



CHAPTER 2

A case of déjà vu

Holly Maxwell was an attractive woman and well used to compliments. However, vanity was not one of her failings, and she didn't take them seriously. From her own perspective though, she was too heavy. "I could do with losing at least a stone," she murmured, as she caught sight of her reflection in the bathroom mirror, then she added, with a wry smile: "Maybe a stone and a half. But, that's not so bad. I shouldn't expect to have a schoolgirl figure now that I'm forty-one. I'm just maturing, *like fine wine!*" She laughed: a bright and happy sound that was infectious in any company. Holly was looking forward to her new life in Ryeport, and knew that a little extra weight wouldn't spoil that. She dressed, brushed her shiny, auburn hair, added a light touch of makeup, and went downstairs to breakfast. Since Sarah Bass had made it clear that she would be doing all the cooking, that made the meal even more enjoyable.

The morning passed quickly, but she was pleased to see Sexton arrive for lunch. As she was clearing away his dishes, she said: "Thank you for showing me that ad, Sexton. This inn feels strangely warm and familiar to me – like an old friend. There's a comforting atmosphere about this place that I just can't explain. I really do feel at home here. I could hardly wait to start." She flashed a mischievous smile at him. "Do you think I'm a bad girl Sexton? I didn't give Freefrees any notice. I just phoned and told them I'd quit. They were mad at me, of course, and said I'd forfeit Monday's pay. But that's okay. I never want to see that place again. I left a letter for the landlord of my flat, giving him my furniture to compensate for the short notice. I only took my personal bits and pieces. I have no intention of going

back there or leaving a forwarding address.” Sexton smiled. “Tut-tut. Yes, you really are a bad girl Holly. But you’ve had a lot to put up with. Anyone who knows you would understand, and forgive, that little breach of proper behaviour.” She laughed. “You must be my guardian angel Sexton. You appeared, out of nowhere, when I was so desperate for a better job. I’m so glad you found me.” Sexton smiled as he responded. “My dear, I never lost you.”

Holly was puzzled over those words, and wondered why she played them over, again and again, in her mind. ‘*My dear, I never lost you.*’ Could that mean he’d been watching her? Following her maybe, or simply that he wasn’t the one that had lost her...or what? The coincidence of this stranger turning up at Freefrees at such a low point in her life and providing an ideal solution to her problems seemed almost magical. She also recalled that Sexton had called her by name from the outset, treating her like an old friend – but she hadn’t told him her name and that ‘macho creep’ at Freefrees hadn’t used it. So, how had he known it? It was all rather strange – not scary strange – but puzzling nevertheless.

The lunch customers drifted away and Holly found herself with time on her hands. Sexton was now the only customer left in the bar and looked depressed, and rather tired. Holly took a bowl of peanuts to his table. “A penny for your thoughts, Sexton. You look quite fed up. How can I cheer you up?” Sexton returned her smile. “You already have Holly. Your happy personality brightens this gloomy room for all us patrons of the ‘Harbour Light.’”

“Well, thank you kind Sir,” she replied, adding her trademark curtsy. “But I’m serious. You do look quite miserable.”

“Oh, I’ve had a disappointment, Holly. A good friend of mine from Canada, had planned to vacation here in time for the wedding this weekend. But just this morning, he emailed me to let me know his vacation had been cancelled. Instead he has to substitute for another lecturer at a seminar in Boston, Massachusetts. He will be involved there for the whole week that the wedding guests will be here. Apparently the original speaker was badly injured, almost killed, in a freak accident.” Holly looked concerned. “What a shame! But surely he’ll be able to come over later, after the seminar perhaps?”

“Possibly, but this is very bad timing. I really needed him here for the wedding.” She smiled. “He’s not the groom is he?” Sexton laughed. “Not likely Holly. Father Charlesworth is a Catholic priest.”

“Oh! So why is it so important that he be here for the wedding?” Sexton’s

face creased in a broad grin. "Boy, you are full of questions today, Miss." She coloured a little. "Sorry, Sexton. I didn't mean to be nosy."

"That's okay, Holly. It's just that I've been trying to get Father Charlesworth to Ryeport for more than twenty years now. We've been good friends for over thirty but we only see each other when he is over here on business, or when I go to Canada. And every time we try to arrange for him to visit here, something always crops up to spoil our plans. He's never made it yet." Holly repeated her earlier question. "Why is it so important that he comes to Ryeport?"

"Well Holly, Father Charlesworth is an expert on the paranormal. He's also well versed in reincarnation theories and related subjects and there are some intriguing stories about this old inn and 'The Seahorse', a ship that was wrecked here about two hundred years ago. Her salvaged timbers were used to build the extension to this inn you know. I'm sure my friend would be very interested in this place and I would love to hear his opinions on those stories and some of the artefacts salvaged from that old ship. Ryeport's history and the supernatural stories about this area, and this inn, are a hobby of mine."

"Ooh!" Holly shuddered. "I wouldn't want to get mixed up with any of that supernatural stuff. Too creepy! Excuse me Sexton. I've got a customer." Holly hurried to the bar, leaving Sexton gazing after her with an amused smile on his face.

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Whitt's first-class flight to Heathrow was smooth and on time. Bearing in mind the limitations of an aircraft galley, the food had also been acceptable. That, plus generous complimentary beverages, were responsible for his relaxed mood. The tension that had plagued him since Jones' rejection had slipped away, and he had been dozing comfortably until wakened by the flight attendant's call: "Please fasten seat belts in preparation for landing." He even managed a smile for her when she handed him a note. "We have a message for you, Sir." Chernak had arranged for Whitt to be notified on the plane.

