

RED SHIFT

ALAN GARNER

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY THE AUTHOR

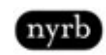
ALAN GARNER (b. 1934) has lived for most of his life in Cheshire, England. His first book, *The Weirdestone of Brisingamen* came out in 1960 and since then he has published eight novels for children and adults, as well as opera libretti, plays, and collections of folktales. Among his books are *The Old Service* (winner of the Carnegie Medal; 1967), *The Stone Book Quartet* (comprising *The Stone Book*, *Granny Reardun*, *Tom Fobble's Day*, and *The Aimer Gate*; 1983), *Strandloper* (1996), and *Thursbit* (2003). In 2001 Garner was appointed to the Order of the British Empire for services to literature.

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Biographical Notes](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Red Shift](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Copyright and More Information](#)

Introduction

Garbage often makes good compost.

In the 1960s I was rootling among the bins waiting to be emptied, and I came upon a newspaper article, the report on an inquest into the death of a young man. It was the story of a lovers' quarrel. Both worked in the computing industry, and their relationship was stormy. One evening, in a pub, he threw a punch tape at her and left. A week later he killed himself. Only then did she think to run the program. It was a complete apology for his behaviour; but he said that if she didn't care enough to read the tape within the week he would know that he had ruined everything and life would not be worth living. With no conscious purpose in mind, I filed the article.

On a rocky hill, ten miles from where I live, is Mow Cop village. A descendant of an old Mow Cop family told me a story she'd heard from her grandmother, who could neither read nor write. She said that long ago a group of Spanish slaves who were being marched north "to build a wall" had escaped and set up a community on Mow Cop. And that, said the grandmother, was why the inhabitants of Mow Cop are swarthy. It's true that the local families tend to be dark-skinned and black-haired. But what really startled me about this story was something else. I had been educated as a classicist, and I knew that one of the most enigmatic events in the history of the Roman occupation of Britain is the disappearance, about AD 120, of Legio Nona Hispana, the Ninth "Spanish" Legion, one of the major controlling forces of Northern Britain. Yet about five thousand men vanished and had to be replaced by another legion. The story does not make sense in the context of Roman bureaucratic record-keeping.

The disappearance of the Ninth coincided with a visit to Britain by the emperor Hadrian, at which time he decided to build a stone barrier of seventy-three miles along the northernmost boundary of the province: Hadrian's Wall; still one of the most impressive feats of engineering in Europe.

The grandmother could not have known any of this. Yet that is how oral memory works. A historical fact is changed by a process of Chinese whispers into a local anecdote. Spanish slaves were being marched north to build a wall. Legio Nona Hispana was somehow expunged about the time when Hadrian was in Britain and decided to seal off the empire. It was enough for me.

Below Mow Cop there is the village of Barthomley, and on Christmas eve 1643, the parish church was the scene of one of the cruellest massacres in the cruellest conflict on English soil: the seventeenth-century Civil Wars. There are two accounts of the event, one from each side of the conflict. The first is in the diary of a Puritan vicar, Edward Burghall.

The enemy now came to Barthomley; as they marched they set upon the church, which had in it about twenty neighbours, that had gone in for safety; but the lord Byron's troop, and Connought, a major to Colonel Sneyd, set upon them, and won the church; the men fled into the steeple, but the enemy burning the forms, rushes, mats &c, made such a smoke, that being almost stifled, they called for quarter, which was granted by Connought; but when they had them in their power, they stripped them all naked, and most cruelly murdered twelve of them, contrary to the laws of arms, nature, and nations. Connought cut the throat of Mr. John Fowler, a hopeful young man, and only three of them escaped miraculously, the rest being cruelly wounded. Christmas-day, and the day after, they plundered Barthomley of goods and cloaths, and stripped naked both men and women.

Sir John Byron, the Royalist commander in charge of the attack, wrote a letter to the Marquis Newcastle, dated 26 December 1643: “I have thought fit to acquaint your Excellency that the rebels had possessed themselves of a church at Bartumley, but wee presently beat them forth of it, and put them all to the sword, which I find to be the best way to proceed with their kind of people, for mercy to them is cruelty.”

I had known about the massacre of Barthomley for many years, but soon after hearing Grandma's story of the “Spanish slaves,” the image of Barthomley began to haunt my mind. I can't say why. There was no obvious connection between the two. But I felt the warmth of compost working.

Four months after hearing about the “Spanish slaves” I was reading the graffiti on the wall of the waiting room of a local railway station.

It was the usual stuff, including one record, in chalk, of teenage romance, written in the form of the ubiquitous mantra: “Janet Heathcote + Alan Flask. It is true.” Then the sky fell in on me, and, with it, *Red Shift*.

Someone had come back later and had written immediately below the mantra, in silver lipstick, without punctuation or a capital letter, the cramped, single line: “not really now not any more.”

This is how my novels arrive. I don't go looking for them. They come looking for me.

not really now not any more: Why should it bring spontaneously and simultaneously into my consciousness the newspaper cutting, by then years old and forgotten, though still kept, the Ninth Spanish Legion, and the massacre of Barthomley? I have no explanation. But I knew that I was pregnant with a novel, though what it was, or why, remained hidden.

