



Ghosts

in
the
Machinery

Phil Lewis

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINERY

- A modern day fantasy adventure

by Phil Lewis

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PHIL LEWIS

I started writing short stories when I was about ten. Yes....they were about robots and space ships. I loved the plots, twists and turns, enjoying the writing and then the reading of them.

I have always been creative, earning my living as an illustrator and designer – but always continued writing as a hobby.

Now I am retired, I can look back on my extensive collection of novels, plays and short stories and try to do something with them – hence my website (<http://www.phil-lewis.net/publications>) to which I will be adding anything worth reading over the course of the next few years.

If you like my work, please email me to tell me so (publications@phil-lewis.net). If you didn't – I'm sorry. No refunds.

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Take care.

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PART 1. JOAN

CHAPTER - 1.

Friday - October

It was bad enough she'd broken down on the motorway. What made it scarily traumatic was that it was at night, it was raining - and she was totally alone.

It had seemed an age since Joan had called for the Rescue Service. Many water seeping minutes had been spent at the rain swept, roadside telephone booth. Trying to answer all the routine questions, before they admitted she was eligible for a rescue vehicle. It would be there soon. Possibly within the hour. That had been thirty minutes earlier and it was now 20.30.

She sat shivering damply in the car's passenger seat, as suggested by the operator over the phone. This was to imply to passing traffic that she was not alone in the car, the driver being somewhere nearby. Joan watched the rain drive down in front of the moving cars' headlights. Its hypnotic effect allowing only fleeting glimpses of the downpour, which had lasted for hours. All the car doors were locked and she had the radio on for company. An expert was expounding his theories on supernatural events. Joan watched the rain hitting the windscreen as she listened to the educated voice, pronouncing all his vowel sounds so precisely. His detailed theory explained why people could see spectral images, why these images appeared to walk through walls and how only *some* could communicate with the living.

At first the expert seemed to make some sense to Joan and she listened with a reasonable amount of attention, her fingers idly drumming on the dashboard in front of her. The second guest speaker then tried to discredit the first man's theories. There developed a theological argument. Joan had always shied away from argument, or any other display of aggression, so she turned the radio off with an angry twist. Besides, talk of ghosts was making her jittery and she was nervous enough as it was. Now she needed a cigarette!

The only sounds came from the rain on the roof, the hazard lights' rhythmic clicks and the swishing tyres of the rapidly passing traffic. She leaned forward and switched the radio back on, tuning to a nondescript piece of classical music. Even a boring programme might be sufficient distraction to keep her from her nervously wandering thoughts.

The wind swept trees moved in and out of her peripheral vision. She saw movement everywhere in the darkness. As she turned to look directly at any sudden activity, it seemed to calm. Disappear. Imagination was a wonderful thing, but not when you are alone on a wind swept, wet night, on the motorway. As she hugged herself for comfort she wished, desperately, to be somewhere else. Somewhere warm and comfortable. Preferably at home, with Alfie. She also wished she could shed her prejudice and buy herself a mobile phone. At least she'd have someone to talk to.

Joan watched the rear view mirror constantly. The traffic approached in a misty halo of lights, heavily distorted by the steadily increasing downpour. As each set of lights appeared, she hoped it was for her. Eventually a set of lights slowed, pulling in behind her. The approach was very slow and appeared to her to be a little overcautious. She felt herself stiffen, sinking deeper into the seat, while still trying to make out the colour and shape of the vehicle behind her. Fresh droplets, making it useless to see any detail out in the dark, were bombarding the rear window. She slid further down into the seat, switching off the radio to listen nervously for approaching footsteps. There was a long silence, in which she felt her tension further increase.

A tap on the passenger window made her jump and cry out at the same time. A man was bending down looking in. It took her a few seconds to see beyond his heavily bearded face and see the fluorescent stripes on his yellow coat. The beard broke into a worn smile, as he motioned for her to wind down the car window.

"Mrs Ryder?"

She nodded dumbly, feeling slightly less nervous, now more foolish. "Would you release the bonnet, please? Let's see if we can get you on your way."

Joan felt a short-lived sense of relief, as the wind blew in rain and cold air through the open window. She reached forward and pulled the bonnet trigger and then quickly wound up the window. At least he sounded confident he could get her going again. She felt sure he would. After all, these people were experts. Yes, soon she would be "on her way."

* * *

An hour later, she was still watching the rain hammering on the windscreen, as the wipers slowly crashed from side to side in a hypnotic rhythm. She watched as all the other cars were passing at a fast speed, while she was agonizingly crawling along. Joan craned her neck round to make sure that her car was still attached to the tow bar.

At least she was warm and continuously moving towards home. The mechanic had run out of conversation after about ten minutes and for this she was grateful. She didn't feel like talking. Both stared myopically through the rain. She occasionally cast nervous glances at his eyes to make sure he wasn't being hypnotised by the wipers.

Forty minutes later she watched the tail lights of the Relay truck disappear around the corner and turned to look at her beloved green Fiesta sitting back in her driveway in Molesey. Silent, wet and temporarily useless. But home. Joan opened the door to a dark flat and paused to hear if any intruders were lurking to attack her. A soft purr greeted her and she switched on the lights to see Alfie. His need seemed greater than hers, so she fed him first. But only after locking the door in three different ways, putting on every light in the ground floor flat and the CD player on loud.

The flat dated back to the fifties and was quite solidly built. Those were the days before economics ruled the quality of houses. Joan's neighbours wouldn't complain, as the adjoining wall was bedroom side, not sitting room side. Besides, the Dixons were often excessively noisy themselves. It was a single bedroomed ground floor flat, not overly large, but perfect for her and Alfie. It had a neat garden, which she enjoyed, if the weather was right. The street outside was quiet, most of the time, and very near to the local shops.

Joan rarely drank alcohol, but this night definitely deserved a brandy with hot water and sugar. She experienced its impact immediately, felt better and wondered why she didn't drink it more often. After the drink, she found herself lusting after the forbidden cigarette.

An hour later, Joan sat enwrapped in a huge dressing gown, with Alfie on her lap. The remnants of a light snack lay on the floor, with only crumbs left as evidence. A mug of tea cradled warmly in her hand as her eyes resting unfocused on the blue and yellow flames of the coal effect fire.

What a night! It would be easy to blame the disastrous evening on her sister. Rita had been as irascible as ever and so Joan had left earlier than planned. Joan hated these duty visits, but she felt she ought to make the effort to keep in touch, despite the fact they no longer had anything much in common. Joan slowly sipped her hot tea.

Their mother had died a few years earlier and Rita had taken it particularly badly. Rita and her mother had always been close. This had particularly bothered Joan when she was younger. It had always appeared to be favouritism towards Rita. As Joan had grown up and understood her own feelings better, she realised that she had not really shown any warmth to her parents, not in quite the same way as Rita had shown to her mother.

Joan put the empty cup down on to the plate with a sigh. Still, at least she wouldn't have to see Rita again until Christmas. She gently stroked Alfie and heard the purr rate increase.

Joan's husband, Adrian, had hated the duty visits too. But now Adrian had gone and she was left to visit alone. She paused a moment to think about him. The moment turned into a two-minute silence, which some times could last for hours. Joan still missed him, in every possible way. She also knew that she would always regret the loss.

Alfie's purrs calmed her and she settled deeper into the sofa. After all, Joan was reasonably happy, wasn't she? She worked for herself, from home. No boss to get angry, or frustrated at. She had Alfie, her best friend in the world. A small, but close, circle of friends. She was only thirty years old, with all her life ahead of her. Somehow it sounded good, but she was often reduced to tears when thinking about it in any detail. The positive side of her lifestyle didn't make her feel particularly fulfilled that evening.

