

The Pedlar

by

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The Pedlar

It was nearly Christmas and the December air was cold with the sharp tang of salt, in Bickering on Sea. The local shops were decorated and many were playing seasonal pop music over their public address systems. In the offices above Woolworths, Jemima Penn was staring out of the window next to her desk, watching the grey clouds scud across the sky. She was a pretty young woman, but rather a slave to fashion. Her blonde hair was almost solid with hair-spray, styled in the latest fashion, her blue eyeshadow was heavy, and her dress, which she had made herself, was white, patterned, and the spitting image of one worn by Glenda Jackson.

There was no doubt that today Jem was completely distracted. Excitement was gnawing in her stomach and she was entirely unable to focus on the pile of typing and filing which was piled precariously on the corner of her desk. Instead, she chewed on the end of a pencil and dreamed of her Jack.

“Miss Penn? Tell me, is there something more pressing going on outside of the window?”

Jemima was pulled out of her reverie and looked around, dazed.

“What?”

“Not what, Miss Penn. Pardon.”

“Sorry, Pardon... Miss Possett?”

Miss Possett loomed over her and sighed heavily, her patience sorely tried by silly girls. “I asked you, Miss Penn, if there was something more pressing or urgent on the outside of the window than there is on the inside?”

“Er... no. I don’t think so. Why?”

“Because, Miss Penn, you are staring. Outside. At whatever is going on there. And I can’t help but notice that there is a large stack of paperwork demanding your attention on your desk which, it seems to me, would be a far better use for your divided attention.”

Jemima was confused, which wasn't unusual. "I'm sorry, Miss Possett, I don't understand."

Miss Emeline Possett was an imposing woman. She was tall, statuesque one might say, and always stood proud, shoulders back, chin up, ample chest thrust out. She was in charge of the typists and clerks at Possett, Possett and Pugh, Chartered Accountants, and spent large parts of the day prowling their floor of the offices, which were above several shop fronts at the centre of Bickering on Sea's High Street. She did so with vigor and purpose, the staccato clop of her sensible shoes on the tiled floor more than enough to warn the staff of her approach. Jem, however, had been so engrossed in her study of the winter skies that she had missed it entirely.

All of the girls were frightened of Emeline Possett, and most of the men too for that matter. She was the organised heartbeat of her elderly father's business. A spinster who, while not unattractive, laboured under the reputation of a dragon. In truth, she was driven and realised that, as a woman, if she were to succeed, she must work harder at everything she did than the men around her. So that is what she did, at both chartered accountancy and as a founder member of BWFE (Bickering Women for Equality).

She walked slowly towards Jemima's desk, her heels like the beat of a drum on the day of execution. "Miss Penn," she asked, her forehead wrinkled and eyes piercing, "why are you staring out of the window when you have such a lot of work to do?"

Standing next to the desk now, she towered over the pretty young clerk, pointing imperiously at the buff files in the in tray to illustrate her point.

"Oh, sorry, Miss Possett," Jem replied with an ill-judged smile. "I didn't get what you meant."

"You rarely do." Emeline muttered.

"I was thinking about my Jack. He's coming for Christmas with us tomorrow and I was thinking about that."

"Your Jack?"

Jemima entirely failed to read the signals, even while other members of the office staff made a point of ducking behind their typewriters to avoid what they were sure would be the inevitable blast.

"Yeah," the blonde girl replied, "We're engaged, you know? We're

getting married in the summer and he's coming to meet my family properly for Christmas. I was thinking about that."

"Really? You were thinking about that, rather than your work?"

The picture of innocence, Jemima replied, "Yes, Miss Possett. Do you think it'll be alright?"

The question hung in the air, like a butterfly in the path of a fly swat. For just a moment, Miss Possett looked as if she might destroy the butterfly, but, in a possible moment of weakness, because it surely could not be kindness, she sighed and spoke gently. "Jemima, you must concentrate at work, you really must. You're not a stupid girl, but if you want to get anywhere in the world you have to work hard. You certainly can't expect to get anywhere by staring out of windows and daydreaming. And you certainly can't let a young man distract you. He's not a handsome prince, you know, and you're not Cinderella. The way for a young woman to get on in life is not on the arm of a man, but by her own hard work, wits, and sense of purpose."

Jemima wasn't so distracted that she didn't notice the unusual softening in her boss's voice. She looked up for a few seconds, listening carefully, until the moment passed when Miss Possett straightened up once more and spoke loudly enough for the whole office to hear. "Get on with your work, young lady. Now!"

"Yes, Miss Possett. Sorry, Miss Possett."

Emeline Possett turned away and clopped back to her own office in the back corner of the large open plan space, shutting the door behind her. Ralph Flint leaned forward, from the next desk but one, and said, "That was close, Jem. I thought she was going to let you have it with both barrels."

"Was it?" Jemima answered, in an apparently nonchalant way. But her smile betrayed more clearly than her tone that she knew she had had a close shave.

Ralph smiled, "The Christmas spirit must be getting to her, eh? Even an old cow like Possett can have a heart at Christmas."

"She's not that bad," Jem answered and turned back to her work. For the rest of the afternoon she worked hard, managing to clear her desk. Even Miss Possett was pleased, nodding her approval as she walked by at her end of day inspection.

At 5:30pm, Jemima put on her coat, ready to leave, and retrieved her handbag from the bottom filing drawer of her desk. Ralph walked over in a way he must have thought was nonchalant and leaned on her desk. The way he stammered his invitation showed he was anything but nonchalant. “I just wondered, do you fancy a drink on the way home?”

Jem looked at him and noticed that his face was already preparing for rejection. She almost felt sorry for him. “No thanks, Ralph. I’ve got to get home and get ready for Jack. Maybe another time, eh?” By which she meant, no, not ever.

Ralph covered his disappointment with a laugh. “No worries, eh? Me and the lads’ll just have to get on without you.”

Jem gave him a half smile, hoisted her handbag over her shoulder and walked quickly towards the door and out of the office, punching her card as she left.

Jemima Penn walked quickly through the centre of Bickering on Sea, coat wrapped around her to keep warm in the cold wind. The evening was dark and the wind seemed to come straight from the north pole. She wondered if Jack felt the same chill in London.

She hurried up the hill, past the Chapel, across the road and onto the council estate. She walked fast, passing house after identical house, each one’s lights shining into the winter evening, illuminating tableaux of mums and wives in kitchens, preparing tea for their families, washing up, working hard.

She reached the back of the estate where the new houses made way for Victorian terraced houses, which were much larger, and brooded in the evening gloom. These too looked almost as identical. They backed onto Bickering Woods at the eastern edge of the town, not too far from Beacran’s Ring. The row of houses where she lived were special, because they had been the birthplace of Mungo Ronald Possett. When the council estate had been built after the war, the Grey family had seen to it that these were saved because of their historic significance. The house where she lived had been her Nan and Grandad’s, and it was in the middle of the row.

Jemima burst through the front door, into the warmth and smells of home. She slammed it behind her and hung her bag on one of the hooks in the hallway.

Her mum called from the kitchen, “Is that you Love?”

“Who else would it be, mum?” she replied.

“You never know, do you? How was work, dear?”

“It was alright.” Jem hung up her coat and walked over to lean on the kitchen doorframe. Her mum was standing with her back to her, washing up a pan. Her apron looked strange, tied as it was over her best coat.

“New look, Mum?” Jemima asked. “Not sure the apron goes with the coat.”

“Oh, very funny. You know I’m meeting your dad up the Social Club tonight. It’s Country and Western Night, remember? You’ll have to see to yourself.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Your tea’s under the grill, and I’ll wash up your things when I get home. You can eat in front of the telly if you like... but don’t tell your father.”

Brenda Penn peeled off her rubber gloves, laid them carefully over the edge of the sink and turned to look at her daughter. She was smiling as she untied her apron and hung it on the back of the door. She was always smiling. She looked nothing like her daughter, who favoured her Nan. The most similar thing about them was their blonde hair, although there was quite a lot of grey in Brenda’s.

“I can wash up Mum, you know that, don’t you?” Jemima commented.