I opened a file and a notebook and began by collating the three main images. All they had in common, it seemed, was brutality, death, and mindlessness, to which was soon added insanity. Why enter into such a nightmare world? I have no answer. I can only speak of my experience.

The way I write is to make connections between disparate images, which then draw in more images unsought, making more connections.

The intellect plays two parts in this: at the start, when I have to learn everything I can about the primary “sources”; and at the end, when the novel is finished and needs to be edited and honed. But the story is the province of the unconscious mind. Here the conscious is called upon to be no more than the occasional drudge. All this requires a rigorous self-discipline: the discipline not to write but to wait, watch, dream, record. This goes on for years, as pictures float and congeal of their own volition; and then I begin to see characters and to hear them speak in the theatre of the head. I write down what I see and hear. It is exhausting, but I don't think it is mysterious.

The final paragraph or sentence of the novel always appears first, without context or meaning, but with a hard edge around it that I've come to know. I set it down at once, in a different part of the manuscript, then leave it and let the rest of the story write me.

Eventually the book starts to cohere, and the writing accelerates. From being a few words infrequent intervals it becomes an unstoppable torrent, over which I have no control. Day and night lose their meaning, and I still don't know what is going to happen, or how it will be resolved.

Then there comes the moment when that final paragraph or sentence appears over the horizon. What if the story misses? Will it take me on an endless journey out of the galaxy? But, so far, the docking has always been a smooth click. It is done. Till the next time.

With *Red Shift*, from the moment of “not really now not any more” to the docking manoeuvre was seven years, of which the last eighteen months were the writing, and the rest waiting; but the waiting was the real work, preceding the composition, and the book was complete at last with the reappearance of the appointed final words. The pattern has been the same with every novel. All the other words to

are there from the beginning, but they have to mature, until, through an alchemy I do not understand
but must accept, the violence of the seed is transmuted to the consummation of the flower.

—ALAN GARNE

For Billy

“Shall I tell you?”

“What?”

“Shall I?”

“Tell me what?” said Jan.

“What do you want to know?”

Jan picked up a fistful of earth and trickled it down the neck of his shirt.

“Hey!”

“Stop fooling, then.”

Tom shook his trouser legs. “That’s rotten. I’m all gritty.”

Jan hung her arms over the motorway fence. Cars went by like brush marks. “Where are the cars going? They look so serious.”

“Well,” said Tom. “Let’s work it out. That one there is travelling south at, say, one hundred and twenty kilometres per hour, on a continental shelf drifting east at about five centimetres per year—”

“I might’ve guessed—!”

“—on a planet rotating at about nine hundred and ninety kilometres per hour at this degree latitude, at a mean orbital velocity of thirty kilometres per second—”

“Really?”

“—in a solar system travelling at a mean galactic velocity of twenty-five kilometres per second, a galaxy that probably has a random motion—”

“Knickers.”

“—random knickers of about one hundred kilometres per second, in a universe that appears to be expanding at about one hundred and sixteen kilometres per second per megaparsec.”

Jan scooped up more earth.

“The short answer’s Birmingham,” he said, and ducked.

Jan looked across the flooded sand quarry behind them towards the Rudheath caravan site among the birch trees. “Come on.” The earth was still in her hand.

“Where?”

“What were you going to tell me?”

“Oh, that.” He took his shoe off and turned it upside down. “It really is grotty being gritty. I was going to tell you when I first saw you.”

“When was it?”

“When you came back from Germany.”

“Germany?” The earth ran through her fingers. “Germany? We’ve known each other longer than that.”

“But I didn’t see you until you got out of the car: and then I—saw you.”

“I wasn’t away more than a fortnight.”

“What was it like?”

“Anywhere.”

“The people you stayed with?”

“Ordinary.”

“So why go?”

“To see what it was like.”

“And she found that the ground was as hard, that a yard was as long— No. She found that a metre was neater—”

“Tom—”

“Yes?”

“Lay off.”

He put his head on her shoulder. “I couldn’t stand it if you went now,” he said. They walked from the motorway fence along a spit of sand between the lakes.

“ ‘Grotty’ is excessively ugly,” said Tom. “A corruption of ‘grotesque.’ It won’t last.”

“I love you.”

“I’m not sure about the mean galactic velocity. We’re with M31, M32, M33 and a couple of dozen other galaxies. They’re the nearest. What did you say?”

“I love you.”

“Yes.” He stopped walking. “That’s all we can be sure of. We are, at this moment, somewhere between the M6 going to Birmingham and M33 going nowhere. Don’t leave me.”

“Hush,” said Jan. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not. How did we meet? How could we? Between the M6 and M33. Think of the odds. In a space and time. I’m scared.”

“Don’t be.”

“Scared of losing—”

“You’re not—”

“I always win.”

She pressed the back of her hand against his cheek.

“Tell me,” he said. “I’ve been waiting all afternoon.”

The motorway roared silently. Birds skittered the water in flight to more distant reeds, and the iron water lay again, flat light reflecting no sky. The caravans and the birches. Tom.

“Next week,” said Jan. “Right?” Her knuckles were comfortless between his. “Next week. I go next week.” She tried to reach the pain, but his eyes would not let her in.

“London?”

“Yes.” Teeth showing through lips drawn: lines from sides of nostrils: frown and pain lines. “And my parents—”

“It’s a pretty mean galaxy.”

