

Strange Stories

three short fictional tales of the supernatural

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Inheritance

December 1945, South East London

The shabbily dressed man walked hesitantly through the icy rain until he came to the door of a modest terraced house. He paused a moment before knocking. "Hello mum", he said. "Peter! you'd better come in said the astonished woman". The stern looking middle aged man looked up from his paper. "Well, well. What brings you back here?", "I've come home, dad" replied Peter.

"This is not your home any more. And you are not my son." The woman and the young boy in the corner sat in silence and disbelief. "When you ran away from the army like a coward you disgraced this family, and this country.", "We've been treated like outcasts because of what you did."

Peter looked at the floor. "Dad, I just couldn't...", but he knew he was wasting his time. "I'll give you one last chance. Get out of here now and I won't tell the police. Get out and don't try to contact any of us again. You've made your bed, now lie in it."

A broken man, Peter walked towards the door. Before he left his mother opened her purse and pressed some notes into his hand. "It isn't much... I'm sorry... Take care." He gave her a final hug before stepping outside. The rain was turning to sleet as he buttoned up his coat for a little more warmth. He shuddered at the thought of yet another night of sleeping rough.

December 2000, Brighton

Andrew Jackson and Sara, his partner of two months, were eating breakfast in the kitchen of their dingy rented bedsit. The clunk of the letterbox indicated the days post had arrived. "More bills", sighed Andy. "I'll get it", said Sara chirpily. "you never know it might be a reply from one of those hotel jobs you applied for." After six months on the dole Andy could not be so optimistic.

He pushed the brown envelope to one side. "I'll look at it later" he said unenthusiastically. "I'm working this afternoon" said Sara, "will you pick up something for tea later, and if you get the chance can you vacuum the floors." Only half listening, he agreed. "I might walk down the JobCentre later" he said. "Tim told me they were looking for postmen for a few weeks. Over the Christmas rush".

When Sara returned from her lunchtime shift at the Rose and Crown Andy's mood had changed completely. He'd obviously been drinking, but this time it was to celebrate rather than drown his sorrows. The brown envelope had contained a letter from a solicitor. It confirmed that Andy had inherited a house and some money from a long lost relative. "At last. Our troubles are over. I can't believe it. I didn't even know I had an uncle Peter."

That evening he called his father who was obviously shocked to hear of the letter. "Yes, I had a brother Peter." he said, though it was obviously painful to remember. "He was quite a bit older than me." Andy's father told him how Peter had suffered from depression. He was conscripted into the army when the war began and saw active service. But it all became too much for him and he ran away. The old man's voice trembled as he described the last time he saw his brother. "After that we never heard from him again, though someone told us he'd gone abroad. Your gran often thought about him. I knew that. But she never mentioned him out loud."

June 1960, New Zealand

"Pete, can I see you for a moment" said Ralph Newby to his business partner. The partner, Peter Jackson, sat down in Newby's office. "I've been going through the accounts. There seem to be

some discrepancies. And a lot of payments to a Mr Charlton authorized by you. Who is this Charlton? Why have you been paying him all this money?"

Jackson knew he'd been rumbled. His voice trembled. "I, er... I can explain. I just borrowed it... I got into some trouble..." Newby sat expressionless, saying nothing. Jackson glanced at the wall clock, it was almost 8. He realised they were alone in the building. Instinctively he stood up, snatching the heavy metal cash box he struck Newby over the head as hard as he could. Newby slumped forwards. Jackson struck him twice more.

Jackson kicked over the paraffin heater, grabbed the contents of the cash box and ran from the building. He watched the smoke in his rear-view mirror as he drove away as quickly as he could. He figured that in such a remote location the building would be destroyed along with the evidence before any assistance arrived. And so it was.

There was of course a full investigation. Jackson was questioned by police, but it was eventually put down as an opportunistic robbery. Soon after Mr Charlton's account was closed and the proceeds withdrawn in sterling.

December 2000, Plymouth

A couple of days after receiving the letter Andy had made his way to the solicitor's office in Plymouth. "Mr Gross will see you now" said the middle-aged secretary, pointing to the black door in the corner of the waiting area.

Seated behind a large desk sat a formal looking man with tiny-lensed spectacles perched near the end of his nose. "Ah. Mr. Jackson" he said lifting his head to make eye contact. "We've had a devil of a time tracking you down. Take a seat, won't you." Andy sat on the ancient looking red leather chair. "Now, there's the house, and the sum of some 60,000 pounds. You do have some proof of ID, don't you." Andy thought for a moment before replying "err, yes, driving licence, credit card. Will they do? What can you tell me about my uncle?"

