

The Bridge

by

Wes Hobson

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A dozen years ago, as a seventeen-year-old student working hard to gain a decent A-level grade in English Literature, I stumbled upon a passage of writing that chilled me to the bone. For three weeks I had been struggling heavy-heartedly with Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, when, in chapter twenty-two, I came upon a subtle description of a supernatural apparition. It was contained in a three-sentenced paragraph.

“Are there wicked things, not human, which envy human bliss? Are there evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man? What was near me . . .”

They were words that, even after Charlotte's later demystification of the incident, I found disturbing and difficult to forget; and my reaction intrigued me. On analysis it couldn't have been borne from any form of naivety, because I was no stranger to writings that dealt with ghosts. I was familiar with the work of all the leaders in the genre and considered I possessed as broad ranging a literary intellect as it was possible to have, given my few years of serious study. But those Bronte words had an immediate and profound effect, engaging a remarkable *beyond the literary* experience. And they were words that, twelve years later, I would recall when the inescapable truth of their sentiments was demonstrated to me on a lonely motorway bridge in South Yorkshire.

After reasonable success in my studies my literary ambitions eventually crystallised into my employment as a photojournalist for a regional weekly newspaper. It was a job that turned up more than a few surprises, because there is a shared sentiment amongst most press photographers that they are the front line troops of the newspaper or agency for whom they work. I have become a living testimony to the truth of such an axiom. In my career as a photojournalist I have sustained fractured ribs and arms. I have broken one nose and one leg.

One fateful day, I entered my editorial office holding a huge wad of darkroom tissue to my bleeding nose – an injury inflicted on me by a newsworthy 103-year-old birthday woman, who took offence at my saying that she didn't look a day over four hundred. Judging from the way she delivered her gravel-filled handbag to my face, life in even a posh residential home has its own endemic stresses.

Ignoring the quizzical looks from my laptop enslaved colleagues, I made straight for the corner of the open plan office that belonged to the photography department. But, mid-journey, I found myself halted by an all too familiar voice from the far end of the room behind me.

“Thomas, can you join us please? Now.”

Holding ajar the door to his sectioned-off, tinted-glass inner sanctum was my editor. No quizzical look from him; he regarded me with his usual inscrutable hooded stare, and then disappeared back into his office – the “goldfish bowl”, as we called it.

I glanced around the room for some signal, some discreet note from one of my associates, a clue as to the reason for my summons at this early hour; but nothing was forthcoming. So, resigning myself to yet another tirade of abuse, I discarded my camera bag, and bloodied tissues and began the long, carpeted walk to the nerve centre of our beloved newspaper.

When I eventually entered, the room was complete with four individuals. Already seated were the editor (‘Mr. B.’ as he liked us to call him), a newly appointed features writer called Andrew (whose quick rise to this intimate sort of status I found suspicious) and a young, urbane-looking woman, who, judging from everyone's grim expression, seemed to be holding court on a matter of some gravity. Mr. B. stopped her for a moment to effect an introduction.

“Thomas, this is Helen Cadwalleder. She’s a reader from one of our backwood territories.” He glanced at her. “No offence meant by that, of course.”

“None taken,” she replied.

Mr. B. elaborated. “Miss Cadwalleder is here in connection with the story we ran last week about the supposedly haunted bridge in Westbrook. You took the picture that went with it, didn’t you?”

The pangs of a guilty conscience suddenly started to trouble me. “Ah, no – that wasn’t one of mine. I was down to do it, but circumstances . . . er . . . things altered during that day, and I . . . er . . . asked one of the other lads to do it.” I’d actually spent that particular afternoon covertly shopping with my new-found girlfriend – a dangerous liaison that I’d deemed of great, risk-taking importance. Now I began to experience a sinking feeling that I should have been more careful. But I was let off the hook by an alarming statement from our visitor.

“I’m actually here in my capacity as a psychic,” she said.

This brought from me an involuntary guffaw. “Have we got a vacancy for a psychic then?” I said, turning to my boss.

“No, Thomas,” he said, missing the joke as usual. “Miss Cadwalleder isn’t here on a job interview; she’s here, judging from what she’s already said – and if I’m not very much mistaken, to warn us in some way.”

She reached down to her bag on the floor and withdrew a small packet of Kleenex. I’d surmised from the sound of her voice that she might have had a cold; and when she continued to speak, her deep, bruised tones began to add a dark, sombre emphasis to what she began to unfold.

She braced herself. “I realise, and fully understand, that you all may feel a certain journalistic scepticism towards my professional role as a psychic and spirit-medium. But please . . . firstly, listen to *all* I have to say before making any comments.”