She pulled him to her. “You’re just a baby.”

“Yes.”

“Upset.”

“I’m not upset. I’m panicking. Love me.”

“I do. I do love you.”

“For ever.”

“How—”

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.”

“Quote.”

“More know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows. And that’s another.” He stood back from her and bent down to skim a stone across the lake. “On one side lay the M6, and on one lay a great water, and the site was full. Seven bounces! Bet you can’t do more than three!”

“Which of you am I supposed to believe?” said Jan.

“Both.”

“When will you grow up?”

“We were born grown up.”

“I love you: you idiots.”

They went round the caravan site by the sand washer. It was a tower, with chutes that fed sand into a piled cone. There was a catwalk to the top, over the chutes. The top was a very small steel plate.

Tom ran up and climbed to the plate. He stood slowly, feeling for his balance. The sand pile was a perfect gradient, one in one. Tom spread his arms, thirty feet above the ground.

“If you drop,” he called to Jan, “it doesn’t half rattle your teeth. But if you jump out as far as you can, it’s flying, and you hit the sand at the same angle right at the bottom, no trouble. It’s the first time that grips. You have to trust.”

He leapt through the air clear of everything and ploughed the sand with his heels.

“Coming?” He looked up at her.

“No thanks.”

“It’s not what it seems. Or aren’t you good on heights?”

“I don’t like being gritty.”

They crossed the road to the houses where Jan lived.

“That was fairly stupid,” said Tom.

“I was impressed.”

“Not the jump. That was stupid, but the other was worse.”

“It’s happened before.”

“And it’ll happen again.”

“I know.”

“Stupid and infantile.”

They were clear of the birch wood, by open fields. Television screens in the caravans flickered among the white bark.

“Corpse candles,” said Tom.

“Snob. They look cosy.”

“They are. Togetherness!”

“Don’t take it out on them. I’d rather not live in London; but I do want to nurse. It’s as simple as that.”

“I wasn’t stopping you.”

“You weren’t?”

“We’ll adapt,” he said. “You’ll get a fair bit of time off, even in training, and you can come home. It’s quick from London. I’m used to you every day, that’s all, knowing I’ll see you— Oh my God.”

Two men were putting up a *For Sale* notice in Jan’s garden.

“I was trying to tell you,” she said.

“No one does this to me.”

“No one’s doing anything to anybody.”

“What’s that, then?”

“I was trying to tell you. Mum and Dad have been given a unit in Portsmouth. We’re all moving. We’ve never stayed long anywhere.”

“I reckon it’s a pretty mean galaxy.”

He took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. They went inside the house. There was a red light on the telephone-answering machine. Jan pulled a face.

“What’s the matter?” said Tom.

“Mum has a patient who rings every day. It’s rubbish.”

“Not to him at the other end.”

“Precisely.”

“How can they stay sane, doing that work?”

“They never let themselves be involved. It’s in the training.”

“But they’re always on call, especially with that thing.”

“What, the Tam? There are some patients who’d rather talk to a phone than to Mum or Dad.”

“Get away.”

“They would. They feel safer. A tape recorder doesn’t want things from them.”

“A cassette confessor.”

“If you like.”

“An automatic answering divine. God in the machine.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Jan. “It’s only something that helps two people help a lot of others. It means they’re never out of touch.”

“Or never in.”

“They’re busy.” She switched the tape on and spoke into the telephone. “This is Jan. I’m going to the caravan for tea, then Tom’s coming back to work.”

“Do you ever meet?” said Tom.

“I didn’t ask for that.”

“Sorry.”

“OK. But it wasn’t funny.”

“No.”

They sat by the fire; landscapes were in the coals.

“Are you sulking?” said Jan.

“Thinking.”

“What?”

“Plans.”

“Secret?”

“No.” Tom fingered the stonework of the hearth. “I’ll miss this nonentity box.”

“I shan’t,” said Jan. “All our houses are bland, wherever we go. Dad has to buy and sell quickly.”

“It’s better than a caravan. It gives you room. Every way. Plenty of space for ducks on these walls.”

“You’re a snob.”

“Inverted,” said Tom. “I made my father a regimental gnome when I was ten: spent weeks of Freudian Expression on it at school.”

“What happened?”

“It melted in the rain. But he was chuffed at the time.”

“Will you be able to work in the caravan?”

“Not as well as I can here, but I’ll manage. Anybody can pass exams.”

“You’re spooking me. You’re too quiet.”

He put his head on the stone. “I’m not very quiet inside. Come on. Let’s go. Forget the house. It’s only a waiting room now.”

The men had stopped their hammering.

It was dark in the birch wood among the caravans. People moved along the cinder roads, carrying buckets. On every screen, the same wrestler bounced off the same ropes into the same forearm smash.

“It was recorded last week,” said Tom.

They reached Tom’s caravan. His father’s topiary, privet grown in ammunition boxes, stood along the front, the rope handles stiff with white gloss paint.

Tom and Jan kicked off their shoes as they entered. Now the crowd could be heard, and the bell f

the fifth round.

“Leave your boots in the vestibule,” Tom’s mother called from the lounge.

“Have done. What’s the score?”

“One each. A folding press and a back-breaker submission.”

