

"I'm standing at the end of Albion Street
I'm watching the Sun go down
Looking down the Old Straight Track
I wonder if she'll ever come back."

From the song 'Albion Street' by John Ellis

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A woman stands in an upper-floor bay window of a house that overlooks the heaving mass of black sea beyond the beach.

She is wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat that overhangs thick-rimmed sunglasses. She is naked except for a pair of shorts and has crossed her arms, arthritic claws holding each elbow forming a cradle across her breasts. She softly sings an ancient Cornish lullaby. By her boney-bare feet she has laid a child's fishing net.

Even in the dusk, she can see the tide is coming in.

BOOT

Walker usually stopped walking when the sun, harried by the approaching autumn dusk, slinked away. Once it had finally gone, the night took control and the attendant darkness seemed to bind his legs, so that putting one foot in front of the other became a struggle between an exhausted but willing mind and a tiring body. So, in the very last of the light he would look for a convenient patch of ground, out of sight from the curious gaze of possible passers-by on whatever by-way or lane he'd been navigating, and unpack the new one-man tent he'd bought in his forced and hasty exit from London.

But he was in the countryside now. The autumn brought early dusks and Walker would sometimes risk a small campfire just for the company it gave him, sitting cross-legged as he stared into the heart of the flames fuelled by gathered twigs and paper. Entranced by their dance he would either go over the days journey or rewind to the good times before the front door had imploded and his life had been changed in an instant. Sometimes he imagined he could see that scene being played out in the fire as the wood spat and cracked.

As he travelled he stocked up on sandwiches, salads, fruit and juice from garages and convenience stores along the way and sometimes he treated himself to a can of beer. And when he did spend a night under canvass, he wouldn't bother to eat a proper meal or wash before going to bed. He could do that in the morning in a more convenient location. And anyway, he was mostly too exhausted, so he would unfurl his sleeping bag, chuck it into the tent, dive in after it and zip out the world. Sometimes he'd read by torchlight, and occasionally he'd get out his Champ for a special treat.

But this particular evening was different. He'd hoped to get a long walk in before he made a decision about where he would spend the night but his gait had felt a little out of kilter for the last few hours, so he sat down to investigate the possible cause. He was too tired to affect a perfect docking with arse and

earth and, unbalanced, he found himself rolling down a slight incline to the South of the lane. He rolled just enough to pick up a few brown and orange leaves that had shed from the oaks and beeches that loomed over him, their giant hands and fingers spread out as if they were protecting him from the world he was leaving behind.

His rucksack refused to roll with him, so it remained moping in the last of the evening light. To Walker, it looked like a child's crumpled body that had been dumped by a gang of Blitzers after a nasty little city execution, followed by a drive to the countryside for some fleshy fly-tipping. But that was just his understandable paranoia in light of what had prompted his escape from the flat in Shadwell. Victims of Blitzer retribution were encountered on a regular basis in the rural landscape now. A special police unit based in London, nicknamed The Fairy Liquids, had been set up, and they were usually called in to deal with the situation and remove the bodies and other nasty leftovers. Taking their nickname from the deep green boiler suits they wore while on duty, presumably designed to blend in with the surrounding foliage and make them less visible to the public, they left each crime scene as if no nastiness had ever happened there.

Walker had made an oath not to use swear words in his imagined idyll, but he reverted to a 'fuck it' when he found the cause of his ambulatory impairment. After removing his left boot, he could see that the sole had begun to come away very slightly from the uppers. He'd owned many pairs of Grenson shoes and boots but this had never happened before, despite testing them on several long walks across rugged landscapes. As he looked closer he had a feeling that the stitching might have been deliberately cut, but that was paranoid thinking again and was soon put aside. Even with this minor setback, he realised that the purchase of a pair of Fred Triple Welt in Brown Grain Leather had been remarkably foresighted, as if he had acted on a subconscious premonition of things to come. And it was a stroke of luck that he had been wearing them on the day his world got turned upside down, inside out and back to front.

A millimeter thick shadow ran along the outside edge of the sole where there was the start of a separation of the above from the below. The stitching had

begun to yield to the push-pull of the softer uppers and harder leather beneath and it seemed to him to be a perfect metaphor for the situation that had caused his sudden departure from the City. He reckoned there might be another three or four weeks walking before it finally gave up the ghost. And even with the tools in his Champ, he didn't have the skills or materials to do an adequate repair job, so he pulled the boot back on. Maybe he'd be able to find a Grenson retailer or old-fashioned cobbler somewhere on his journey, assuming his cash held out.