It had been three weeks since she'd given up smoking. She idly touched the nicotine patch on her arm and still wished for the real thing. Joan had anticipated emotional changes and tried to remain rational, no matter what life threw at her, or how emotional she became over the simplest things.

The CD stopped playing and she eased the cat off her lap and turned the stereo off and the TV on. Time for the evening news. She sat back in the sofa and let her mind drift with the visual images, as Alfie crept back to his rightful place. Joan watched the weather forecast and saw that it was going to be better than the normal October expectations. The news was its usual depressing standard and most of it went over her head. Was there no good news in the world? Did the broadcasting authorities think the public needed to be bombarded with depressing news only? She felt a letter coming on. Tomorrow she would write to the Broadcasting Standards Committee about it, but right now she only wanted to get to bed.

What a night!

Joan checked the front door locks again and turned everything off in the flat, apart from her bedside lamp and the bathroom mirror light. She cleaned her teeth, used the toilet and washed her hands and face. She used a skin cleanser, put on some light cologne to make her feel better. She switched off the bathroom light and walked to the bed, catching her knee on the padded corner as she nearly tripped over Alfie. The cat yelled, from surprise rather than pain and left the room in a hurry.

Joan paused to look at herself in the long wardrobe mirror. Standing naked, she pressed fingers into suspect areas of fat. She was in good condition, overall. She was slight of frame, which meant that her breasts were on the small side and her shoulders narrow. But nobody was ever completely happy with their own body, were they? Her long dark hair curved around her squarish jaw line, framing her face. Her most attractive feature, she decided, was her eyes, bright blue and sparkling. She smiled at herself, nodded in contentment and was not too disappointed with what God had started her off with. She would have to do more general exercises though. Her hips were looking bigger, or was that more of her active imagination? She ran her hands through her hair letting it fall heavily and smoothly back into place.

Joan turned away from the mirror and paused. A strange feeling had touched her. Her mother had an expression for it, "Like someone's walked over my grave." She thought a moment before she could catch what it was. It had been fleeting and yet strong. In a second she had it. She thought she was being watched. She quickly turned to make sure the bedroom curtains were drawn tight. They were. She looked back into the mirror and forced a smile. Just Joan being paranoid again.

She walked to the bed, eased back the duvet and slid gratefully between the smooth sheets. She took the pad and pen from the bedside table and wrote down her list of things to do for the following day. Joan found that by listing all the important events for the next day before going to sleep, she rarely forgot any of them. It had become a habit that had worked very well for her. Two manuals to complete, see another client about new work and rehash an old report. Some shopping and household cleaning to be done. A relatively light day.

Joan lay down, turning out the last light and began to relax. She was aware of Alfie's gentle leap on to the bed and him snuggling beside her. He'd apparently already forgiven her for treading on him. She stroked him out of habit, not aware she was doing it. His purrs gently receding from her drifting thoughts.

Joan thought back to some of her more unusual dreams of late and wondered if she were getting too tense about various aspects of her lifestyle. She realised that earlier that evening, on the motorway, she had good reason to be uptight. Dreams were funny things and supposedly indicators of the dreamer's real mental state. So if she dreamed tonight, she'd make the effort to remember in the morning and try to analyse and find out what she was really worried about, making notes on the pad by her side when she awoke. If she dreamed at all!

Right now she felt cosy, warm, relaxed and content. More so than at any other time of the day, or past month, as far as that went. Her mind drifted into the more bizarre realms of fantasy, that cannot be easily recalled and she would normally have slipped into a deep sleep. She was very adept at holding this moment between sleep and wakefulness. She enjoyed the strange feeling. Gradually she began to let go and fall into the unknown areas that sleep would bring.

That night she was to have the kind of dream that would change her whole life. And the lives of several others too.

CHAPTER - 2.

There is a strange, little realised and unexplored area of time, between being asleep and getting there. It's a period that few people ever remember - in any detail. The human mind changes its wavelength from Beta to Alpha. At a certain pitch, varying slightly between individuals, sleep finally occurs. What can happen to the mind during this period differs between each sleeper. As yet, no detailed research has produced a definitive explanation.

As Joan's brain waves calmed, she distractedly allowed her mental screen to be filled with a calm colour, for no other reason than it sleepily seemed a good idea at the time. She was vaguely aware that she was about to enter her regular sleep pattern and relished the moment of complete abandonment. She looked forward to falling into the warm, comforting embrace of deep sleep.

The colour green filled her mind completely. She was conscious enough to realise she was not quite asleep, as she idly focused on the centre of the green area, watching as it shifted hue, gratefully she fell towards its centre and into the anticipated deep sleep. The green swiftly dispersed, revealing a rapidly sharpening and strange new image. She was standing on a rectangle, which was about a metre square. It was connected to other squares, like a huge Grid that disappeared into the distance all-around her. The overall image was of a light green coloured floor, with the Grid being marked in darker green lines. It was a painstakingly accurate mental image. Despite her readiness for sleep, this image intrigued her. Straight ahead the lines converged to a central vanishing point on a distant horizon. She looked to her left and right and the parallel lines did the same. The same image was behind her. The horizons to her left and behind her seemed nearer, yet less distinct.

As she looked at the square beneath her feet, she could see numbers sharpening into focus, portrayed in a darker green. They read "23.00." She tried to recognise the typeface and decided it was somewhere between Arial and Times Roman. The square in front of it could now be read as "22.00" and the one further on "21.00." And so on until the numbers became indistinct as they disappeared into the far distance. Behind her the first square read "00.00." As she looked, she noticed words coming into focus, above the numbers, which read "11th October" and the current year.

As Joan puzzled over this illusion she began to realise she was looking at a two dimensional calendar. Where she stood was the current time, day, month and year. The rows of squares to her left were similarly numbered, but the month had changed to November, to the right the month had changed to September. Joan was standing on a huge, time calendar. To her left was the immediate future in terms of months and days, to the right, the past. Behind her, the future. This was indeed a strange mental experience. Joan decided she might as well enjoy the dream, so she stepped forward on to the next square and watched it deepen in colour. She assumed that she'd now, in fact, stepped back an hour in time, if she'd understood the Grid correctly. She looked behind at her original square to see it turn a very dark green, almost black. It stood out starkly amongst all the rest.

So she'd moved back by one hour, what next? Joan looked down at the figures under her feet, a frown developed. The figures faded away to reveal - a ceiling!

It took her a few seconds to realise that it was her bedroom ceiling and she was back in bed and awake. She sat up and tried to recall the dream in detail. She remembered her intention to make notes of her recollections immediately on awaking and reached for the pad and pen. It was then she noticed that the bedside light was still on. She was confused. Surely she'd turned it off before going to sleep? With a start, she realised her bathroom lamp was also still on. With a cold touch of fear she heard someone moving

around in the bathroom. There was the sound of running water, then silence. Joan felt her heart pounding loudly in her chest. Her breathing had almost stopped. Her throat constricted in fear. A faint sound of a toilet flushing reached her ears, and then the bathroom light was switched off. She froze in fear.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Alfie moving towards the bathroom door and at the same time somebody was walking out of it. She stared in complete amazement as she saw herself walking naked from the bathroom. She watched as her double nearly tripped over the cat and banged her knee on the corner of the bed. Alfie fled with a whine of complaint. Joan watched, totally still, hardly daring to breathe, as her double began to admire herself in the long wardrobe mirror. Joan clearly remembered herself doing all that, earlier! With a shock she realised that she was now watching herself as she was earlier that evening, as she'd prepared herself for bed.

The image smiled at the reflection in the mirror and ran hands through her long hair. The current Joan was standing, watching. I've not woken up at all! I'm still dreaming!