“I know Love,” Brenda replied, kissing her daughter gently on the cheek, “But you’ve been working all day and it’s my job. Besides, I need you to make up your Nan’s room for your Jack. We can’t have him arriving and not having anywhere to sleep, can we?”

For a moment, sadness clouded Brenda’s face, blotting out her smile. Then it was back again.

“I miss her too Mum.” Jemima said, giving her a hug.

Mrs Penn laughed in a forced way and picked up her handbag from the kitchen table. “The bedding’s on the dresser in her room. It’s pink. Do you think he’ll mind?”

“I shouldn’t think so. I’ll sort it out Mum, don’t worry. You go and have fun

with Dad.”

“Hmm. Slim Whitman is the last thing I need, but your dad enjoys it,” Mrs Penn said as she bustled towards the front door. As she closed it behind her, she called, “Have a nice evening, Love!”

Jemima stood for a few moments, alone in the silence. She felt it enrobe her, together with the comforting smells of home, and it reminded her of her Nan. The house had always been hers, but now she was no longer there. Jem missed her so much.

She had moved in with the old lady with her mum and dad about 3 years before, after grandad had died from a heart attack. Hilda had gone downhill after that, getting more and more forgetful, until she had died a few months before. Her passing had left a huge gap in all of their lives. Despite the forgetfulness, Nan had always been such a funny, lively old lady. Full of stories, as well as wisdom and good advice. “Don’t just choose anyone, Jem,” she had said, when she heard that her granddaughter was dating a boy from London. “It has to be the right one. Kind, fun and willing to put you before himself.”

“Jack loves me,” Jemima had replied.

“Good,” the old lady had answered. She’d repeated the advice about four more times, but each time left it at just a little advice because Hilda never pushed herself into Jem’s life, even if she had something to say. If Nan had still been alive, Jem would have been keeping her company tonight. Watching TV, talking about grandad, and drinking tea. The fact that she wasn’t simply made the house feel even more empty. Jemima would have liked Jack to meet her.

Jem turned back to walk into the kitchen, and caught sight of herself in the hallway mirror. She stopped for a moment and looked at herself. She knew she was pretty, because her Nan had always told her so and boys had been trying to ask her out all the time, since she had been at school.

The most persistent was Ralph, at the office. She’d lost count of the number of times he’d asked her out and she’d put him off, but he kept trying. He was nice enough, she thought. Good looking, clever, funny, but he wasn’t really her type. For a start, he came from Bickering on Sea. But, worse than that, he actually liked the place and seemed to enjoy his work too. Whereas, she was bored. Eight years, doing a job she found boring, in an office she found boring, in a town she found boring.

He didn’t have any ambition to move somewhere bigger or more

exciting, and she simply couldn't get her head around that. She had once talked to him about moving to London, which was her dream, and he'd replied that he couldn't understand why anyone would want to leave Bickering. "After all, he said, Bickering's a place you stay in, not a place you leave." The worst thing was that most of her friends agreed. All she wanted to do was get out. The people in Bickering were weird, and she was so fed up with strange things happening.

As she looked in the mirror, the locket around her neck caught her eye. Once more, her Nan rose in her thoughts. She had given Jemima the gold locket just before she had died. One of a pair. A very precious gift. Her Nan had always worn one of them, and her Grandad the other. In fact, one of Jemima's favourite memories of her Nan was, as a child, sitting on her knee, fiddling with the locket while she snuggled up for a cuddle.

"Do you like that, Lovie?," Nan had asked.

"It's nice. You always wear it."

"I do. And I've worn it since I got it, and Grandad wears one the same."

"Why?"

"It kept me together with your Grandad when he was at war. It's something special."

"Does he still wear it then?" Jem had asked. He had been alive back then and probably in his garden, or at the allotment, while Nan looked after her.

"He does, Lovie." She replied.

Then Jemima remembered sitting at her Nan's bedside, when the old lady had been very poorly, just before she died. The frail old woman had been like a skeleton, propped up on her pillows, when she had pressed the small wooden box into her granddaughter's hands. Inside, on a blue velvet cushion, had been both lockets.

"Do you want me to have them, Nan?" Jem had asked.

The old lady simply smiled gently and nodded, squeezing her granddaughter's hand once more in reassurance. She had trouble talking, but still whispered, "Don't lose them, Jem." Then she closed her eyes, exhausted by even that small effort, and slept. A few days later, the old lady had died. Jem had been with her, reading *Watership Down* at the time. She never did finish that

book.

Jem had looked in the locket after her Nan died, because the old lady would never let her look while she was alive. She found that neither had a picture, only blank black paper, very like photographic paper, stuck inside. Remembering that her Nan and Grandad had always worn them, and that Nan had said they kept them together, Gem made sure that her Nan wore the twin when she was buried, so she and Jem could always be kept together. Not even her mum knew, only the Funeral Director who had helped her put it on when she went to see her in the chapel of rest.

Now she always wore her locket, on a chain long enough that it nestled below the neckline of her dress and could stay tucked away. But, in the light of the hallway, it sparkled as it hung outside of her clothes. It probably fell out when she had taken off her coat. Jem picked up the locket and held it for a few seconds, the cool reassuring smoothness of its surface in her long fingers was a comfort and reminder that she was always close to her Nan.

After she retrieved her dinner from the oven, Jemima put it on a tray and ate it while she watched the rest of Top of the Pops. She made sure, when she had finished, that she took her tray back to the kitchen, to make sure her dad didn't know she'd eaten in front of the telly (he hated it), and curled up in his favourite chair, a cup of tea beside her.

Jemima woke very suddenly when there was a knock at the door. For a moment she was uncertain if the knocking was real, a part of her dreams, or something on the telly. The mantelpiece clock said that it was still only 8:30 and the jolly strains of 'Some Mothers do 'Ave 'Em' were playing on the TV. Jem uncurled herself from the armchair and turned the telly off as quickly as she could... She hated Frank Spencer.

The knocking at the door came again, so it wasn't a dream. Jem walked into the hall, checked her hair in the mirror, and opened the front door. She wasn't prepared for the sight which greeted her.

In the pool of spilled light from the hallway stood a wide shouldered man of average height and far less than average appearance. He was dressed in a black frockcoat and wore a top hat, with several feathers and interesting leaves tucked into the band. He wore highly polished black boots, into which were tucked bright green trews, and on his back he carried a very large pack, which

looked far too heavy for one man. Hanging from the backpack were pots, pans, and all sorts of other interesting items, and she could make out tantalising shapes beneath the material of the pack too. The man himself leaned against an ornately carved dark wooden staff to help him balance and, in a curiously sing-song voice, he said, “Hello Hilda. How do I find yer?”

The words didn’t really register with Jem. She flicked on the outside light in disbelief, just to make sure, but the man’s clothes remained the same. He smiled an expectant, gold-toothed grin. His face seemed ordinary, neither very young or old, but he wore little, round, John Lennon glasses, which glittered a reflection from the lights. He also had the most magnificent sideburns she had ever seen and, later, Jem thought he reminded her of Noddy Holder.. if he’d been dragged back to Victorian times through a chimney.

“So, Hilda, aren’t you going to invite me in?” He asked in a friendly manner.

“I’m not Hilda,” Jemima answered in confusion.

“Are you not?”

“No, I’m Jemima. Hilda was my Nan.”

“Are you, now?” he replied. “Oh, I do beg your pardon. Might I perhaps ask, when am I?”

“Excuse me?”

“I asked, when am I?”

“What a strange question. You’re in Bickering on Sea.”

“Not where, Jemima Penn... when?”

Jemima stood quite still, unsure how to reply. Curiously, she wasn’t worried by this stranger. He looked strange, but she felt perfectly safe.

He spoke again, “I’m sorry, Jemima Penn, who looks ever so like Hilda. I don’t mean to confuse you, but when am I?”

“Well, it’s nearly Christmas. It’s Thursday.”

“What year might you call it?”

“1973. Why?”

“December the 22nd?” he asked. His forehead wrinkled as if he was

making a tricky calculation.

“No, sorry. It’s the 20th. December 20th, 1973. Why?”

