

# Reality is only a word

Bob Trubshaw

'Hi Al. Sorry to disturb you and all that. Don't shoot me but I need to tell you what's happened. We've found somebody. We've had to stop work till the coppers come over.'

It was Tuesday afternoon. The deadline for getting the site levelled was Friday, even if it rained every day. It was tight. This was the last sort of phone call he wanted from the site. "When are you going to be able to restart?"

'No idea, but not likely to be anytime today.'

"Why did you call the police? Who is this person you've 'found'?"

'No idea, guv. It's just a body. Well, so far it's just their skull. Came up in the excavator bucket. Jim nearly ran all the way home he was so frit.'

"Oh, you found some body, not somebody." Things were starting to make a little bit of sense. "So Jim's dug up a skeleton?"

'That's what it seems. We just stopped when the skull came up. Not like the old days when those sort of things were buried again as quick as poss and everyone kept mum. These day's things need to be done proper.'

Indeed, Al thought. But doing things proper was going to mess up the deadline something rotten. "When are the police coming over?"

'Well one of them's here already. But he's no idea when the SOCO can make it. Seems they're all having a rest day after a big event yesterday.'

"Soccer?"

'Scene of crime officer, guv. They're the boffins in white disposable suits who you see on the telly after there's been a murder or what have you. PC Plod who's here now thinks he might be here for much of the night if they can't get a SOCO over before sunset. Needs to protect the evidence and all that.'

"What!" His voice must have given away his alarm. "What, they think it's the body of someone who's been murdered?"

'Well, maybe. More probably it's just someone who was buried thousands of years ago. But they need the SOCO to come over to tell them. Strict instructions from the PC that nothing's to be touched or moved until he says so.'

Al paused to avoid swearing at the bearer of this news. It wasn't his fault and he'd done all the right things. But, boy, was it going to make keeping to the deadline difficult. Instead he asked, as neutrally as he could make his voice sound, "Is there anything you need me to do?"

'Probably best if you're on site when the SOCO's here. Do you want me to phone again when I've got some news?'

"Yes, that would be good. Is there anything you and Jim can be doing for the rest of the day? If not you'd best pack up and go, if that's OK with the copper. Give him my number so we can liaise as needs be."

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Less than a month after, Al received an email from a delivery driver he'd met while working on the site. They'd got chatting as the driver seemed to be far more knowledgeable about the history of the area than someone doing that job would usually be. He'd asked for Al's email address as he said he'd tell him about something only his family knew about.

It seems that about six or seven years before he'd been in his car with his family and they were returning home along the A-road which runs from the village where the skull had manifested. It was a misty night and, immediately after the right-hand bend, associated with a three-way junction about half-a-mile to the east of the last house – that's the ones built after the skull was found – he encountered something seriously unnerving:

I was faced with a huge bull-like figure in the middle of the road facing us with its right hand horn protruding into our path. I took immediate evasive action and swerved towards the verge but I still should not have had room to get through. I stopped and did a three-point turn to face back the way we had come. I drove back to where the 'bull' had been seen – but there was nothing! The verges are very wide there but we could see nothing! We all saw it but we still cannot explain it. It reminded me of pictures of the now-extinct aurochs, huge head and long horns.

His wife, two daughters and sister were also in the car. The reason he emailed me was because in recent months his eldest daughter, her boyfriend and their baby son were driving along the same road again. They had got a few miles nearer to home, on the outskirts of the next village. Again, after another right bend, they were faced with the silhouette of a large bull in the road. Her boyfriend braked hard but the apparition vanished before their eyes. His daughter also thought the apparition looked like a picture of an aurochs she had seen on the internet.

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Al was both fascinated and perplexed. Seems the aurochs became extinct in the Iron Age. As animals go they were, frankly, massive – much larger than even the biggest bulls of today. And with a pair of horns spanning about six feet on the top of its head. Not something you'd want to encounter by chance, least of all in the middle of the road when you're doing the best part of sixty miles an hour.

When searching the Internet for any sort of information about these aurochs he'd forgotten to clear the search box. Which turned out to have an exceptionally intriguing outcome. Just before searching for aurochs he'd been searching for the nearby village – the one where the skull was found. And, though it's unlikely he would have come across it if he hadn't made the mistake with the text in the search box, lo and behold nearly thirty years ago the skull of an aurochs had been discovered underneath a hedge by a schoolboy and his mum somewhere near that village. The web page had a scan of a short article published in the local paper, with a photo of the boy and the skull, although the latter had lost its horns.

