



THE
GAWAIN
LEGACY

JON MACKLEY

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For Lara, the fact that she was leaving her husband wasn't so bad as the bus being late.

The deep blue hues in the sky were fading in the east. A single wispy cloud floated above, tinted black in the January night. The morning star glittered, watching her. She dragged her coat tight around her slim frame against the chilling wind.

Distant shimmering lights led to the nearby train station. The glow seeped through the morning mist around the platform. A few figures stood waiting to catch early trains like freezing caricatures from a Lowry painting.

The painting ... it had been the painting that had been the final nail in the coffin of her relationship with Michael. It seemed petty now. Even now, despite her desperation, despite her fear, her resolve had almost broken. She could still return before he woke and he would be unaware of her intentions.

But nothing would have changed except her diminishing self-esteem. He'd continue tormenting her and she might never again find the strength to leave.

She could, of course, catch a train from here. An early

commuter train would take her to Birmingham, or to London. From there she could travel to anywhere in the country; hell, she could get to Europe if she wanted.

A man walked past with a dog, which sniffed at her holdall. The owner grunted a 'good morning'. He dragged the dog away, not looking at her.

The light bleeding across the sky had eclipsed the morning star; the clouds were tinged with salmon. The concealing darkness was exposing her to the terrors of the day.

She stared at the Lowry caricatures again, wondering if they could see her, as she saw them. She should have taken off her glasses before she started, then she wouldn't have known about them: blissfully ignorant in blindness.

She removed the glasses, carefully folding the arms down. She could see clearly enough without them, but in this half-light, distant things became blurred.

If eyes are the windows to the soul, I don't want anyone looking into mine.

Without her glasses, the world blended into an anonymous blur of colours. She only needed the glasses for driving and reading, but tiredness had enveloped her and the world faded away to a hazy nothingness.

If I ever leave my husband again, I'll go when I'm less tired.

But there wouldn't be a next time, she thought, unconsciously crossing her fingers. Standing here, waiting for the bus, marked the end of that relationship. And all the time, her father's quotation from *Twelfth Night* on the day she had announced her engagement, rang in her mind: *Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.* Had he seen

something wrong in their relationship when she had been blinded by love?

And it wasn't even a nice painting, she reminded herself. But Michael had decided that it suited the bedroom wall and, because Michael was always right, it had gone up. Six months later, it had fallen down again. Gravity had chosen five o'clock in the morning to remove the painting from its seat of glory. The ensuing argument had forced her to the end of her tether: Michael had found a way of making it her fault. Already, she had been unconsciously planning her escape. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, she had walked out. Her heart had hardened, even though she was still brushing tears away.

And even though she was devastated by grief because everything had ended, and she was crushed by the uncertainty of the future, there was another, stronger, overwhelming emotion.

Relief.

She glanced over her shoulder. The rising sun paled in the mist. Even without her glasses she recognised the familiar landmarks of 'home': the river Welland and the bridge, the wooden archway of the George, the yellow limestone and timber-framed buildings. She needed to leave them all behind her now.

Shivering, she realised her teeth were gritted. She tapped her foot in irritation, praying that the bus would arrive soon.

She looked back at the train station. Her first awareness that something was wrong was pure instinct. It was the same pervading fear that ate into her gut when she

heard the key scraping in the lock as Michael came home from work. The sensation was so familiar that, at first, she thought he had found her, that he had woken early, found her note and had come to drag her back.

A movement, almost imperceptible.

She put her glasses on again and looked down the bank, past the discarded shopping trolleys, to the train lines.

Swathed by the morning mist, she saw a figure standing, Christ-like, arms outstretched, his overcoat hanging loose around him. Standing on one of the sleepers between the silver of the railway lines.

As she watched, he kneeled down, his arms suspended in a parody of the Crucifixion: resigned to his fate.

The mist had almost swallowed him. In the distance – a mere pinprick in the curtain of the night – she saw the light of the oncoming train. The Jesus character had worked out that this train wouldn't stop, wouldn't even slow down for the platform. And there was no way that the driver would see him in time, even if she could.

Another movement. Further down the lines, in the path that the train would take, she saw lights in the distance, torch beams spearing the mist. Dogs barked. Her mind tried to connect the images: man running away from men with dogs. Did he hope that the train would get him before the dogs did?

She wasn't usually blessed with a vivid imagination, but her mind was saturated by the image of a body after impact. Very messy.

The train continued: a weapon of suicide.

She wasn't aware of moving, didn't know where the

reserves of strength came from. It was like watching someone else when she hauled her bag over the iron railings. A myriad of thoughts struck her, the most forceful was a chiding voice inside her head: *It's better to try and fail than to not try at all and live with the consequences.*

Then she was lifting herself on to the railings. Her holdall rolled away down the embankment. She shuddered. If she fell, she could tumble uncontrolled down the side of the bank, perhaps skewering herself on the debris waiting at the bottom like a crocodile's teeth.

She heard the hum of the train on the lines; the sound of the engine was carried by the light breeze. She let go of the railings and slipped down the bank, scrabbling for grasses and roots. She landed down alongside her bag.

The rattling train drew closer. The light pierced the darkness and behind her, torch lights swung closer.

She ran across the train tracks, tripping, stumbling, but caught herself before she fell.

The Jesus character was standing in front of her, a shade among a multitude of shadows.

Her body no longer responded to rational thought. She was either going to help him or join him.

She tripped again, then ran, finding a rhythm to avoid obstructions in her path. The train bore down on her like a predator alighting on its prey. It was on top of her.

She wasn't going to reach the man in time.

The screams of the train were deafening, like standing in the heart of a volcano. Lights blazed. Ozone burned. Suddenly, adrenalin surged through her, filling her with inhuman strength.

She leapt, already knowing that she was going to miss the man and be hit by the train herself.

I'm too late, she told herself. He's dead.

Her hands connected with solid muscle. She hadn't tensed her arms. They buckled against him. The man hadn't been prepared for a 'rescue'. His body crumbled. Her jaw connected with his shoulder. Her teeth snapped together. Blood filled her mouth. Her head swam with the shock. She curled her feet underneath her, pulling them from the path of the train.

The world erupted. Wind was dragged out of her. Her spirit felt like it was being sucked out of her eyes. The vortex dragged her towards the train as unforgiving as a demon.