In her dream, she'd travelled back an hour and was watching herself from a different vantage point. Joan let out a long breath that she'd been holding for all this time, with an explosive sigh. Puzzle solved. Just dreaming! Her image paused for moment and looked around the room in a sense of near panic, as if looking for the source of the sigh. A few moments seemed to allay the fears and she continued to move towards the bed.

Joan knew she should to get out of the way, but the sight of herself moving determinedly towards her slowed her reactions. The image moved on to the bed and straight through Joan's body. For a few seconds her sight became fuzzy, as the moving body passed through hers, blotting out light. Joan could smell the aftermath of her cologne and toothpaste as it passed through her.

Joan turned fearfully to look down at her earlier self, as the image reached for the pad and pen. This was some, weird, dream!

She pinched herself, recalling that this was what you were supposed to do, if you thought you were dreaming. Although in dreams you never did, or wanted to do, anything really logical.

It hurt!

Joan decided she'd had enough. She wanted the dream to end. No sooner than she'd had the desire, her surroundings became indistinct and were replaced by the Green Grid pattern again. Joan was standing in the same place and quickly took a step back to her original square, still a very dark shade of green. She closed her eyes and wished herself back home and safe.

When she opened her eyes she was in a darkened room, which she slowly recognised as her bedroom. Alfie lay by her side asleep. All the lights were off and the alarm clock read 11.03. She sat upright and listened. Joan could hear traffic from the high street, faintly in the distance. Somewhere a dog barked, just once. She sniffed and could smell her cologne. It was a dream.

She fell back on the bed and laughed out loud. It had just been a silly, yet realistic, dream. She turned on the light and wrote down all the details, excitement and confusion making her handwriting very shaky.

Joan lay awake in the darkness for several hours, running over the dream in her mind. Normally she would have tried to go straight back to sleep. After all, she'd had far more disturbing dreams than this before, but several things had puzzled her. The dream was very vivid and in colour. She could remember very clearly every detail, the memory not fading on her awakening. The other thing was that she could not remember ever having the sensation of smell in any dream before. Then there was the pain of the self-inflicted pinch. Was that real or imagined?

In the early hours of that morning it didn't appear to be a dream at all. But if it wasn't a dream, what was it?

12th October.

The following morning Joan felt very disorientated. Her normal routine was disrupted by her thoughts constantly drifting back to the unsettling experience of the night before. No matter which way she reviewed the details, it was disconcerting. It was unnatural and therefore difficult to accept as anything but a bizarre dream. Except she still couldn't believe it to be only a dream!

Joan had tried to maintain her normal routine as best as she could. She had a shower before breakfast, started work on a report for a client at 8.30, called the garage at 9.00 to instruct them to collect and repair her car, prepared and ate lunch by 12.30. More work, until she couriered the project to the client at 3.30. Shortly afterwards the tow truck arrived from the local garage and towed her beloved car away to the car hospital. She had a half-hour exercise swim in the local baths and shopped on the way home. She did some housework until about 6.30, when she prepared a light evening meal, which she ate while watching the evening news on the TV.

It had been an average day for Joan. No surprises, little tension. No real pleasure, or excitement either. Simple and manageable, both physically and mentally. She replaced her nicotine patch carefully and consoled herself that she used to smoke forty a day, but not anymore.

By early evening she had the TV on as background, while she read a romantic novel from the local library. By 10.00, she realised it was too light and far-fetched a story, so closed the pages for the last time and began to take an interest in the programme on the TV. Joan watched with growing attention a documentary on the British Government and its history. It was a subject not normally of interest to her, but there was a good compilation of visual images that appealed to her. It had a very well written commentary, spoken by one of her favourite actors.

As it was a subject that varied in content, it didn't hold her interest throughout the whole programme. She found her mind wandering back to the Green Grid and the intense excitement and anxiety of the adventure. She couldn't write it off as just another dream. She had considered calling a few people to tell them about it, but decided she wouldn't. Over the past few years, she'd reacted in strange ways to events that other people seemed to regard as normal. She felt sure her friends tolerated her often bizarre ideas and would assume this to be just another imaginative experience. Further convincing them that she'd become totally, mentally unstable. No. She decided to work this one out, on her own.

The special graphic effects on the TV caught her eye and her mind focused in on the programme again, only to drift away within moments. The State Opening of Parliament was being discussed, noting its supposed historical relevance.

This was silly. She just wasn't concentrating. She pulled a blank videotape from the rack, inserted it in to her old video machine and pressed record, to capture the remainder of the programme to watch another day, when she was more in the mood. She made a note of the programme name and videotape number on her typed up videotape list.

At 10.30 she'd made up her mind, to try and recreate the events of the night before and see if she could make them happen again. She'd take more detailed notice of what was happening and see if she could make any sense of it, this time. Just to prove to herself it was only a vivid dream.

By 10.45 she was laying in her bed, with all the lights out and the front door and windows locked and checked. Two different perfumes applied to her wrists and a small brandy and cup of tea in her stomach. Alfie lay in his usual place at the bottom of the bed. She turned off the last light, closed her eyes and tried to relax.

The clock read 11.45 and still she didn't feel sleepy. She was too excited and tense. Thoughts of taking a sleeping pill came and went. Joan tried again to take the steps, as far as she remembered them. She was definitely not as sleepy, or exhausted, as the night before. She closed her eyes, trying slowly and gently to let her mind go blank. She allowed her mental screen to fill with a green colour, focused on the colour, allowing it to change subtly and gently. She imagined herself moving in towards the centre. Once again, the Green Grid swam before her eyes. Her heart pounded in her chest, as the excitement became almost too overpowering. She slowed her panic response down and took her time. After a few seconds, she was able to look in more detail at the area in which she stood.

There did not seem to be any direct light source, just an overall green luminescence. Above, where the ceiling or sky should be, was a uniform colour of pale green, darkening near the horizon. She felt warm, but not hot and realised with a slight shock that she was standing there absolutely naked. She felt a moment of embarrassment, before she realised that she was obviously alone. In fact, she realised that she couldn't actually feel anything. No breeze or draughts, no direct effect of temperature - warm, or cool. She gently pinched herself until it hurt. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. It all appeared a little too real!

Tentatively, she stepped on to the square ahead of her, one hour back in time and closed her eyes momentarily. She opened them, looking down at the square beneath her feet, concentrating on its centre. Her surroundings changed. It grew rapidly dark and she was back in her own darkened room. She looked at the bedside clock - 10.50. She was back one hour in time. Joan smelt her wrists and recognised the two distinctive perfumes. She was standing in the middle of the bed and looked down to see her other self restlessly turning over, trying to get into a sleepy frame of mind. Alfie was washing himself gently by her feet. He didn't respond to her movement from the bed.

The excitement was getting to her. She felt wide-awake and trembled with the anticipation of the adventure she was beginning, whether it was real or imaginary.

Joan moved cautiously away from the bed, so as not to disturb the restless form under the duvet. She took several steps back, not wishing to take her eyes off her identical image in the bed. Suddenly everything went black. She stopped moving instantly and for just a moment, felt very afraid. What had happened? She gently moved forwards to get back to her bed. Full vision returned immediately. She turned to see the rest of her body emerging from the bedroom wall. She had walked through the wall and it was very dark inside bricks!

Joan looked down and noticed that her feet had apparently melted into the floor up to her ankles! It was all very strange and images of Alice in Wonderland sprang to mind. She turned to face the wall and slowly pushed her hands through and watched them disappear. So, in this time zone, which was an hour earlier than real time, things were not solid to her, except whatever floor she was actually standing on. She turned to her dressing table and tried to pick up a lipstick. Her hand passed through the lipstick and through the top of the table. She quickly withdrew her hand. Slowly she walked to the bed and reached out to stroke Alfie. Her hand went right through the animal. He wasn't seeing, or sensing her at all. She stood up straight and thought for a few moments. She had learned one thing for sure. She could have no effect on her environment and, logically, it should have no effect on her. Joan turned back to the bedroom, took a deep breath, held it and with a hesitant step she walked towards the wall and into total darkness.