Walker stood up and took a long, lung-full of air. Paradoxically, the smell of rotting vegetation mixed with a potpourri of country odour induced a kind of primal energy. As he walked up the incline and picked up the rucksack, he heard a shuffling sound somewhere close to where he had been examining his boot. He was in two minds whether or not to investigate but as he peered into the dark, a shadow came to life and launched into the air, almost knocking his cap off as it flew past. He just had time to glimpse a large, black bird wheel away with something in its beak that managed to find a last ray of the disappearing sun, causing a little glint against the dark backdrop of dusk as if it were one of the emerging stars. Intuitively, he held his left hand up to reveal the space on his third finger where his wedding ring had been. This time, "fuck it" didn't seem to be personal enough, so he aimed a "fuck you." at the disappearing winged shadow. The shadow made no reply as it dissolved into the distance, embraced by the night.

Walker's legs suggested that there might be another half-hours walking in him now, and that would get him among the houses set below a large hill he'd seen in the distance when he had stopped to take a breather on a sharp-humped canal bridge a few hundred yards back. The scene was quite picturesque, especially as some of the houses were beginning to light up and the smell of wood smoke added to the effect. It was nice to see something that was so old-fashioned and reassuring still existed in the ugliness of the modern world, so he hoisted the rucksack onto his back and headed for the siren lights ahead.

His half hour amble took him into the village of Wormwell. Since he wouldn't be under canvass tonight he adopted his usual routine for finding a place to

stay. He'd ask a local to direct him to the nearest pub, have a drink and then ask the landlord or landlady to recommend a cheap local B&B or hotel. If he was lucky, the pub and the place to sleep were one and the same and he would be able to spend the evening in the company of a pint or two while observing the pub's regulars. Walker liked the idea of drinking in old-fashioned public houses, so he could imagine he was back in the days of his literary hero, Charles Dickens, quaffing Smoking Bishop or its watered-down cousin, Negus. But if the recommended boozier turned out to be one of those gastro affairs, he'd leave it to the 'second homers' who usually frequented those establishments. Just the kind of people he was eager to avoid these days, especially as he might know some of them. Or, more to the point, someone might know him, despite his slowly changing appearance.

After passing two characterless pubs that did not appeal, Walker finally struck gold. From the outside, The Crafty Crow looked like his idea of heaven, so he stood across the road admiring the old building with its whitewashed plaster and black timbers supporting a low, straw roof that looked like it needed some care and attention from the local thatcher. The swinging sign set close to the road had been recently repainted with a large black bird set against a blue sky, while the pub's name arched across the top of the wooden panel in gold letters.

The only modern intrusion was the cars parked outside, nearly all of which seemed to be from the upper end of the auto market. As he crossed the street and headed for the entrance, a large white dog appeared from behind a metallic blue Bugatti Chiron. Maybe it had been pissing up against the car and the re-invented Walker hoped it might have been. The dog stopped to take a look at him. Was it a dog? It had a very large bushy tail and it was pure white. No. It was definitely not a dog. Charlie now realised it was a fox. The creature stood and looked him steadily in the eye until an elderly man emerged from the pub, looking like he had drunk the establishment dry. His appearance broke the spell and the white fox was gone in an instant.

But the lights inside the bar were seductive, so Walker approached the front door in anticipation of a relaxing hour or two. Above it, a black painted lintel had the number '1674' painted on it in small, white letters. For three hundred

and forty eight years, The Crafty Crow had quenched the village thirst. Walker looked at the door and wondered how many people had gone in sober and come out pissed. "Right choice, Walker", he told himself as he lifted a large brass latch and gave himself up to the embrace of The Crafty Crow. As he stepped forward, his foot brushed against a piece of wood that marked the boundary between the dark world outside and the womblike interior. The sill was worn down in the middle from the caress of a million soles and, as he looked down to see what his foot had brushed against, his eyes found one end of a long, narrow piece of ancient, threadbare carpet that ran from the door up to the bar. Along its length an embroidered serpentine creature with its tail at the door and its gaping mouth close to the bar could still be made out, despite years of wear and tear. As Walker proceeded along its length he imagined himself to be a human counter in a game of snakes and ladders.