Earl: "Regret that I can't meet you as planned. Long story. Will explain later. I have arranged for a car and driver to take you to Ryeport. All is well. Some last-minute changes demanded our personal attention. See you tomorrow."

*My apologies. Your driver, Dave Trelaw, will meet you when you clear Customs. It's all arranged and paid for. Thanks for your understanding.
Al."*

Whitt was met by a well-groomed, casually dressed young man, holding a large card bearing his name. "Good afternoon Mr. Whitt. I hope you had a pleasant flight. Mr. Chernak asked me to offer his apologies for the inconvenience and change of plans. Totally unforeseen he said. My name is Trelaw, Mr. Whitt...Dave Trelaw. If you wish we can leave directly, or I can arrange a meal or refreshment first."

"Let's go Dave. I'm thoroughly sick of travelling and looking forward to a big steak and a few drinks when we arrive. And they'll all be going on Chernak's tab."

"Yes, Sir. Mr. Chernak did advise me of that." Whitt thought Trelaw's smile was a little too 'knowing'. "Have you ever been to Canada Dave? Have we met before? You seem familiar somehow." Trelaw shook his head. "No Sir. But I do hope to go there someday. I love to travel."

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While Trelaw was loading Whitt's luggage into the boot of the rental car, Al Chernak and his bride-to-be, Heather McDowd, were trying on shoes and costumes in a London theatrical costumers. Heather caught her fiancé checking his watch for the third time in half an hour. "In heaven's name Al, quit worrying about Earl? He's a big boy and quite capable of looking after himself. I'm sure he's landed safely and Dave Trelaw (poor soul) has met him. They will soon be on their way to Ryepoint. Then Sexton will look after him, 'til we get back. He'll fill him in on the changes, and, undoubtedly, look after his cranky needs and complaints." She gave a short laugh. "He may even straighten out some of them by the time we get back. Let's hope so. I think Earl will meet his match there. Anyway, this is our wedding. It's supposed to be the most important event of our lives, not Earls. So, don't let him spoil it!" Chernak managed a wry smile. "You know how he is Honey. Not the sweetest guy in the world when things don't go his way."

"Who cares? I think he was a rotten choice for best man anyway. He doesn't even believe in marriage. As poor Millie found out the hard way! Are your shoes okay?" Al nodded. "Yep, they'll do."

"Fine, then please go into the next room and check that all the gear for the

students is packed and ready. Use Sexton's checklist to make sure everything's correct."

"Yes Ma'am!" he said, and snapping to attention, executed a nifty 'Benny Hill' type salute. "On the double. Left-right, left-right." Heather didn't even look up.

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Whitt heaved a sigh of relief as Trelaw turned off the motorway onto the secondary road to Ryepport. The long journey, plus the unexpected changes, had left him feeling very unsettled. Trelaw was a good driver and pleasant enough, but they had little in common and conversation had dried up many miles back. Whitt was looking forward to relaxing with a couple of stiff drinks and a good meal, followed by a good night's sleep. Last night certainly hadn't been restful. From Trelaw he learned that Chernak was expected back tomorrow afternoon. That meant he would be denied the satisfaction of complaining about the discomforts he'd endured on his friend's behalf for yet another day.

This new road was narrow and winding, with high hedgerows and no sidewalk or shoulders. There were some stretches where they drove under overhanging trees that made a patchy tunnel over the road. Some of the trees had obviously been pruned to provide clearance for taller vehicles. They crested a rise in the road, breaking out of the 'green tunnel'. A church steeple appeared on the left, then some irregular roof lines on the right. Only when Whitt felt his shoulders relax did he realise how tense the drive had made him. "We're almost there Sir."

Trelaw's smile looked a little artificial; riding with Whitt had not been a relaxing experience and his tension had been contagious.

"Boy! I could sure use a drink, Dave. Can I buy you one?"

"No thanks, Sir. I have to leave right away to pick up Heather McDowd's grandparents. They will be staying at Heather's parent's place, in Ryepport, for the wedding. They don't drive anymore. She is dying of cancer and only has about three weeks to live. When I return I'll leave this car at the inn for you. The keys will be at the bar." The high hedgerows gave way to more open countryside, providing a clear view of a long kidney-shaped harbour, ahead on their left. On the right, across from the wide harbour, stood an irregular assortment of buildings, some stone, and some beam and plaster buildings, with clay tiled roofs. Whitt noticed small clumps of moss growing

on some tiles and stone walls they passed, as he sought his intended resting place, and that long awaited drink. “I expected that we would see the sea by now Dave.”

“Oh, the harbour is actually enclosed by cliffs, Sir. There is a dogleg passage between the cliffs that leads out to the sea, at the far end of the harbour. Can you make it out yet? I always think of the harbour, and its’ exit as resembling my old ‘bullseye’ putter. The shaft of the club being the seaward passage, and the head of the putter is the calm, protected, pool of water. The shaft of the putter has a bend in it though – just like my old putter.” He grinned, “Just joking, Sir. Actually, it’s my driver that I’m often tempted to wrap around a tree. At this end of the harbour – the toe of the putter – is a shelving sandy beach. The locals call that ‘The Landing’. Farther along, a jetty divides deeper water from The Landing.”

“So, you’re a golfer Dave?”