Strong lights hit her as she passed through to the other side. For a moment it blinded her, until her eyes adjusted and she could see properly again. Joan assumed she was in her neighbour's flat. Their bedroom was well lit and someone was in the bed staring straight at her.

She was again aware of her nakedness and began to utter an apology, realising that she hadn't a clue what she could say to explain why she was there. As she looked at the bed, the figure looked down and continued filling in the crossword puzzle. Joan waited a moment and began to move around the bed, watching the woman closely. Under all the curlers and night makeup, Jean Dixon continued with her pastime, oblivious of Joan's presence. Joan waved a hand in front of Jean's face and got no reaction. Joan was invisible. She let out a sigh of relief.

She looked back at the wall through which she had just entered and saw a large mirror. As she looked into it, Jean looked up again to study her own reflection, pondering over the next clue. Jean had been looking at herself, not Joan's entry. Joan breathed even more easily.

Joan looked at the reflection of Jean Dixon for a moment and almost smiled as she realised that she couldn't see any reflection of herself there, even though she was now standing right beside Jean. Just like in the Vampire movies.

The sound of a flushing toilet made Joan look away from the mirror. At the same time, she became aware of music playing and the smell of cigarette smoke. Robin Dixon came out of the bathroom and looked in on Jean. He turned and left again, trailing smoke from his cigarette, as he saw Jean was still engrossed in her puzzle. The smell of the smoke awoke the desire in Joan again. She ignored the feeling and allowed the new visual experience to dominate her thoughts. The music was coming from the small colour TV sitting on

the dressing table area of the fitted wardrobe units. Joan moved nearer to see the end of the programme she had started watching earlier. She recognised the style of graphics. The credits were rolling and she suddenly had an idea. She waited for the main credits at the end and memorised the Producer and Director's names. They were previously unfamiliar to her. She said them softly to herself a couple of times, so she would recall them later.

Robin came back into the bedroom after switching out the lights in the narrow hallway. He was getting ready for bed. He started to unbutton his shirt. Joan thought it prudent to leave. She turned for one last look round to see if there was anything else she could memorise, when it went dark for a second. Joan had automatically blinked in reaction and when she'd opened her eyes, she realised that Robin had walked through her and was turning off the TV set. She smelt stale cigarette smoke and alcohol on his breath. The experience made her nervous. It was certainly a very weird feeling to actually pass through somebody and smell them completely.

Joan moved hesitantly towards the mirror and walked slowly through it and into her darkened bedroom. It smelt fresher and comforted her, softening her anxiety. She allowed her eyes to slowly adjust. She thought about the Grid and it appeared. She moved to the dark green patch and thought of her bedroom. She opened her eyes to still see the Grid in front of her.

Her first reaction was to panic. She was suddenly desperate to get back to safety and her own reality. She calmed herself down, enough to think clearly. She had started her trip from the bed. She was standing by the wall when she had tried to Trip back. Perhaps she had to start and finish in the same position!

She retreated back to the previous time zone. The Grid disappeared and she was back one hour again standing by the wall separating her from the Dixons. She moved to her bed and the restless figure. Once again feeling conscious of invading her body space. Joan suddenly felt very weary; the experience was apparently taking its toll.

She thought of the Green Grid, the colours of the room changed to green. She was back on the Grid. Joan stepped on to the dark green patch again and thought herself back to the real time, opened her eyes to see the clock at 11.52. She took a few moments to breathe properly before sitting up in bed. Everything was real again.

The room felt cool, as the heating had turned itself off at 11.30. Joan felt suddenly very tired. She forced herself to get out of bed, opened the wardrobe and pulled on a nightgown. She switched on all the bedroom lights and smiled at the puzzled Alfie. She gave him a quick stroke and moved quickly into the lounge. Joan switched on a few lights and the TV. She partly rewound the videotape and played back the last part of the recorded programme. She paused the machine during the last credits. The director and producer's names were the same as she remembered them. She'd no previous way of knowing who they would be!

She'd read somewhere that these anti-smoking nicotine patches could cause unusual dreams. Was this the case now? She'd pinched herself and had felt the pain. She was sure that she was now awake. She pinched herself again and it felt the same as when she was on the trip. It hurt.

It just couldn't have been a dream. Could it?

CHAPTER - 3.

13th October.

Joan came gradually to a semi-awake state around 8.30 the following morning. She felt very tired and wanted to sleep longer. The sudden thought of her experience snapped her eyes open and she got wearily out of bed. Her memories of the night before were still vivid and she could recall everything in detail. It couldn't have been a dream.

Once again, she stumbled through the morning, half-heartedly trying to finish some work ready for delivery that afternoon. Betty called in around midday for a quick chat and a coffee. Betty and Joan had become

friends while working at Richardsons. Although Joan had left eighteen months earlier to go self-employed, they had remained in touch and saw each other regularly. Betty quickly picked up on Joan wasn't in the mood for idle chatter and made an excuse of urgent shopping as her reason to leave so quickly. As soon as she'd finished her coffee and biscuits, she stood and hurried to the door. A cheery wave and she'd gone.

Joan ate little for lunch and was delighted when the garage brought her Fiesta home, although not so pleased with the bill they presented to her. A new distributor, whatever that was!

During the afternoon she drove to Horsham to deliver the work for her client. Joan didn't like to work over the weekend, but some jobs were more urgent than others and necessitated personal delivery to a client's home. Her client was very pleased and wanted her to stay for coffee. She politely refused and began her return journey. All the way home her thoughts were distracted. At one point she realised with a start that she was driving into a ditch. She pulled the steering wheel hard over, braking sharply. Joan sat shivering with reaction. At that moment, more than ever before, she was desperate for a cigarette. She nagged at herself for becoming obsessive. Being neurotic was one thing, this was something else. What was going on? Who could she talk to about it? Who would believe her? She had a difficult enough time in believing it herself!

All the films she had seen involving time travel had assumed some physical contraption was needed to span the years. Now it appeared that all that was really needed was the human mind and the knowledge of how to use it. She desperately needed to discover what this half-dreaming, half-reality, experience meant to her. If she could travel back and forth in time with her mind only, what sort of things could she do with that ability? What sort of things should she do? Could she see into the future? Have advance knowledge of events? She could certainly make lots of money. She could become very influential. Joan couldn't begin to list the possibilities. Excitement made clear thinking very difficult. One question arose above all the others. A question she knew couldn't be answered by her. "Why me?"

There was no one she felt she could talk to on this. Even her closest friends, like Betty, might see this as the last straw and suggest she had sessions with a 'shrink'. No, she wouldn't be believed. She'd have to handle this alone. Daunting though the prospect was, the novelty of the adventure had a strange hold on her imagination.

Joan eventually felt steady enough to continue her drive back home. She took her time and managed to fit in a small grocery shop at the local supermarket. The familiar surroundings brought a sense of security back to her and helped calm her taut nerves.

* * *

Joan arrived home and unloaded the car, putting all the shopping in its rightful place. There was no spare room in the small flat for anything left out of cupboards, or drawers. After this she felt very tired. She looked at the mantelpiece clock, it was 14.20 and so she sat on the sofa with a mug of tea, letting her mind wander again. Her mind drifted into the colour green and again she was standing on the Green Grid pattern. She was shocked, at first, by the suddenness of being back on the Grid. It had been an almost subconscious transition, after the long and determined efforts of the previous evening.