The Crafty Crow was indeed an old fashioned watering hole, with a snugery for the posher clientele and a public bar for the less well-heeled, separated by a large oak-paneled screening structure into which was set a door that housed a small stained glass window. The bar passed around the far end of the screen and served both sides of the establishment. In the time it took him to walk from the tail to the teeth, Walker had already developed a strong impression that this was no ordinary boozier. On the surface, it was a typical country pub. He'd found himself in many similar places during his 'long march', as he liked to call his journey now. There were a few customers, mostly men, sat around half a dozen tables. Some were talking while others tapped the screens of tablets and smart phones. The one woman in the room had her back to Walker but she was making the most noise while she jabbed her finger in the direction of a sad looking man who looked like he was used to her drunken attacks.

As he approached the bar Walker was taking in some slightly unusual features. He hadn't come across a skittle ally before, although he knew there were still a few dotted around the country. There was a little sign in the shape of a pointing hand guiding the would-be skittler to a separate room set off from the main part of the bar. Half way along the serpent beneath his feet he passed close to the padlocked door to the ally. On the wall next to it there was a small glass trophy cabinet. It contained several silver cups of different shapes and

sizes, plus a set of miniature skittles. Presumably the skittlers of the Crafty Crow were skittlers to be reckoned with. Next to the cabinet a small poster announced a forthcoming appearance by a dystopian goth band called 'Deus Ex Machina'. And Walker had most definitely not come across a pub with a birdcage hanging from a wooden beam above the bar. Inside, a large, shiny, black bird shuffled about on its perch, inclining its head as if were trying to make sense of the various conversations taking place around the bar. Walker assumed it was the eponymous Crow, discounting rare Ravens and not so common Rooks, and it certainly had a crafty look to it. As he stood at the bar waiting to be served, the bird fixed an eye on him. But the approaching barmaid caused the bird to remove its stare and let out a little caw.

She was a real-life version of a Donald McGill postcard. Rosy cheeked, blond and buxom. Just the thing to bring in the local men that made up the majority of the customers tonight. She approached with a smile. "What can I get you, my darling?" There was a time when this kind of cheerful banter had been commonplace, even in London. That was until the liberal left had issued a fatwah on such conviviality. It had been quite some time since he'd had such a warm welcome.

As Walker looked along the bar at the different drinks on offer signified by brand badges attached to the long handles of phallic beer pumps, his eyes were magnetically attracted to the barmaid's cleavage, shown off to good effect by a very low cut, very tight, red woolen top in an open knit that let her white cotton bra show through. But the moment of hardening excitement was interrupted by his eyes falling on a rather unusual brooch pinned to her top. Whether by accident, or not, it was placed directly over where he imagined her right nipple was lurking.

He couldn't stop looking at the brooch, even though he tried to engage with the barmaid's eyes. And she knew exactly where his eyes were focused, but she didn't seem to mind. On the contrary, in the apparent act of reaching over the bar to clear an empty glass, she moved her chest closer to Walker, almost as if she was offering a better view of the brooch. It seemed to be made of gold, circular in design and about two inches in diameter. A stylized serpent figure

encircled the circumference of the brooch leaving a large circular space in its center. The barmaid's erect nipple thrust through underneath her top into the open space, giving the impression that the serpent was wrapped around it. Between the open mouth and tail of the serpent there was a representation of a female face with wild flowing hair, almost like the barmaid's own unkempt, but very sexy, locks. He had a feeling the object might be very old, as if it had come from one of the great hoards of treasure occasionally unearthed by metal detectorists. The goldsmith's work was intricate and detailed, although a few parts were worn smooth. But he was focused on the thrusting nipple. Surely that nipple in that hole can't be a coincidence, he thought.

"You still haven't told me what you want." She lifted her eyes towards him, spicing the question with erotic invitation. Snapping back into the bar, Walker asked her what she might recommend. "You might like to try a pint of Wessex Jewel. It's brewed in Cornwall. One of them craft beers. The locals round here love it." She moved down the bar to pull a pint from the hand pump that, in light of the thrusting nipple and recent inquiry, had become a phallus wrapped in her slender fingers. She opened and closed her grip as she pulled on the pump causing the Wessex Jewel to come gushing out of a small brass spigot into the large straight glass she held below. As he stood watching Walker became aware of the sound of names being read out in the adjoining snugery. The cleavage returned with the pint, and, fighting his desire to stay and admire the barmaid and her brooch, Walker took himself and his rucksack to a small table close to the door in the paneled screen. It was constructed from a dark wood, possibly oak, but was probably not an original feature. The rich brown surface glowed from many years of rubbing, both deliberate and accidental, and he was sitting close enough to recognize the faint smell of beeswax polish that brought to mind old church pews and school desks. Looking around the room he saw a large open fire set into the wall opposite, and its warmth and glow added to the cozy atmosphere of the bar. However, he decided he would have just one beer and then sort out where he would be sleeping for the night.