He took out a pocket watch from his waistcoat and tapped the glass on the front. “Oh, shit,” he said, “I’m dreadfully sorry. Something seems to have gone wrong. Oh well.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes, I’m late. If I was here on the 22nd then I would be talking to Hilda Penn.”

“That’s my Nan’s name, you know.”

“It would be your Nan I would be after.”

“But she still wouldn’t be,” Jem said. “She died in September. Did you know her?”

“Oh yes, when she was young... like you. You’re the spit of her, you know that?”

“You can’t have known her when she was young. You’re not that old. She was 83.”

“I imagine she was, Jemima Penn. I imagine she was.”

“Look, I’m sorry to say it, you really are very strange, you know that?.”

“I imagine I am to you... how about we start again?”

He closed his eyes and, for a moment, as if calming himself. When he opened them again, he smiled and said, more confidently, in his sing song voice, “Good evening to you, young woman. My name is Jeremiah Scraggs and I’m looking for Mrs Hilda Penn. Would you please be kind enough to tell me if she might be at home?”

Jem looked at him as if he were mad. “I just told you, she died three months ago.”

“In which case, I am most dreadfully sorry to have disturbed your evening. I can only offer you my sincerest condolences and be on my way. Goodnight.”

Jeremiah turned with some difficulty, because of the sheer size of his backpack, and started to walk back down the short garden path.

He was pulled up suddenly short, when Jemima, without thinking, grabbed

one of the straps on his pack and pulled it back in an effort to stop him walking away. Jeremiah Scraggs, burdened as he was by the pack, staggered backwards a step, tried to keep his balance, before sitting down hard on the pathway, with a clatter from the pots and pans.

Jemima gasped in horror and rushed to his aid. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen. I just wanted to ask you what you meant. Are you alright, Mr Scraggs?”

He looked up at her, over the top of his glasses, an expression of amused impatience on his face. “I’m fine, thank you. Although both my pride and my posterior might be a little bruised.”

Jeremiah made several fruitless efforts to get up. “I wonder if I might trouble you for a helping hand, Jemima Penn?”

“Of course,” the young woman answered, offering her hands in anticipation of pulling him up. Jeremiah looked at them, and then at her. “That’s not quite what I had in mind, my dear. Would you be kind enough to hand me my stick?”

“Oh, sorry.” She looked around and retrieved his ornate stick from the flower bed next to the path and offered it to the prone man. He smiled in thanks and, with a whoosh of air, swung it violently over his left shoulder. The stick hit hard against his backpack, causing the pack to make a whirring sound as, from the bottom, there emerged something like mechanical spiders’ legs which groped around looking for purchase. When they had found what they were looking for, the little legs lifted both pack and man from the floor and balanced the huge pack at exactly the right height to allow Jeremiah Scraggs to undo the shoulder straps and step away. The backpack stood in the middle of the garden path, like a very odd spider. Jem’s jaw dropped in shock.

Jeremiah smiled, “Good, isn’t it? Without the legs, it’s a devil to put on again, you know?”

“How?... what?...” Jemima spluttered.

“It’s just a bit of helpful fun is all,” said Jeremiah. He straightened his coat and smiled a golden smile, “It seems to me that you don’t want me to leave just yet. So, how may I help you, Jemima Penn, who looks so like Hilda?”

Jem wasn’t one to be surprised for long and asked, “How do you know my Nan? Why are you talking so strangely? And what the hell is in that pack that

lets it do that?"

"Do you really want to know?" Jeremiah Scraggs asked.

"Of course, I do."

"Well, the pack's easy. It's just a little machine is all. As the for the other questions, perhaps you might be good enough to make me a cup of tea, and I'll explain?"

"My parents'll be home soon," Jemima said. "I'm not sure they'll be very keen on me letting strange men into the house."

Jeremiah took the pocket watch out again, looking at it carefully and said, "No, they won't. Your Dad hasn't even finished his second pint yet. Besides, I'm not a stranger. I'm a friend of your grandmother's." He gallantly gestured Jemima towards the open door.

"What about your backpack?" she asked as she led the way after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh, don't worry about that," he replied, "it won't let anyone take it."

Jemima led Jeremiah Scraggs through the house and into the sitting room, where she served him tea in her Nan's second-best china.

"It's changed a bit," he commented, as he sipped from his cup, sat in her mother's usual armchair. A beatific smile lit up his face as he slurped, "I do love tea," he said. "It's always the thing I enjoy most, when I come here. That and the company, of course."

"When was that?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"You said it's changed since you were last here. When was that?" Jem hadn't touched her tea.

"About twelve months ago. Although I'm starting to suspect it might be quite a bit longer. How old did you say she was? Hilda, I mean. When she died?"

"83."

"Well then," he looked into the distance, calculating. "I'd say that would

make it about twelve months, and 60 years ago.”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“I know, good isn’t it? It was December 22nd, 1914.”

Jem’s jaw dropped. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I know,” he replied in an infuriating tone which made the impossible sound almost reasonable. “The last time I was here, that dresser was on the other wall... the curtains were red... there was a painting of Christ knocking at the heart’s door over the fireplace, which was a coal fire, rather than gas, and there wasn’t one of those boxes in the corner. I believe it’s called a television?”

“I don’t get it. That’s impossible.”

“You’d think so. But you still believe me, don’t you?” He finished his cup of tea and held it out for a refill. While Jem poured another from the pot, the man moved his top hat, which had been next to his chair, so it was in front of him on the floor. When his cup was full once more, he leaned back in the chair put his feet up on the hat.

Jemima sat down in her father’s chair and looked hard at her visitor, her thoughts in turmoil. “Are you telling me that you know my Nan? That you met her in 1914, which is... er... about 60 years ago? Even though you don’t look old enough. And now you’re here talking to me?”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“But that’s impossible.” Jemima insisted.

“You keep saying that, but it’s true all the same.”

The young woman hesitated. She thought about some of the stories her Nan told her about the strange things that happened in Bickering on Sea, and the man’s tale didn’t seem quite so ridiculous. “Nan used to tell me stories,” she said slowly, “and I thought they were just stories.”

Jeremiah smiled, “Beacran is stranger than you can possibly imagine and if your Nan told you some stories, then perhaps they were truer than you gave her credit for. She probably heard some of them from me.” He seemed proud. “Before we met, she didn’t know very much about it at all.”

“Do you mean Bickering? Most of the stories don’t make sense.”

“Of course they didn’t,” Jeremiah said. “People, especially in your reality,

don't like to think these things are real. But they are."

"My reality? What's reality got to do with it? None of this seems very real," Jemima shook her head.

"Yes. Realities are what I travel between. But most people here call these things legends, in an attempt to explain things they don't understand. But it doesn't mean these things aren't true now."

"Time travel is true?"

"Not time travel. Although that is true. Travel between realities. I travelled here from another reality. Another version of here. But if you think it's too ridiculous and don't want to believe me, I won't stop you. Maybe I'd better go, so that you can make up something as an explanation and put this meeting down to something like temporary madness, or bad cheese, or something else. You can carry on with your boring life then, if you like."

Jeremiah still had his feet stretched out in front of him and, when Jem didn't answer, he said, "Or you can be like Hilda. Your Nan. She sat in almost exactly the same place you're sitting now, and believed. She accepted my gift, and the promise that we would meet again. Which, unfortunately, is not very likely now."

"But how?" she asked. "I don't get any of this..."

"Do you want to hear an explanation?"

Jemima nodded.

Scraggs placed his cup on the table beside him, steepled his fingers, cleared his throat, and said, "Very well. Beacran, or Bickering, as you know it, stands on the conjuncture of three powerful ley lines. These are invisible lines of mystic power which run all over every world."

"I've heard of them. The palm reader on the pier talks about them."

"Well, where two ley lines cross, out of the ordinary things tend to happen. But where three ley lines cross, as happens here, it is possible for travel between realities through portals which are anchored in the landscape. There are many different realities and, where the ley lines cross, the walls between those realities are very thin. If you know how, you can travel between them by using the portals. Portals like Beacran's Ring."

"You travel between worlds?" she asked incredulously.