“Just a weekend hacker, Sir. On a good day, I’ll break a hundred. But golfing is a pleasant way to spend time in good company.” He smiled: “I always do well at the nineteenth hole though.”

At The Landing, a number of small boats were lying, tilted at various angles, just as they had been left by the receding tide. But Whitt was surprised to see a three-masted, square-rigged, tall ship tied up to the dockside wall, closer to the seaward exit. “That tall ship is a real ‘blast from the past’ Dave. Looks like the reproduction of The Bounty that I visited in Florida. Obviously, there’s deeper water under the ship.”

“Aye Mate,” responded Trelaw, with a smile. “There might even be a press-gang waiting for us at the inn.” Then Whitt spotted the inn. It was only a hundred yards ahead now and reminiscent of many calendar pictures of old country buildings. Whitewashed walls between black posts and beams, dominated its other features. The doors were short but wide, and the small windows were fitted with diamond shaped grids of glass and everything looked a little off-square or plumb. There was also a shortened bowsprit, protruding from the ceiling level of the second storey. Slung beneath the bowsprit, was a figurehead – a golden seahorse. Some of the rigging, including the martingale (dolphin-striker, he believed the Yanks called them) and chains were still in place. Certainly there was no mistaking the identity of the inn. “The inn looks to be below the sole of the putter and in line with the shaft Dave,” said Whitt. “But you know, that figurehead seems strangely familiar. Maybe the inn has been used on calendar pictures.”

Trelaw's expression was puzzled too. "Funny you should say that Sir, I also find that familiar." They turned into the small, gravelled, parking lot. A quick glance at Whitt's face told Trelaw that his passenger was not impressed. And with good reason; the whole village appeared bedraggled, and under repair. There was even some waste building material piled against the side of the inn. "If Chernak has booked me into some grungy dump, he'll get the rough edge of my tongue." Whitt muttered. "A favour is one thing but I'm not prepared to live in a fixer-upper while I'm doing it." Trelaw pretended he hadn't heard. "I'll get your bags, Sir, then I'll have to push off, or I'll be late for my next pickup."

"Okay Dave. Thanks for the ride." Whitt pulled out his wallet.

Trelaw raised a restraining hand. "Mr. Chernak has already taken care of everything, Sir. I'll see you at the wedding. I'm one of the attendants. I hope you enjoy your stay. I'll put your luggage inside the kitchen door; someone will take it to your room for you. You'll need to register at the main entrance. That's the large door, to the left of the small one." Trelaw opened the smaller door, put the bags inside and called out: "Sarah! Mr. Whitt's here. Luggage is at the side door." Whitt heard a muffled response. Then Trelaw gave him a quick smile and a wave. "I'll be away to pick up Heather's grandparents now Sir," he said as he reversed out of the parking lot and headed back towards 'the green tunnel'.

Whitt stood for a while, studying the harbour and the tall ship. "My God, I've been sent back in time. By at least a couple of centuries," he exclaimed. He hoped that the inn's, quaint, but uncomfortable looking exterior would not be representative of his lodgings. On the wall beside the door, was a weather-beaten sign displaying a flaming brazier, and the words: 'The Harbour Light'. It was obviously original and very old. The paint was chipped, and the colours faded, despite the protection of several coats of shellac. That too had crazed and yellowed with age. The sign struck a familiar chord in his memory. "Same name as the Salvation Army building, in Toronto," he thought. "That must be why it seems familiar. I wonder if the accommodation is the same too. My guess would be that the 'Sally-Anne's' is better." The doorknob turned easily under Whitt's hand but when he pushed the door, it jammed at the lintel. A second, harder push caused the bottom of the door to move in just a little, and vibrate noisily but it still stuck on the lintel.

"What's the matter out there? Didn't you 'ave yer 'Wheaties' this morning? Give the door a decent shove for Gawd's sake." The sarcastic voice from

behind the door had a heavy and unfamiliar accent. “Obviously a local yokel,” thought Whitt as, for his third try, he struck the top of the door with the heel of his left hand as he pushed with his right. This time, with a protesting squeal, the door scraped free of its frame. Whitt ducked under the lintel and stepped down onto a brick floor. The floor was a good six inches lower than the door’s threshold – but he had known it would be so – and that realisation stopped him dead in his tracks, just as the sense of déjà vu struck. He had ducked under the lintel, and his step down had been fluid, almost practised. He recalled a warning: ‘*Watch your step. The floor is a goodly step down inside.*’ Or did he imagine that? After looking into bright sunlight during the long ride from Heathrow airport, this room was extremely dark, and his eyes struggled to adapt. That near blindness must have heightened his other senses, because it was a confusing mixture of smells that struck him next. At first it was a damp, musty, mix of odours that seemed to come at him from all directions. But he soon managed to isolate and identify some of them. The strongest was a very distinctive, earthy smell, most likely from the brick floor, then the stale smell of spilt beer. Then, there was the smell of damp hessian, probably from the scraps of carpet now coming into focus in front of the bar. Sunlight had penetrated the small window on his left, and illuminated a truncated area of brick floor, filling that lighted patch with the elongated shadows of the diamond-shaped, leaded, windowpanes.