The Wessex Jewel was a lovely pint, not too hoppy and with a slight overtone of toffee. As he took another sip, the door in the tall wooden panel opened to

allow a rather corpulent old man in a faded pin-striped suit into the saloon. He was carrying a very weathered top hat in his left hand and a furled umbrella in his right. Several coloured ribbons were attached to right-hand sleeve of his suit jacket with a safety pin. After he had passed through, the door remained open, giving Walker the chance to have a look at the stained glass window set into it. It seemed to be very old, as if it had been transplanted from a medieval church or monastery. It was the kind of thing his parents had loved. Walker had been carted off to many old churches and cathedrals as a child to see the rich reds and blues of the medieval glassmakers. He'd even done a little bit of stained glass work at school. The scene depicted was of a stylized mountain thrusting out of a flat landscape. In the sky above the mountain there were five black birds set in a semi-circle. And wrapped around the mountain was a serpent-like creature, from whose gaping jaws appeared the face of a woman with wild flowing hair.

It took several more sips of beer before Walker realised that the barmaids brooch and the stained glass depicted the same scene. Now he needed to see that brooch again before he could be sure he wasn't imagining things. As he got up from the table, he felt a sharp pain at the base of his thumb. The two small punctures from the bite were still red and slightly puffy despite several days of healing. He made a mental note to apply some cream and take a couple of tablets when he'd found somewhere to stay. The barmaid was not to be seen when he got to the counter and, as he waited for her to make an appearance, his eyes settled on another glass cabinet set up below a line of optics at the back of the bar. It was smaller than the skittle trophy cabinet and contained dozens of objects made from silver and gold. There were also some scraps of silver foil and other shiny material. They were all laid out in neat lines over three small shelves, like a miniature museum display. He could see rings, coins, buttons, thimbles, ring pulls and all kinds of small objects. And there, at the end of the lowest row, was his wedding ring. "That's Bobby's treasure, you're looking at young man. Marvelous, ain't it? That bird's a living wonder, indeed it is."

Walker hadn't noticed the corpulent man approach the counter while he was looking at the glass case. He nodded towards the birdcage. "That's Bobby.

They let him out every day but he always comes back at dusk, yes he does. Very often with something he's found. Or maybe stolen, the little blighter." The old man poked his elbow into Walker's side before carrying on. "He's a bloody good burglar, that one. Ain't ya, old bird?" As Bobby cawed in answer the old man laughed and looked around the room to see if he had an audience. As he propped his umbrella up against the bar he continued in a broad, West Country accent. "I'm The Mayor, young man. Pleased to meet you." He held out a hand for Walker to shake and as he did so, reunited his top hat with his head. His hand was large and very sweaty and his little finger was missing. His face was covered in scarlet thread veins, his nose was blue and his breath smelled of onions. "The Mayor of Wormwell?" Walker asked. "No. Just The Mayor. See you tomorrow."

The certainty of that sentence unnerved Walker for a moment, but before he could ask the old man what he had meant by that last statement, The Mayor had passed back through the little door, pulling it shut behind him. As he did so, the barmaid re-appeared minus the brooch. "How's the Wessex Jewel, my lovely?" "Very nice. Would you mind if I have a look at that brooch you were wearing earlier?" "What brooch?" "You were wearing a round brooch with a snake on it." "Not me my lovely" "You don't have a twin sister working here, do you?" He tried to make a joke, but he was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. "Only me. Wish there was. I've got a mouth to feed. And it's always hungry. So I'm the one and only here, the queen of the castle. Except busy periods when the boss helps out." Walker cheeks were flushing from embarrassment and alcohol. "Sorry. I must have got confused. Perhaps it's the Wessex Jewel at work. Did you say 'it's always hungry'? Have you got a child or a dog or something?"