I could hardly believe my ears. All of a sudden everything seemed to have turned serious. I thought, *is she for real?*

She produced a papercutting of the story and placed it on the table between us. Not being a regular reader of our newspaper, this was the first time I’d actually seen the article. Its accompanying photograph showed two young women standing on a small, motorway-type bridge, looking down at a busy dual carriageway that ran beneath. The picture caption read:

“Is there anybody there? Would-be Ghostbusters Lisa and Joanne revisit the scene of their terrifying experience . . . ”

The text went on to describe how the two young ladies had staked out the notorious spot one night and fled the scene when faced with an apparition that resembled, quote: “ . . . a bloody great big monk . . . ”

Once again I had to laugh. “So you’ve come to explain something about this ‘bloody great big monk’, have you?”

She stared at me for a long moment and then, smiling enigmatically, she replied. “Yes . . . something like that.”

In that slow instant, as I watched her lips curl into one of those muted, comprehending smiles, I suddenly realised how attractive she was. In my experience, spirit-mediums just didn’t come in this shape at all. They were elderly, “mumsy” types, with coloured perms, and woolly cardigans. But here I found myself looking at an articulate, obviously intelligent and impressively tailored, young woman. And a woman completely unfazed when outnumbered by males.

Her expression now became that of someone focusing their mind's eye on some inner objective and she began to speak with more urgency.

“Gentlemen, all my life I have dealt with the supernatural on my terms. From being very young I’ve been aware of sights and sounds invisible and silent to those physically around me. As I’ve grown older I’ve adapted this . . . this *gift*, if you like, to suit my own ends – those ends being questions answered, mysteries solved – and trying to gain something close to *absolute* truth regarding the existence of other forces, the after-life, and so on . . .”

She paused a moment. Evidently, articulation was important to her. I could fairly hear the workings of her mind as she constructed her sentences. Andrew was trying to meet her intellectually head-on by showing off his shorthand skills, busily noting down all she said. Mr. B. was slumped, stretched full length in his chair, and, from the look on his face, enjoying this unusual meeting.

She continued, looking at each of us for a moment, in a gentle, sweeping action from one to the other. It was an arresting technique.

“I know many in the secular world believe all pursuits such as mine are futile and irrelevant. This side of the divide between the physical and the non-physical will always be difficult to represent – to ‘sell’, perhaps – because of the absence of what most would consider to be irrefutable proof. But, much as I’d like to, I’m not here to debate the existence of other forces. On the contrary, I’m here to encourage you to do the same. It’s my sincere hope that I can persuade you to drop any further interest you may have in the incidents at Beanrobb Bridge.”

In a prevailing action she made eye contact with us all, but was cut short by Mr. B., who stood up to open the one outer window in his office. I, for one, was lost for a retort to all of this; so, in deference to his position, left it to the editor to take the lead in this strange meeting.

He sat down again, smiled brightly, and spoke. “Miss Cadwalleder . . .”

“Please, Helen . . .”

“Helen . . . as far as we are concerned, the story ran last week and is now old news. Other than yourself, it has generated no extra interest, or inspired any one, single piece of correspondence from our readers. Rest assured then, that it *has* been forgotten . . . and it will be forgotten. But please, enlighten us on why you feel this need to discourage any further publicity.”

“Yeah – so what’s the problem anyway?” barked out Andrew. His voice startled me; I’d almost forgotten he was in the room. “I’d have thought it would be to your advantage to get people chattering about something like this. Surely it gives you a chance to ‘strut your stuff’, and put people right on a few things.”

She laughed. “Yes – but one of the problems now with Beanrobb Lane, its bridge and its surrounding farmland, is that an invasion of thrill-seekers have been ‘strutting their stuff’ up there for some two months now. Ever since the stories first broke on television the place has been inundated with individuals who have tromped about the place – most of it private land – looking for the ‘monk’. It’s been very distressing for the landowners.”

“So you’re here on their behalf, is that it?” I said. “To somehow put a stop to all that, for their sakes?”

“Yes and no. I do have a friend who has property in the area . . . but my primary concern is to do with the phenomenon that exists up there. It is very real. It is very dangerous. And it’s getting bigger and more powerful every day . . .”

A journalist’s environment rarely embraces the concept of silence; but for a number of seconds, after that last remark, we all seemed to be under a spell – a spell which I tentatively broke.

“When you say big, what do you mean? Size – or threat?”

“Both.”

“So how big is it now then, this ‘monk’?”

“It isn’t a monk,” she replied *very* quickly.

“So what is it then, a nun?” asked Andrew, equally quickly.

“Neither.”