“Not simply worlds. These are the same world, but different realities. Different versions of here, this world. Versions where very different things have happened and where the laws of reality are different too. There can be many similarities, most especially geography and land masses (although not always), but there are always differences. Some are covered in snow, in one there is a single global city, others are at war and, in my reality, there is a great deal of what you call magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yes. So, as a result, we have never needed to invent some of the things you take for granted. The horseless carriage and...” he pointed at the TV, “things like that. We don’t have what you call electricity, so we don’t have television as you know it. We also have more than one intelligent species, so our reality isn’t simply dominated by humans.”

“How come I’ve never heard of this before?” she asked.

“It’s not something that people in your reality like to talk about. Remember, I told you about people who try to explain things away with legends and myths? The fact is, travel between realities happens all the time in different places all over your reality, and mine. Each reality has lots of ancient portals where the ley lines cross and the walls between realities are very thin. Places where travel can happen. In yours, they are in Salisbury, Upsalla, Olympus, Uluru, Machu Piccu, Djenne, and many other places too. Have you heard of them?”

“They’re just landmarks and historical sights aren’t they? Apart from Beacran’s Ring. That’s just a place in the woods near here where they tell lots of stories about weird creatures and other stuff. My dad says that anyone who hangs around up there is just a “bloody hippy.””

Jeremiah shrugged, “I’m sorry to say that your Father is very wrong. You must have heard of the creatures in the Greek myths, vampires, fairies, elves, dwarves, and other ancient legends like them? All of them are real... somewhere. There is a reality, for example, where the dominant species is half horse and half human.”

“Centaur’s? Like in Jason and the Argonauts.”

“Jason and the what? But yes, they are real. Here they are legends, but they’re real too. So, do you know what I’m saying? Bickering, as you call it, is one of those places in the world where travel between realities is possible. The legends simply give those who don’t want to think about these things an

explanation to smirk at.”

Jemima was dumbstruck. It all seemed too strange. Like something from the Twilight Zone. The man she was talking to looked pretty strange to begin with, but it was nothing compared to what he was talking about.

Jeremiah continued, “The place where I live is called Beacran (like the ring) and is identical to your Bickering in geography. It is on the coast, with a river and it even has a ring of stones in the forest, but there are very great differences too. In my reality, there is no town, only a trading settlement near the stones. The nearest town is in the place you call Squabbling, and it is called Harpenden.”

“Do the stones exist in every reality?” Jemima asked.

“Yes. Or something very like them. And I, together with my community, use them to move between realities, trade goods, meet people and prepare.”

“Prepare for what?” she asked.

Jeremiah ignored her question, “While travel between realities is possible, there are still complications which can occur. Unfortunately, the reason I am talking to you is because of one of these. I thought I was going to be travelling to see your grandmother, Hilda, in 1915. Instead, I am here in 1973.

“One of those complications is that you can inadvertently move through time as well as reality. It is rare, but in certain circumstances you can end up moving backwards or forwards on the timeline as well as to a different reality.

“Most especially, it happens at certain times in the year, when the borders of reality are at their thinnest and the power that flows between worlds is at its most unpredictable. You know those times as Solstices. Actually, so do we, but when we travel at those times, things can get a little strange and very unpredictable.

“For three or four days either side of the Solstice, it is more difficult to travel directly between realities, because things are more likely to go wrong and you can appear at the right place, but in the wrong time.

“That’s what happened to me. I was intending to travel to December 1915 to visit Hilda and, instead I am here in 1973. Not what I expected. But, since the Solstice is so close, it seems I made an error.”

“Are you telling me that, not only can you can travel between realities

whenever you want, but during the Solstice it is most likely to go wrong?"

"Yes."

"So why travel at the Solstice at all?" Jem asked.

Jeremiah blinked. He hadn't expected her to understand so quickly, even a part of what he was saying, so he wasn't prepared for the insight of the question. "Well, um... yes... the truth is, Solstice is the time when other people are less likely to travel, so I'm less likely to be seen."

"Why?"

Jeremiah ignored her question again. "The theory is that the reality and place you travel from is called Zero. That Zero reality is anchored in time and space, so it is the reality and place to which you return. But, during the Solstice, travel isn't quite so stable. During Solstice, you can leave Zero and end up moving forward and backwards in time - inadvertently, of course, because you can't control time travel. Although you will still return to Zero when you return, there is, I am told, about a 240 year window either side of Zero, where you can end up. I have moved forward by 59 years from my intended destination. I won't be able to go back to visit Hilda again, since I might end up disrupting time and, that would be a disaster in every reality. Do you understand?"

Jem looked thoughtful. This was certainly not what she had expected of her evening. She had completely forgotten about preparing Jack's room and her parents. "I think so. You seem to be saying that normally, time in your reality and mine are the same, but during the Solstice, it can go a bit... elastic? So, why not travel when it's easier? Why travel at all at the Solstice and why don't you want to be seen?"

"I'm not supposed to be doing it during the Solstice, but I have to," Jeremiah replied. "In my reality, the circle is closed during the Solstice and no travel is allowed. They close it to stop things like this from happening. But I am doing something that's very important, so need to travel when no-one will see me. During ordinary times, a very strict record of the things we carry when we travel is kept by the Guardians, to make sure there is no smuggling. They don't want us leaving objects in other realities, in case they cause problems, and they don't want us bringing things into our reality which might... undermine... Anyway, we're watched very carefully."

"Who are the Guardians?"

“They’re the ones who make sure that the portals, like the stones, aren’t misused. They guard my reality. Every reality has Guardians of some kind or other.”

“There are Guardians at Beacran’s Ring?”

“Certainly.”

“Who are they?” Jem asked.

“I have no idea, but I know they’re there.”

“But you travelled here despite the Guardians in your reality? And you did it at a time of year when it’s most difficult and problems are most likely to happen so you wouldn’t be noticed, because you don’t want the Guardians knowing what you’re carrying between realities.”

Jeremiah looked uncomfortable, “Sort of.”

“What kind of things?” Jemima asked. “And why don’t you want them to be seen?”

Jeremiah pointed at her chest, which made Jem blush. He reached forward, but she flinched back, suddenly aware that she was alone in a room with a strange man. He stopped, “The locket,” he said. “Things like that locket.”

She grabbed the locket which hung around her neck, feeling the cool of the golden surface on the palm of her hand. “My Nan gave it to me,” she asserted.

“And I gave it to your Nan,” Jeremiah Scraggs said simply.

“Why?”

Jemima thought she saw a hungry look in his eye, but as he sat back and smiled, the smile eventually reached his eyes too and the tension lessened. “You see, Jemima, the things they don’t like us taking into other realities are magical objects. I told you that in my Beacran, magic is far, far stronger than here. In fact, my world is a place where magic flows freely and everything that we make is imbued with it. The... leader, of my world doesn’t like any of our objects to be taken into other realities. Especially realities where innate magic is scarce and the objects themselves can be hidden.

“You see, in my reality, we can weave magic in many different ways and objects can be sensed and found by the tenor of magic that is within them. In realities like yours, where magic simply isn’t real, we are unable to do magic ourselves and we cannot, therefore, sense the magic objects. The objects,

however, retain some of their power and become valuable here, but can therefore be effectively hidden.”

“So, you gave it to my Nan to hide it?”

“In a way, but also so that she could use it.”

“But this locket isn’t magic. It’s just a locket.”

“Is it?” Jeremiah asked. “As a pair, the lockets are linked.”

Jemima looked worried for a second. “As a pair?”

“Where is the other one?”

Jemima sat up straighter, “I don’t think that’s any of your business. My Nan gave them to me.”

Scraggs sat very still. He took his feet off of their resting place on his hat and leaned forward, speaking intently. “Jemima Penn, it is my business. I gave the lockets to your grandmother in 1914 to look after, together with something even more valuable”

“How do I know what you’re saying is true?” she asked. Jemima often hid behind stridency when she was unsure.