"Did I say that? Silly sausage, I am if I did. ". It was clear to Walker that any more questioning about the brooch was a waste of time. And besides, there was the matter of the ring. "I think your bird might have found my ring. About an hour ago. I can prove it's mine. There's an inscription." "Is it the one at the end? He did bring that in an hour or so ago. Bobby, you naughty bird. Did you steal this nice man's ring? What's the writing say, my lovely?" "To Charles. All my love, Isabel." The barmaid inspected the inside of the ring closely and then

handed it back to Walker. She looked at Charles as if to say, "I bet there's a good bit of gossip to be had about you and Isabel." "That's the first time we've found the rightful owner to one of Bobby's offerings." The cleavage lunged forward as she placed the ring in Walker's open hand but it fell out and onto the floor. As he retrieved it from the embroidered serpent's mouth, a searing pain shot across his back and he stayed a moment, waiting for it to subside. When he straightened up the barmaid was resting her folded arms on the bar, pushing her breasts together and exaggerating the cleavage.

"Offerings? Why do you call them that?" "I have no idea. Bobby has been here longer than me and the stuff he brings back has always been called 'offerings'. My Mum remembers feeding Bobby when she was a little girl, and she remembers the offerings in the case." Walker had a feeling she was spinning him a yarn and he was about to point out the chronological absurdity of the barmaid's statement, considering the probability that crows don't live very long, when he realised he'd left his rucksack and pint at the little table. And besides, he still needed to find a bed for the night. "I don't suppose you could recommend a local B&B or hotel that'll take me in this late at night?" The barmaid had turned her back to Walker while she poured a drink from one of the optics, but now she twisted her face back towards him. "Yes I can, my lovely. You're standing in it. We're in all the books and them phone apps. Do you want me to show you a room?"

This was what Walker had hoped for, so the barmaid lifted a section of the bar that gave her access to the tables, beckoning him through to the rear of the pub. Walker followed her up a couple of flights of well-trodden stairs into a snug room that was fit for purpose. Despite feeling pretty exhausted, Charlie Walker decided to return to the bar for another pint. He managed to reclaim his little table and settled down to do some man watching. Some woman watching would also go down well too, but other than the barmaid, there was only the loud woman to be seen. Walker was happily male and hetero, despite some of his friends proselytizing about the joys of gay living or gender transitioning and he had come to the conclusion early in his life that he simply liked looking at women. As he sat at his small table he discovered another bit of strangeness. He was convinced that every time someone approached the

bar, their upper body did an almost imperceptible bow towards the barmaid. If she wasn't there, the bird received the salutation. The rest of the evening was spent in an increasingly cozy glow brought on by the Wessex Jewel and a single Talisker, before Walker took himself off to bed and dreams of snakes, mountains and cleavage.

Most mornings, when Walker came back to life after sleep, he would think of Isabel. Sometimes he'd call up a memory of breakfast on the balcony in Shadwell, or on the deck of their yacht. At other times, when he was weak physically and mentally, he could not fight off visions of her being taken, and that brought on the darkness that was always with him now. Even when he allowed himself some pleasure in something he was doing or seeing, the grip of grief and fear were always close at hand. This morning he'd woken up to the sound of many voices coming from somewhere in the pub. When Walker entered the small breakfast room behind the bar, he was surprised to see it full of people dressed almost entirely in every shade of red. The men all wore loose red trousers, held up with belts of twisted rope, with the bottoms tucked into red wellington boots. Their open white cotton shirts were decorated with red ribbons, two or three per shirt and large, loosely tied red bow ties covered their throats. The women in the room wore long red skirts that brushed the floor, and white shirts, like the men. But instead of giant bow ties, the women wore red scarves that were pinned across their chests. There must have been thirty or forty people packed into the small room. Walker could not see any children. It was very warm and smelled of breakfast food and body odour. He immediately experienced a claustrophobia that took him by surprise and, as he turned to leave, the Mayor, who had been standing in a corner singing quietly, put himself between Walker and the door back into the main bar. It was clear to Walker that he was going to be having breakfast, whether he like it or not.

Given his rare condition, Walker was quite used to being stared at, so he wasn't surprised when he noticed most of the people filling the room were looking at him. After a long look at the strange, pale outsider, those who were eating turned away to tuck into breakfast, which consisted entirely of Cumberland Sausage in the typical ring style, with a little mound of mashed

potato set in the middle. "Hello. How are you on this wonderful Well Day? Sleep deep, young man?" "Very well." Walker replied. The Mayor laughed at that unintended pun. "You're not carrying a camera or one of them mobile phones are you? What about them contact lenses what takes them virtual reality pictures?" The edge to The Mayor's voice had a slight hint of menace. "No, don't have either any more and I don't need contact lenses. Why do you ask?" That was a little lie in answer to a very strange question. He'd actually left his phone upstairs at the bottom of his rucksack. The Mayor ignored his last question. "I suggest you sit down for a bit of breakfast before we all move on. It's a chilly day and you'll be glad of something in your belly." Once more there was a hint of an order in The Mayor's voice. "Sorry, but I'm checking out as soon as I've had breakfast. I've got to get on."