Turning to Mr. B., Andrew began to elaborate. “I remember when I saw the accounts about this place on television, there wasn’t a mention of anybody actually seeing anything. The main buzz was about some security guard bloke having his van attacked with stones and bricks. But he couldn’t see anyone doing it. He just heard the sounds. There was no damage to the van, but it was rocking about and *sounded* like it was being pelted with rocks. The poor sod just ran off and left it . . .”

His recollection triggered one of mine. “Yeah . . . but somebody did see something once, didn’t they? I remember some old bird in a MiniMetro was driving up the road and over the bridge and ended up turning a corner and driving right through some figure. She thought she’d killed someone, but there wasn’t a sign of a body anywhere.”

Miss Cadwalleder returned to the conversation with more assertion. “Since the television coverage, all sorts of stories have been related. And it’s an entirely predictable reaction. The real dilemma now is that all the hype is masking a very real danger.” She picked up the press cutting. “The thrills that these sorts of representations bring to the public, I’m afraid, are doing them no great service at all – and, on this occasion, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.”

She paused. “Gentlemen, I repeat: I have always managed my dealings in the supernatural with confidence and good heart. I’ve grown to understand that, mysteries aside, the other world essentially mirrors our own. There is good and there is bad, and the two mix. One truth, that early became apparent to me, is that the concepts of Heaven and Hell receive no credentials from the ‘other’ side. No one talks with any great reverence of God, Jesus or the Devil . . . all one comprehends is that a system of existence is being played out – and that it has all the complex layers of our own.”

“So, you have all the answers, do you?” Mr. B. interjected. “You have special knowledge of things that the rest of us can only wonder about?”

“Yes, I do have special knowledge – but I don’t have all the answers. What I’ve learned – and I repeat – is that on both levels of existence there is good and there is evil. But the evil side of the other world is a very dreadful place . . . and eventually coming to this understanding is the reason why I’m here today.” She shook her head self-consciously. “You were right, sir, when you said you’d sensed I’d come to give you a warning. I *do* bring a warning – one borne from my own experience of trying to deal with the power at Beanrobb.”

In what seemed to be a comfort-seeking gesture, she began to fondle an amber-stoned necklace that she pulled out from beneath her white blouse. After a moment’s pause, while we all watched her do this, she continued.

“Over a year ago, I was asked to become involved in the activities up there; but I have now washed my hands of the place. I can do nothing to help.” She leaned forward in her seat, and closed her eyes for a moment. “Please be assured . . . there *is* a brooding and growing and malevolent power there that – I have to admit, for the first time in my life – has filled me with an awesome dread. The range of its influence is very profound. It has kinetic energy that can lift and overturn a car. It has its own sound, smell and shape . . . but not a human shape. And I believe its power is growing – growing as it feeds on the energy from the dozens of electric pylons in the area. The pylons that service the local industries.”

After another uneasy pause, Mr. B. spoke. "Goodness me . . . that is *some* creature of the night you're describing."

She shook her head slowly. "Its sphere of influence is not confined to the night. My own, last experience was right bang in the middle of the day. Lunchtime."

"Do tell," said Andrew, with a thinly veiled sarcasm.

She drew a deep breath. "One thing you learn about Beanrobb Lane is that it is a short cut to *so* many places – and I was using it one day to keep an appointment with a friend, the one mentioned earlier, who lives in the locality. In the end I never got there. My car was hijacked at the T-junction at the top of the hill."

"Hijacked?" both Andrew and I exclaimed in unison.

"Yes. The entire passenger half of the interior of my car – the seat beside and behind me – were 'screened-out', obscured totally, by a dense, black wall – like a veil had been drawn across and bisected the saloon. It had no reflection and no substance. I put my hand into it and felt nothing."

"So what did you do?" asked Mr. B., with an incredulous shake of his head.

"I got out of the car, left my door open, and asked it to leave. Which it did."

"What, it got up and walked out?" I asked.

"It dissipated slowly . . . turning from black to grey, and then, smoke-like, to nothing."

"And that was your last, if I may say so, well-articulated, experience?" asked Mr. B.

"Yes," she answered, leaning back in her chair.

He sat up straight, and pulled his chair closer to his desk. I think we were all privately fascinated with both the story and its teller; and equally aware that the meeting seemed to be coming to an end. Our guest looked tired, and sat quite still, waiting . . .

After scribbling a few notes into his huge desk diary, Mr. B. resumed. "Well, Miss Cadwalleder – Helen – it's been most absorbing. And not a little worrying. All this talk about 'growing in size', and 'feeding from the pylons' makes me feel that, well . . . maybe the authorities should be informed; the Army perhaps – or better still, the Air Force. A couple of Stealth bombers should be able to see it off, wouldn't you think?"

