



*Crossing the  
Threshold*

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# Crossing the Threshold

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## PROLOGUE

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Again, it was the dream that woke him; that delicious erotic dream of forbidden love. The illicit one-night-stand with the colleague from work, made all the more passionate because it should never have happened.

Even as the dream started to dissipate, Paul could still feel her fingernails tracing down through his stubble, caressing his ear, down his neck, down through the forest of his chest hair and then ... arousing him all the more. He could smell her musk, feel the places where she had bitten him. He reached to entice her back to him, but he knew no one would be there. No one was ever there. As soon as his hands reached out, the fantasy crumbled.

It was the absurdity of the dream that woke him: the

fact that this liaison could not have happened, and that he could even date it. The absolute certainty of that date unnerved him: Tuesday, the last day of February, first year of the millennium.

This morning, as he did every morning that he dreamed of her, he tried to discern some significance of the dream. He wondered if the taboo was the *idea* of breaking trust – that they would have to lie for the rest of their lives – and it was that guilt which manifested itself as this dream.

Whatever the reason, the dream came with its charged amorous passion and left him feeling hollow – even an unconscious betrayal seemed to taint the sanctity of marriage. As rational conscious thought prodded the dream away from him, his cheeks burned with an irrational guilt that should not be his to bear.

Pulling himself from the clammy cocoon that his duvet had become, he knew he wouldn't sleep again. The dream did that to him. It had the power to leave him disorientated for a couple of hours until he was certain he had managed those tentative steps over the threshold into reality.

He had hoped that by moving away from the city he might also have fled the dream. But Lucy, or at least his subconscious memories of her, had followed. He wondered if the dream had come to him tonight because this was the first night in the house. As he'd turned out the light, he'd laid in the bed, bathed in the moonlight that seeped in through the curtainless windows, listening to the creaks as the house settled for

the night. One time, the rasping sounded like the distant rat-tat-tat of a hammer, another time there was more distance between the gripes making Paul think of slow footsteps overhead. Then there were those points of dozing when he was neither awake nor asleep, the time when the conscious mind met its unconscious twin and they debated in words without sound. It was here that Paul was aware of the bittersweet silence, a silence so profound that he almost begged for the sound of creaking timbers again, to remind him that there was a world beyond his breathing. But then he jerked at every resonance, wondering how long it would be until he became so accustomed to them and how long until he would feel deprived on those nights without them.

Now, as he wiped the sleep from his eyes and stared out of the window as the first shards of dawn prised the night away and dragged day behind it, he was aware of another sound.

The bedroom window – not his bedroom, that still needed to be decorated, this was the spare room – was an alcove at the rear of the house. It looked out over the garden. Standing in the alcove, swathed in the pale pink light of dawn he looked at the place where his garden should have been stretching away from him. The morning mist, thicker this morning, shrouded the clusters of trees nearby. It was from somewhere towards the middle of the garden, where there were more trees, that the sound emanated: a distant high-pitched chime.

If he had been in the city he wouldn't have noticed

the sound. He had tuned out the hustle of city life in the same way that the tribes that lived close to the Victoria Falls might not hear the torrent of water unless they thought about it. But the almost inaudible chiming came from the uncanny stillness and it was something he needed to understand, to explain why the sound intruded into his silence. Something he needed to do to take his mind from the dream. Away from Lucy.

He padded over to the suitcase in which he'd packed the barest essentials for his move: a few changes of clothes, some clean bed linen, his toiletries. What he hadn't fitted into the back of his van would follow in a few days; there was no hurry: he would still throw most of it away. A rejection city life.

He pulled on a fresh tee-shirt and his overalls, knowing that his timber suppliers would arrive some time during the day and he had to be prepared for them, whether they turned up at eight o'clock in the morning or in the evening. Then he made his way down the stairs, through the large kitchen. He picked up his coat from where he had draped it over a large white packing box labelled 'Tools', and, slipping into his shoes, he went outside.

He was unprepared for the blast of cold that set him shivering; but it was a few days to the start of winter and the longest night of the year. He'd not been prepared for the atmosphere of the misty morning: muted colours. He'd been able to watch the last eclipse of the last millennium from a hotel in Dover when he'd been down for a conference. The organisers had

arranged an 'Eclipse Break' along with the tea and lunch breaks. This break had had to be extended as the organisers had not been aware that, as Dover was further east than the foot of Cornwall, the eclipse was several minutes later than advertised. It had been the eerie moments of the eclipse of which Paul was now reminded – the uncanny silence, the cold air thick as treacle, the heavy clouds which made the actual eclipse more anticipation than anything else, and the minutes that were day and not day, night and not night at the same time. And at the heart of this time between times was the continual chiming.

Paul took a deep breath, feeling the cold air congealing in his lungs; with that thought he expelled it in a thick cloud of vapour that took too long to dissipate.