"Don't you think it's strange that we are all wearing red and eating sausage rings? I'm sure you've been keeping your eyes open." The Mayor smiled as he waited for an answer. Walker was definitely curious, but he was not sure what he should give away about how he was feeling. The rest of the breakfasters looked up from their plates to see and hear his answer. "I suppose it is a bit strange, now you mention it." An old man with a long white beard and a wall-eye, who was standing close to The Mayor, laughed at that. Without saying another word The Mayor smiled knowingly and left the room. Walker was invited to sit at the table in a space created just for him and was immediately served a plate of sausage and mash by a very old lady dressed like the other women in the room. He felt a bit cheated by the appearance of this waitress. He had hoped the cleavage might have delivered his breakfast with an enticing smile. He cut off a bit of sausage and dipped it in the mash. Although it was not ideal breakfast fare, it was actually very tasty. "Perhaps you'd like to see some more *strangeness*". Once again, The Mayor was not asking as he loomed over Walker.

Walker had always been interested in the outer edges of human experience and, paradoxically, given his financial dealings, all things spiritual. That was partly why he had intuitively headed West when he got out of London at the end of September. And he was a long time subscriber to a strange little magazine inspired by the works of the maverick writer Charles Fort. When

Walker said “OK”, it was like an ‘end of the working day’ siren had gone off in a factory somewhere. All the occupants of the room abandoned their breakfasts, stood up and marched through the lounge out into the street, led by The Mayor, and followed by a slightly bemused and hungry Walker. It was pretty chilly once they got out into the fresh air, but only Walker seemed to notice the cold.

The group processed down what appeared to be the High street in silence. In the distance, just visible through an Autumn mist, Walker could see the little hill he’d seen from the canal bridge the evening before. It had a sharp incline and looked almost man made, like a coal heap drawn back into the arms of Mother Nature. The street was lined with a few onlookers. Some of them bowed to the procession, while many of the local youth shouted out the odd “wankers” or “don’t you know this is the twenty first century?” A glance up to a street sign gave it the name Albion Street. He assumed the party was heading for the hill but, when they came to a little crossroads, everyone turned left. At this point, two of the larger members of the procession sidled up to Walker and linked their arms with his, making sure he couldn’t make a run for it. Strangely, Walker felt more curiosity than fear, so he allowed himself to be carried along with the crowd without a struggle or shout. About a hundred yards along, after passing a row of very quaint houses and shops that seemed to be of a similar age to the Crafty Crow, the street came to an end and the countryside opened up before them, fields spreading out into the rising distance.

At the end of the street, where it abutted onto the fields, there was a grotto-like construction made of large irregular shaped stones forming a high arch over the mouth of an old well. The stones were dressed in red and gold Autumnal leaves, flowers and red ribbons, deliberately placed all over and around the structure. As he and the Mayor came up to the group that stood before the well, everyone’s head turned to the right. Walker followed their gaze and there, once again, was the sharp hill in the near distance. It was not so far away that he could not see a throng of people coming down its side, flowing like red lava. The crowd got to ground level and came towards the well along the edge of the intervening fields. When they got to within a

hundred yards, Walker could see that someone was being carried on a chair raised onto the shoulders of a group of young men, all dressed like the group gathered around the well. He suddenly had an image of Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra on a palanquin being carried on the shoulders of muscular Nubian slaves. But when they got nearer again, he could see that this Cleopatra was just the barmaid, all smiles and cleavage.

And now the weather seemed to be part of the performance, as the morning sun disappeared behind incoming clouds to the sound of distant music that was jostled in and out of hearing by the slight breeze. The group and the barmaid approached the well and, when they were just a few feet away, Walker was almost deafened by The Mayor bursting into song.

“Here’s the day again, old friends
When the year is close to end
Let’s send Sally off to see
Old Sneaker from The Hill
She’s got the gifts that Bobby’s brought
Sneaker loves the shiny sort
If he’s happy, he’ll give Sally back to all her friends
Have you brought your buttons bright?
Have you brought your thimbles?
And to bring the ladies luck
Sneaker will be nimble.”