In front of her, and to the right, was the quadrant of the past. Now she began to understand what it meant, it was clear and sharper to the eye. To her left and behind her, the area was less distinct, fuzzy, almost unwelcoming. She turned around and with a rapidly beating heart, stepped one hour into the future. And walked into an invisible wall.

Joan was stunned. She pressed against the soft, yet unyielding invisible presence once again. She reached up and pressed her hands hard and felt it give a little. As soon as she eased off the pressure, it pushed her gently back on to her original square. With a great sense of disappointment, she knew that travelling into the future was not possible! She felt cheated and a little angry. With a sigh of resignation, she looked at her feet and wished to be back in the real time zone.

Joan was back in her chair staring at the wall. Had she dreamed again? Had she taken a Trip? The clock still read 14.20. No real time had passed at all. She suddenly felt exhausted and closed her eyes to rest

them a moment. It certainly seemed that Tripping took its physical toll. She slipped into an unusually deep and restful sleep.

* * *

Joan awoke at 16.20, with a start. It was getting dark and she hadn't even realised she'd been asleep. Alfie was fast asleep and she eased him off her lap. He sank his claws gently into her dress, but eventually had to grudgingly give in to her superior strength and determination.

Joan tidied up and put the washing away. She was laying her fresh smelling jumpers into the drawer of the bedroom cupboard, smoothing them into position, when she discovered a framed photograph buried amongst her clothes. She remembered putting it there some time ago. She sat on the bed and looked at the picture of her and Adrian on their wedding day, four years ago. Tears came to her eyes, as she lightly touched his face with a fingertip.

The image was fresher than the memory. The sun splashed shadows in the background archway, lighting the wedding couple's faces up, as if they had a bright future to look forward to. They certainly both believed they had - at the time. Huge green shrubs stood either side of the arch, brightening up the ancient stonework. Four years ago. The church was St. Peter's and was only about half a mile from where she now lived.

Joan remembered the day very clearly, the noise and confusion. It was a long day for both of them, but somehow it had passed too quickly. Mum was alive then too. Joan's tears dropped slowly on to the glass. She ignored them, eventually rubbing them gently into the glass. Her vision was misty, the photo became a simple pattern of shapes and colours. She saw the white of her wedding dress, but the predominant colour was green. Almost against her wish, she found herself standing on the Grid.

The surprise lasted only a second. Now she was on a Trip, she might as well make the most of it. She walked on to the next square and continued moving forward. Looking into the distance she realised it would take her a long time to walk back four years in time. She strained to see the horizon and was just able to make out darker horizontal strips. As she strained, they moved rapidly nearer until she was standing on a band of darker squares disappearing off either side of her. She looked at the numbers on the square. She had moved back one year, just by willing herself.

Joan looked into the distance for the next band and saw it swim into focus. One year earlier. Within moments, she was standing on the year of her wedding. Physical movement on the Grid didn't appear to be necessary. Purely mental effort. A few steps to her right and more forward movement ate up the hours and days, putting her on 8th June. Her wedding day. She moved her feet forward and stepped out the hours, the numbers coming alive, changing until they read 14.00. The time of her wedding. With an enhanced feeling of elation, she dropped through the Grid and into the past.

* * *

The view had changed. She was facing a bed. The bed was quite small and set against the opposite wall. The room was decorated in totally different wallpaper to hers, yet somehow the room was vaguely familiar. It was her home, but looked quite different. She looked down and again noticed her feet disappearing into the floor. She stood up and walked to the front door, reaching for the handle. Her hand passed through it. She still hadn't got the hang of this Tripping, yet. She 'misted' through the door and into the street. Joan turned right and walked the familiar route until she entered the high street and turned left towards St. Peter's church.

For a few moments, she tried to avoid the people who were trying to walk through her. After the first few, she gave up. She let the people pass through her, smelling them as individuals and seeing her vision briefly blur and darken each time. The street was busy with shoppers. The day was bright and sunny, a perfect day for a wedding.

Joan was several hundred yards along the high street, realising how little it had changed over the last four years, when she realised it was the long, conventional route she was taking. The street route. She looked in the direction where she thought the church should be, in a road just behind the high street. With a quick intake of breath, she walked through the nearest shop window. She looked with passing interest at the

goods in the small store and the shop assistants going about their normal business. She passed through the wall, momentarily in the dark, into the storeroom. Two young girls were sitting and smoking quietly, despite the shop having potential customers. The smell of smoke awoke her desire for a cigarette. Joan moved guiltily through the next wall into the back alley, through the wall at the end and into a garden.

Joan felt slightly embarrassed about walking through a stranger's house uninvited, but they would never know and would, therefore, never be embarrassed about it. It went dark again as she passed through the brickwork of a house. It still bothered her that she was invading someone's privacy. She'd hate it, if someone was watching her without her knowing it.

The house she found herself walking through was large and she grimaced at the poor taste in colour scheme for the lounge. She walked through into the smaller, of what must be several bedrooms. It was very messy and obviously a child's room. She kept pausing to look in detail at the rooms, despite her hang-up about privacy. Joan caught sight of the church steeple through the window. This brought her back to her mission and she moved quickly towards it, across the front garden and on, into the small street. Ahead of her were crowds of people and beyond them, St. Peter's church.

Joan could hear the bells ringing and saw the people gathering on the steps. She moved nearer, walking, quite literally, through the crowds, losing her vision periodically and smelling the vast array of perfumes and aftershaves. She moved to the front of the throng and, with a sense of shock and amazement, saw herself and Adrian on the steps, covered in confetti and laughing. Just like the photograph.

Joan realised she was still carrying the picture and looked at it again. It was almost identical. She turned to see the photographer bent over his camera. She felt the tears welling up and looked for a handkerchief, but didn't have one. She had left the house completely unprepared. It was still a vital thought, if she'd really left the house at all!

She became aware of the increased noise, it was deafening as people cheered the bride and groom. She looked around and recognised many faces from both the past and present. Then she spotted her mother.

Joan had accepted that she would never get to see her mother again, yet there she was, laughing and smiling at Adrian. As if there was nothing wrong with her. Although at the time, her mother knew she was dying and it would be six months before she even told anyone. Three months after that she would be gone.

Joan walked nearer to the happy group and looked more closely at herself and Adrian. He was certainly handsome that day. The old Joan had a radiance, which she realised had never been repeated. She was also a few pounds heavier, although that may have been the rented wedding dress.

Joan moved to her mother and stood as close as she could, without actually being inside her. If only she could reach into her mother's body and pull out the vile growth that was already killing her. Was there a way? Could she change the course of history? Should she? As lightly as she could, she kissed her mother's cheek. Her lips sinking into her mother's face. For a moment, her mother had a look of surprise on her face and looked around. Someone had walked over her grave. Her mother appeared to look straight into Joan's eyes, but they were focused way beyond Joan's face. The moment was soon gone, as the crowds pressed forward for the group photographs. Soon Joan was engulfed and the singular intimate moment had passed.

Joan's father had left the family home ten years prior to the wedding. The family were very pleased to see him go. Mum had an easier time raising two young girls, without worrying about his tempers and weaknesses. Mum never mentioned him again from the moment he left. Rita and her husband, Mike, stood near the back. Joan recognised several cousins and some more distant relatives, whom she had not seen since the wedding. Joan made a mental note to write to some of them. These people were on the fringe of the gradually swelling crowd.

Joan suddenly felt tired. She looked at her watch, it read 16.50. The second hand was moving. It appeared that real time could still be measured and that she had been Tripping for about twenty minutes. She knew it was tiring her and she would soon have to leave. It was normally a ten-minute walk, shorter if she went through other people's houses. With a last glance back, a silent farewell to her mother and a smile towards Rita, Joan turned homewards.