“I’ve worked it out,” he said to Jan. “We’ll be all right. Tell you later.”

They went into the kitchen. His father had laid the table, and was tossing lettuce in a dressing.

“Smells good,” said Jan. “What is it?”

“Wine vinegar and dill.”

“I always drop the salad on the floor,” said Jan.

“The secret’s in the bowl. Use one a lot bigger than you think you need: give yourself plenty of room.”

“I estimate that salad has proportionately more space allocated to it than I have,” said Tom.

“Permission to be a lettuce, sir, please.”

“Permission refused,” said his father.

“Carry on, sergeant-major,” said Tom, and went to lie on his bunk.

Through the partition wall he could hear the television commentary, and a few feet away Jan and his father were discussing salad. “Boston Crab and Cold Lobster do not mix,” he wrote in his Physiology notebook.

He took from behind the pillow a pair of army headphones which he had padded with rubber. He clipped the cans over his head, and was private again. Jan and his father made the rest of the salad, and he watched them as if they were in an aquarium. On the caravan wall, framed, were his grandfather’s war medals, and beneath them his grandfather’s. His father’s uniform hung, ready for duty, the one ribbon, for Long Service and Good Conduct, clean, new, crimson and silver.

He felt his mother pass by from the lounge and saw her go into the kitchen to fry herself some bacon. The smell came through the silence. Then Jan was with him, smiling, reaching out her hand. He took off the cans and entered the aquarium.

“Single-leg Boston in the last round,” his mother said. “After two Public Warnings.”

“So long as the damage is done, warnings don’t count,” said his father.

The lobster lay dismembered in a bed of lettuce. “Seems a pity to spoil it,” said Jan.

“Ask the lobster,” said Tom, and filled his plate.

Tom’s mother cut off the bacon rind and ate it. “The nights are drawing in.”

“As Thomas à Becket said to the actress.”

Jan spluttered.

“You what?” said his mother.

“How’s the dressing?” said Tom’s father.

“Delicious,” said Jan.

“Let’s see how you do with the wine, then. I’ve a poser for you this week.”

“You wily warrant-officer,” said Tom. “You’ve decanted it.”

“All’s fair in love and war. Couldn’t have you seeing the bottle, could we?”

He poured the green-white wine for Tom and Jan. Tom’s mother put the kettle on the stove to make herself some tea. “Never stake money on a bet with this man,” said Tom. “He waited till we’d had the dressing.”

“That’s your manky palate, lad. The dressing and the wine have to balance. There’s the art.”

“It’s a Moselle,” said Jan. “Very fresh. Last year’s, I think.”

Tom’s father stared. “How did you know? Come off it: that wasn’t a guess.”

“I was *au pair* for a grower at Easter,” said Jan. “Moselle.”

“~~Ay, you can’t win ’em all. Lovely wine, though, isn’t it? The only good thing to come out of Germany.~~”

“What about the iron crosses hanging with the medals?” said Tom.

“They weren’t from walking-wounded, I can tell you.”

“Swapped for a packet of fags?”

“Hand to hand. Them or us. That’s our mob.”

Tom turned to Jan. “We don’t count that. You’d been there— What’s the matter?”

Jan stumbled from the chair, her handkerchief at her mouth.

“Not the bog!” Tom shouted after her. “I’ve not emptied it this week!”

Jan threw the door open and was sick into the bracken.

“So much for your fancy teas,” said Tom’s mother. “Well, it had to show sooner or later.”

Jan came back into the caravan. “Sorry,” she said. “Do you think I could have a glass of water?”

“Sit down,” said Tom’s father. “I’ll get it.”

“Thanks.”

“Here you are.”

“Do you mind if I take it outside? I want to rinse my mouth.”

“Not before time,” said Tom’s mother.

Tom followed Jan out to the steps and put his anorak round her. She was shivering. He went down the steps and turned the leaf mould over with a spade.

“One of the benefits of the rural life,” he said. He came back to her. “What’s up, apart from the lobster?”

“Sea food gets me sometimes.”

“Indeed.”

She shrugged. “I’m fine now.”

“At least you’re human. I thought you weren’t bothered by next week.”

“I’m bothered, all right.”

Tom’s father was finishing the meal, but his mother had taken her tea through to the lounge.

“Better?”

“Thanks. It sometimes gets me.”

“You should’ve said. Can I make you anything?”

“A piece of bread will do fine.”

“Moselle?”

“I’d rather not. Sorry. It was a lovely meal.”

“Moselle’s good for an upset stomach.”

“No thanks.”

“Your colour’s back.”

“I’ll finish your wine,” said Tom.

“Show it a little respect,” said his father. “It’s not lemonade.”

“To the glorious dead German grape.” Tom raised his glass.

“Cider’s the worst,” said his father.

Tom and Jan cleared the table.

“You feel it in your bones next day. Soon as you drink anything—tea, milk, water—you’re a stoned as when you began. Wicked.”

“Courting time,” said Jan. “All ancients into the lounge.”

“Ay, well,” said Tom’s father. “Think on.” He closed the kitchen door after him.

Tom poured the last of the wine. He hid his face in Jan’s hair. She stepped away.

“What’s wrong now?”

“I don’t like the smell of drink,” she said.

“Have some, then you won’t notice.” She shook her head. “Your loss.” He emptied the glass.