Gross hesitated for a while and then began to explain the somewhat strange and sorry tale of Peter Jackson. It seemed he had left England for New Zealand shortly after the war following some kind of disagreement with his family. He'd moved around for a time from place to place and job to job before meeting one Ralph Newby. Together the two had set up an importing business which became quite successful. It seemed Newby was the brains and Jackson had somehow been under his control. Anyway they'd done quite well together. Until, in the early 60's tragedy struck. Newby had been murdered while working late at the office. It seemed some opportunists had broken in, battered Newby to death and taken a large amount in cash.

Suspicion had even fallen upon Jackson for a time, but there was no evidence linking him to the crime. Jackson disappeared for a while but then turned up again in England. He settled in Plymouth, bought the house in which he died and lived out his life as a virtual recluse. About two years ago neighbours became concerned after not seeing him around for a while. Eventually the police were alerted and when they broke in they found his decomposed body. He'd died from a massive heart attack. Gross continued, "We were given the job of winding up his affairs and found he'd made a will in favour of his nephew Andrew, your good self. Trouble is we had no idea where you were, but tenacity paid dividends, and so, here you are."

Andy and Sara were somewhat subdued as they approached Andy's newly acquired house. He turned the key with more than a little trepidation. Sara gripped his arm in support. Inside was exactly as his uncle had left it. Dusty, sparsely furnished, with an overpowering musty smell hanging in the air.

Sara rolled up her sleeves, opened the windows and started the task of cleaning and tidying. Andy stood. Lost in thought. "I think we'd better scrap all this furniture and stuff and start again"

said Sara. Andy did not answer. "Are you listening? Andy?" she tried again. "Oh, sorry. Yeah, whatever. I was just a bit overwhelmed by all this" he said.

"What's this?" asked Andy, holding up a piece of polished wood engraved with the letters of the alphabet. "It's a Ouija board." replied Sara. "It's for talking to the dead. I tried it once when I was at college. It's a laugh. Shall we have a go later?".

A fish and chip supper and countless cans of lager later the Ouija board was set up on the kitchen table. Nothing happened. Andy was just about to put the board in a black rubbish sack when he suggested they try one more time. This time they were more serious. The glass slowly began to move. S - O - R - R - Y - S - O - R - R - Y - M - A - K - E - A - M - E - N - D - S. The glass was still for a second or two before it flew across the room. Both were stunned.

Over the next few weeks the house was gradually cleared and started to take shape as their home. The Ouija board was put away, but Andy couldn't bring himself to throw it away. The events of the first night were never mentioned. Sara noticed that Andy began to change. He became serious and withdrawn. She asked him if anything was wrong, but he said he was just exhausted working on the house. She also noticed that he wasn't sleeping well. Several nights he woke covered in sweat screaming "help!". When questioned he claimed he couldn't remember anything about it.

Gradually they grew further apart. Sara inwardly wished Andy would sell the house, but he became increasingly attached to it. It was like he had finally found his real home.

One weekend they had a big argument. Sara asked Andy to go with her to visit her parents. He refused. She went on her own leaving him alone.

That evening he decided to pay a visit to the local pub. They'd been so busy he hadn't had a chance until then. He ordered a pint and took a seat at an empty table, quietly observing the world, or a small corner of it, go by. He was there no more than twenty minutes when a lively sounding young man asked, "Mind of I join you?", "Go ahead", replied Andy, inwardly welcoming the chance for some new company.

It turned out Jeff, the young man, was also new to the area. He'd recently travelled from New Zealand. By chance he was also in the catering business. He'd trained in Auckland but found the opportunities limited so he'd come to visit his father's country to broaden his horizons. He'd been working in London a while and was now looking to open a restaurant of his own. Nothing extravagant, just something that would allow him to exercise his own creative freedom.

A few years before Andy had taken a college catering course. Artistic by nature he'd been driven by the desire to create his own unique culinary delights. After graduating he'd gone through a succession of jobs in sweat shop kitchens peeling spuds and slicing carrots until he'd become disillusioned with his chosen path. Talking to Jeff reignited his original enthusiasm.

Without disclosing his inheritance he hinted to Jeff that he might have a few quid to spare if he were looking for a partner.

