. When Nik discovers that the coldest winter night ever seen in Glasgow is coming he realises he must do a deal with the spirits of frost and ice to protect the residents of the tent city. A deal that sees Nik lose his thumb.

Rachael discovers that Nik slept with Midori and walks away. Corbie leaves saying he has nothing more to teach Nik who loses his job after all the media scrutiny. Just when he thinks he has finally hit rock bottom he sees he has been left a gift of cans of food. Perhaps his work is appreciated after all?