As she hurried through the first house, she noticed that her vision was becoming slightly blurred. As she passed through the shop, she had difficulty in concentrating on her direction. Once in the main street, the bright sunlight helped her vision, so she took no chances and stayed on the road route, just cutting corners by walking through the edges of buildings. She was now feeling exceptionally tired. To Joan's intense relief, she saw her front door only fifty yards away. Now she was hardly able to walk. Joan stopped for a rest, but after a minute she realised that stopping didn't help renew energy. She tried to move forward again and found herself staggering towards her door. Yards away from her goal, she fell to her knees and began to crawl. The ground yielded slightly to her touch. Her hands sunk out of sight into the pavement. In her bemused state, she noticed that it felt neither warm nor cold. Ambient was the word that sprung to mind. She played with the word, until she realised that her mind was wandering and she wasn't getting any nearer to home and much sought after safety.

Everything appeared blurred now and she had great difficulty in breathing. She thought she'd momentarily blacked out, until she realised she'd passed through her front door and was in the darkened hallway. Joan managed to get to the bedroom and crawled towards the bed. Her vision had almost completely gone. She collapsed fully on to the floor and thought of the Grid.

Joan was momentarily disorientated. She saw the whole of the Grid as a blur. She had to decide in which direction to move. She'd travelled a long way to get here. In the distance were some dark bands. They moved closer at her thought. She watched they years float by. She was moving in the right direction. Finally to the current year. With some sideways adjustment, she saw her dark patch and gratefully stepped on to it, falling through the Grid into real time. She opened her eyes and mistily looked around the strange room. She hadn't returned to her own time zone!

Of course! This was the room as it was four years ago! Joan had bought the flat from an old lady. Now she realised why the wallpaper was familiar. But why couldn't she get back to the Grid? It took a moment for her to remember her previous experience, where she'd discovered she needed to be in the same position as she'd entered the Grid, for her to be able to leave it. This time she'd started from the chair, not on the bed. It took Joan a moment to locate the chair she'd started from and summoned all her energy to crawl to it. She thought of the Grid and it appeared. She tried hard to concentrate on the dark square again and dropped through.

Joan found herself seated on the bed. She let the photograph slip from her grasp as her body fell back on her bed, already fast asleep.

14th October

Joan awoke some time the following morning with Alfie beside her, touching her face with his paw. She sat up and tried to get her thoughts together. She looked at the clock, 5.00. It was still dark outside. She'd been asleep for twelve hours straight, but now she was wide awake, feeling fine and desperately in need of a cigarette. She changed her nicotine patch. She got up to visit the loo and then fed the starving Alfie. She made herself a snack and sat in the armchair, sipping her tea.

She was becoming more nervous. She couldn't blame all this on the nicotine patches. Just in case, she pulled the patch off her arm and threw it away, along with the box containing the rest of the patches. If she'd had a cigarette in the flat, she'd have smoked it.

The last Trip had nearly ended in disaster. What if she hadn't made it? What if her energy had run out before she got to the Grid? What would've happened to her body in the real time? For a full hour she sat and worried. If Joan wanted to Trip again, she'd have to be much more cautious, never straying too far in time, or distance. That's if she'd ever be brave enough to try it again!

Joan ate slowly and sorted through the facts, from her three adventures thus far, in her mind. She sat in front of her computer and typed in the points, as she understood them. This often helped to clarify her thought process and deduction ability.

The Grid seemed a separate entity entirely. It was a gateway, a portal. Physical movement wasn't necessary, but mental energy was undoubtedly needed. In fact, it was possible that the further in time she

travelled, the more energy was drained from her mind. If, therefore, energy was draining during Tripping, it was logical to assume that the mind needed rest to recuperate. This would help explain the tiredness after returning to reality and the soundness of sleep afterwards. Also, the feeling of well-being after the rest!

It was logical, or so she reasoned, that if she were separated from her body, her energy level would be dictated to by the amount of stored energy she had in the body/mind on commencement of the Trip. If she could find a way to increase her energy levels, or stamina, she could travel further distances, or stay longer, in the chosen time zone. Or both.

These were totally new and unique ideas she was trying to deal with. She'd never been any good at science. Psychology was never a subject she could get into and therefore mental aberrations were a complete mystery. Besides, this was bordering on the paranormal, surely? There was no lifeline in this other world. No one could help her if she got lost, or disorientated. A cautious approach must be used in any future Tripping. From her mental ramblings, it looked like she had already decided she was going to Trip again, but was not sure how she would, should, or could, use this newfound skill.

On the one hand, it could be useful to renew old acquaintances, like seeing her mother again. It would be nice to relive, albeit from a different point of view, old experiences. Her first lover, for instance. Some of the nicer moments of her marriage would be wonderful. She'd love to be at her parents' wedding. Wouldn't that be unique! Even her own birth!

As her fingers flicked over the keyboard, she found herself typing in the disadvantages of Tripping. The physical toll, the invasion of someone's privacy, the potential embarrassment, learning things she was never supposed to know, the danger of the unknown. The next section listed the 'Why's'. Why do her feet sink into the ground? Why was only the floor solid? Why are there no physical sensations?

Joan sat back in the typist's chair and read through the few pages she'd typed. She was becoming even more confused. Whatever happened, she wouldn't do anything for a few days. Let it all sink in. A visit to the library was called for. Though she doubted the local library would stock books analysing the particular problems of the most complex piece of equipment on the planet - the human mind. Joan prepared herself for a day's work. After all, she'd got off to a really early start.

15th October

The following day, Joan reviewed all her reference material at home. After two hours of research, she could only find one reference to time travel that wasn't classified as fiction.

She felt completely rested physically and found herself mentally more relaxed than in a long time. She'd somehow managed to come to terms with her new found ability and had made the conscious effort not to rush into anything silly. Time would reveal any ulterior motive for this special gift being bestowed on her, if there was any real reason at all! Although not a religious person and therefore holding any specific ecclesiastical beliefs, she'd always thought there was a hidden pattern to each life. Something moving people and events in mysterious ways. Joan had always believed that you made your own luck in life. On quick reflection, perhaps she hadn't done very well making her own luck!

Betty phoned to make sure she was all right, interrupting Joan's train of thought. Joan said that she was absolutely fine. They made a date to meet for lunch and Joan softly hung-up.

The day was bright and not too cold, so she cleared most of her outstanding work and finished a thank you letter to Rita. She also carefully worded a Happy Birthday card to Adrian. This she found very difficult to write.

Joan decided on a walk by the river. She drove to the Thames near Hampton Court and parked very close to the lock. The area wasn't busy, as the tourist season had finished. Joan walked the short distance to the lock gates to watch the slow business of the river traffic passing through. The sun was warm on her back and the air smelt fresh. Adrian used to like to walk the towpath with her, on days such as these. Dear Adrian. She briefly wondered how he really was.

River gulls wheeled their dance through the still air, their calls strident in the quiet morning. A large canal boat was making its sedate way up river from the direction of Kingston Bridge. The boat had timed the lock

well, as it only had to slow slightly to enter through the narrow entrance. Beyond the bridge lay miles of river and ultimately the Thames Estuary. Beyond that, the North Sea. Beyond that, Europe and the World. All a mystery to Joan, who had never left England.

The skipper of the canal boat skilfully manoeuvred the craft and loose moored it to the lock bollards. The roar of the water increased as thousands of gallons of water rushed through the slowly opening sluices. Joan slowly walked on, down the few short steps of the landing to the towpath. The hire boats were still tied together, slightly out into the stream, gently nuzzling together. Hampton Court Bridge looked gloomy in the strong shadows, but beyond it the Palace was brightly lit by the autumn sun.