She assumed a stoic countenance. "I'm sorry you feel that I've wasted your time . . . but I have done what I set out to do. Now, of course, you must react in whatever way you see fit."

"No, please – you haven't wasted our time at all," Mr. B. hurriedly replied. "I'm sorry. I must ask you to forgive my levity. Your visit has been most enjoyable and, I feel, important. So much so I'm tempted to ignore what you've asked, and prompt a full investigation of the place. But . . . another day perhaps."

He stood up to shake her hand; and she corresponded. As she withdrew he grabbed my arm and whispered, "Thomas, before she leaves, would you get a head and shoulders picture of her." Overhearing, she turned to face us, so he addressed her. "If it's all right with you, of course. It's just so we have something of you on file."

She smiled and nodded; and then said quietly – again looking at each of us in turn – "One of the three of you is psychic . . . but you're not aware of it yet . . ."

"Really?" I said. "Which one? Me?"

"Perhaps."

"I knew you were going to say that." I raised my hand. "Sorry . . . one of my old psychic jokes."

We left the office and Mr. B. closed the door behind us. I escorted her back to her car and photographed her showing me the amber stone necklace she wore as ‘a symbol of protection’. It was an eternity brooch that, she claimed, she could never be without. I told her that it suited her and she grinned at the compliment.

I rattled off a whole film of portrait shots and then made to shake her hand. She reciprocated, but then did something that surprised me. Gaining a firm grip on my hand, she pulled me towards her and kissed me lightly, just underneath my right ear.

She whispered, “It’s *you* that’s psychic.”

I was embarrassed. “How do you know?”

“Because your energy is calling out to mine.”

“Is that so?”

“Very so.”

“Well . . . if you kiss me again, you’ll find even more energy headed your way.”

She smiled and then got into her car. She started up the engine, and, before pulling away, wound down her window. “Goodbye, Thomas,” she said. “And be careful.”

“I’m never anything else,” I replied. And then she was gone.

On returning to my desk I found a short memo from Mr. B. It said:

*“Thomas. Tonight would be a good time for you to have a scout around the place our good friend the ‘doom chick’ was on about. See if you can bring up the dead...or something like that. I expect some scintillating images. Best of luck . . . **The Boss.***

P.S. Take a crucifix. Ha, Ha . . .”

* * *

Over the next few days, and with my usual studied aplomb, I managed to forestall any dealings with what was rapidly becoming known as ‘that bloody bridge’; the reason being that, very quickly, the week took on its predictable organised chaos. Two separate murders were recorded in the locality: the town football club signed a foreign international player; and I was almost savaged to pieces by a Rottweiler, whose owner went on record as saying that his “pet” was “. . . misrepresented and misunderstood . . . by nearby residents”. The fact that it ate one of my lenses was no indication that the dog (inspiring named Satan) was any different to “. . . your regular Pekinese, Guv . . .”

Being the only weekly newspaper in the British Isles that publishes in the early hours of Friday morning, we have to get the product completed by Thursday lunchtime. It is a goal that all my colleagues embrace with fortitude and salivation; the local pub does very good business on Thursday afternoons.

But the communal weekend winding-down is a one sided affair. The poor photographer, unlike his desk-bound colleagues, has no respite come the weekend. Quite the opposite; his or her work goes on and on and on . . . and, as fortune would have it, this particular Thursday afternoon, my circumstances were again to deteriorate when I came upon Mr. B. as he emerged from one of our production areas. He was clearly preoccupied, and, on seeing me, simply nodded as he passed; but then he arrested me with a late afterthought.

“Thomas . . . how did the pictures from the troubled bridge come out?”

“They didn’t. Because I haven’t done them yet.”

“I see. Reason?”

“Reason being that I just haven’t had the time. It’s been a very busy week.”

He began to look me up and down. “Shame,” he said; and then, “So whose duty night is it this evening?”

My heart sank. “Mine,” I replied.

He smiled thinly and came nearer. “I didn’t tell you, did I? Our friend the ‘doom chick’ has since sent us some extremely interesting literature. Quite a sizeable package; she must have been stuck to her photocopier for days.” He peered into my eyes. “You’ll find it on my desk. Odd thing – the parcel bears your name, but it’s addressed to me. ‘*Thomas Doorage, The Editor*’, it says. Can you explain that?”

“No, I can’t. Particularly as I don’t recall telling her my full name.”

“A clumsy mistake. Rather gauche. Hardly the way one would expect a woman of such declared prescience to conduct herself, wouldn’t you say?”