There had been no attempt to date the auroch's skull. But it had crossed Al's mind that the area of land around there would have been just the sort of upland woods where the last surviving aurochs might just have survived. Indeed, as it was known to have been an Iron Age grove, perhaps they were 'managed' as a sacred herd – somewhere between the way Hindus regard all cattle as sacred animals and the way rare breeds of long-horned cows are kept in special parks and such like. Pure speculation, he fully realised, but not implausible.

The various aspects of the family's encounters with the apparitions of the aurochs and the actual skull continued to bug Al. Only when he drove past there on his way to a new job in roughly that part of the world did he spot the name of the pub.

The Durham Ox – named after an actual animal which achieved widespread fame throughout England in the first few years of the nineteenth century. A legendary ox commemorated at a place where aurochs had once lived – and near enough to where they had recently been seen, at least as ‘phantoms’.

The name of the inn revealed that it had been founded to provide food and accommodation for the drovers bringing livestock down from the north and heading towards either the local markets or on to London. This trade declined quickly after the railways were built. Drovers were regarded as a fairly rough bunch, although they had to be honest with the substantial amounts of money they took back to the farmers after selling the animals. But the location of the inn on a county boundary would have been ideal if any shady shenanigans were going on as back then the forces of law and order only had jurisdiction in their own county – so neer-do-wells could escape justice by walking a few yards into the next county.

Al never had a reason to stop and go inside the Durham Ox. But the name had intrigued him sufficiently for him to do some research into the location. Apart from the A46 it was effectively in the middle of nowhere and, until the 1974 boundary changes, was located right on the county boundary. The A46 was now a dual carriageway but originated as a Roman road – the locals still called it the Fosse Way. There was also another minor Roman road which crossed at the Durham Ox. Thanks to road improvements it was somewhat difficult to make out how things would once have been, but old maps showed the original crossroads clearly enough.

Although the inn had probably only come into existence in the early nineteenth century, the location had some real history, even prehistory. Around the tenth century it had become the meeting place for the local administration – the so-called hundred – and before that had been a pre-Christian sacred site going back to the Iron Age. Indeed a small Roman town nearby had taken its name from *nemeton*, Latin for ‘sacred grove’.



'That's the third time it's happened.' Once was unnerving enough. Twice was just a bad coincidence. But three times was just not possible. Except it was. It had just happened. Idly clicking through the local news on the BBC's web site Al had almost not bothered to look at the brief details of a fatal car crash on the A46 a few miles at the next crossroad south of the Durham Ox. The loss of life, although tragic, was not of itself what made this significant. Just that at about the time the accident happened yesterday evening that stretch of road had come into his mind, for no reason whatsoever – whatever he'd been thinking had nothing to do with driving nor that part of the country over a hundred miles away. Just an unbidden 'memory' flashing into his thoughts and then going away again just as quickly, but leaving a strange draining sense of dread. Presumably everyone had such flashes of seemingly random recollections. He couldn't recall anyone saying they did, but why would you?

The first time was nearly a month ago. He'd been driving along a country lane he used most weeks and felt the same uncommon sense of dread. He took his foot off the accelerator and checked no one was too close behind. Was this some sort of sixth sense about some danger around the next bend? He was accustomed to those sorts of unexpected thoughts – they'd helped him avoid several accidents. But he got into town without anything untoward arising. But when he tried to come back along the lane nearly an hour later the traffic was blocked by a police car sideways across the tarmac, with all available blue lights on the go. The police officer came over and he opened the window. 'Sorry, sir, the road will be closed for quite some time', the constable informed him. 'There's been a rather serious accident which will take some time to sort out.' The only other route was quite a lengthy detour but at least it passed

along the foot of the chalk escarpment and made the extended route home pleasant.

The weekly local paper provided the usual sort of details. It too had been a fatality, with a cyclist being the victim. He was fairly sure that he'd seen a cyclist coming the other way moments after his sense of dread. Quite probably the same one.

That had unnerved him. But the second time was different. He'd been talking on the phone to an old friend. That in itself was rare as they usually just emailed from time to time. After a good few minutes of chatting all of a sudden his stomach felt like it had clamped up small inside and he felt cold from the inside out. Just like he was suffering from shock, he thought. He put it down to something he'd eaten and tried to keep the conversation going as if nothing had happened.