Jeff and Andy's friendship grew as rapidly as Sara and Andy's fell apart. Sara felt she was becoming less and less important to Andy and eventually moved back to her parent's. Before the inheritance Sara had been Andy's backbone, but now he hardly noticed she'd gone. He'd fallen in love with his uncle's house and simply couldn't imagine moving anywhere else. The bad dreams which plagued him in the early days had ceased, though he started to get very vivid dreams of places and people he didn't know. Perhaps his imagination was making up for him having no time any more for the tv soaps.

He didn't care. His new project with Jeff gave him a sense of purpose which had been missing for a long time. They found premises they both agreed on and set about transforming their plan into reality. Jeff seemed mature beyond his twenty-one years, and, as Andy discovered when they came to pay the deposit, surprisingly wealthy. Jeff explained that his grandfather had been killed in an accident and that the money had been held in trust in the family. When his mother had learned of his plans in England she agreed to let Jeff make use of it. Andy simply told Jeff he'd inherited his house and a little money from a long lost relative.

"Thank you very much, gentlemen", said the bank manager, "it only remains for me to wish you the very best of luck with AJ's". "Oh, before you go, there is just one more piece of information we need - your mother's maiden name. It's a kind of security check in case you ever need to contact us by telephone." Andy replied "Robinson". "Mine's Newby", said Jeff. It immediately rang a bell with Andy, but he just couldn't think why. Later that night he recalled the conversation with the solicitor who told him about his uncle's past in New Zealand. "Newby. Surely it couldn't be..... Just a coincidence....." He resolved to put the matter out of his mind.

July 2001, Plymouth

"Heyyyyyyyyyy!, we did it!" whooped Jeff. AJ's opening night had finally arrived. A mere six months after their first chance meeting, it seemed to Andy like an eternity. He so wanted this to be a success. After a life of false starts and broken dreams this was his chance to be somebody. A more reserved character than his partner he simply smiled, inwardly praying this time things would turn out right.

Some boys had been pushing leaflets through doors and giving out flyers. They'd even managed a few lines in the local rag. How many customers would turn up for the opening? Would the two of them be able to cope?

They needn't have worried on that front. Just three customers came that evening. A respectable looking middle-aged couple and a businessman who just happened to notice them as he was passing. The new entrepreneurs reassured themselves that things would get better. They'd chosen to open on Wednesday so as not to be overwhelmed. Just wait 'til the weekend, they'll be turning folk away.

But the rush never came. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months. The bills continued to arrive, and letters from the bank became more frequent and less friendly. Then disaster struck. One of their few customers got food poisoning. The environmental health department ordered them to close while it carried out a thorough investigation.

Jeff changed from being life and soul of the party. He became morose and aggressive. Often accusing Andy for the mess in which they found themselves. Though he would quickly calm down and apologise. Both men sought ways to extricate themselves.

The Sunday after the closure Andy dozed off in the armchair after finishing a whole bottle of wine. In the dream that followed he found himself in the cellar of the restaurant. He scratched at the wall and found a secret compartment. Inside was a box containing gold, jewels and money. He woke with a start. It had been so vivid, so real. He looked at his watch, half-past midnight. He knew he had to go to that cellar right then.

Jeff looked around before inserting the key gently in the lock. The street was deserted. He splashed the petrol from the can liberally around. He felt sad, but this was the only way. The insurance money would release them both from this nightmare. He could return to New Zealand, and Andy could keep the house he loved so much. He lit a match, tossed it on the floor and walked away without looking back.

Down in the cellar Andy searched everywhere for the secret compartment. When he realised it didn't exist he just lay on the floor. Unable to find the energy to get up he swigged from the bottle he had helped himself to on the way down. Drifting in and out of sleep he could feel himself coughing, choking, but unable to move or even cry for help. And then before drifting into oblivion for the final time he was aware of the sound of hysterical laughter.

It was several months before Andy's parents could bring themselves to clear his house. Bundling his clothes for the local charity shop his mother found some pieces of charred and broken wood at the back of the wardrobe. Wondering why he should have kept them she looked more closely, making out what had been letters of the alphabet.

Meanwhile, police investigations into the blaze had drawn a complete blank. Visiting the address Jeff had supplied the bank they found a derelict house. The owner was an elderly invalid who'd had the property boarded up some years before after squatters moved in. It was clear no one had been there for a long time. No claim was ever received by the insurance company. Neither was any trace of the Newby family found in New Zealand.