“Let’s wash up.” Jan pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and ran hot water into the sink. Tom picked up a towel.

“There’s something bothering your father. He wasn’t himself.”

“Wasn’t he? Look, I’ve worked it all out. On your pay, and what I can scrounge, we should just about be able to meet, say, every month. Crewe.”

“Why not come here? It’s not that much further.”

“Crewe’s quicker, and we shan’t waste time we could spend together. No privacy here. We couldn’t talk. If you make it Saturdays, the shops’ll be open, and it’ll be warm.”

“I’ve never felt romantic in Crewe.”

“You will. It’ll be the most fabulous town on earth.”

Jan gave him a plate to dry. “Fantastic,” she said.

The kitchen door opened, and Tom’s father appeared.

“Er.”

“Yes?” said Tom.

“My glasses.”

“By the telly?” said Jan.

“Oh. Feeling better?”

“Right as rain.”

“Good.” He went out.

“There’s definitely something wrong,” said Jan. “He’s embarrassed. And listen: they’re arguing.”

“When aren’t they? I’m sorry I panicked at the motorway. We’ll be OK.—I wonder why rain is always right.”

“Didn’t you see him?”

“No. We’ll be OK in Crewe. You can get a cheap day-return.”

“Listen!” She held his shoulders. Warmth seeped through and bubbles rainbowed his shirt.

“You’re wonderful,” he said. “Your eyes are like poached eggs.”

“Tom, listen. Something’s wrong— What did you say?”

“Poached eggs. Round and meaningful. I cherish them.”

Jan laughed and wept onto his chest, hugging him. “You lovely bloody idiot. What am I going to do?”

“Don’t swear. It demeans you. Poached isn’t the same as hard-boiled. I love your face.”

“I love you.”

The kitchen door opened. Tom’s mother stood with uninterrupted vision. His father was with her.

“Is there no privacy in this camp coffin?” said Tom.

“Your mother and I would like a word with you. Both of you.”

“Why?”

“In the lounge.”

“It’s Sunday, sergeant-major. We have the kitchen, and you have the lounge.”

Jan led the way to the other end of the caravan. Tom’s father turned off the volume control on the television.

“It must be serious,” said Tom.

“Shut up,” said Jan.

“Sit down: will you—please? On the divan.”

They sat. Tom’s father went to the window and peered out, half facing the room, his hands behind his back. “Stand easy,” said Tom. His mother lodged one buttock on the arm of a chair, swinging her foot.

“I want to ask—”

“What?”

“I want to ask you and Jan—”

“What?”

“It’s written all over you,” said his mother.

“Your mother and I—would like to know whether you’ve anything to tell us.”

“What’s your problem?” Tom reached out his hand for Jan. She took it.

“We think—”

“Both of you?”

“Don’t,” said Jan.

“I’m trying to be useful,” said Tom.

“Like hell.”

“Watch that tongue of yours!” said Tom’s mother.

“She’d look pretty silly if she did.”

“Stop arsing around,” Jan whispered.

“I heard that!”

“Let’s try again,” his father said.

Tom opened his mouth, but Jan kicked him.

“Your mother and I. We wondered if you’d had any occasion to do anything to make us ashamed of you.”

Tom stared at the muted commercials on the television screen. I’m wearing my cans. Please, I’m wearing my cans.

“Well?”

“Would you care to rephrase the question in English?”

“You heard me.” His father was shouting: he could see him.

“Yes. We have.”

“What did I tell you?” said his mother.

“What did she?”

A silent boy poured cornflakes silently into a bowl of light, and smiled.

“When?” said Tom’s father. “When did you?”

“When did we what? Look, sergeant-major, I’ve a pile of work to get through tonight—”

“When did you have occasion—”

“—to make you ashamed of us? Last Saturday.”

“What?”

“We went by bus to Sandbach without paying.”

“What’s eating them?” Jan said to Tom in Russian.

Tom stood up. He was shaking. There were no cans. He spoke clearly.

“My parents are trying to articulate—or, more accurately, my prurient mother is forcing my weak father to discover on her behalf, where, when, and preferably how, we, that is, you and I, have

expressed ourselves through sexual intercourse, one with the other. Am I not right? Daddy?"

His father grasped the side seams of his trousers, rocked as if he would fall.

"What did I tell you?"

"Yes, what did she tell you?"

His father steadied himself. "We've had complaints."

"Complaints?"

"Reports."

"Reports?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

"Neighbours."

"May we know their names?"

"Never mind who," said his mother. "We've heard and seen. You two: always walking wrapped round each other: kissing and that."

"Kissing and what?"

"And—that."

Cans.

"And the time you spend in that house alone. Do her parents know?"

"Of course," said Jan.

"Then they ought to know better."

"Than what?"

"Than to let you get up to things in their own home."

"It's the only," screamed Tom, "place I could ever work without your clattering: drivelling: the weather! The only—keep books clean! Jan first ever," his eyes were shut, "see anything. anything me. worth. anything." He rammed the backs of his fists into his face, dragging his eyes open.

"I do not propose to discuss our relationship, or matters appertaining to it, beyond that statement will be private, sergeant-major. I will be private sergeant-major—" He meant to laugh, but the trembling reached his throat. He stood, his father's size, broken.