“If you explain to me what ‘prescience’ means, I’ll answer that.”

His expression betrayed a faint amusement. “Never mind. You can take the stuff off my desk anyway. I haven’t read it all, but fundamentally she’s tried to legitimise the place by laying a plethora of historical data on us.” He turned and walked away, but continued to speak. “Don’t bother to return the stuff; it’s not even close to what I call a good read.”

Yeah, I thought, that explains a lot.

I was annoyed with him on two counts. Up until then I’d enjoyed the prospect of a night free of assignments – a very rare thing indeed. And secondly, he was again parading his infuriating habit of using words that I’d never heard before and didn’t understand. It becomes quickly obvious to everyone that meets him that his vocabulary is vast – his secretary calls him the “wordy man” – and after every encounter I resolve myself to broaden my range of English usage. But, somehow, I never quite get off the ground.

Resigning myself to another night’s work, I went to his office and claimed the parcel she had sent. He was right; there was a lot to read. I cursorily scanned some of the pages and turned to the last A4 sheet. It was handwritten and concluded with her phone number, to contact if “any further info” was needed. I had to smile, and thought, she really is serious about this place.

I took the parcel to a quiet corner in the darkroom, prepared myself a cup of coffee and set about doing justice to her concerns. But it wasn’t easy reading. It took me thirty minutes or so to comprehend what I needed; an abridged version of what had happened some nine hundred years ago at Westbrook, and more specifically at Beanrobb Lane . . .

* * *

I learned that in those days the land was owned by a powerful feudal lord named Teecher, who rented out properties and farming rights to over a hundred families. Troubles began when his rates became too high, forcing the “villains” to “up sticks” and move out to other pastures. Many of them found refuge nearby, in land half-owned by the Church.

Teecher, otherwise known by his self-proclaimed title of the Lord of Westbrook, became angry at his sudden loss of revenue and, quote “*sent a dragon to slay them . . .*” the word “dragon”, in this context, being an arcane term used to describe a “band of renegade knights”. The slaughter was terrible and comprehensive. Whole families, children, animals, even the passive monks and priests were put to the sword. And in a final act of bitter retribution, the psychopathic lord decreed, “Their bodies shall not be

interred. Not one. Their blood and flesh shall irrigate and feed the soil until the seasons of wind and torrent alone hide them from the sight of God and man . . .”

Gruesome stuff. But all the more intriguing was her attached note, summing up all this historical grief. Her manuscript was elaborately uniform and I felt I sensed an elaborately uniform woman behind it. She explained:

“The power that haunts Beanrobb is the collected spirits of all those who were killed by the Dragon. Being unburied and given no suitable right of passage, their torment and their restlessness has blinded them to all reason. There is no correspondence to be had with such a chaos - and that is why I have withdrawn from it. It is best left to God, in his great mercy, to finish this profound unhappiness.”

I didn't think she believed in God, I thought.

Curiosity had now definitely got the better of me. Apart from the typical, chilled fascination one derives from any goulsh story, I was also intrigued to learn that this area, where I had lived all my life, had such a surprisingly dramatic history – and that the very spot where all this carnage had occurred was less than twenty minutes drive away from where I was now sitting.

So I was resolved: I would go there that night. I would go and face the “collected spirits”, and not only that, I would take their picture. After all, the worst that could happen is that they might frighten me. Even with all its “kinetic energy”, the force up there hadn't actually physically hurt anyone yet. And now, possessed of my newly acquired “psychic” qualification, I would go where others had feared to venture; and I would bring a healthy dose of twentieth century scepticism with me, to quell the ancient beast.

I spent some minutes clearing up in the process room and checked my diary for the next day. Leaving a note for my colleagues, telling them of my plans for the night, I left the deserted editorial floor and enjoyed an evening meal for one at a nearby KFC.

Sitting there, re-reading some of Helen's research notes, I suddenly felt a need to speak to her, to tell her what I was about to do, maybe even meet her somewhere before I started. So I left the restaurant, and, from my car, rang her with my mobile phone. It was just before ten o'clock; and there was no answer. I let it ring and ring – until the clicks of an answer-machine and her recorded voice came whispering down the line. But for some moments I became confused. There was firstly the functional banality of her message, but then more sounds. The hiss of interference – and then her voice again, returning – but different this time, clearer, louder.

“I know you really want to speak to me. And I really am so sorry, Thomas . . .”

I shouted into the phone. “Helen. Helen, it's me. It's Thomas. Are you there?”

Silence. “Helen? Helen – you've just spoken to me. I *know* you're there. Listen – I want to talk. I want to tell you what I'm going to do. Tonight.” Still no answer.