“Do we need to go through it all again?” he said. Jeremiah reached into his waistcoat and took out a ring. “OK, perhaps this will prove it. This is a ring from my world and it has several very important properties. The most important is that it allows the wearer to see other people for what they are. When they wear the ring, they see, superimposed over the image of the person they are looking at, the likeness of an animal that represents their character. So, for example, if you were to see a Lion superimposed over your view of a person, you would know they were strong, royal and dignified. Or whatever virtues or qualities you understand in the character of the animal you see.”

“What good is that?” Jemima asked.

“I would have thought it was obvious. Do you know who you can trust, Jemima Penn? Do you really know the true character of the people around you?” She shook her head. “Exactly. I suggest, to prove the truth of my words, you try this ring and see what happens.”

Jeremiah passed it to Jem. Just as she was about to take it, he kept hold of it and said, “But this is to prove my point. After which you will tell me where the other locket is.” She nodded and took the ring.

When Jemima put the ring on her thumb, which was the only finger big enough for a comfortable fit, something seemed to shift in her vision and, suddenly, Jeremiah changed. The bespectacled man with sideburns and wild hair was still sitting there, but superimposed over him was the image of a dog or wolf, its piercing eyes staring at her.

She looked away, quite scared of the force of the creature's stare, and caught sight of a photo of her Nan on a side table. She knew the image of her beloved Nan so well, but this time, overlaying that image, was the wisest looking owl she had ever seen. Its eyes were closed, but there was such an impression of peace that she almost cried.

Again, Jemima looked away, down this time, in an effort to find some relief from the apparitions she was seeing. But her eyes alighted on the Radio Times magazine, on the cover of which was a photo of Morecambe and Wise, and The Two Ronnies. Each of them had a different animal overlaying them; Ronnie Barker was a fox, Ronnie Corbett a fluffy rabbit, Ernie Wise a shire horse, and Eric Morecambe was an orange-maned orangutan with huge jowls. Jem tugged the ring off her finger in a near panic, almost panting for breath.

"How the hell did you do that?" she demanded.

"You know how. We talked about it. Can I ask you? I'm always interested to know, what animal was I?" Scraggs asked.

Jem couldn't think of a reason not to say. "You were a wolf... with very piercing eyes."

"And what qualities do you think of when you see a wolf," he asked.

"Fierceness, the pack, running wild and free, danger," she replied.

"A good answer. Are you afraid of wolves, Jem?"

"Not especially. We don't have them, but I know they're wild, they come from somewhere else, and they can be dangerous."

"Do you think I'm dangerous?" Jeremiah asked.

"No. Not at the moment. I don't think so."

"You're right, Jemima. You have nothing to fear from me, as long as you're in my pack. But I can be... dangerous. When I have to be." His smile was gentle, but she could still see his teeth, even though she could no longer see the wolf. "You looked at the photo of Hilda, didn't you?" he asked. "At least I think it's

Hilda, but she looks so much older than I remember. What animal did you see there?”

“A wise and beautiful owl. Why does it work on pictures?”

“I have no idea. Is an owl a good thing?”

“Yes. It’s perfect for Nan. Wise and beautiful.”

“I agree. I saw something very similar, when I met her. It’s one of the reasons I trusted her. But what about you Jemima Penn? Is there someone you don’t trust? What do you see with the ring then? That’s the test for whether it works or not.”

Jemima stood up and walked to the bookshelves. She pulled a large, hardback book from the shelf and returned to her seat. It was a coffee table book about World War Two. Her father was fascinated by the war. He’d fought on the beaches of Normandy, and would often buy large history books full of photographs. Jem liked to look at them too, so she knew what to look for. She quickly flicked the pages to find a full-page photo of Adolf Hitler. “I don’t trust him,” she said.

“Who’s that?” Scraggs asked.

“Hitler. He started the Second World War. He was a monster.” She slipped the ring back on and steeled herself to look at the photo.

What she saw made her feel slightly sick. Over the photo of Hitler, the usual image of him with smart black hair and toothbrush moustache, was a bedraggled, rabid hyena with rotten teeth. Its fur was matted, caked with blood around its terrible maw, and there was madness in its dead eyes. What she saw was both fascinating and horrible at the same time, but she hastily took the ring off and dropped the still open book onto the carpet. She was breathing rapidly.

“I take it you didn’t like what you saw,” Jeremiah commented, “but was it accurate?”

The young woman nodded, staring at her visitor who she now knew had come from another reality.

“So, can I see the locket?” he asked, holding his hand out. Jem pulled it over her head and passed it to him, the chain dangling to the floor.

Jeremiah Scraggs opened the locket gently and looked inside. “I take it that the other one is in a box somewhere?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Jem replied. “It was buried with my Nan.”

“Ah,” Jeremiah replied. “That explains the blackness.”

“Pardon?”

“The blackness. The picture inside the locket is black.”

“But it’s always black,” she said in confusion.

“No, actually, it’s not. The lockets are a pair and the image inside one is the location of the other. So, wherever the partner of this one is located will be the picture inside. Because it’s in a coffin and, I assume, underground, the image is black.”

“But it was black before too. When Nan gave it to me.”

“Where was the other locket when you looked at it?”

“In its little box... oh, I see. It was dark in there and when I looked at the other one it was visa versa. Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t Hilda ever let you look inside?” Jeremiah asked.

“No. She wouldn’t let anyone open it. She said it was private and special to her and grandad.”

“That’s what I told her to say. We didn’t want anyone knowing that these were magical artifacts. They could be misused too easily... in this reality for spying. The only one she was supposed to show was Reg.”

“Grandad?”

“Yes. She had one and he had the other. It meant that while he was at war they kept an eye on each another.”

“But what if one of them lost theirs? Or if he had died fighting?”

“There are ways I could retrieve it. If I had to.”

Jemima thought for a second or two. “Hold on a minute. Why let her use it at all? If you wanted to hide them, why not just dig a hole and bury them?”

Jeremiah looked uncomfortable. “It was payment.”

“For what?”

Jeremiah paused for several seconds before saying, “I left something else here for her to hide too.”

“What?”

“Not what... who. I left my sister here with her. It was only supposed to be for a few years and I was going to come and fetch her again. I left the lockets for your grandma in payment, and she promised to look after Phoebe for me.”

“Why did Nan agree to that?”

“She was worried about Reg. He was about to go to war, and she wanted to keep an eye on him. She was also, while I was wearing the ring, clearly the most trustworthy and wise person I could find at short notice,” Jeremiah admitted.

“Short notice?”

“Yes. I had to get Phoebe away from my reality while she grew up. While she was young, she was vulnerable. If the leader had found her, she might have been killed, or worse, put to work in the capital. We needed to keep her safe.”

“We?” Jem asked.

“Yes, my family and I.”

“Wasn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes, it was. But that’s why we came through during the Solstice, when the Guardians in my reality are at their most cautious.”

“Not for you. I meant for my Nan. If you brought this Phoebe through to hide her because her life was in danger, couldn’t the bad guys in your world follow you?”

“Oh... I see. It was very unlikely. There are a limitless number of realities, so it is down to the individual crossing how they can anchor to a new one and, as far as we know, entirely random at first crossing. So, Phoebe and I crossed here because of our minds. Anyone following us would be very unlikely to pass into the same, unless they travelled with us. A different crossing time would mean they could end up anywhere, or somewhere they have been already. I’d been here before, so I knew where I was going. And it needed to be an almost entirely non-magical reality, so anyone who followed us wouldn’t have the magical power to overcome us.”

“This is all a bit much to take in,” Jemima muttered. “First you tell me you’re from another world...”

“Reality,” Jeremiah corrected.

“... Reality, then. Then you tell me my Nan’s locket is magic, which it appears to be. Then you’re on the run and leaving your sister here. You can understand why I’m skeptical.

“Anyway, why does it matter? Can’t you just travel to the right time and rescue your sister and get the lockets back from Nan?”

“Time doesn’t work like that. The simple fact that I have crossed to the wrong time means I can’t travel back. If I did that it could kill me, or worse still Phoebe. I couldn’t do that. All I can do is hope she will travel back to my reality when she is older which only time will tell.”

“I really don’t understand!”

“I know. Sorry. I told you before, when I travel back, I will end up in my reality at the time and place I left. But I can’t travel back here again, because I might destroy the timeline and kill myself or someone else. So, when I go back, I have to wait and see if my sister will return to me but, because of the way time works, I will have to wait in real time.