Joan watched a mother and child feed ducks for a few minutes from the edge of the water. She observed the chosen loneliness of the few fishermen, waiting for the brief excitement of catching a fish. Adrian used to like fishing. That was before they married. One man was having difficulty coming down the steps. He was carrying a huge, long bag of fishing rods over one shoulder and pushing a wheeled vehicle laden with fishing gear that needed both hands to handle. All that to catch a little fish? What was the point? Surely there was more skill in catching something with the least amount of equipment! Joan smiled at the thought.

Joan found a low wall and sat quietly on its drier edge. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply the crisp air, filled with the smells of the river. Towards her walked an old man, looking intensely at the ground, stopping occasionally to look around him. As he approached, he made a small movement of his gloved hand saying, "Excuse me, but have you seen a bunch of keys anywhere, please?"

With a reflex gesture Joan looked around before saying, "No, I'm sorry."

The old man forced a smile and said, "My house keys, you see. I can't get in without them."

His face was wet from exertion, panic or fear, Joan couldn't decide. She took him by the arm and guided him to the low wall, seating him beside herself.

"I'll have a look for you, don't worry."

He smiled his gratitude and said, "Oh, thank you."

Joan smiled back and said, "Sit there. Where've you been walking?"

He waved in the general direction, indicating a path from the other side of the bridge, to some way past where he'd met Joan. She smiled at him and decided to start at the edge of the bridge. She walked up the slight slope, then she had an inspiration. She looked back at the old man, who was wiping his face with a handkerchief. He was occupied. There were few people about. She moved up the bank towards the road, out of sight of the old man, composed her mind and thought green. The vision blurred into the Green Grid and she looked down at her feet. The figures said 10.30. She shuffled forwards until they read 10.15 and dropped through. The scene seemed unchanged. A few different people moving about. She stood and waited, feeling the excitement build inside her. At last some practical use for the 'gift'.

She looked around at the scenery, noticing no physical change in colour, hue, clarity, or distortion from real time. A few minutes went by before she saw the old man again make his careful way over the bridge and down towards the river bank. She watched as he paused and rested on a balustrade, leaning heavily on it for support. Once he managed to control his breathing, he pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Joan saw a glint of metal as something fell from his coat pocket as the handkerchief was pulled out. Joan stood and moved towards the old man, looking at the ground. As he turned to move away, his foot touched the keys and pushed them into a particularly large clump of grass and weeds.

She smiled, bent and tried to pick them up, knowing it wouldn't work. Her fingers passed through them and disappeared into the ground. She stood up and moved back to where she originally started this Trip. She saw the canal boat creep once again under the bridge's arches, chugging towards the opening mouth of the lock.

Joan was about to Trip back, when she noticed a man walk right through the side wall of Hampton Court Bridge.

CHAPTER - 4.

The sight of someone else walking through walls hit Joan hard. She stood with her mouth open wide, just staring at the blank stone walls of the bridge. It hadn't occurred to her that someone else could Time Trip, like she'd been doing. How ignorant and self-centred could she be? She'd become so absorbed in her selfish interests that it didn't occur to her that other people might have this remarkable ability too. Her thoughts lasted only seconds, before she found herself walking quickly after the man. She moved hesitantly through the bridge wall and kept walking in the total darkness, fearing to stumble and lose her sense of direction. Light broke suddenly and she was on the roadway part of the bridge. To her left she could see the man walking rapidly up and over the bridge. He seemed intent on his course and ignoring everything going on around him. She began to run to keep him in sight.

As she began to gain ground on her quarry, she was able to observe him in more detail. He was wearing a padded jacket with many pockets, jeans and flat-soled shoes. He was carrying a large bag over his shoulder and was in a hurry. Joan noticed that she and the man ahead were actually walking on the bridge. Her feet appeared to sink into the bridge surface, but only by less than an inch. Once again, she wondered what comprised 'the ground' in the Green Continuum? Once over the bridge, the man turned right, alongside the river, and cut straight across the lawns separating the boundary of Hampton Court Palace from the towpath. He walked through the metal railings and through anything in his way, including trees. He was heading straight towards the main Palace entrance.

She'd visited the Palace often and was reasonably familiar with its layout, as far as the tourist trips would allow. She knew that, once inside the main archway, there was a walkway through to the back of the Palace. From there, a long driveway led directly into the historic town of Kingston upon Thames. Where was he heading?

She ran even faster to try to catch him up, pondering whether to approach him directly, or see what he was up to first. He moved through the main portal and into the Base Courtyard of the Palace. Here, he turned left and went through a wall. She hurried to keep him in sight. She burst through the wall and into a very dark corridor, looking quickly both ways to try and find him. A movement caught her eye and she ran towards the gloomy distance. The end was roped off from the public, but further down the corridor she saw movement. She ran, feeling her breath coming in painful gasps, already getting noticeably more difficult. Joan suddenly remembered that she was now a fair way from her body, way across the river. She looked at her watch 10.40. She'd been in the time zone for about ten minutes.

What was the man doing? Here she was, rushing headlong after a complete stranger, leaving her body miles away with no concern for safety or precautions. She was doing everything she promised herself she wouldn't do again! Silly cow. Too late to turn back now!

What was it that made her follow this man? He was a fellow Tripper and she had to meet him. She needed someone to talk to about this strange and frightening new ability, someone who wouldn't think she was crazy, someone who would fully understand. If only she could catch up with him! Besides, she wanted to know why he was in such a hurry! Something was important enough to make him Trip and rush into Hampton Court, moving faster than she could follow.

Up ahead, her quarry turned into another solid wall and disappeared. She hastened to follow. Seconds later, she was standing in the Grand Hall of Hampton Court Palace. The room was unlit, as it was probably closed to the public. Tapestries and flags adorned the walls and ceiling, while huge pieces of simple furniture attempted to fill the room. The area was obviously being restored, or redecorated, as sheets covered many items of furniture and wall mounted displays. One covered piece looked like a long dining table, pushed to one end of the huge room. The focal point was a large recessed fireplace, now empty of logs and full of builders' materials. The man was facing this table, with his back to her, as she entered from the wall. As she watched, he began to fade.

It took her a moment to realise that he was Tripping and she instantly decided to try and follow. She thought of the Grid and it materialised. Ahead of her, she saw the man was moving rapidly away, moving back in time. She concentrated on his form and mentally wanted to catch him up. Rows of dark green squares began to move towards her. They moved faster with the years clicking by at an ever-increasing rate. Her whole attention was on the figure ahead of her, desperately trying not to let him get further away.

Suddenly he disappeared.

Joan slowed her movement until she came to the area where she thought she'd last seen him. She looked around until she saw a dark patch ahead of her. She moved slowly towards it to see the dark square, a now familiar telltale sign of Tripping activity. Joan was breathing very heavily now and thought to rest, then realised, from her church Trip experience, that it made no difference. She looked at the date and lost her remaining breath. 1535.

The knowledge of her mammoth journey made her feel even more exhausted, but she was determined to go on. She stood on his spot, still marvelling at the date. She noted the time he'd dropped through, at 18.30. She shuffled her feet until the figures changed to 18.32 and Tripped through herself.

* * *

Her entry into the Banqueting Hall of the past was like a hammer blow to her senses. The noise was deafening and she instinctively put her hands over her ears. The room was full of people and animals. Dogs and cats roamed the floor. Many dogs were barking at the men and children that were tormenting them, with half eaten pieces of food. Musicians were playing from a small gallery and their instruments were very basic and reedy sounding. Several were completely out of tune. Conversations were loud and raucous. She looked around and gazed in wonder.