A few days later he got an email from the same friend. 'Sorry to pass on sad news,' she had typed, 'but my mother died suddenly on Tuesday evening.' He double-checked against the calendar on the wall. Yes, it was Tuesday evening when they'd been talking. She hadn't said what time her mother passed away. In all probability she didn't know. Anyway, contrary to popular belief, death doesn't just happen in an instant. It is a process which takes from many minutes to many hours. But why the sudden sense of cold? And why him? He'd last met his friend's mother over a decade ago and they'd hardly been close then.

And now the cyclist's demise just a short while after he'd driven past him going the other way. He tried to accept that all this was just coincidence, that the circumstances of each of three 'coincidences' were too different. But Al found it hard to dismiss so easily. He really hoped there were no more 'funny feelings'.

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The kestrel lifted itself off the branch and flew a short way into the wood. That's a good sign she thought. The woodland had only been planted in the early nineteen-eighties – she'd taken a photograph then, when almost all the trees were just 'whips', small saplings with plastic spirals around the thin stems to try to stop the rabbits and squirrels from chomping through. Now each of them was as high as a small house. Every one was a native species – she'd even spotted wild cherry in there. All credit to whoever did the planting. But she was wary of the place. Twice before she'd been made unwelcome by the spirits of the place. Once she'd been 'pixie-led' away from the path – although she had no awareness of actually leaving what was a fairly well waymarked footpath – and ended up in brambles and then the wrong side of some barbed wire. That was inconvenient enough, but it was accompanied by a real sense of fear, a need to get out of there as fast as possible. There was no rational reason – it was daylight, there was no evidence of anyone else around. It was just fear – 'fear of fear'. By the time she'd scrambled back to the road she just wanted to get into the car and drive away as fast as possible.

Before that she'd been walking along the path – and stayed on the path without difficulty – with a new boyfriend. When they got to one of the clearings in the woods they looked up at the sky. It was late summer and there were lots of fluffy clouds in an otherwise blue sky. But over to the south-west was a small dark cloud. A few minutes later it had got much nearer and seemed much larger. Neither she nor her friend had got coats. 'I think we need to get back to the car quickly if we don't want to get soaked.' Within six or seven minutes of brisk walking they'd made it back, just as the rain came down heavily. Then there was hail. And lightning almost overhead, with a crack of thunder almost instantly afterwards. Even trying to shelter under the trees would have been futile, they would have got soaked in moments.

As they'd parked the car outside the Durham Ox they went in for a drink and some food. The storm soon passed, just as quickly as it had started, and the sun came back out. But the ground was now too wet for doing what she and her boyfriend had planned to do in the open air. She smiled ruefully. They never did get to make out in the open air.

She felt like there was still old guardians of the place, presumably put in place when it was an Iron Age sacred grove, and a Roman temple, and then an Anglo-Saxon sanctuary. Well, the name of a Roman town just over a mile away revealed there had been a sacred grove there. But although the archaeologists thought the town was next to the one-time grove, more likely it had been centred on the place where she'd had these two experiences of being made unwelcome.

This time she wanted something from the wood. She'd parked up at the other end, away from where the previous two situations had taken arisen. Just at the point when she'd stood on a stile near the side of the road she'd stopped and asked permission of the guardians. Frankly, there was no response. But at least there was no sense of 'no', no unexplained fear – and she'd looked up at the sky for any signs of any approaching dark clouds. It was just a grey sky, although the cloud base was quite high. Not much chance of even a light shower. She'd kept her mind focused on whether or not she should continue walking, and whether the trees would allow her to saw off a straight branch. She had a pruning saw concealed under her fleece. After only a couple of hundred yards she'd spotted the kestrel sitting near the top of one of the trees. She'd stopped, to avoid disturbing the bird and allow her to just look at it. But it had seen her anyway and, after a few moments, flew away without any sense of urgency further into the wood.

This was the guardians' way of saying 'Yes' she realised. Kestrels, and birds of prey in general, always fascinated her. She'd grown up when they were seldom seen and been old enough to be driving up and down the motorways more or less

the length of the country when changes in the law meant that kestrel populations began to recover and could, from time to time, be seen hovering over motorway verges. A few years later you could quite often see several in one journey. And then buzzards started to be seen too. In more recent years sparrowhawks and, in at least some places, red kites were around as well.