Ghost Story

He lay there in the darkness, paralysed with fear. He could hear the footsteps getting closer, knowing they were carrying something evil. He tried to move, to defend himself or make his escape, but his muscles wouldn't respond. He tried to shout in desperation but even his lungs wouldn't oblige. The footsteps had ceased now; the door handle creaked as it turned. The door slowly opened, he saw the glint of the blade in the moonlight, and finally he yelled out...

His mother woke him. He was covered in sweat, his heart pounding as if it would explode.

"I must have been having that nightmare again", he said.

"That's the second time this week. Why don't you see someone about it?" suggested his mother.

He flatly refused to see a "shrink". They sat in silence for a while; "Let's talk about it in the morning", she said as she left the room.

Martin Taylor didn't sleep any more that night. Was he really going mad? He'd had bad dreams since he was a child, but they'd left him alone for a while. Now, since his divorce they'd returned, worse than ever. And always the same. He tried to remember it logically. It doesn't start as a nightmare, he's at a party, music playing and people talking, he can see their faces, but no one he recognizes. But then the horror begins. He's in bed in a room that's not his own, and the footsteps, and then, he can't remember any more.

"Why don't you take a holiday?" suggested his mother at breakfast. "What with the divorce, and Jean getting the house and the kids, and all that overtime you've been doing - it's no wonder your brain's getting a bit mixed up!"

Perhaps she was right.

"Can't you look up some of your old friends, see if they've got some time off?"

"No mother, they're all still happily married." he snapped. "I'll go away on my own for a bit, give me time to think about the future. Might even take up photography again."

She was a bit worried about him being alone in his present state, but at least he'd agreed to take a holiday. When he got in from work that night it was all arranged. He'd booked the time off, and was going to drive down to Cornwall. It was somewhere he'd always wanted to go but had never before found the time.

The two weeks before he left passed without him having the dream again, as though anticipation of the holiday were enough to calm his mind.

He set off on Sunday, feeling more relaxed than he'd done in ages. Most of the first day was spent on the road, arriving in Cornwall just in time to find a room for the night. He'd decided to make the most of his visit, taking in as much as he could and staying somewhere different each night. After a sound night's sleep and a hearty breakfast he headed towards the coast, camera gear in tow. A full day later he found that night's lodgings.

And so went the next three days. On Thursday he arrived in the picturesque village of Brabney just before sundown. He entered the Coach House Hotel and made arrangements for the night. He had a strange feeling he'd been there before. After dinner he got talking to the landlord in the bar, the feeling of recognition now stronger than ever. He remarked that he appeared to be the only guest; the landlord informed him there was just one other guest, who spent most of the time in her room.

"Are you a photographer?" enquired the landlord.

"No, nothing so exciting," replied Martin, "I'm just pursuing an old hobby."

"You must visit the old abbey while you're down this way", suggested the landlord; "they say it's haunted."

"If you believe in that kind of thing." said Martin sceptically.

The landlord hesitated for a while then said, "I hope you're not superstitious, but they say this place is haunted."

"Tell me more," said Martin curiously.

"Well, about two hundred years ago there was this boy that used to help out here, anyway he started getting a bit too familiar with the owner's daughter. The owner didn't want servants marrying into the family, so he murdered the boy and hid the body in the cellar. Eventually the villagers got suspicious and burst into the place. When they found the boy's body they carried out their own death sentence on his killer. It was shortly after that my own ancestors took this place and it's been in the family ever since."

"So who's the ghost?" asked Martin, "the boy or the innkeeper?"

"Well it's supposed to be the innkeeper, destined to remain on earth to pay for his sins. It's quite a well known tale in ghost-hunting circles, in fact they used to run tours here for people interested in that kind of thing."

"Have you ever seen anything?" asked Martin.

"Not exactly seen," said the landlord thoughtfully, "but I've often felt a presence, like you're not alone, and I've had three or four staff leave over what they claim to have seen."

"Evening, Alice." he said as a smartly dressed old woman entered the lounge.

The woman said good evening to Martin. He didn't answer at first; he was trying to remember where he'd seen her before.

The woman took her drink back upstairs. Martin decided to retire to his room, he wanted to make an early start next day.

He still had a vague feeling he'd lived through all this before, but he couldn't remember and right at that moment didn't care. He lay back in the bed feeling more relaxed than he'd done in ages, it was as though this part of the world had been made for him. He made plans to quit his job and get a place here. He soon drifted into a deep sleep of satisfaction.