Now all the people present were singing to the accompaniment of an accordion player, who had pushed through the crowd and was now moving toward the well.

“Give us all the food we need
Fill the ladies full of seed
Bring the spring again next year
Bring the spring again.”

And as they all repeated what had already been sung, the barmaid was lowered to the floor. Walker could see that there was something that looked

like a sword in a scabbard attached to a belt wrapped around the barmaid's waist. She had been carrying a small bag and, holding it over her head, she approached the opening to the well. The singing seemed to get louder as she emptied the contents of the bag onto the wide stone lip of the opening. Rings, buttons, thimbles and all kinds of shiny objects tumbled out, some dropping into the well. They were the contents of the cabinet behind the bar. The almost inaudible splashes gave Walker the impression that the well was deep. He noticed a young boy at the side of the structure turning an old handle that was hoisting the well's bucket to the surface. As it arrived, the audience burst into spontaneous applause.

At this point The Mayor approached the barmaid and gave her a kiss on both cheeks before helping her onto the rim that circled the wide hole. As she stepped into the large bucket, still all smiles and cleavage, very theatrical and displaying no sign of fear or agitation, she gathered up the remaining offerings and dropped them into her blouse. Now it took three men to turn the handle attached to the rope to slowly lower her into the dark as the song was started again by The Mayor and a few of the group closest to the well. Waving to the onlookers, the barmaid slowly disappeared from view, while the singing and accordion gradually got quieter, until she was gone and a strange silence descended over the rituals participants. Walker noticed another young man carrying a length of black wire disappear behind the well, looking like he was up to no good. As he looked back towards the dark opening, a sound issued from it that was something between an elephant's trumpeting and a ship's siren, punctuated by some pretty nasty screams and the sound of violent splashing, all sounding like a soundtrack to a nineteen fifties sci-fi movie where the rubber monster attacks the scientist's daughter. In his amazement, Walker looked beyond the well into the field behind it, where he could see a group of schoolchildren guarded by several adults. They were gaily dressed with wide brimmed hats covered with coloured ribbons and all of them wore red tee shirts. The sounds from the well had triggered cheering and waving from the children. A few minutes later the bucket was hoisted back. But no barmaid was in it, just water slopping over the side and back into the gape of the well. "What the fuck is goin.....?" He didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Hands grabbed him around the shoulders and neck, and duck tape

was wrapped around his head to stop any sounds getting out. The Mayor turned towards him with a forefinger to his lips. "Shhh."

There was nothing Walker could do, no escape and no way to scream for help. And now the accordion and singing started again as the group stood looking at the well. A few approached it and threw what appeared to be nuts and berries into it. Some threw shiny objects and coins, while others dropped flowers into the holy space. One woman, younger than the others dropped in a tiny wooden doll before she took a pace backwards and said a silent prayer. And now, as if on cue, the sun escaped from its dark minder. After several minutes of music from the accordion, the crowd now stood silently for what felt to Walker like an eternity. They simply stared at the ground, heads bowed. Some let out a low, almost inaudible moan. Some wept quietly. Then, suddenly, The Mayor shouted "Crow". The taller members of the group gathered around Walker so that he wouldn't be visible to any onlookers. They stayed to let others go on before them. Once the first group was far enough ahead, they proceeded back down the quaint street, jostling Walker along in the centre of the group. At one point he slipped over and was immediately picked up by strong arms and dumped back on his feet.

At the crossroads they all gathered together again and, on a discreet signal, bowed to the hill at the end of Albion Street as The Mayor burst into the song he'd sung at the well. Walker was pushed and pulled back to the pub and almost thrown through the front door. He was forced onto a seat as more and more people arrived, all dressed in the red uniform of the processors. But they didn't go to the bar to buy a drink. They just stood chatting very quietly in little groups. After another eternity, The Mayor ordered the duck tape to be removed from Walker's mouth. "You've murdered the fucking barmaid you morons. What the fuck is going on? What have you done with her? I'll get the police in."

"Well, that's not a very nice way to repay our hospitality is it? I suggest you buy me a drink". The Mayor loomed over Walker, as if he would punch his lights out at any minute if the order was not obeyed. And now he repeated very slowly and deliberately. "I suggest you buy me a drink, old son", but this

time with an added menace, his face all red and sweaty and eyes all bulgy and bloodshot. So Walker took the hint and went over to the bar, unaware that he was standing in the wide-open mouth of the ancient embroidered serpent. He looked around to see if there was a line of escape, but he was surrounded by men and women who had their eyes fixed on him. Of course there was no barmaid there now, and no bird, cage or cabinet. It was beginning to feel like he was still asleep, unable to force himself out of a terrible nightmare. But he was not asleep and his mind was racing, trying to formulate a plan of escape. He was beginning to shake, so he just stood there, staring down at the large oblong beer mat in front of him.