She said thanks to the kestrel and to the wood. After looking closely at several of the trees, including the kestrel's brief perch, she found a branch which was straight enough to be suitable, and the right diameter. She wanted enough wood to make a ceremonial staff which would put her back in contact with this place after she'd moved away, as she would be doing within weeks. To make the top of the staff like an animal's head she specifically wanted a sloping 'T' shape where it joined a bigger branch, so she would be pruning two branches off the tree. This tree not only had branches in the configuration she wanted but they were growing out almost horizontally. Left untrimmed then at sometime in the future they would get too heavy and would break off, potentially damaging the trunk. She paused for a few moments, partly listening in case anyone else was around, but also in case she got the sense that the guardians would object. Nothing untoward so, after three deft saw cuts, she got what she'd come for. It took less time than she expected. But then again she had used that pruning saw many times before.



Al had stopped there often enough. He could park for free and there were plenty of options for short strolls. Longer walks too, but he'd rarely had the time. He had only walked as far as the exit of the car park when he noticed a young lad walking towards him. Or at least he noticed his T-shirt. 'Reality is just an ever-changing theory' it said. He must remember that and tell his friend Simon.

He never could quite get his head around what it was that Simon researched at the university. He struggled yet again to remember. The first part was 'comparative' but it always took a few moments to remember the second word. 'Ontology'. 'Comparative ontology'. Almost every time they met Simon smiled patiently and explained yet again what it was. But each time he gave a different explanation. And none of them came clearly to mind. But 'Reality is just an ever-changing theory' seemed to fit right into the middle of his vague recollections.

Rather lost in thought, Al went through the first gate almost without thinking about whether to go a different way. A couple – presumably American as she was wearing a baseball cap and white trainers, even though not a year under seventy – held the gate open after them and he almost automatically followed them through, saying a polite thank you but making no attempt to start a conversation. From here he could walk across the main road and set off for the higher bank near a clump of trees. Visitors came from around the world to see the prehistoric stone circle. He'd never got the attraction himself. The megaliths were impressively large – there must have been some serious effort to move them and stand them on end – but nothing special about them. He tended to ignore them and aim for the raised banks beyond the ditches where you could see out towards the downs. He was happiest when walking somewhere with clear views of distant horizons. Woodland and the inside of this ancient earthwork didn't really do it for him.

He made it to the biggest stones by the side of the road, where many of the visitors stopped to take photographs of each other sitting in a natural chair-like shape in one of the stones. He walked on a little further toward the clumps of trees, intending to stand in the shade. But he felt he was invading the space of the woman standing there with her back to him. She was just under average height and quite slim, probably no more than seven stones. She turned and stared at him for a few seconds then turned back again and took a few steps away. She was walking with a stick.

In those few seconds he felt a whole cluster of emotions. She did not look at him with any sort of malice, of that he was sure, but made it clear she did not want to be spoken to. But it was more than that, much more than that. She had some incredible sense of presence, of inner power, quite disproportionate to her almost frail build. Her eyes seemed jet black and her brief glance was just piercing. If she'd continued to look at him he felt that she would have simply read all the thoughts in his head. Not that it was possible. But he felt that if it was then she could have done it.

Her presence was uncanny. He'd heard that pagans and witches came to this stone circle. The one's he'd seen before were dressed in colourful robes and, when he'd happened to walk close enough, could see more clearly they wore pendants with pentagrams or crystals or animal horns or such like. They dressed to look like pagans. 'Whacky, but happy and harmless' was his verdict. This woman was something else and was dressed nothing like the pagans. Other than being dressed all in black she would not stand out in a crowd. But he got the distinct impression she was more like a witch than any of the pagans he'd seen before. It was a curious mix of admiration and apprehension. Not someone he'd even think of annoying, even accidentally. So walking over and trying to start a conversation was not an option, even though it was the overwhelming thought in his mind. Not that he fancied her, he mentally told

himself. Although she was certainly 'fanciable'. She simply intrigued him beyond all reason.

Without even looking at him, let alone saying anything, she seemed to exude a polite but nevertheless powerful sense of 'Please go away'. The only option he had was to turn back and leave her to occupy the space by the trees, just as she had been doing when he started to stroll over.