“Look, Helen . . .the stuff you sent, it's brilliant. Just brilliant. And I'm going up there tonight – I'm going up there now . . .”

There was still no response. I was sure she was listening . . .but there was nothing – nothing but the infinite white noise of a dormant telephone line.

I had one more go. “Look, if you don't want to speak, that's okay. I can't figure out why but it's still okay. I just wanted to let you know what I was doing. I know you think it's a bad idea . . .but . . . I'm going up to Beanrobb Bridge. I'm going to take some pictures – in fact, that's why I'm ringing. I wanted to know if it's possible to take photographs of this thing.” A loud, high-pitched drone sound suddenly exploded in my ear. If she had been there, listening, she was gone now.

I set out with mixed feelings. Apart from the bizarre and unsettling phone call, I felt unwell. I had sensed earlier in the day a sort of scratch in my throat – and now, some eight hours later, it felt as painful as tonsillitis. All the reading had also left me feeling tired, eye-strained, so that driving at night became more difficult; the town centre was a particularly harsh, stressful experience. But I was soon on to the ring road, and then out into the dark villages that perimetered the borough.

I had known of Beanrobb Lane for years, but in a different context to all this ghostly stuff. In my younger days I had latched on to a gang of push-bike fanatics who used it as an initiation/endurance test because of its long and very steep incline from bottom to top. In the Eighties, a famous actor bought a large property up there and, for a while, the area became something of a media attraction. And then, two years ago, there was a suicide on the lane, at the now notorious bridge that spans the Westbrook Bypass. A girl of fourteen, evidently a victim of school bullying, hanged herself there using the electric cord from her bedside lamp. Her suspended body had been visible from the carriageway for some four hours before anyone fully realised what had happened. It was a great tragedy; and it stunned the community.

I had been on the road for ten minutes, and now drove into steep, climbing country roads of almost complete darkness. My headlights picked out dry-stone walls, jagged hedgerows, cattle-gates and, on turning a very sharp corner, the alarming sight of the red eyes of a dog as it emerged from a ditch.

The lanes then began to level out as I reached the crest of Redbourne Hill, where – in grim silhouette against the overcast sky – stood the derelict windmill that marked the beginning of Beanrobb Lane. It was an arresting sight and I stopped the car to take a proper look.

I had only ever seen it before in the daylight. It was one of those distant horizon landmarks that I saw dozens of times a week as I hurriedly drove from one assignment to the next. On the rare occasions that I had ever found myself actually near the thing, I had noted only a tall, dilapidated tower of weather-beaten stone. But here, given my new understandings of the place, I felt my first real chill and a flutter of hesitation. For all the world it now looked like a huge, black finger pointing to the heavens – or maybe a huge, black finger giving a warning? *I have got to get a picture of that*, I thought. But I would do it later . . .

Turning left into the lane I caught a glimpse of one half of an old metal sign bolted to a wall. It announced 'BEANROBB'. The 'LANE' half had obviously broken away . . . and I sensed another small shudder of apprehension, because I realised that I had just entered the lane at the junction where Helen claimed her car had been hijacked by some black, indescribable apparition. I looked quickly to my left and felt genuinely relieved that I could still see through my passenger window. *Good God*, I thought; *come on . . . pull yourself together. You've only just got here. Don't be so nervy . . .*

The lane wasn't as I remembered it. Within seconds of driving along it, its width had narrowed so much that I feared for my wing mirrors. There were no hedges, just high walls of compacted stone. And no passing points that I could see. For a full minute I was channelled along that dim corridor, hoping that nothing would come the other way. And then I eventually negotiated – crawled, more like – a very tight, blind corner, and my claustrophobia ended as the walls were replaced by short boundary gorse and banks of grass.

I had now reached the top of Redbourne Hill and begun the descent that would lead me to the grazing pastures – and infamous bridge – below. But I was arrested by the view of the landscape before me, because, even at this dark hour, it was

overwhelming. Below, for miles in every direction, stretched a vast plain of urban light. From the huge industrial steel complex and the villages that surrounded it soared pulsating reds, ambers, blues and greens – electric colours that emphasised the chasm of dusky, humid air that separated the high hill from the deep valley. For a moment I shivered in awe at the sight and then felt even more empowered to complete what I had set out to do. This was real life – the physical, the literal; the smellable, seeable, hearable and touchable.

Galvanised by the majesty of the view, I drove down, occasionally winding, but continuing down. There were still no lights on the lane, but it had widened substantially, my headlights picking out centre markings and newish kerbstones – and then, as sudden as a hiccup, the metal pales and railings of the bridge itself. I stopped the car and got out.