"You great wet Nelly," said his father. "You're as much use as a chocolate teapot."

"Is Tom right?" said Jan. "Is that why you've done it?"

"What can't speak can't lie," said his mother. "I can read that one like a book."

"You cow. You think we've been having it off together, don't you?"

"I've told you to watch your filthy tongue, young woman."

"You're afraid," said Jan. "Afraid we're doing what you did when you had the chance. And what we have? Who are you to preach? I bet you've flattened some grass in your time."

Tom ran from the room.

"That's no way to speak."

"Sorry, sergeant-major. Will you excuse me? I must see how Tom is after your achievement."

"I knew what you were the moment I set eyes on you," said Tom's mother. "I felt a shiver right down my spine. And our boy. See what you've done to him. Standing there, crying his heart out. Couldn't look his own mother in the face. Couldn't deny it: not even his fancy words could get round that one."

"Oh, piss off, you," said Jan, and slammed the door.

She found Tom leaning across the sink, his head on his arms against the window glass. The sobbing came from his stomach, shook the caravan. His sleeve had dragged a clean line through the

condensation, and his giant shadow was on the wood outside, like a hole in space among the white birches.

Jan put her arms round him, stroked, kissed, “It’s all right, it’s all right,” but the spasms of her weeping shook her, would not be subdued.

“How dare they—?”

“Hush, love, it’s all right.” Both taps of the sink had been twisted out of shape, but Tom’s hands were not marked. “It’s all right; I’m here.”

“How dare they try—how dare they—how dare they try to—?” He pressed his open palms against the window gently, relentlessly, so that it broke without shattering, and the glass collapsed only when he moved his hands.

“Tom!”

He held the fragments like crushed ice. Shallow, pale lines crazed his skin. He felt nothing.

The hard, smooth terror was in him. He saw the birches carved, bent to shapes that were not trees but men, animals, and the hardness and the terror were blue and silver on the edge of vision. He opened his cloak, and Logan saw him strike at the guard with something smooth held between his hands. The guard fell, and Macey jumped from the road to the ditch.

“Follow the kid!” shouted Logan. “Move!”

They drove for the wood. Logan snatched the rein of a pack mule. The air thrummed and hissed with arrows. The mule’s baggage was a shield, but Logan stumbled over men on the open ground.

Macey was behind a birch, wiping his hands on rags, wrapping, thrusting the rags under his cloak.

“Come on, kid!”

“No,” said Macey. “Stop. And the others.”

“Move!”

“No.”

The guards were still on the road. They had not followed.

Macey went to the edge of the trees. “This,” he called across the ditch, “for all men, in the name of the keeper of the place.”

“Don’t push it,” said Logan.

“They won’t touch sanctuary,” said Buzzard.

Logan looked about him at the worked trees. “Where are we?”

“Rudheath.”

“It’s a Cats’ sanctuary,” said Face.

“And Cats is allies,” said Magoo.

“The country’s federation ground hereabouts,” said Buzzard.

“Federation ballocks,” said Magoo. “Cats is Cats.”

“I don’t trust nobody past Crewe,” said Logan. “Get further into the wood.”

They retreated until the guards and the road were lost.

“How good’s this sanctuary?” said Logan.

“Depends how the Cats rate it,” said Face, “and what they figure the army’ll pay to get us back.”

“The road must’ve clipped the sanctuary,” said Buzzard. “Reckon the army won’t be too popular.”

“We need hardware,” said Magoo. “Ain’t nothing on the mule.”

“Go see what you can find on the dead guys,” said Logan. “There may be a knife, or something.”

“Lotta use that’ll be,” said Face.

“It’s a start.”

“We was marching degraded, remember?” said Magoo. “Hey, what was that Macey pulled on the guard?”

“Not!” said Macey. He sat by a tree. Sweat from his hand had soaked the rags. The hardne wrapped in tatters hung at his shoulder, beneath his cloak. The weight of it was heavy for the first time, heavier than anything ever.

“Aw, come on, goofball.”

“He said no.” Logan watched the men.

“What’ll we do?” said Face.

“We’ll soldier,” said Logan. “We’re the Ninth.”

“There ain’t no Ninth,” said Face. “Why are you carrying on like we wasn’t busted?”

“I don’t give a toss what some minging stonemason does because he thinks he can run an army. Let him build his goddam wall, and the rest of the crap, but we’re still the Ninth, not brickies. Right?”

They looked at each other, and at the sanctuary.

“Yeh.”

“Anybody claim rank over me?” said Logan. “Right. We’re back on duty. Military discipline will apply. Face, Buzzard, check out this place. You still waiting?” he said to Magoo.

Macey was inert, wrapped in his cloak. “My mates,” he said.

Logan tethered the mule. “That was pretty smart, kid. I thought you’d flipped.”

Macey looked up at him. He seemed to be terrified.

“We’d all’ve gone if you hadn’t used it,” said Logan.

“You didn’t see.”

“I saw enough.”

“You mustn’t see!”

“You used the stone axe from way back.”

“No. They’re never used.”

Logan held out his hand. “I’d sure appreciate it—”

“No! But I had to. You’re my mates. Not for me. My mates.”

“Yeh, we’re your mates. It was OK. Quit worrying.”

“Brilliant mates. All brilliant mates.”