It had been a few months since she was here last. Autumn was a good time to be just sit and look around, especially in the sunshine. From the tables outside the front of the pub she had a good view of the beech trees at the south entrance to the henge. Despite all the people around she still thought it was one of the more magical places. Sure, the east entrance beech trees looked the most magical. But that simply meant that everyone and anyone came and did their stuff there. Which also meant they came and dumped all their crap there, psychically and physically – all the ribbons tied in the branches and the initials carved in the bark of the trees. The south entrance trees took it all in but weren't usually as phased by all the goings on. It's as if they fed on the energy of the people but digested that energy in their own way.

Oh, such ridiculous metaphors. Of course the trees didn't feed on or digest energies. She wasn't even sure if energies was anything like the right word anyway. Just that energies was the word everyone used without ever thinking about what it really meant. But there was something, even if there wasn't a word for it. At least not in modern English. But most other languages had words like *mana*, *shakti*, *qi*. Even Old English, the language of the last pagans in this country, had several words which just might have referred to something similar. For some time her preference had been *wod* as that would make the deity Woden

in the god with *wod* 'in' him – in other words, Woden meant 'full of *wod*'.

More recently she had come to understand that the Old English word *leac* meant something rather like charisma or gift – as in the sense of a 'gifted child', with the added sense 'good luck' – though the similarity of sound between *leac* and luck was seemingly coincidental. The various sensibilities of the word overlapped in a somewhat nebulous manner, but made her feel that this was perhaps the word more widely used by Anglo-Saxons.

The ritual knife she used – which would be termed an athame by modern witches – was to her a *leac seax*. *Seax* was the word the Anglo-Saxons used to describe the iron knives worn at the waist by many men and some women too. They were somewhat similar in shape to bayonets and Bowie knives. Clearly they had everyday, practical uses. But they also seemed to be what academics would want to call 'cultural identifiers', in exactly the same way as all Sikh men carry a ritual knife, called a *kirpan*, and Ghurkas carry a *khukuri*. She thought too of the knives tucked into the socks of kilt-wearing Scotsmen, known only by their Gaelic name, *sgian dubh*.

Her inner musings were distracted by the man walking towards the entrance to the pub. She'd seen him before, but couldn't recall. It was only the briefest of encounters. But why did he have a human skull sitting on his desk at home? She shivered at the thought. Why had that even come into her mind? But she was used to what seemed like random thoughts just coming to mind when she looked at people, especially strangers. He'd stopped and looked at her a little too long. He recognised her from somewhere too. He turned away, seemingly embarrassed that he'd made eye contact too long.

What was she doing here, Al thought. Well, the only time he'd seen her before was just a few hundred yards away, so perhaps that wasn't too surprising. Perhaps she lived here, or came here

often. But it was hardly as if he came here often, and least of all to buy a drink in the pub.

After being served he felt an irresistible urge to take his drink outside, to see if she was still there. He was careful to take a seat near the door, well away from where she was, even though it meant more people were walking past the side of him than he'd have liked. But to no avail. She turned round, looked straight at him, picked up her walking stick and came over to the other side of the table.

'Do you mind if I ask you a question?' she said.

"No. But I've no idea if I'll be able to help you."

'That won't be a problem. I just need you to tell me something about yourself.'

That's a pretty impressive starter for being chatted up, he couldn't help thinking. But the mental equivalent of a gentle slap went through his mind. Oh er, is she reading my mind? He got a distinct sense of a chorus of female voices going 'Oh yes she is!'

'You will find it hard to understand why I know what I already know,' she said. 'Let me explain a little about myself. Do you mind if I sit down?'

"No, of course not, not at all.' He waved his hand as if that would help her feel more welcome. But he got the distinct impression that she felt fully in control of this encounter. Close up he got an even stronger sense of her presence. She was a pagan – there were small tattoos on her wrists and some of her finger joints. Just strange symbols, he'd no idea what they meant.

'I have always suffered constant pain since early childhood,' she said. 'These sigils help keep it at bay. At least in my hands and wrists.'

He was speechless. OK, so she really did know what he was thinking.

‘Yes, I realise it’s hard for you. I said that because I need you to know that I can do things that most people say are impossible. It’s been with me since childhood. I can’t explain it. You’ll just have to accept it. Is that OK?’

Whether or not it was OK was beside the point. No one had ever read his mind before, least of all a strange woman outside a pub who he’d only just met. Well, not quite true, he had seen her once before. But she wasn’t threatening in any way, and he felt sure this wasn’t some ruse to seduce him – he wasn’t sure he was anything like her type anyway.