Whitt’s eyes were adjusting now but the powerful sense of déjà vu was unnerving. The familiarity was so strong that it confused him. He knew there would be another patch of light on the floor to his right, behind the cluttered post that was doubling as a coat rack. Beyond that there would be a rough wooden table, and two benches. At the end of the room, there would be another plank door, similar to the one he’d just struggled with. His eyes had completely adjusted now, and he was able to pick out more detail in the gloomy room. Neglected brass horse ornaments and plates contributed their dull reflections in the shadows of the room. There were miscellaneous dishes on shelves and disused copper cooking pots hung on ceiling beams. “I don’t recall those,” he murmured.

A heavy Cornish accent intruded on his muddled thoughts. “Well don’t stand there all day, man. Put the wood back in the ‘ole. Or don’t you ‘ave enough strength left after fightin’ so ‘ard, to get it open?”

“The local yokel’s giving me the gears,” thought Whitt, struggling to comprehend the overwhelming flood of recognition that had struck him

on stepping through the door. "I've never been here before," he muttered. "Never been in England before! How the hell can this seem so familiar?"

"Watcha say mate? Talkin' to yerself now are ye? Big boy like you should know better. You know what that's a sign of don't ye?" The sarcastic voice belonged to Sam Bass: owner of The Seahorse Inn. He was standing behind the cluttered bar, wearing a soiled white apron and a grungy smile.

Whitt's stomach was sour with the unpleasant sense of panic that had accompanied the onset of the *déjà vu*. For the first time in his life he felt disoriented, and scared. "This must be part of some forgotten dream," he mumbled. "But I remembered that unusually deep, step down, onto a brick floor and my entry through that awkward entrance seemed almost practised. He recalled another warning: from a different voice: *'Be careful! The floor inside, is about six inches lower than the doorstep. You have to step down, onto a hollow pounded into the brick floor by hundreds of left feet that have entered here for two hundred years.'* Still confused, Whitt turned and closed the door behind him. Then he peered around the 'coat rack' to see if his mental picture of the table and benches, patch of light, and the door at the end of the room, matched the facts. The patch of light was there right enough but no table or benches. Instead, an old ship's companion ladder occupied much of that space, obviously leading to the second floor. There was an arched opening in the wall where he expected to see the door and through the archway he could see stacked tables and chairs, and new carpet. He gave a sigh of relief. In a way he was disappointed that his precognition was uncorroborated, however, it was a relief to be wrong and the knot in his stomach unwound a little.

Now that the door was closed, and Sam's confrontational voice was silent, the locals lost interest in him and resumed their conversations, but even the buzz and pattern of their chatter seemed familiar. The strong smell of wood smoke was another memory. "Well, wood smoke smells the same wherever you are," he rationalised. "But this room was bad for that. The smoke stung my nose and eyes. Bad chimney I guess." He shuddered, shocked to find that he was accepting the *déjà vu* as a remembered experience. Two patrons, a short, tubby man and a taller, stiff looking fellow, sitting close by, looked familiar. "They must have been sitting there for centuries," he muttered. "Now why would I think that?"

"What'll it be then? If you've finished all your sniffin', an' mutterin', per'aps you could buy a drink." Bass had been watching Whitt, wearing an expression

of pained disbelief all the time. “You should leave some of the atmosphere for others to sniff up ye know. Shouldn’t hog it all for yourself. Maybe you could find the strength to hoist a pint?”

“Okay. Give me a beer,” said Whitt.

“alf, or a pint? Best bitter, or scrumpi?” queried Bass. His nose was twitching now. Testing the air to see if he could determine what it was that the newcomer had found so engrossing.

“Make it a pint of bitter,” said Whitt.

Bass extended both hands towards Whitt; one held the glass jug of beer, handle towards him, the other, an open palm. “That’ll be two quid if you please. Cash up front! No tellin’ if ye’ll ‘ave the strength to pay for it after you’ve drunk it.” Whitt had had enough. The panic in his stomach was a bad addition to his normal bad temper. He felt nervous, and threatened, and the adrenalin was pumping hard. This scruffy slob had got away with his smartass comments long enough. He grabbed the tankard with his left hand and a handful of Bass’ shirt with the right, jerking him up against the bar so hard that one foot left the floor and struck a cupboard behind him with a crash. Everyone in the room turned around and the buzz of conversation abruptly ceased.

“Now look here you stupid, unwashed, son-of-a-bitch,” said Whitt. “I use maggots like you for fish bait, and I never pay for something until I’m satisfied with it.” He raised the jug, with the apparent intent of pouring it over Bass’s head. But a firm grip restrained his arm just in time, effectively staying the anointing. Whitt scowled, and turned to face the owner of the hand.

“Come now, Mr. Whitt. There are less expensive ways to give poor old Sam a bath. Besides, your way would be a waste of good beer.” The owner of the restraining hand was an older, black man. His relaxed features wore a slightly amused smile, but there was a definite sense of strength and purpose behind both his grip and the friendly expression.

“Do I know you?” Whitt was getting that uneasy feeling in his stomach again. Not the same sense of déjà vu this time, but there was a familiarity about this man, as if from a partially remembered dream. The black man smiled. “I really can’t say, Sir. But if we have met, it would seem that, for you at least, it was not a memorable experience.”

“Then how do you know my name?”

“Your friend, Al Chernak, asked me to look for you. He couldn't be here to meet you himself so he asked me to cover for him until he got back. His description of you was very accurate, right down to your short fuse. Why don't you put Sam down? After all, you don't know where he's been; he might be contagious. You could possibly catch something nasty. Please... bring your beer to my table to enjoy. Then I can bring you up to date on your friend's wedding plans.”