Cutting through the mist, like he was in a dream, seeing, but blind, he could make out the path at his feet, although if the stones remained, it would be hard to find them. Weeds and tangle-root choked this furrow through the landscape. The garden needed attention. It was returning to nature, becoming feral.

Ching-ching chang.

He started at the sound. It was closer than anticipated. He swirled in the mist, wondering if the chimes could echo against walls without substance.

Ching-chang-ching.

There, in front of him, a grey shadow in the sea of shadows loomed up. As Paul came closer, he saw an oak tree. Branches pointed at the sky like thick accusing



fingers. Approaching, he saw that the patterns in the bark were not vertical: they were more diagonal, wavy. Similarly, the tree itself seemed deformed and hunched up: almost sinister.

He looked back at the shadow of the house, down at the sprawling, tentacle-like roots, coiling toward the building. Perhaps the tree was too close to the house.

For a moment, he wondered what caused such a disturbance. The clang cling-clang seemed almost animated, almost sentient, calling to him. The branches formed a web of fingers overhead, and Paul looked up at the canopy.

There, among the branches, was a small object, hanging down like a pendulum. He reached up, touched it, and listened to the clang-cling cling: the tones sounded accusing to his handling. He snatched his hand back and the chimes rebuked him: cling clang-clang.

He was sure that the mist was dissipating. The morning sun would burn it away. The tree had become clearer and reminded him less of Lucy – quite why the tree *should* remind him of Lucy he did not know, but the dream played strange tricks on his mind. He looked up again at the branches and stood on tiptoes trying to focus on the source of the disturbance.

Five long metal tubes hung down. In the centre of them, balanced on a line of thin wire, was a small wooden drum. When the drum moved, it chimed against the tiny bells.

Clang, cling-clang.

There appeared to be no wind, no disturbance that

caused the chimes to strike – except his own breath, his presence causing the drum to vibrate, but still, it was enough to call the muses to play their ethereal tune and the chimes to resonate in front of him.

He reached up, trying to still the chimes, but this called them into action again in a discordant clang.

As he tried to silence the striking, he was aware of something else – a kind of web that hung above the chimes. He had seen the design before in the shops that he considered to be ‘money for old rope’ – ‘New Age’ shops, the sort that lurked in the vicinity of the healing wells in Glastonbury. These nets were called dream catchers. Paul had read a little about them; from what he remembered, they were a trinket of some sort that ensnared nightmares.

He had been ready to tear it down and either throw it away or crush it underfoot for disturbing his sleep, but he hesitated before touching it. He was not superstitious. He walked under ladders if it was more convenient than stepping out into the road, never threw salt over his shoulder. But supposing, *just* supposing, that there was *any* truth in its power of catching dreams and trapping them, suppose that it caught the dream about Lucy – suppose that it caught the dream and held it fast, paralysed it like a spider with a fly, and held it until that dream dissolved. What if it *could* work? Would it mean that Lucy would never trouble him again?

And what about the *other* dream? Could that be caught, never to be released?

Paul let his head fall back and gave an anguished

sigh. He'd promised himself that he'd not think of the other dream unless it was through the prompting of his subconscious. Perhaps the dream catcher had already caught the other dream and when he was in the proximity of the snare it would resonate in his mind and call the memories to the fore.

Even if this part of land were never cultivated, it was better that both dreams were entangled here, instead of roaming through his subconscious mind. But ...

But what if dreams communicated when they were caught in the same snare? What if they shared their innermost secrets – *his* innermost secrets – like hostages held in the same sunless chamber, spilling their darkest secrets as though the person opposite was their confessor, qualifying because they spoke the same language? What if the dreams discussed, and argued the discrepancies within the dreams, debating his location on that last day of February? Was it possible that the dreams were alive: when people spoke of dying brain cells, were they dispersed, still sentient, as they congealed around him forming a cognitive entity called consciousness?

He took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts, then turned away from the dream catcher in disgust. Such an irrational thought would not have troubled him when he worked in the city. The world of Banking was a world of extremes and oppositions: something was either a viable financial proposition or it wasn't, a company was either in receivership or it wasn't. There was no difference between being in the red or the black.

Companies wishing for expansion required financial assistance, otherwise banks like his, an organisation that he now referred to with little affection as *Wecheetem and Howe*, would have no place in the commercial world. One of Paul's senior managers had explained that in order to be big, you had to borrow big. It always came down to the question of feasibility. That was why a company was worth £2m one day and in receivership for the same amount on the following. No uncertainty. No irrationality. No grey area. He might have rejected City life, but there were some things he would need to keep afloat in village life as well.

He looked back at the dream catcher once again. Although he was determined to prove that he wasn't superstitious, he couldn't quite bring himself to tear it down.

He turned back and strode towards the house. The cling-clang, cling mocking him in his retreat.