‘When I was about four years old I was at a family party and went running across the room calling out “Mummy, mummy! I can’t see uncle so-and-so’s future!” Much to my mother’s great consternation! I was told I must never say such things again, it could frighten someone to death. Needless to say that uncle died a few months later. Though I only found out a long time after – there was a real attempt in the family to keep it hushed up, at least so far as I was concerned. They didn’t want me to know what I could do, at least at that age.

‘Suffice to say over the next few years I was taken on long walks by my grandmother. She “had the sight” and had learnt how to deal with it from her grandmother. You see, people who aren’t psychic think it’s great to know the future. But most of the time it isn’t. My grandmother was wont to say “It’s a curse, not a blessing, my dear.” And the last thing you should ever tell someone is when they’re going to die, even if they almost desperately want to know.’

He had no idea what to say. He just felt like he was going into shock. There was no reason to doubt that this woman could do exactly what she said – and probably a great deal more, he surmised, that she had no reason to tell about.

'Anyway, I simply wanted to ask you a question. Promise me you won't simply ask how I know what I now, because I have no way of explaining. I just do.'

"OK", he said with a rather querulous tone to his voice. "OK, just ask and I'll do my best to answer."

'Why do you have somebody's skull on your desk?'

Al went cold. His face must have lost all its colour. It took a few moments to swallow the lump in his throat – several times – before he could speak. "Because... Because I'm waiting to get it reburied and... and... "

'Yes, it needs to be reburied. Soon. It should have been done before. Do you need someone to help you organise it?'

He wanted to ask how on earth she knew. But he'd promised not to ask.

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"Well, that's the taken the wind out my sails," he said, pointing to Simon's T-shirt.

'Why's that, Al?'

"Just that I was going to tell you I'd seen someone walking around near here wearing a T-shirt that said 'Reality is just an ever-changing theory'. And it made me think of you and your attempts to explain all this ontology malarky to me."

'Hmmm. Yes indeed. And, unless someone's making those T-shirts by the dozen, then there's a good chance the person wearing it's one of my students. There's been a bit of a flurry of near-copies of mine.'

Simon's T shirt was even more concise but at the same time more abstruse: 'Reality is only a word' it said in rather stylish letters. He thought he got the sense of it, but thought best not to say as much to Simon just in case he'd missed a few tricks.

'So what was it about this woman you met? Your email made it sound like she's been ferreting around inside your brain. What's all this about? A bit more than a love interest trying out a subtle way of seducing you? Are you sure she's just not a female counterpart to Derren Brown?'

"If only it was that easy to make it seem so normal Simon. As I said in that email, she walks over to me, says a few sentences and then asks me why I've got a skull on my desk. And then proceeds to pressure me into getting it reburied. Not that I wanted to keep it forever, but she was seriously insistent."

'Have you really got someone's skull on your desk?'

Al nodded. He explained to Simon that it had been discovered on a building site a couple of summer's back. The SOCO had come out the next morning, along with the county archaeologist. The SOCO took the skull from the police officer – who, having been there since his shift started during the night was decidedly dour – and turned it upside down. 'Well from the wear on the teeth he has been here since before the thirteenth century', he'd said. 'And it's a "he" from the look of the brow ridges and so forth.' The SOCO passed it to the archaeologist, who glanced at the teeth and nodded. 'But, it's in remarkably good condition for a skeleton that old. We should be finding all the bones, right down to the fingers and the toes.'

Simon interjected, 'Before the thirteenth century the way flour was ground left so much grit in with it that teeth got worn right down. That's why this chap's skull could be so easily dated. After a better way of grinding grain into flour is introduced, teeth wear is greatly reduced.'

"Yes, that's what the archaeologist said to the police officer and me. The police officer rather too quickly said to the

archaeologist 'He's all yours', and went over to his vehicle then left. The SOCO, who it turns out was an archaeologist by training, and the county archaeologist both got out trowels and had an enthusiastic 'dig' around where Jim had been levelling off. But not a single bone turned up."

Al explained to Simon how he'd hung around, hoping there would be something more. But after nearly two hours they decided to stop for a cup of tea. The archaeologist almost casually picked up the skull, keeping it the right way up this time, and remarking that it was so smooth and shiny that it seemed someone had been polishing the top. Then he turned it over and pushed at some dried-on soil right at the back of the skull, just above where the neck would have been. Most of it came away. Some metal wire was showing. He pointed it out to the SOCO. He went off for a moment and came back with what looked like dentist's tools. He carefully displaced some more of the soil, clearly trying to stop it all coming away in one go.