Whitt gave Bass a final, belligerent, stare before releasing his hold. The innkeeper – relieved to feel both feet firmly back on the floor – avoided further eye contact with Whitt, straightened the front of his shirt and hurried to the other end of the bar as though to tend some forgotten, but urgent, chore. For the benefit of the locals, he did manage a wimpy smile, as he said: “Bloody Yanks; got no sense of ‘umour.”

The black man led Whitt to a table at the back of the room. With the confrontation over, the buzz of conversation resumed. “Bloody crazy Yanks.” Whitt heard one man say. “Them bastards can't drink worth a shit. Just the same during the war! Two or three beers and they just go rangy.” Whitt turned to locate the speaker, but the black man restrained him again. “Come, Mr. Whitt, you're too intelligent to be bothered by tavern banter. Just relax. Unwind after your long journey. By the way, you can call me Sexton. That's my job you know, my name too. I'm sexton of the church where Heather McDowd and your friend will be tying-the-knot on Saturday.”

Once seated, Sexton inclined his head, querulously, and asked: “Mr. Whitt; you seemed confused, disoriented maybe, when you first came into the bar.” He wagged his hand, palm down, indicating something unstable. “Are you feeling unwell? Or just tired perhaps, from the flight and the long drive? You would have been staring into the afternoon sun all through the drive from Heathrow. Perhaps it took a while for your eyes to adjust.” Whitt took a long pull on his jug of beer. It had a much stronger flavour than he was used to and was quite warm. He gave it a disgusted look and put it back on the table. “I can see why he wanted me to pay in advance for this slop,” he said. “No one in their right mind would pay for it after they tasted it.”

“Oh, give it another try Sir. I'll admit it takes a little getting used to – especially after the sameness of the cold lagers of North America, but once you 'discover' the flavour, it'll be hard to put down I promise you.” Sexton's

manner was persuasive, and Whitt gave the brew another try – but only after peering into the glass jug, and examining the beer from every angle. “I guess if you are thirsty enough, even swamp water would be acceptable,” he said. Sexton’s answering smile was mechanical, and devoid of humour. He repeated his earlier question. “When you first entered the bar, Mr. Whitt, you seemed disoriented. Are you okay now?” Again, Whitt ignored the question. “Why isn’t Chernak here? When will he arrive?”

“Oh, he had to go to London for a couple of days Mr. Whitt. He needed to get fitted with new clothes for the wedding, plus attend to some other chores that needed his attention. I will explain in more detail shortly. But first, please answer my question. I’m charged with your wellbeing, and therefore, rather concerned. When you first entered the bar you did seem unnaturally disoriented. Are you okay now? Are you feeling quite well?”

Whitt was tired of being forced to answer questions that he would rather ignore; first Jones, and now this black guy, Sexton. “Mainly the sudden darkness after driving so long into bright sunlight, I guess. That plus some travel fatigue. Strangely enough, I experienced a feeling of familiarity when I first came in here. Stupid really! This is the first time I’ve been in England. I have never been in here before, or there wouldn’t have been a second time.” He took a longer drink from his jug.

“Well, some say that *déjà vu* is a memory from a previous life Mr. Whitt. Perhaps you spent some time here in a previous incarnation. This inn would certainly cover a few lifespans – especially since they used to be so much shorter.” Whitt, gave a short: “humpff”, and gave Sexton a disdainful look. “You’re not serious I hope. I wouldn’t figure you for someone that would buy into that reincarnation crap. Especially, since you’re associated with the church.”

“Oh, but the church used to accept the reincarnation theory Mr. Whitt. Right up to the fifteenth century I believe. Then they blamed that theory for some loss of control over the worshippers. They found that too many people were ‘slacking-off’ in this life, believing they’d get a chance to make amends in the next. Today, we might consider that a credit card approach towards claiming a place in heaven. Play now, pay later! To combat that attitude, the Church started preaching hellfire and damnation. More potent, it produced better results, and gave them stronger control over the ignorant masses.” Sexton raised his hand, and Bass quickly arrived with two fresh beers. Whitt was getting used to the brew and grudgingly

conceded – but only to himself – that the flavour was ‘moreish,’ once you got used to it. But it was still too warm. He gazed at Sexton over the rim of the mug. “Dead, is dead, my friend. You go around once. There ain’t no heaven, and there ain’t no hell. Look out for yourself first, last and always. The devil takes the hindmost.”

“Oh, he’ll do that for sure; actually, the foremost too, more often than not. But where did you get the devil from, in an existence that has no heaven and no hell.”

“Just an expression! Heaven and Hell belong in the same bag as witches, Frankenstein, the living dead, voodoo etcetera – just different branches of the same gobble-de-gook.”

“Really! So, you are familiar with all of this gobble-de-gook? Voodoo for instance?”

“Well, not familiar. I wouldn’t waste my time on that stuff. Voodoo only works if the victim convinces himself that it does. Its power comes from the victim’s fear, instigated by suggestion and theatrical mumbo-jumbo. It’s that fear that produces the response the victim dreads. It’s ridiculous to imagine that you could hurt your enemy by making a clay doll of him, and then by sticking pins in the doll, make the enemy feel the pain – that’s naive. And how the hell would your friendly demon know who the doll is meant to represent anyway. You couldn’t claim many instances of a good likeness. And that still ignores the fact that pain can’t be transmitted through space.”