Even dimly revealed by the phosphorescent light from the steelworks half a mile away, the bridge looked perfectly ordinary. It was simply a modern, motorway passover, with towering electrical pylons straddling it on both sides. Spliced to it, and going off in different directions, were wooden fences with styles. A public footpath sign stood prominent next to a gate – this was, after all, walking country, biking country – and nothing, even in the dark, suggested it was anything more. So what was I doing here?

I walked from the car and stood watching the traffic as it raced underneath. A number of inventively illuminated lorries passed, giving me an idea. What was it Mr. B. had asked for? “I expect some scintillating images.” A long exposure shot of streaming lights as they passed under the bridge should give him what he wanted. Well, not quite, perhaps . . .

I went back to the car and unloaded the equipment that I needed. My throat was still very sore, but the night was uncomfortably humid, so I took the risk of discarding my jacket and throwing it in the back seat. Apart from a background of distantly quiet industrial babble, I could hear nothing other than the traffic passing beneath me. And when the bypass cleared for a while, I was left almost in silence; but for the gentle hum of electricity as it moved by cable from pylon to pylon. I spent a few moments listening to the sound and shuddered again. “*It grows as it feeds on the pylons . . .*” I smiled to myself, but without humour.

I placed the tripod centrally on the east side of the bridge, intending to catch the traffic both ways. Working in the dark, even with a power torch was difficult. I thought, *no matter how much you spent and invested in cameras, they were so bloody hard to manipulate in less than perfect conditions.* But I got going eventually. Long exposure shots need aptitude and patience from the photographer if they are even going to begin to work. But, hunched over my camera, cable-release in hand, I soon fell into the brown study that is necessary for the job – and jumped out of it and my skin at the sound of a voice behind me.

“Evening.”

Standing on the other side of the road was a man and a dog. The two of them seemed rooted to the spot. He spoke again.

“Sorry to disturb you. I just wondered what you were doing.”

“Good question,” I said. Furtively I shone my torch at the dog. It was a black Labrador. “Hello. Look . . . please, don’t be alarmed. I’m a professional photographer who just happens to be prating around late at night. I’m from the Gazette.”

“Oh, I see,” he said, as if that explained everything; and then he moved on without another word. I watched him for a while as he slowly made his way up the

lane, and then lost him as the overcast gloom swallowed him up. The dog still trailed behind, but soon followed him into the darkness.

I returned to my camera. For some reason I was getting small electric shocks from the hot shoe attachment every time I took an exposure, and it was beginning to hurt more and more as I progressed through the film. So – I had a sore throat, I was perspiring uncomfortably and now I was receiving further grief from my equipment. *Just go home*, I thought, *this is such a waste of time*.

I heard someone whistle from further up the road. *It must be the guy with the dog*, I thought. I took another picture and heard another whistle, this time louder and more compelling. And then another. It sounded like someone was trying to get my attention, so I shouted.

“Yeah – I’m here! What’s wrong?”

There was no answer. Moving to the middle of the bridge I shouted again. “I said, is something wrong?”

There was still no retort . . . but then an odd sight presented itself. Three hundred yards back up the lane there was a large ring of white smoke. It slowly floated high up above me, hanging there for a second before stretching itself into a tall thin column. I could hardly believe my eyes – but then sensed something even more bizarre and startling.

In the space of some ten seconds the temperature around me dropped dramatically. It became so cold that my already sore throat began to seize up and almost choke me. Instinctively holding my neck with both hands I looked up and down the road again and – following the same pattern as before – there appeared another ring of smoke. But this time there was a noise to go with it.

It seemed incredible, but coming from somewhere behind me was the sound of a woodwind recorder, or panpipe, playing a slow, unhappy sequence of notes. Quiet at first, but then swelling and contracting as if carried on a wind. But there was no wind . . .

I ran across the road to the edge of the bridge, to find out where the sound was coming from. It was down below, emerging from the banks of a walkway that ran parallel to the bypass. I could see nothing; but the sound grew stronger. *Someone is pulling my plonker*, I thought. So I climbed over the rail and jumped down into the deep gorse bank that fell to the path. Events then began to happen very quickly.

The walkway had steep, grassy sides, which shut out any natural, ambient light. I couldn’t at first actually see the path because it was so dark, but as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I noticed two things. Firstly the music had stopped; and secondly there was something moving towards me. I stood quite still and strained hard to see.

Someone was dragging themselves up the walkway towards the bridge. A bent figure, holding something and making deep, whinging sounds. Feminine sounds . . . Whoever it was found walking hard, and eventually dropped to their knees.