Simon's face made it clear he was intrigued by all this, so Al recounted all the detail. "The archaeologist said 'This is a repair made after the skull cracked', then passed it to the SOCO for a second opinion. The latter said it looked a very professional repair. 'Why would anyone go to that trouble?' 'Well,' replied the SOCO, 'my guess is that this is a medical specimen, kept on some doctor's desk or such like. Most probably it came over from India sometime after the Burke and Hare scandal in the nineteenth century. For about a hundred years there was a big trade in skeletons from bodies fished out the Ganges.'"

'Really?' asked Simon. 'I knew nothing about all that. But then why would I? But no wonder the top looked polished – some faithful cleaning lady would have passed her duster over it most days of the week. Any idea why it came to be where you were building?'

"No idea whatsoever. Seems it had been an orchard up until the developers bought it, then was used to break up old lorries for

well over ten years. So if someone found a skull while clearing out their grandfather's stuff after his death, then it would seem a safe enough place to park it.

"Anyways, without going into any more boring detail, the county archaeologist said he didn't want the skull because he wasn't local. As the representative of the developer, would I mind taking charge until it could be reburied. He then explained that the official procedure was to bury any human remains discovered on building sites in the nearest churchyard or cemetery.

"On the one hand I was a bit reluctant, but on the other I'd never held someone's skull before, so I was intrigued. I did a bit of homework to find out what was required – as it's not a body as such it doesn't need to be six feet deep. But on the basis of where we thought he'd come from it didn't seem right for someone to say a Christian prayer over him. I wanted to make contact with a local Hindu priest – or whatever they call themselves – but I rarely got over that way again and never had the chance to make enquiries. On the basis that he's most likely spent quite some time on someone's desk, I felt it was better he stayed on top of mine, rather than me putting him in a box and forgetting about him."

'Hmmm,' said Simon, 'I suppose that's some sort of justification. But I gather it didn't go down too well with this new-found lady friend of yours?'

"Well, I did think to start with that she was about to get very irate with me for not burying it already. But it seems, from what she actually said, that she'd just picked up that it was on my mind that I needed help with this."

'What had you said to her about the skull at that point?'

"Nothing. I hadn't said anything whatsoever to her before she walked over and asked me if she could ask me a question. She said a few things and then just came out with it."

‘What?’

“Why did I have someone’s skull on my desk?”

‘But you must have said something...’

“No! Believe me. Nothing whatsoever that would give her the slightest clue. No reason to think I even had a desk at home, let alone a skull on it. And that’s only part of it. Believe me, it’s exactly like she can read my mind. Even from a distance.”

‘Now that does sound disconcerting. Not something I’d feel comfortable about.’

“Me neither. But I’m OK with it. So far at least she doesn’t seem to trying to do anything untoward, just trying to help.”

‘So what do you make of her? Is she all sweetness and light, crystals and dolphins?’

“Not a bit of it. Just the opposite – all I can say is that she has this incredible ‘presence’ that’s nothing like what she actually looks like. Someone you wouldn’t dream of messing with, yet barely anything to her, just a lightly-built woman who walks with a stick.

“But it seems it’s not just me. She told me she’d been psychic since she was a young child. Actually, that’s not quite right. She did say she didn’t like being called ‘psychic’ because folk who called themselves psychics were different to her. She seemed to be rather dismissive but I didn’t get the chance to ask her. What she did say was that she and her sister were really close. In the days before mobile phones they didn’t speak very often, but always knew when the other was ill or having a bad patch. Anyway, from what she said, it seems that one wet and windy winter’s night she keeps hearing her sister saying, quite loudly, ‘Call me, call me.’ This goes on for about half an hour. Eventually she puts her coat on and sets off for the phone box – seems she was in a flat without a phone, or it had gone wrong.

“Her sister answers and says words to the effect of ‘No, no, I’m just fine. No reason to ask you to call me whatsoever.’ And then goes ‘Oh, Oh no! I’ve just thought! I’ve just finished rehearsing with the band. We were going through that Blondie number, the one that goes ‘Call me, call me.’”

Simon broke into a laugh.

“For all I know she could be making most of this up. But I really don’t think so. Not after she turned up on my doorstep at 8.30 in the morning.”