“You were right, kid. I saw nothing.”

“I saw.”

“Saw what?”

“Blue. Silver. And red.”

“What’s with this blue and silver? You ever had it before?”

“When I was a kid. Pain. But then it was— Hell, there ain’t words.”

“Like you flipped?”

“But I didn’t go,” said Macey. “Blue and silver—makes me so chickenshit I can’t remember whatall next. It was changing. But when—that guy—killed him hereabouts— when I killed him—on the road—blue and silver—I freaked—but I could see him, what I did—but there was two hands—pressing at me—a long way off against my eyes—and then near—and then noplac—big as all the is. Sir, I don’t think I’m too good for this unit any more.”

Magoo appeared among the trees. “Nothing,” he said. “And there’s no guards.”

“Scived back to Chester,” said Logan. “I’d like to see their report!”

“I don’t figure they’ll be making none. Sir.”

“Why?”

Magoo smiled, and went back towards the road. Logan followed.

“They’ve taken the bodies.”

“Reckon?” said Magoo.

They stood by the road. It was empty and straight, the cleared ground on either side hid no one.

On the road, blood still moved. It lay in patches for a hundred metres. The guards had tried to run.

There was nothing left.

“Did you hear?” said Logan.

“No.”

“What, then?”

“We’re past Crewe. Like you said.”

“Back on sanctuary. Quick.”

Buzzard was hurrying to meet them as they crossed the ditch. “Sir! Face and me: we’ve found the shrine. It don’t look healthy.”

“Show,” said Logan.

They went into the birch wood. Every tree had rags tied to it: in a clearing they came to a spring and around it were offerings of human heads.

“What tribe?” said Logan.

“Cats.”

“But the trees are Cat totems.”

“Look at the spring, sir.”

The water emerged from above a line of clay, but recently, so recently that the earth had not crumbled, the bank had been cut back to hold a stone through which the water ran, and the front of the stone was carved as a snake, open-mouthed.

“How do you read?” said Logan.

“Not more than a week old,” said Magoo, turning a head between his hands. “The stone’s new.”

“Reconsecration,” said Buzzard. “By the Mothers. They’re moving south.”

“Stand to. All arms,” said Logan. “At the double here.”

“Yessir.”

They brought Macey and the pack mule.

“Alternative analysis?” said Logan.

“None, sir,” said Buzzard. “This is a Mothers snake, and those heads are Cats.”

“Will they be near?”

“Unlikely,” said Face. “They’re scared of their own sanctuaries. They’ll come if they’ve any Cats sacrifice.”

“You and Magoo stand sentry,” said Logan, “but listen. All of you get this, and get it good. The guards have been taken out, maybe not by Cats. The Mothers have come south. They’ll raid the Cats wherever they find them, and both sides will whip our ass if we let them. Solutions.”

“The usual,” said Face. “Divide and rule. Hit the infrastructure.”

“Correct. All right? We retreat until we’re clear of the Mothers, then we go tribal.”

“What about you, sir?” said Buzzard.

“I can pass. I know enough to get by, but when things stabilise here, we’ll have to settle for our dialect.”

“There’s only one,” said Magoo, and laughed. “Who’d’ve thought the Ninth would end up frigging Mothers!”

“We’re still the Ninth,” said Logan. “But we’re fighting a different war.” He pulled out the snake

from the spring mouth and broke it. He left the pieces as they lay. "Bury the heads. Then move. Sing file. South-east. Kill on sight."

"What with?" said Buzzard.

"Anything. We're fighting a different war. You've one chance, if you're smart, and there's one way to know you won't be double-crossed. That applies at all times."

"All mates: all we've got," said Macey. "All we need."

"What was it you pulled on the guard?" said Magoo. "I've marched with you five years and never saw. What was it?"

"No," said Macey, hugging himself.

"Aw, don't be like that. We're your mates, goofball." He tried to wrestle with him.

Logan's boot came down on Magoo's wrist. "I'll kill any man who touches Macey's gear. No questions. A military order. Acknowledge."

"Affirmative," said the Ninth.

They withdrew slowly, hiding their tracks. Buzzard led, Macey held the mule and Logan covered the rear. They swung into deep forest away from the road. It was quiet in the forest, as if sanctuaries moved with them.

They halted at the lip of a steep river valley. "The Dane," said Buzzard. "It's fordable."

Face climbed a tree. "We're on course," he said when he came down. "Sanctuary bearing three-five-zero, and a mountain, bearing one-three-zero, estimated eleven clicks. But we'll need to swing south to avoid towns. They'll be full of Cats wanting protection right now, so we'd better watch out when we cross the Sandbach road. There'll be heavy traffic."

"Mountain status," said Logan.

"Isolated peak," said Buzzard. "Mow Cop. Ridge running north. Gap near Bosley, where Cats have federal permission to fortify a camp. Suggest ideal, but cold, sir."

"We'd see them coming."

"Militarily strong, good water, but severe exposure."

"Right," said Logan. "Maintain present bearing. Cross Sandbach road, then swing for Mow Cop. And I want me a Cat village before dark."

"We could reach Mow Cop in daylight, sir."

"It's not that easy."

"How big a village, sir?"

"Big enough to equip us, not too big to take."

They crossed all tracks, followed none.