Something woke him suddenly, and then he remembered... This place and these people were from his dream.

He could hear the footsteps getting closer, knowing they were carrying something evil. He tried to move, to defend himself, or make his escape, but his muscles wouldn't respond. He tried to shout in desperation but even his lungs wouldn't oblige. The footsteps had ceased now; the door handle creaked as it turned. The door slowly opened, he saw the glint of the blade in the moonlight.

But this time it was for real. The figure drew closer, still he couldn't move. The face, hidden in the darkness, hovered above him. The blade was poised to strike, and then he overcame the paralysis of fear. He grabbed the arm of his unknown adversary, and he felt the knife go in

deeply. The strength suddenly drained from his enemy, the figure collapsed in a heap. Taylor felt a great force pushing him into the bed, so hard he could barely breathe, the whining sound in his head felt as though it would burst his brain, and then he sank into oblivion.

The clock said 8:05 when he woke, the sun was streaming through the window and it looked like being another fine day. He remembered the dream, but far from being concerned he felt confident he wouldn't have those dreams again. Looking forward to breakfast he dressed, shaved and went downstairs. To his surprise the place was deserted. He shouted and searched but to no avail.

He went outside, the main street was empty, but he noticed the newsagent's was open. He went in and enquired if the owner knew where the landlord of the hotel had gone.

"Potential buyer, are you sir?" asked the man behind the counter.

Taylor explained that he'd stayed the night and wanted to settle up before he moved on.

The man looked puzzled, and explained the hotel had been boarded up for about four years after the owner had murdered his wife and then killed himself. "You see sir, at one time we used to get a lot of visitors round here, but these days people prefer to go abroad. Old Tom couldn't bear to see the business go downhill, he'd been there since he was a boy. I suppose he couldn't face it, and just cracked. He stabbed his wife Alice while she was sleeping, then hanged himself in the lounge."

When Taylor wouldn't accept the shopkeeper's explanation the newsagent left the shop and the two men walked across the road together. The hotel was indeed boarded up.

"It's been like that since it happened sir. Nobody wanted to go near it, but now they've just put it back on the market. That's why I thought you were asking."

Taylor was confused, then he wondered what had happened to his bags. At least his car keys and money were in his pocket. He went over to his car, and there in the boot were his belongings.

Forgive me

Andy Marsh stood at the door with more than a little trepidation. He'd been curious about the spiritualist church for some time, but this time circumstances and desperation had combined to force him over the threshold to discover what lay within.

A once bright youngster he was now a life-weary thirty-something with neither job, family nor hope. A broken marriage, too many failed relationships to count, and the inability to hold a steady job had left his fortunes shipwrecked.

Inside the church he found a congregation of some 20 average looking people. He was welcomed by a smiling elderly gentleman who introduced himself as Eric. Eric explained that the church was part of a serious religion and its members were serious seekers after the truth and not a bunch of air-headed weirdoes conjuring up demons and devils. He proceeded to offer Marsh a strip of raffle tickets. Top prize was apparently a bottle of mediocre wine.

The service was very much along the lines of the Christian affairs he remembered from his distant youth. After a few hymns and prayers a plumpish woman called Brenda was introduced as the evening's medium. She began demonstrating her clairvoyance, the transmission of messages from the dead to the living. As she cheerfully proceeded to reunite one white haired old lady after another with their departed spouses Marsh began to feel somewhat foolish for being there at all.

Suddenly Brenda's mood altered dramatically. Gone was the jovial manner, replaced by an air of extreme seriousness. "Does anyone here know an Angela?" she pleaded, two or three times, each one sounding a little more despairing. To this day he cannot say why, but Marsh sheepishly raised his hand. "Thank you", said the medium, with an expression of sincere relief, "she desperately wants to say she's sorry, and begs you to forgive her. Do you understand?". Again, for reasons he cannot explain Marsh replied, "Yes, I understand". The medium's mood swung just as dramatically back to the jovial again as she gave a few more reassurances to the lost and the lonely before the final hymn and prayer followed by tea and coffee, which Marsh did not feel inclined to remain for.

As Marsh left the building he still did not know why he had accepted the message from the troubled soul. It was like it was meant, but he didn't know where it would lead him. Inexplicably his dark mood lifted a little and that night he slept better than he'd done in a long while. Next day, as if he'd rediscovered his purpose, he went into town and recommenced his search for work with renewed energy.