On it there was a picture of a busty barmaid who looked remarkably like The Crafty Crow's own, offering up a tankard of frothing beer. Around it the slogan 'Wessex Jewel. A gem of a beer. Brewed by Oldstones of Land's End.' was written out in bold display lettering. A noise pulled his eyes toward the floor behind the bar and there was a sudden movement as a trap door slowly yawned open. "What can I get you my lovely?" the barmaid inquired as she came back to life from the darkness of the cellar, smiles and cleavage fully resurrected. "Wasn't it a pint of Wessex Jewel?" There she was, looking like she'd never been down the well, or played the part of Cleopatra, or been devoured by God knows what. Walker looked for the brooch, but it was missing. A pint was not needed now. But he had a headful of questions. And as Walker turned to The Mayor for an explanation, the bar was empty except for a few drinkers hunched over their pints and they were no longer dressed in red. The pub had returned to its state of Old English coziness, with no hint of the recent goings on. Walker stood and stared around the room in disbelief. When he turned back to the bar, Cleopatra was putting the glass cabinet back in its place of honour. She turned and stood before him with a beautiful smile that said "Now what did you make of that, Charlie?"

"Actually, I don't think I'll have a drink. I need to be away. Can I settle for my bed and breakfast?" "It's been taken care of my lovely." "By who?" "The Mayor, of course. He won't take no for an answer. Not The Mayor. It's his way of saying sorry for being rough. But he wanted you to see what happened today. He said you had to see it and you'd appreciate it one day and you'd know what

to do. The Mayor ain't often wrong, in my experience." There was no point in arguing with the woman, so Walker went up to his room, packed his rucksack and prepared to leave, trying to make sense of the events he'd just witnessed. As he tried to calm himself he looked out of the window onto the street below. There were no people to be seen, just a great white fox that stood silently looking up at him from a small passage way on the other side of the street below, until a passing car sent it running off in the direction of the canal and humped bridge. On his way past the bar, to the front door of The Crafty Crow, the barmaid asked him if he'd be coming back again. She smiled as she leaned forward across the bar to give him one more glimpse of the cleavage while she wiped away some spilled beer. "Probably not, but you never know. By the way. I didn't ask your name." "My name is Stella, Stella Phoebe Moon. But ever since I've worked here people have called me Sally. It don't bother me and it seems to keep the old 'uns happy, 'specially The Mayor. Here's something you might need one day. Take care, Charles". Walker was struck by the way she said those last few words, as if they meant something important, words he should take notice of.

She handed him a beer mat across the bar. It was another that advertised the delights of Wessex Jewel. He found Stella's mobile phone number written on the back and she'd done a little drawing in biro pen. It was a very rough picture of a hill and, inside the drawn line, there was a simple, smiling face looking like a classic emoji. Above the hill there was a circle with squiggles radiating out. Presumably that was the sun. Stella had something hidden in her other hand and Walker had a feeling she was about to hand it to him, but she hesitated as she stared into his eyes. He thought he heard her say "No Stella. Not this time." under her breath as she dropped whatever it was into the well of her blouse, where she'd recently dropped the offerings. He put the beer mat into the front pocket of his rucksack, knowing he'd be throwing it away later, but as he did so her name echoed back to him. Stella Phoebe *Moon*. And now he was placing flowers on a grave beneath a great Yew tree in the village of Starley.

"Thanks, Stella. I don't expect I'll be needing it, though. I'm not planning on coming back to Wormwell. You've been very kind." She gave him a last rosy

smile as she disappeared behind the wooden panel separating the two bars. Walker headed out into the street, preparing to get back down to the business of walking towards his unknown destination, drawn by a something currently unknown to him. Still trying to link the barmaid's name to another person or place, he buttoned his duffel coat, put on his cap and lifted the rucksack onto his right shoulder. He paused for a moment, looking along Albion Street. He could see the junction where the group had sheared off towards the well and he wondered if he should go back and have a closer look down into the black hole that had sucked in Stella Phoebe Moon just a couple of hours ago.