“She might well have already travelled back in this timeline, but I won’t know until I wait long enough in my time. Or she might never travel back at all. I won’t know until I wait and see.”

The silence continued. Jeremiah looked upset and Jemima looked utterly bamboozled. But, as she thought about it, she could see a way. “You said Nan, Hilda, agreed to look after Phoebe?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps she’s mentioned in Nan’s diary, or there’s a picture of her. Nan loved to write things down. I think they’re all in the loft.

While Jem retrieved her Nan’s diaries and photo albums, Jeremiah made more tea. She returned with a large, heavy looking box and they set about looking through the contents. Inside were any number of diaries, carefully marked with their year, as well as boxes of photos. “It’s a good thing Nan was so fussy,” Jem said.

They quickly found the diary for 1914 and, on December 23rd, was an entry in neat copperplate script, which read,

“P has come to stay. I don’t know how long for, but it will be good to have

company. Especially when R leaves. I will miss him so much, but thanks to P and J, we will keep in touch. She will be my cousin."

"I think I know who 'P' is," Jeremiah said.

"I'm pretty sure it's Cousin Prudence," Jem answered. "She died, I think. Let me see if I can find a picture of her."

Jem looked through the box and found a photo album, "I always loved looking through these with Nan," she said as she flicked through the pages, "but I've not read the diaries. Dad did, though. Here we go. This is Nan's cousin, Prudence."

On the page was an old photo of a very pretty young woman, formally posed in a chair next to an aspidistra. The photo was mounted on card with gold embossed writing saying, Victor Humble, Photographer. Bickering on Sea, and it was dated 1916.

Jeremiah said, "That's Phoebe. She looks older than when I left her. She must have waited for me."

"Nan showed me this when I was a girl. She said Prudence was a lovely girl, and that she missed her."

"Did she ever tell you what happened to her?"

"No, but I remember..." Jem rooted in the box, taking a box out and carefully removing the lid to reveal tissue paper. The box contained several photographs, formally posed, with a small child in christening robes at the centre of all of them. "These were the photographs Nan and Grandad had taken after the war, at Dad's Christening. The one of Nan and Grandad over there", she indicated an old photo of the wall near the door, "was one of them. Dad doesn't like these much though. He says he looks like a doll in the christening dress. But, look here."

Jem handed a photo mounted on the same card as before to her guest. The card was marked 1920, and in the photo was the baby, with his mother and father, and either side of the couple were a man and a woman. Everyone looked quite serious, and the man standing to one side of Hilda Penn looked quite ordinary, but the woman, who was next to Reg Penn had an almost luminous beauty. Almond eyes, delicate nose, perfect skin, but there was something sad about her. It was clearly the same woman Jem had always known as Cousin

Prudence, only older.

There was a tear in Jeremiah's eye as he looked at the photo. "Are there any more?" he asked.

"I don't think so. At least, I don't remember seeing her again. But we can keep looking." They spent some time searching through the photos, but there were only the two of Phoebe. Then they began to flick through the letters and papers in the box, looking for anything that might help. Jem found the diary with 1920 on its spine and started to flick through.

In the midst of the search, Jeremiah stopped so suddenly that Jem looked up. In his hand was a plain brown envelope and he was reading a letter with such intensity that the whole atmosphere seemed to be in the balance. On the front of the envelope, Jem could read sweeping writing, "My Darling Hilda".

"What does it say," she asked.

When Jeremiah had finished reading he handed the paper to her with a perplexed look. The paper felt very old, and smelled dry and musty. It said,

Darling Hilda, thank you so much for all you have done. You have been a sister and mother to me, and I will forever be grateful to you. You have opened your heart and home to me, and I will always be in your debt.

I am so overjoyed for you both. Little William is such a blessing. I must, however, return home. I fear that my brother has been lost, or might never return. Now that I am grown, I feel I must find out what has happened and learn to use that which is inside me. It is with deep sadness that I suspect we will never see one another again, since it would be dangerous for me to return to you. Especially now you have William to think of. I wish you every blessing and great prosperity for the future.

Your dearest friend,

Phoebe

The letter was dated June 21st, 1920.

"It seems that she will be coming home in five years' time," Jeremiah said, relief evident in his voice. "So, all I have to do is return home and wait."

Jemima looked through the 1920 diary and found an entry for 22nd June. It read:

P was nowhere to be found. Reg looked all over the woods and no-one had seen her in town. She must truly have gone home. I will miss her. I hope J is there to meet her. He promised to return to fetch her, but he didn't. P was always worried. I will pray for her often.

They sat in silence for what seemed an age, before Jemima said, “What does all this mean? I’m not sure I understand.”

Jeremiah replied, “It means that Phoebe has returned to my reality. In your reality, more than fifty years ago. When I travel home, however, it will be five years into the future.”

“Can’t you go back and then go to 1915 and tell her it will be alright?”

“No, it’s too dangerous. I will have to wait for her to come to me. If I were to go and see her in 1915 after I had met you today, God knows what might happen. It could change the entire timeline. Your Father might not be born. You might not be born. Phoebe might follow me home too early.

“At least she has travelled back as an adult. The Leader won’t be able to scry her and find her location now. I will need to teach her to control her power and use it properly, but there is a chance at least.”

“I didn’t understand most of that,” Jem said.

“I know,” Jeremiah replied. “I wish I could let you know more, but it wouldn’t help. All you need to know is that I will be, 50 or more years in the past, and in another reality, be deeply grateful to you, and to Hilda too. Phoebe is coming home.”

“What now?” Jemima asked.

“I need to ask you a great favour, Jemima.”

“What?”

“I need the lockets before I return home. I will need to hide them again until Phoebe joins me, where I can retrieve them, but we will need them for what we need to do.”

“But, they’re my Nan’s. And one of them’s buried.” she complained.

“I know, and I’m sorry. But they are very important. Even more so now.”

“What for?”

“I can’t tell you that. It would be too dangerous.”

“How are we supposed to get the other one?” she asked.

“Dig it up, of course.”

Jemima exploded, “I’m not digging up my Nan for a locket! You’re out of your bloody mind!”

Jeremiah raised his eyebrows.

“I wasn’t expecting you to, Jemima Penn. I will do that before I travel back, if you will give me your one.” He held up his hand to forestall another explosion, “And I promise I will return her resting place to just how I find it. But I need the lockets.”

“What’s so special about them?”

“You mean, other than seeing where the other is located? Well, in an atmosphere which is more embedded with magic, like the one in my reality, the lockets also act as a link between wearers, allowing them to travel instantly to one another. They are also a means of communication.”

Jemima looked longingly at the locket, which was still sitting on the table nearby, where Jeremiah had put it to look through the box. “But, it was my Nan’s. She gave it to me.”

“I know, and I am sorry. I won’t make you give it to me, but I will say that I really need it. Would you please let me have its return?”

She thought for several seconds, taking into consideration the things that Scraggs had told her, before nodding. “You can have them. I think Nan would have let you.”

“Thank you,” he replied simply, placing the locket into his waistcoat pocket. He handed something back to her. It was the ring she had used earlier. “This isn’t to replace the locket, which I hope one day to return to you, but by way of a thank you. You know what it can do and, I suspect, you will find it helpful.”

She took it reluctantly and turned it over in her fingers. “What do you see

me as?" she asked. "When you wear the ring, I mean?"

"I see you as a big cat, a Jaguar."

"You mean like a leopard?"

"Yes, I think so. It is a powerful animal. Quite a loner, very beautiful, powerful, and fiercely faithful to its family."

"Is that why you trusted me?" she asked.

Jeremiah stood to leave, "Not really," he replied. "I trusted you because you are the granddaughter of Hilda and, in my experience, blood runs true more often than not. But now, having got to know you, I trust you with my life."

Later that night, after she had cleared away her Nan's box and removed any evidence that there had been a visitor, her parents came home. They found their daughter in the living room, looking intently at the photo of her Nan and Grandad which had been on the wall.