The room was very dimly lit, burning torches and candles filled the air with fumes. The huge fireplace displayed a large pile of burning logs, scraps of food having been thrown idly on to it, giving off a greasy smoke that hung in layers up to the ceiling. People were constantly moving around. A few simply dressed servants brought dishes to and from the tables. As they passed her, Joan could smell them. Personal hygiene was obviously unknown at this time. It made her feel very nauseous for a moment. The noise was vibrant and yet she couldn't distinguish individual conversations, picking out only an understandable word occasionally. Dogs were barking and children playing around the furniture and servants.

Joan looked around and her eyes settled on the large table, now in the centre of the room. Figures were seated all-round it, yet appeared hazy through the smoke and inadequate lighting. As she moved closer she saw, seated at the centre of the table, a very large man with an elaborate costume. He was slowly eating a piece of meat. With dawning realisation she knew she was probably watching the famous, and infamous, Henry the Eighth!

He was certainly quite fat and had a very pale complexion. His cheeks were covered in some sort of rash and he idly scratched himself as he ate. He had a solid looking head and almost no neck. His beard looked grey under the grease and his eyes sunken in a puffy looking face. A flat ornate hat adorned his head at a jaunty angle, large feathers sprung from its centre and curved down his back. His coat was heavily padded and bejewelled with rose motifs in rubies and diamonds. A large gold necklace lay on one shoulder and swung across his chest to rest on the other. His tunic top was a mass of intricate gold stitching, inset with rubies. He positively glittered.

The King's eyes wandered around the room and back to the metal plate. He used a large knife to cut into the meat he was eating. One of the many rings on his fingers caught a sparkle of light as he moved. Beside him sat several women of varying age groups. With a start Joan knew she was looking at one of Henry's six wives. She studied the ladies' faces closely, trying to memorise them so, on her return, she could check out who was who. Joan felt she had to move closer.

Joan looked at the youngest of the women, sitting nearest to Henry on his right. She looked very young and had a swarthy complexion. Her head appeared petite, supported on a long neck. Her mouth was wide and her eyes small, black and quite beautiful. Her loose black hair was covered in a brocaded cap that sat high on the forehead and covered her ears. The detail in the woman's clothing was amazing. Joan had never seen anything like it, outside museums. She wore a padded dress, with enormous puffed sleeves. It was delicately adorned with rows of miniature pearls and emeralds. By today's standards, each item of clothing would cost a fortune. The lady sat still and silent, occasionally putting a small item of food into her mouth and chewing slowly. She appeared withdrawn and took little notice of the splendidly adorned assemblage, who appeared excessively animated.

Joan slowly reached forward to try to touch the Queen of England when, with a gathering of the voluminous skirts, the elaborately adorned lady stood up from the table. Joan's hand passed right through the Queen's body.

Joan's eyes were distracted by a movement behind the King's chair. The man she had followed was moving to the back of the table. Joan felt she needed to hide from her colleague, as she wasn't totally ready to confront this stranger. She moved back into the shadows, away from the main group and crouched behind a huge chair. She remained there for a moment before realising that she had deliberately chosen a different time zone, or frame, from him. She should be two minutes behind his actions. He couldn't see her for, the same reasons Henry and his entourage couldn't see Joan, or the Dixons see her on her uninvited visit. They were all in different time zones. She relaxed slightly and let out the breath she'd been holding a while, without realising it.

Her chest was beginning to hurt. She looked at her watch - 10.59. She'd been in the zone for nearly half an hour and was hundreds of years from home. She must start back soon. She was taking too much of a risk staying much longer, but she was fascinated by it all. Joan saw her quarry moving around the table taking photographs. Photographs! Of course, why not? The man seemed to have all the shots he wanted, as he stood to one side of the table and appeared to be waiting for something to happen.

Joan knew she was tiring too quickly to last much longer. The smells and the smoke were beginning to get to her. These people were disgusting. Children and animals were eating off the same plates! Some even off the floor! They ate with their hands and wiped their fingers on their clothes. Some of them looked like they'd worn their clothes for days.

She saw Henry was standing stiffly and holding out his hand for his Queen. It was a public gesture, without warmth, or emotion. The young woman's face showed no emotion either. The King and Queen stood and moved away together. Courtiers acknowledged their departure with bows, curtsies and polite applause. The minstrels played them out with another badly executed tune. The photographer followed them and Joan moved to follow too. She was now confident that he couldn't see her, being a few minutes ahead of her in time.

With a grimace, she suddenly bent over in pain. Her chest was hurting badly. The pain was sharp and incisive. It filled the whole of the chest cavity and forced air from her lungs. Taking a breath was difficult and painful. She knew she had to leave, immediately. She would come back another time and see what the photographer got up to. With a disappointed sigh, she turned and began to make her way back through the Palace and its grounds. She had to get over the bridge, to the other side of the river - and quickly. Joan moved as rapidly as she dared, letting her mind dwell on what was happening back at the Palace. With a frown she knew what it might be. The King and Queen were possibly retiring for the night to bed. Unknown to them, there was going to be somebody taking pictures of their more..... intimate moments.

Joan began to get angry, as she realised the insensitivity of the voyeur and the misuse of the travel gift. It spurred her on with additional effort to find her way home. She left the Palace grounds and welcomed the daylight and fresh air. She could see the other end of the bridge and realised the most direct route was across the River Thames.

Almost too tired to think, she walked to the riverbank and down into the water. It became very dark, but she could see well enough to walk. Under normal circumstances, a Trip along the bottom of a river would be quite exciting, especially without the fear of drowning. She put one foot in front of the other, trying to walk in a straight line. Fishes moved by her, unconcerned. Some debris floated past, but otherwise the river was fairly clean, but gave off a heady smell. As she descended to the central, deeper part of the riverbed, the light reduced dramatically. Blindly she tried to maintain a straight line. Despite the bed of the river being littered with weeds, tree roots and half-submerged vegetation, her path appeared to be smooth and firm.

She was vaguely aware of the surface of the river, way above her, the constantly moving waves breaking up the light in an almost hypnotic rhythm. She felt the river bank rise ahead of her and she emerged just short of the edge of the bridge, the light momentarily blinding her, as she broke the surface of the water. She was nearing total exhaustion and it was hurting her to breathe. She struggled through the brickwork and across to the other side. She stood where she thought her position would eventually be and thought of the Grid. It quickly appeared.

Ahead of her lay a long journey, back through time. The years flashed past and she slowed occasionally to check where in time she was. Eventually, after much moving from one side to another, she found her own era and saw the dark green entry port. Gratefully, and in much pain now, she dropped through, opening her eyes to Hampton Court in the twentieth century.

She felt almost totally exhausted. Despite her aches and weariness, she stood and moved back to the clump of grass, bending painfully down to pick up the hidden keys. She then moved back to where she'd left the old man. He looked up expectantly as she approached. She smiled and handed the keys to him.

He looked into her now tired eyes and said, "You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble, my dear. Thank you."

She patted his arm and said, "It was worth it, I assure you. Look after them this time, OK?" He nodded and she moved tiredly away to her car. Once the door was opened, she managed to gently ease herself into the seat. She shut the door with an effort and was almost instantly fast asleep.

* * *

She awoke an hour later, still feeling a little tired, but strangely exalted. Her mind was now racing. There was so much to think about. Things had taken an unexpected turn. She started the car and slowly drove home in a daze.

Alfie welcomed her, seemingly unaffected by her apparent distraction. She fed him and stroked him automatically. She locked the front door and sat on the sofa, staring at the empty fireplace in a stupor. Sometime later the stupor turned into sleep.

A hammering sound awakened her. As she became gradually awake, she realised it was a knocking at the front door. She eased herself up, noticing how quickly she was coming to full wakefulness and how much energy she felt she suddenly had. She opened the door. There stood the man that had just been spying upon the more intimate moments of Henry the Eighth. A man who travelled through the centuries, just to take photographs of a King and Queen in bed. There stood the man she'd been following.

And he was smiling at her.

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