"Mow Cop bearing eight-zero," said Face, "ten clicks. And I smelt smoke: wind one-seven-zero."

"Report," Logan said to Buzzard.

Buzzard went up the tree. "Domestic," he said.

"Not a raid?"

"Negative."

"Distance?"

"Estimated three clicks."

"Tether and blindfold the mule," Logan said to Macey. "Magoo, Face, go see that village. Full logistics and report back before dusk."

"Yessir."

"You all right, kid?" said Logan.

"I guess so."

“We’ll be depending on you. Your mates. You won’t chicken?”

“I hope not, sir.”

“Kip down: Buzzard and I’ll stand to.”

“What do you plan?” said Buzzard.

“I don’t know yet,” said Logan.

“Why smash that snake? Sure, they were the Mothers, but I’ve never known you violate gods. Even

Magoo was shook up. Hit the infrastructure, yeh, but in the Ninth we always said Logan—”

“In the Ninth we still say.”

“Sir?”

“We still say, we still think, we still do. The Ninth functions.”

“Yessir.”

“Sound more convinced.”

“I’d just like to report,” said Buzzard, “that if we’re the Ninth, we’re understrength.”

“I can’t sleep, sir,” said Macey.

“Lie quiet: rest.”

“What are you figuring on?” said Buzzard.

“I don’t know yet,” said Logan.

Face and Magoo returned.

“Small settlement,” said Face. “I’ve seen it before. Called Barthomley. Cats. One roundhut: two

three others: estimated twenty men plus families. Situated on low mound, stream to the north at foot

called Wulvarn. One gate, shut, guarded: simple ditch and stockade. Four sentries in all. Ditch filled

with green thorns.”

“Attitude,” said Logan.

“Defensive only.”

“Trained?”

“Negative.”

“We can take ’em,” said Magoo. “If we throw the pack tent across the thorns, the stockade’s only

three metres.”

“Noted,” said Logan.

They led the mule to within half a kilometre of the settlement, then Logan ordered a halt. It was

night and a clear moon.

“Buzzard, I want you to go in there and bring back one sword.”

“You kidding?” said Buzzard.

“Get.”

Buzzard hesitated.

“Make with that sword,” said Logan.

He was away an hour. The blade was long.

“You can use this?” Logan said to Macey.

“Guess I can.”

“Sir,” said Buzzard, “them Cats is easy. They’re farmers. Who needs Macey? Shout ‘Mothers’ over

the fence and they’ll die.”

“Good,” said Logan. “Now we’re going to take out this village with tribal weapons, OK? I figure for

the Ninth to survive it must disappear. They won’t put this one down to us. We maximise harassment

and interdiction. OK?”

Magoo grinned. “Outta sight!”

“Here’s how it is,” said Logan. “Macey flips. We go in across the tent and pull it after us. When we hit their perimeter, Macey should kill four, five just like that. We grab assets, then eliminate. Result, raid put down to the Mothers, and we have the gear to go tribal. As the Ninth, there will be no about but if we louse it up, survivors cut ass out on their own. Questions?”

“We hit this village,” said Buzzard.

“Correct.”

“And they don’t know it’s us.”

“They know,” said Logan. “But that’s all.”

“Children. Women.”

“Wise up,” said Magoo.

“I told you,” said Logan, “we’re fighting a different war.”

“I can’t do that cold,” said Buzzard.

“You won’t be cold,” said Magoo.

Macey could hardly walk. Logan and Face took an elbow each to steady his trembling. Logan held the sword.

“You’ll be OK soon, kid. This is the worst. You’re with your mates.”

The village was only an enclosure on a long, low mound above a stream.

“How’s that water?” said Logan.

“Clear,” said Face. “Bog the other side. I suggest we hit near the gate.”

“Agreed,” said Logan, and settled Macey on the ground, with the sword hilt between his hands, like a child with an unknown toy.

“Why don’t we try it easy, first?” said Buzzard. “Like ask them to let us in.”

“You crazy?” said Magoo.

“No, but Macey is. And when he turns on, he ain’t exactly quiet, neither.”

“Right,” said Magoo.

“Surprise is all we got,” said Face.

“They don’t know that,” said Logan.

“I’ve been in,” said Buzzard. “They don’t want trouble, but they’re sure scared.”

“And they don’t come more dangerous than then,” said Face.

“Go talk to them,” Logan ordered Buzzard. “Say we’re a patrol and we’ve a wounded man. That cover Macey. But don’t let them open the gate. Say there’s Mothers about.”

“You may not be fooling,” said Magoo.

“Go with him,” said Logan, “and as soon as Macey’s across them thorns, you and Buzzard drag the tent over. It’s deployed?”

“Yessir.”

They went through the forest towards the camp.

Face twisted a harness round Macey’s shoulders, holding him upright against a tree. Logan worked the leather down to Macey’s elbows. “Keep close behind that trunk,” he said.

“You bet,” said Face.

“What you want for light, kid?” said Logan. “There’s a moon.”

“No!” Macey struggled.

“Steady,” said Logan. “Not yet. We gotta have light. Stars OK?”

“Yes.”

“Well, look there, kid. If that ain’t old Orion up in the sky. Can you see his belt? Three bright stars. Which of those pretty little stars are you going to be?”

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