Brenda was a little tipsy, after a few too many port and lemons, but her Dad was still stone cold sober, and he had a satisfied look of his face as he plopped down into his favourite chair.

"What are you looking at that for, Kiddo?" he asked.

"Dad," she asked, "do you remember much about when you were very young?"

"Not too much, why?"

"I was just thinking about Nan, and Grandad, and... well, you know?"

"I suppose. Well, Mum was very strong. She was always the centre of the family. Dad worked hard and didn't talk much. Your Uncle James and Auntie Jane were a pain in the neck. But we were happy."

"What about other family?" she asked.

"What other family?"

"Aunts, Uncles... cousins."

"I don't remember any... Why? What's brought all this on?"

"Nothing really," Jem replied. "I'm going to bed. Good night." She

replaced the picture on the wall next to the door and turned to look at her father. She felt light headed.

“Are you alright, Love?” Brenda asked. “Have you been drinking too?” She laughed at her own joke and went to sit in the chair where, only a couple of hours earlier, Jeremiah Scraggs had been sitting.

“Night, night,” Jem said hurriedly as she slipped the ring off and walked to her room.

She felt excited as she watched the National Express coach drive up the road to pull into the bus stop next to the derelict train station. It seemed ironic that, following the closure of the line ten years before, the coach company used that stop as the drop off point for Bickering on Sea. Jem had had an interesting day.

First, she had made a point of going into the Free Church graveyard on the way to work, to make sure her Nan and Grandad’s plot were undisturbed. There was no evidence that anyone had done anything, other than some flowers on Hilda’s half of the grave, which were fresh.

When she had got to work, Jem had surreptitiously placed the ring over her thumb to see what it did to the people in the room. It was amazing, several people around her had been transformed into sheep of one description or other, while one of the directors who had been perched on the edge of her friend Elsie’s desk (a kangaroo for some reason), had been transformed into a vicious looking fox. Ralph Flint had been transformed into a beautiful red setter which almost exuded faithful reliability and, much to her surprise, Emeline Possett had moved up and down the office gracefully, overlaid by a magnificent lioness who was, very sadly, constrained by a collar. Jemima had wanted nothing more than to leap up from her desk and free Miss Possett from her constraints and tell her to walk into freedom. After that, Jemima would never look at her the same and made the commitment to herself to build a friendship with Miss Possett if she possibly could.

The day had been filled with animals. Elephants, dogs, sheep, a myriad of birds and mammals, superimposed over the people around her. Most frightening had been Mr Possett Snr, who had popped his head round the door to talk to his daughter, because he was a dead eyed crocodile. Funniest was the man who worked in the cafe where she had a cup of tea at lunchtime, mainly so she could use the ring. He was a lizard and he even licked his own eyeball as she watched him slide fried eggs onto a customer’s plate.

All day she had thought about Jeremiah's visit, so it wasn't until she watched the coach slide up to the curb that she really felt any excitement rise in her stomach. Then, a moment or two after the coach opened its doors, her beloved Jack sauntered down the steps. He looked around, disdain clearly evident on his face, until he saw her and a smile climbed across his features. "Hi Babe," he said, kissing her soggily on the lips. He looked around again, "This is small, ain't it? Oh well. Good to see you. I'll grab my bag and you call a taxi."

"There aren't any taxis here, Jack," Jemima said, almost apologetically.

"No taxis? What kind of hole is this place? Everywhere's got bloody taxis."

"It's ok. It's only a 15 minute walk home."

"Fifteen minutes?" Jack swore. "Oh well, in for a penny... I'll get my bag." He sauntered to where the driver was pulling luggage out from the space beneath the coach.

Jem had been waiting all day to put the ring on. She had been wondering what Jack would be like, but she was shocked to see that, when the ring went over her thumb, he turned into a giant, greasy haired rat, with yellow teeth and a half-chewed tail. She was so shocked, she took the ring off. Then she put it on again to make sure. Then she took it off again.

Jack was a rat. Untrustworthy, dirty, horrible.

"You alright Babe?" he asked. "You've come over all pale. You look like you seen a ghost."

The Christmas holiday had been horrible after that. Jemima had decided to ignore the insight that the magical ring had given her. It must have made a mistake, but the more time she spent with Jack, the less happy she became.

Jack had been quite nice to everyone's face at first, but when they were alone he didn't have a good word to say. Bickering on Sea was a dump, too small and smelly, he said. The people were all a drag, the pub was boring, the music amateur... nothing like London. Everything was great in London, according to Jack. He couldn't wait to get back and drink some real beers and listen to some real music. He seemed to be of the opinion that every band in every pub in London was just waiting to sign a record deal, and that all the beer was like the nectar of the gods, instead of seaside piss.

As time went by, he was even rude about her parents. He was convinced they didn't like him, which might well have been true, and he kept making jokes he thought were funny, but which were trying to make him seem bigger at their expense. The night out at their social club was a complete disaster. Jack, who seemed to have given up any pretense of happiness by that time, sat in a moody cloud in the corner, ignoring their friends, grunting replies to their efforts to start conversations, and complaining to her that he was bored and they should, "Split and go and see if they could find a real party with better people."

Christmas day itself had been the worse. First, Jack had refused to join them early in the morning to open presents. He said he was still tired and wanted to sleep. Then, when he did join them with a cup of tea, he had quickly torn the paper off of all of his presents and set them aside one by one. He didn't even try to pick them up and take them to his room, leaving them, instead, at the table, as if they were beneath him. Jemima had overheard his call to his own parents after lunch, when he told them that he "couldn't wait to get Jem away from this place, so she could be happy at last." She was happy. She was with her parents.

She told him as much when they were alone, after her parents had gone to bed, and he replied, "You don't mean that, Babe. You wait till you get to London." Then he'd tried to stick his tongue down her throat. She'd gone to bed herself soon after, ignoring his plea that he was lonely and wanted to go out and find a party. "There must be something worth doing around here," he'd said. "Apart from that pathetic social club or pub."

It was only when her Father had found her crying on her own in her room on Boxing Day that things changed. "What's up Love?" William asked.

"Oh, nothing Dad. I'm OK," she tried to wipe her tears away and cheer up. But he sat down next to her, handed her his hanky and said, "No you're not. What's up, Chicken?"

She cried a bit more and said, "It's Jack. He's... well, he's not very happy... and I wanted this Christmas... to be so good."

"What's he unhappy about?"

"Everything!" she cried some more.

After her tears had subsided a little, William Penn said, "You know what the problem is, don't you, Chicken?"

“Yes, I suppose so. He comes from London where everything is so exciting. This place must seem so boring to him. And he’s missing his friends and family.”

“No, that’s not it. He’s got your friends and family, and we’ve all tried to make him feel welcome. No, I don’t think we’re the problem...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what could you do to make him happier?”

“I’ve tried. He thinks we should go to his parents’ place for New Year, so we can have some real fun, but I thought we were going to stay here. Nothing I do seems to be good enough. What can I do Daddy?”

“I’m not sure you can do anything, Love. If you want my opinion, he’s the problem. Nothing you do is making him any happier and he’s been very rude. I can’t help but wonder, if you can’t be happy at Christmas, when can you be?”

“Don’t you like him, Dad?”

“If you like him, Chicken, that’s fine by me. But he does seem a bit... self-centered.”

She didn’t reply. Her Dad was right. Jem had done everything she could to make Jack’s Christmas happy, but he had moaned, complained, and been rude for the whole time. All she could see was the rat, when before he had seemed so handsome.

The next day, over lunch, Jack had said to her parents, “We’ve been talking, haven’t we Jem? And we don’t really want to be here for New Year, do we? We thought we’d go back to London tomorrow, if that’s OK. Thanks for having us and all that, but we want to be in London, don’t we Jem?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jemima replied angrily, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“But, we talked about it, didn’t we Jem? We said, we weren’t enjoying ourselves and we’d prefer to be in London.”

“No, we didn’t. That’s what you said!”

“I thought you agreed.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“OK, calm down, Jem. Don’t you want to make me happy? I want to go to London. You could agree with me, you know? You’re my fiancé, after all.”