A lorry suddenly thundered past on the carriageway, and, for a moment cast a light on the person before me – a light that curiously didn’t disappear with the vehicle. It remained behind, growing slowly in intensity, illuminating the path and turning the surrounding banking into an arena of misty, amber gloom.

I could now clearly make out the crouched shape of a woman. She was moaning quietly and rocking forwards and backwards, and in her folded arms she held tightly the naked and mud-spattered body of a baby. I was shocked and tried to figure out how they had got there. It had to be a road accident.

The woman was also filthy. Her hair was tied back with a piece of rag, but matted skeins from her fringe fell down over her wet face. Her dress, made from what looked like sackcloth, was damaged and smudged with large patches of deep, vibrant red. With genuine horror I realised she was bleeding heavily from more than one part of her body. She had obviously been attacked; and it didn't need a Samaritan to know that action was needed, so I moved closer to help. But before I could speak I was halted by a sickening odour – a smell that had me reeling in disgust.

My reaction brought a response from the woman, who then sensed my presence and slowly raised her head, fixing me with a bloodshot stare. Then, blinking slowly, she spoke in a truly pathetic voice.

“Please, sir, don't hurt me . . . Don't hurt me anymore. Please . . . for my bairn's sake . . .”

This was insane. The pain in my throat was now even worse, but not because of the cold. There was now a warmth, a heat coming from somewhere that was creating and then evaporating the perspiration on my body. I felt light headed – fit to faint – and struggled to stay calm.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” I stammered. “I want to help. You've been injured.”

She was evidently frightened of me and exhausted to the point of collapse. “I'm dying,” she rasped. “I'm dying with my bairn.” Her head dropped once again, and she spoke to the floor. “Are you an angel?” she asked. “Are you an angel come to take me and my bairn?”

I was trembling. “No, I'm not,” I said. “I'm not an angel. I was working on the bridge and heard you crying. Look . . . I'll go back and call for an ambulance. You're bleeding – you really need to be in a hospital.”

She crouched again, folding herself into a huddle – and then began to cry. I had an overwhelming desire to comfort her, to touch her head, reassure her that she was at least safe with me. So, disregarding the still terrible stench, I moved closer and tentatively reached out to press her shoulder. But there occurred a change.

Without looking up, her body flinched at my approach. Still hiding her face, she raised herself up slightly, as if preparing herself to uncoil. I stopped and watched the back of her head and then became very frightened as she slowly lifted it in my direction.

It wasn't the face I had seen moments earlier. This one had small, yellow eyes of pulsating, almost electric, malevolent intensity. And it wasn't the face of a woman anymore, but a grim skull only partly covered in decaying, luminescently white flesh. I was mesmerised; but sensed in my terrified confusion that I had to leave. I knew – I *knew* – my life was in danger.

Without taking my eyes away from this nightmare creature, I stood from my crouching position and slowly backed away. The figure also rose, almost in unison, and began to stalk my retreat. I knew I was going to have to run for it, but I was too scared to turn my back. And then another shock. In the blink of an eye its face had changed. It was the woman again, grimacing slightly, pleading silently for help. I stopped, and she held out her arms and cried out. And I saw that the baby had gone. There was *no* baby . . .

Now I did turn and run. And it was as if, on spinning around, I had re-entered the real world. Above me was the bridge. I could once again hear the traffic – and I could even see the roof of my car. But behind me I also still heard the creature's plaintive cry. So, without turning again, I sprinted up the banking, jumped the style, and fairly threw myself and my equipment into my car. Shutting myself in, feeling the reassuring insulation, I still dare not look in the direction of my retreat. I didn't even

bother to start the engine; I just released the brake and let it freewheel away from the bridge and down the hill. One minute later it reached the bottom of the lane. Then I started the engine . . .

Driving home I began to cry. I was in a terrible state. I was drenched in a cold sweat, my throat was raw and my nose was bleeding slightly. The ordeal had lasted less than twenty minutes . . . but I was a wreck. I had been profoundly frightened – as *never* before in my life – and I couldn't wait to get home . . .

* * *

The following days saw me with a serious viral infection, and for hours I drifted in and out of sleep, experiencing difficult dreams. I could still hardly believe what had happened to me, and my life seemed to have started a new beginning. But not a happy one . . .

Over the following two weeks of my absence from work I received only two communications. One from Mr. B. telling me that everyone was thinking of me and “relishing” my return. And the other was from Helen – the “doom chick”. Handwritten on a single piece of vibrantly coloured tissue paper she wrote:

I did get your message. And I really am so sorry, Thomas. But I did warn you . . .

Maybe she is right, I thought. Maybe I am psychic . . .