Sexton leaned towards his companion a little. “Did you know Mr. Whitt that the black magic witch doctor – he’s called Bokor by the way – includes in the doll, a piece of the person it’s meant to represent – an identity tag of sorts. Some hair, or a piece of fingernail, maybe even a few drops of blood. Today we rely on such items for DNA evidence. It’s positive identification! Sometimes even a scrap of clothing will do. The DNA can be picked up from perspiration, as I’m sure you know.”

Whitt laughed, quietly. “You sound as though you believe in this garbage. What the hell is Mr. Demon supposed to do if he can’t match the broken fingernail? Does he take it home to his hi-tech lab for identification? You’ve been watching too many late-night movies my friend, and what about the witch-doctor’s dance?” He laughed again. “He shakes a rattle, sprinkles a little chicken blood and graveyard dust over someone, and that person becomes one of the living dead. A zombie! It’s amazing how much acting

talent you can buy for a bottle of cheap booze. Do me a favour Sexton. We do live in a more enlightened age you know. At least, outside of Ryeport we do. If there was anything to all that garbage, it would be taught in U.S. colleges by now. Just imagine, you might even graduate as a doctor of voodoo. Doctor Sexton V.D.” He smirked, beginning to recover his usual self-assured manner. “There is no proven evidence to support the stories or claims of so-called witch-doctors.”

“Surely Mr. Whitt, you can’t believe that we know all there is to know about Heaven and Hell, whatever roles you may think those places play in the overall scheme of things. Let me play ‘devil’s advocate’ for a while – just for the fun of it. As you know, very few ancient civilisations were able to record detailed instructions of their ‘magical’ practices. Knowledge was passed on verbally, often without explanation. That meant details were sometimes forgotten, or misinterpreted, and consequently, the ‘spell’ failed to work. Remember too, the witch doctor wouldn’t need to know why his ‘spell’ worked. All he needed to do was remember the ‘recipe’, and where to use it. Hopefully, he would pass on that knowledge before he died. And remember, some ‘dusts’ are quite powerful. If you mix charcoal and saltpetre, with sulphur – only dusts, after all – you make gunpowder and we still use that today, even in our enlightened world, where atomic weapons have far surpassed gunpowder for destructive force. Perhaps, even chicken blood might contain useful chemicals which, when mixed with the right kind of ‘graveyard dust’, and combined by shaking in a rattle, might produce some sought-after effect, not necessarily a bang. For example: You might not be able to explain the explosion caused by gunpowder, but you could learn the ‘recipe’, and, to the unsophisticated, the explosion you create would seem magical.”

“If I remember correctly, the chemicals that combine to form a human body are worth less than a dollar. But when mixed in correct proportions and with the wondrous addition of a divine catalytic spark they become living, growing, beings that are largely self-healing, can reason, and invent wondrous things; even vehicles that enable them to visit the moon. Pretty powerful results for a dollars worth of chemicals or graveyard dust. And those chemicals that combine to make human beings would have to be present in graveyards, wouldn’t they? Surely their owners didn’t take them with them when they died. Or did they? If so where did they go, heaven perhaps – or hell? A few decades ago, visiting the moon was deemed

impossible.” Sexton smiled. “One well-respected scholar said: ‘It will never be done. We could never build a ladder long enough.’”

He tapped Whitt’s digital watch. “You can alter the numbers on your watch, by pressing buttons. You make it happen, but I’d bet you couldn’t explain how that works, either. Perhaps Voodoo is just like that, another technique we’re not yet privy to.”

Was it the warm beer or merely fatigue? Whitt was no longer interested in arguing with Sexton. He wanted his bed, but first he wanted to eat. “I want a steak!” he said, determined to end the conversation. “Then I’m for bed. I take it that this place does have a bed for me? Where the hell is Chernak? That S.O.B. was supposed to meet me here. It’s dark outside. When is he coming? Or do you think some little witch-doctor has turned him into a doorknob? Come to think of it, he’s been described that way on occasion.” He laughed, and stood up. “I’m going to get my bag.”

“Sit down Mr. Whitt. Sam’s son has taken your luggage to your room. It’s all arranged.” Whitt wondered why the hell he complied so meekly. Sexton raised his hand to catch Bass’ attention, and the bartender brought his stained smile, an oil lamp, and a large jug of beer to their table. Whitt addressed himself to Bass. “Where’s Chernak? And, where’s my steak? I want an aged, inch thick, medium rare sirloin, or a T-bone, a baked potato, with butter – not sour cream – vegetables, and garlic bread. I’m famished.” Bass looked at Sexton, as though inviting him to respond. Whitt turned to the black man with a scowl on his face. “What now?” Sexton nodded to Bass, who took that as his cue to leave.

“Mr. Whitt. The reason Al and Heather are not here to meet you is that they are in London, arranging eighteenth-century costumes for their wedding.” That remark got Whitt’s full attention. “Eighteenth century? What the hell for? Chernak told me to pack my tux.”

“Well this all came about rather suddenly. We thought that a costumed wedding, because of its obvious glamour, would help promote our village’s entry into the tourist business. I believe you already know that your friend’s bride to be, Heather McDowd, is a descendant of the vicar that founded our church. That was over two hundred years ago. Ever since then all their family members have been married here. It’s a time honoured, and jealously guarded, tradition. Now that Church is to be the cornerstone of our new tourist attractions. We are hoping that our modest tourist park

will replace fishing as the main source of income for the village. The attractions will be staffed by villagers in period costume. We even have a square-rigged tall ship – a three master – tied up at the harbour wall. I'm sure you saw it as you drove in. It's a replica of course – leased from a film company. Saturday's wedding date is only weeks before the official opening of the theme park. The wedding should be very colourful and your friend's name will become part of the history of the village, just as Heather's ancestors are.