Jemima’s parents looked at each other and started to get up to leave. “Stay there, Mum and Dad.” She took a deep breath, “What the hell are you talking about? I never said that stuff.”

“Hold on, Jem, not in front of your parents.”

Her voice rose, “If we’re engaged, why is it you that has to be happy? What about me? Don’t I have a say?”

Jack looked genuinely confused, “But I thought you were happy. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Then you don’t know me very well! You’ve spent the whole of Christmas moaning and being rude, to my friends and my family. You’ve told me the house is small, the people are boring, and gone on and on about how much better London is than Bickering and your house than mine... but what about me?”

“But London is better, Jem. We agreed on that ages ago,” he replied.

“Well, maybe I’ve changed my mind! It doesn’t matter where you are, it’s who you’re with.”

“Don’t you want to be with me?” he asked.

“I do... kind of, but these are the people I love too, and I want to be with them.”

“I want to be with you, Babe, don’t I? In London. I’m your fiancé. You said you love me.”

“Are you really this stupid?”

“I ain’t stupid. I just want to be with you... in London. Not here.”

“Well I want to be here, and if you don’t want to be with me, then go back to London.”

Jack sat there, his mouth open in shock. “I thought you loved me.”

“So did I, but the last few days have shown me that you’re not who I thought you were. If you want London so much, go without me! Bickering might be boring and quiet, but it’s where my family live and if you don’t like them then you can just piss off!”

She stamped away from the table.

That evening, Jack tapped on her door. She looked up to see his head in the doorway. “I’m, er... off then. Sure you don’t want to come?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Are we still engaged?” He asked.

“What do you think?”

“Well... that’s what I thought. So, er... well... can I have my ring back?”

Jem threw it at him, and Jack had spent ten minutes scrabbling around on the floor of the dim landing before he was ready to go, cheap ring stowed in his pocket, possibly ready for the next time. William had driven him to Branchester to catch the train.

Jemima Penn had thought she might feel sadder than she did, but instead she felt relieved. For the days leading up to New Year, she had gone on walks and used the ring sparingly. It was too disconcerting to leave it on all the time. Seeing people and animals everywhere, sharing the same space in the air, was just confusing and made her feel nauseous if she let it go on for too long. She had been fascinated to see her mum and dad through the ring. Her mum was a badger, fierce and maternal, but her dad was a large lizard that she had never seen before. It was something she found disconcerting, until she looked it up in an animal book in the local library and found that he was a chameleon.

Not that that made it any easier. Lizards were cold blooded and she wasn’t very keen on them. But the chameleon, she found, was able to stay very still and blend in with its background, which fitted in perfectly with her dad who, on the surface, seemed quiet and a little aloof, but there was far more to him than met the eye. He might seem like an enigma on the surface, but he was far deeper and more complicated than people thought. Easily overlooked, but totally wonderful. She decided that the chameleon might be her favorite animal by far.

In the New Year, Jemima returned to work and life returned to normal, until, while walking home one night after work in early February, she passed Bickering Free Church and heard a voice calling; “Jemima Penn?”

She stopped and looked into the shadows.

“Jemima Penn,” the voice came again. “Is that you?”

For a second, she considered going into the churchyard to investigate, but thought better of it. “Yes,” she responded. “I’m Jemima Penn, who’s that?”

Out of the shadows a tall figure emerged. It was almost certainly a man, and he limped. However, it was so dark she couldn’t make out his features and, without thinking, Jem bolted. As fast as she could, she ran towards home. She didn’t even look to see if anyone was following her.

She hared through the estate and sprinted up the path to their house, slamming the door behind her. All she could hear was her heart beating hard in her ears. Her parents were away, staying with her mum’s sister in Nottingham, so she double locked the door behind her. She didn’t put the light on, she didn’t need to, but staggered up the stairs towards her bedroom, which was at the front of the house.

Once there, she opened her knicker draw and retrieved a small velvet bag from it. She took the ring out and walked to the upstairs window, looking out onto the dark street. The streetlights bathed the pavement in circles of orange, leaving dark spaces between them. She stood there, slowly regaining her breath and watching.

After a few minutes, just when she was about to go back downstairs, assuming that it had all been ‘just one of those things’, Jem saw a figure limp into the pool of light up the street. It used a cane and walked at a steady pace into the next patch of dark. It emerged into the light once again, and she could see it was wearing a hat and smart, dark clothes. Then it disappeared again. It was definitely a man, she concluded when he walked into sight again, moving towards her house.

He stopped right in front of her house, leaning on the cane, looking right up at the window she was watching through. He took what looked like a pair of glasses out of his waistcoat pocket and put them on, looking up at her again and waving his hand in greeting. He dipped his hands into another pocket and held up what was clearly two locket on chains.

Jemima still didn’t move. It was certainly not Jeremiah Scraggs, of that she was sure. He was too young and he didn’t have an enormous rucksack on his back, but she was curious. After a few more moments, she could see the man smile in the light as he mimed in a very obvious way putting a ring on his own finger.

She had momentarily forgotten about the ring she was holding, and felt

a fool. Jemima slipped it over her thumb and saw that, superimposed over the man in the light from the streetlamp, was a wolf. Very similar to the wolf she had seen a few days before Christmas, in her living room. Majestic and calm, but fierce too. After a moment, the man walked towards her front door and knocked.

Jem walked quietly down the stairs, unsure what to do. She didn't feel particularly threatened but, following the visit from Jeremiah, she didn't want to just open the door in case the person she met was unfriendly. She was aware there were others who travelled through the stone circle, and they might very well not be allies or friends. She was also aware that it wasn't Solstice, so whoever this was had probably been coming through with the full knowledge of whoever controlled the entrance to the stone circle in Jeremiah's reality, or any number of other realities, come to that.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, a paper package dropped through the letterbox onto the mat, and she heard footsteps limp away from the door. She picked up the package and felt that there was an object in it. She flicked on the hall light switched on, simply to see what it was, and her grandmother's locket slipped out of the folded paper onto her hand. There was a note written on the paper.

"I am Ezekiel Scraggs. You knew my grandfather, Jeremiah, and he told me to return both lockets to you. To prove that they are what they are, look inside this one and you will see where I am. Perhaps then we can talk? I promise, I am here as a friend and I have much to be grateful to you for."

It was signed, "ES".

Jem opened the locket. Inside the locket, on the paper she had always thought was blank, she could make out the image of the front of her house. It was illuminated by the same orange light as the streetlamps, and the light above the door was on. She reached out and flicked off the switch for the outside light, and the picture in the locket changed too.

Jemima took a deep breath, turned the outside light back on, put the chain across the door, and opened it a crack. "Are you there?" she called.

"I'm here, Jemima Penn," replied a resonant voice.

“How do I know you are who you say you are? Jeremiah was afraid to travel when it wasn’t the Solstice.”

“That was more than fifty years ago, Jemima Penn,” he replied. “However, if I told you that I know my grandfather was a wolf, you were a Jaguar, and Hilda was an owl, would that help?”

“Come into the light,” she ordered.

A young man, far too young to use a cane, stepped into the light. He looked very much like Jeremiah, only with a more well-trimmed beard and without the glasses. He smiled and it was as if Jeremiah was there again. “Would it be wrong,” he said, “to tell you that, if I really wanted to hurt you I wouldn’t have warned you before coming this close?”

“Not especially,” she replied. “So, if you’re Jeremiah’s grandson, where is he?”

“He died last spring,” he replied simply.

“But he was here at Christmas,” she insisted.

“Remember that thing about time travel? That was true. In the real timeline, he died in what you would call 1972. But he died in peace and safety. He made me promise to come to you as soon as I could to give you back your grandmother’s locket. He says they’re better kept here and we don’t need them anymore.”

Ezekiel Scraggs held out the other locket, close to the door and dropped it into her open hand, stepping back again to show there was no threat. She inspected it and remembered her Nan again.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked after an awkward moment. She unlocked the chain and opened the door more fully, “Then you can tell me what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Unlike my grandfather, I can’t stand tea,” he replied with that same open smile. “But I would enjoy some water and, yes, I would like to tell you all about grandfather. He often talked about you and Hilda.”