Marsh managed to identify several possibilities and with a new found sense of optimistic enthusiasm he decided to have a celebratory drink before making his way back to the grubby bedsit that served as his home. Finding an inviting looking pub he pushed open the door to find it crowded with a mixture of tourists and businessmen. He bought a drink and looked for somewhere to sit. "May I join you?" he asked a woman seated at a dimly lit table in the corner.

"Of course", said the woman, "do you happen to have the time?" A conversation began and Marsh found himself instantly at ease with his new friend. He couldn't help but notice the ruby ring she wore on her right hand. Over the next few hours he felt he'd told her his life story. In return he discovered that she too was a divorcee between jobs. They went for a meal together and as they talked and talked the affinity between them grew stronger. As the evening drew to a close they exchanged phone numbers. Marsh excused himself to visit the men's room with a sense that finally his luck had changed for the better.

But when he returned his friend had vanished. Puzzled he looked all around, and proceeded to search the streets around the bar. She had disappeared into the night without trace, and they hadn't even had the chance to say goodnight.

Even though he was no stranger to failed relationships, Marsh was left disillusioned and downcast. They had been getting along so well, and he had been optimistic about the future for the first time in ages. Why had she stayed with him so long? Why hadn't she just made an excuse and left when they'd first met? Why didn't she even say goodnight? Why had she given him her phone number? He remembered the slip of paper in his pocket and felt to check if it was still there. It was. It was probably false. He screwed it up and scanned the dark street for a litter bin. He stopped himself and put it back in his pocket without knowing why.

The journey home seemed particularly long and lonely and was not made any more pleasant by the sea of seemingly hostile faces, tired businessmen and obnoxious youths, making their way across the city. He just wanted to shut his door behind him and distance himself from the wicked world. Indoors he drank some more, until he drifted into unconsciousness.

A deep and dreamless sleep followed before he awoke with a thumping headache and even worse heartache. The job application forms he'd collected the day before lay scattered on the sofa.

A couple of days later Marsh had recovered sufficiently to face the world once more. As he put his jacket on to go to the supermarket he came across a piece of paper. The piece of paper. He took it out, "Angela Kaye 697 1284". As he walked among the baked beans he agonised over what he should do. As soon as he arrived home he picked up the phone. At least this way he would know for sure. Heart thumping he tapped in the number. "Sorry, the number you have dialled has been disconnected". He guessed it.

But one final thought crossed his mind. Perhaps she was in the phone book. Hands trembling he leafed through the pages. There it was. A.J.Kaye 29B Mercator gardens E11. It was the other side of town, but he had to know.

Two hours later he found himself in Mercator Gardens, a neat and tidy street of imposing Victorian properties in a well-kept suburb. Finding number 29 he picked up the intercom. A woman answered "come on up", the door unlocked. Had he found her? But as he ran up the stairs he found a smartly attired businesswoman waiting for him. "Ah, Mr Collier," she greeted him. "No", he replied, "I'm looking for Miss Kaye." The woman's expression changed. "I'm sorry", she said hesitantly, "Miss Kaye passed away a couple of months ago. I'm an estate agent, I thought you'd come about the flat".

Andy almost fainted.

"I'm so sorry", said the woman, "was she a close friend?" "Yes, my closest friend", he replied, "I'm sorry, do you know what happened to her?" The woman hesitated, "I'm afraid it was suicide".

Marsh felt he was riding on a roller coaster of emotion, from despair to elation and back again. There had to be some mistake. They spent the evening together. They shared their hopes, and fears, and dreams. She couldn't have been a ghost! It simply couldn't be.

He couldn't face returning to his dingy room. Instead he had to revisit the pub where they'd first opened their hearts to each other. Perhaps he'd see her again and she'd explain, and everything would be fine. The pub was just as he remembered it, and by chance he got a seat at the same table. But no one came. He drank and drank. More than he should. More than he could afford. And when his pockets were empty he left.

He couldn't remember how he got there. He just collapsed in a drunken stupor. He didn't know what time it was, but when he woke she was there, in his bed. He didn't know how long she stayed, but it seemed an eternity. They declared their undying love for one another. And she whispered "forgive me". "Of course, of course", he assured her. And then she was gone from his arms. He was holding thin air. He returned to full wakefulness with a start. He couldn't have

dreamed it. It was too real. But where did she go? And then he noticed on his bedside table, on the piece of paper on which he'd scribbled her address, was a ruby ring.