By the way, Sarah, the landlord's wife, has prepared two guest rooms upstairs for yourself and Al Chernak. She's all aglow. It isn't often she gets to play host to visitors from overseas. I'm sure that you will reward her unsophisticated attentions with charm and courtesy. She is not like her husband. You won't need to grab her shirt although I suspect that Sarah might not complain."

Whitt's jaw clenched tight. He felt he was being manipulated again and the sense of panic was back, twisting his guts as before. His discomfort must have been obvious, but Sexton ignored it. Whitt sensed his companion was getting ready for another lengthy monologue, and fumbled for an excuse to leave. "I have to unpack. Excuse me," he said as he stood up. Just the act of standing restored some confidence. However, Sexton just smiled and waved him back to his seat. "I have taken the liberty of ordering supper for you Mr. Whitt. You can eat whilst I talk." It was obvious that Sexton expected compliance, and he got it. Whitt sat down. "Despite what you may think about this inn Mr. Whitt, Sarah is a good cook, albeit of plain fare, and you will enjoy the meal."

Whitt was now being told what food to enjoy, but he had lost all confidence in asserting any will of his own. As though on cue, a short plump lady emerged from the door behind the bar. She was carrying a steaming plate heaped with steak and kidney pie, mashed potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables. She looked flushed and nervous, and, as she set the plate before Whitt, she half curtsied. "I 'ope ye'll enjoy your supper, Sir," she stammered. "We don't often get the likes of you visiting our little inn. Oh! I'll get you a knife and fork." She turned and almost ran to the kitchen for the cutlery.

"What the hell is this?" fumed Whitt. "I ordered steak, not some house special. She can take this back."

"Mr. Whitt, no one here can afford steak. So the house doesn't buy it. If you want steak you will have to drive to Nextwest for it. That's about twenty

miles away. I'm sure that's not an attractive prospect after the travelling you've already done today. Chernak said you were a good sport. Please, be gracious, and try Sarah's steak and kidney pie. You will enjoy it; I promise you." Sarah reappeared, with cutlery and some condiments. She trimmed the oil lamp and its light supplemented the recently lit, but rather dim, electric lanterns on the bar walls. This afforded Whitt the opportunity to get a clearer look at his companion's face. Sexton's features were quite young but his face was hard to put an age to, partly because of the generous amount of grey hair over his ears, and his eyes were strangely compelling. Whitt felt arrested by them. He had the disturbing feeling that those eyes were doorways to a different world. It took several seconds of concentrated mental effort for him to break eye contact, but in those brief moments, he was sure he'd felt the heaving motion of a ship's deck, smelled the sea, and heard the groans and creaking of an old tall ship. Whitt's sense of panic only subsided when Sexton closed his eyes. However, he suddenly appeared very tired as he lowered his head, and rested his forearms on the table, as if recovering from a strenuous physical effort.

Whitt's insides had again been twisted into that unpleasant sense of dread. This time it was so bad that it was affecting his breathing. His emotions were in turmoil and he wanted to leave this place. He had never experienced such a sense of panic before. He forced himself to a standing position, intending to leave. His back was to the rest of the patrons and the buzz of conversations continued unabated. Only Sexton could see his obvious distress, but he seemed unconcerned as he again fixed eye contact with him. "Please, Mr. Whitt, sit down and enjoy your meal. 'You-be-safe-from-the-storm-tonight', as we still say in these parts. You will enjoy the wedding and, despite your misgivings, find pleasure in your visit." Sexton's voice sounded, metered and, instructional and Whitt felt his pulse return to normal and his fears melt away. He felt fine. Just fine! But Sexton's speech pattern though had sounded robotic, almost like a recorded programming. "Someone should tell him about that," Whitt thought.

The smell of the food was inviting overriding his concerns of being manipulated. He dismissed all of his unpleasant sensations as fatigue. "Nothing to worry about, a good night's sleep will work wonders," he thought. Whitt forgot his discomforts and began to enjoy the appetising meal. True, it was unpretentious, but very flavourful. Sexton was right. Sarah was indeed a good cook and he certainly wasn't disappointed by not having steak. Nor

did the drone of Sexton's voice interfere with his enjoyment of the food, or the constantly replenished jug of beer. "It's strange," he thought, "but the warm beer compliments the meal. Somehow it seems – just right." He tried to ignore Sexton's voice. Once he'd finished his supper though, he grew anxious to leave again. Sexton looked at him and gave a quiet laugh. "No, you can't leave yet, Sir. I have been charged with the responsibility of entertaining you until your friend returns. And it's a duty I take very seriously."

"Why the hell didn't Chernak call me? I have things to do in Toronto that are a damned sight more important than swilling beer in a rundown English pub with some stranger."

"I've already explained that, Sir. It was a last-minute decision. And there is a letter of explanation, from your friend, on your bed, which I am sure, will confirm what I've told you." Sexton continued without further pause, ignoring his blustering companion. "And how sure are you, that we are strangers? If you search your memory – very deeply – you might discover me to be a long-forgotten acquaintance. Not such a stranger as you suppose. I believe your ancestors were from England, were they not?" His eyes searched Whitt's as if expecting some sign of recognition. However, he found none, so, giving a quiet sigh of disappointment, he continued. "Seriously, Mr. Whitt, how do you really feel about reincarnation?" Sexton's searching eyes made contact again and Whitt felt some of his new found confidence ebb away. He responded a little shakily, feeling as though he was living in a bad dream, wondering if this sensation was due to the unfamiliar brew. "Dead is dead," he said. "There ain't no heaven and there ain't no hell. No souls and no second trips around!" He hoped his adamant response would end the conversation. But Sexton didn't oblige. "Well! You are, of course, entitled to your opinion, Sir. I'm sure you are familiar with the word 'karma' Mr. Whitt? It's very prominent in some eastern religions. Some believe that your behaviour in this life will determine your quality of life in the next incarnation. They believe – and this is a liberal translation – that if you observe the doctrine, 'love-thy-neighbour', in its purest sense, then your karma will be good, and each successive life will be more rewarding until, eventually, your soul will attain Nirvana. Be villainous however and your karma will be bad, and it may take several painfully corrective lifetimes to prepare you for everlasting peace."

Whitt's eyelids were closing. The long journey, plus the beer and the heavy meal, had taken their toll. His chin sagged onto his chest and his breathing

fell to a slower, deeper rhythm. He was asleep. Sexton's shoulders slumped as he realised that his companion's attention was now lost to him. "There was a time when I would have gained some satisfaction from your upcoming misfortune," he murmured. "But no longer. In fact, I shall have to share it with you. Never mind, 'Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb', was a favourite saying of yours, if I recall. In fact, you actually were, once."

Whitt was beginning to stir. No longer thirsty, he wanted away from the seemingly endless prattle of this old man. Sexton obliged. "Ah, you have come back to us Mr. Whitt. I think you could use a good night's sleep. Why don't you 'turn-in'? When you awake tomorrow, you will attribute much of today's confusion to unfamiliar brew. However, you will remember the "underlying sense of our conversation." Through the fog of his returning consciousness, Whitt construed Sexton's remarks as instructions rather than conversation. "Tomorrow I shall show you the interesting features of this village," continued Sexton. "Why don't you get to bed now? The room is not as luxurious as you are used to, but you will sleep well. Tomorrow, the Vicar will explain your duties as best man. I will meet you after breakfast, and take you to the church. I promise that you will find tomorrow interesting."

"More instructions," thought Whitt. Sexton raised his hand and, once he had Bass' attention, pointed to the ceiling. Bass called through the kitchen door and Sarah soon brought her flushed cheeks and shy smile to their table. "I will show you to your room, Sir." She led him back towards the door that had given him so much trouble earlier, but she turned left, away from that door, to climb the companion ladder that occupied the space where Whitt had expected to see the table and benches. He paused at the foot of the stairway, and pointed to the archway. "Didn't there used to be a door there?"

"Oh bless you, Sir; that was 'undreds of years ago. 'owever did you know about that? In the ol' days, there was a door there that used to lead outside, to the men's conveniences Sir. Or rather, to the convenient outside, if you get my meaning. There wasn't much in the way of sanitary convenience in those days, Sir. The original owner had the door taken out, after some spooky trouble they say. Over two 'undred years ago that was. I don't remember it of course." Sarah giggled. "Just a li'l joke, Sir," and she turned, to precede Whitt up the companionway, to the second floor.

"Just a little joke Sir," mimicked Whitt quietly, as with mincing little steps and an imitation of what Sarah had imagined to be a sophisticated smile,

he followed her. But, as he grasped the rope handrail and his feet hit the treads, he thought: "They've changed the rope. This used to be a cotton rope." That unpleasant knot was back in his stomach again and it persisted until he was off the stairway.

Sarah was stammering her explanation of the facilities. "The bathroom is just two doors down the passage, Sir. It has a shower and everything. Just like mine and Sam's. Personally I prefer to lie in the bath Sir, rather than shower." Then she blushed at the thought that he might have a mental image of her in the bath. Her mind would have been full of images of this athletic looking guest had their situations been reversed. Sam had never been an attractive or imaginative lover and her mind did, sometimes 'wander'. She fell silent for a while, as she dealt with the images her mind had conjured up. Then, hurriedly, with her cheeks a few shades redder, and in a more officious tone: "There are extra blankets in the wardrobe drawer and extra towels on the washstand, Sir. Most guests don't use the washstand but they do like having antiques in their room."

Whitt's attention focused on the envelope lying on the bed. He recognised Al Chernak's familiar hand and thought that, thanks to Sexton, he could likely recite the message without opening the envelope. After announcing that breakfast would be at eight o'clock in The Seahorse lounge, Sarah bade him good night. Whitt looked around the primitive looking room and shook his beer befuddled head. One small dormer window poked through the sloping ceiling, overlooking the old, clay tiled roof. The bare floorboards were so worn that the knots in the wood stood proud of any softer, wider grain. The walls were of uneven whitewashed plaster between black posts. Limp, printed cotton curtains hung on an expanded curtain wire at the window. There was no socket for his electric razor, but the room did have a cheaply shaded electric light and for extra convenience, a cord dangled over the bed, to control the light. Whitt tossed his suitcase onto the bed and started to unpack. As he stepped close to the bed his foot struck something underneath. On lifting the overlay he discovered a chamber pot. He smiled as he remembered his grandmother referring to it as a g'zunder. 'Because it 'goes under' the bed dear,' she'd explained. "More antiques," he muttered. Sexton had said he would sleep soundly, and he did.