‘You invited her for breakfast or something?’

“No, nothing like that whatsoever. This was before she’d led the little ceremony to rebury the skull. She did a great job, found some quotations from the Vedas which were just right. It seemed odd that there was only her and me. And the skull. I would have liked there to have been some other folk around to share in the sense of occasion. Seems she acts as ‘master of ceremonies’ – there must be a better word – for pagan funerals, and handfastings, and naming ceremonies for children. Must be ace at it, she has that complete sense of gravitas that goes with rites and rituals. She’d even cleared the burial of the skull with the parish council and arranged for a suitable hole to be dug the previous day at the village cemetery, and a head-sized oak casket to be made. Seems there’s some sort of fund set aside by the county council for these sort of occasions.

“Anyway, I’m getting ahead of myself. I’d been having some sort of ‘premonitions’... “

‘Oh, you too?’ interrupted Simon. ‘Not just her who’s on the psychic side. What sort of premonitions? Do tell... ‘

“I’d rather not, not right now. Mostly about fatal car crashes and that sort of thing. I’d find out from the news a day or so later. By the time it had happened three times in little more than that number of weeks I was finding it all very disconcerting.’

'Strewth! You mean you saw the accidents in your mind *before* they happened?'

"No, I didn't see the accidents, as such. Although I think I actually saw a cyclist just minutes before he was killed. It was more like something would flash into my mind, for no reason, along with a feeling of dread. But of course stuff flashes into your mind seemingly at random rather often. Well, it does in my mind, I can't speak about yours. So I really wanted to talk to her about all this. But when we were together the opportunity never arose.

"But this is when it starts to get really weird. Promise you won't think I'm just making this up, or whatever."

'No, no. Tell it straight. I'll just listen.'

"OK. After getting me to promise to bury the skull – not that I took much persuading, I might say – she looked right at me. Right through me, it felt like. 'If you need my help, just ask', she said. I responded with the obvious question, along the lines of letting me have her phone number. 'No, I never give my phone number out to people. My shadow name is Elfmund. Just ask the universe and I'll do my best to help.' At that point she just turns away and walks off."

'So, how do you "Ask the universe?"'

"Simon, if I knew I'd tell you. But seems I can anyway, without knowing."

Simon's eyebrows laid bare his incredulity.

"Hear me out. Just hear what happened. One evening soon after I was actually thinking of you, thinking how you'd be able to help me understand what was real and what was not. But now I've seen your T-shirt, maybe I was being too optimistic... "

'Yes, I'm more inclined to pull the rug from other people's ideas of reality than to help reinforce one that's crumbling around

their ears. But what actually happened? Why did she appear on your doorstep?’

“Yes, that was something how I felt – everything I thought was real wasn’t anymore. She could seemingly read my mind, and other people’s deaths were coming into my mind quite unbidden. At the time I thought that it must be the skull, that she had picked up something bad about the skull, that it was bringing all sorts of ‘bad luck’ and bad experiences into my mind. But at the same time I got no sense that the skull had anything to do with my premonitions, other than it was the skull of a dead person. But it’s not as if I was asking it about the afterlife, or to give predictions about the future, or anything spooky like that.

“Must admit I poured myself a larger-than-usual whisky. The good stuff too, that I can’t afford to buy very often. And most of it went down rather quickly. I even went over to the skull, apologised to it, told it not to bring any nasty thoughts into my mind – if indeed that’s what it was doing. But I got no sense that it was malign in any way. For what it’s worth it seemed like it was quite happy, but slightly embarrassed that I was making such a fuss. Don’t even ask – I must admit that I was getting quite drunk. I just kept saying ‘What should I do? What would Simon do if he were me?’

“Only then did it cross my mind that perhaps you weren’t the right person to ask, and that this woman – her name came straight into my mind at that point, not something that normally happens with folk with unusual names, has to be said. So I simply said, out loud, while the skull was in front of me, ‘Elfmund, where in the name of whatever-it-might-be that you think runs this show, where are you when I need you?’

“And I guess at that soon afterwards either the whisky worked, or something made me feel much more relaxed. I went to be bed, slept well – which is more than I can often say – and got up in the morning. My only thought was that I really shouldn’t drink

whisky without water as I could do without a thumping hangover. But I'd forgotten why I'd got drunk in the first place."

'And this is when she appeared on the doorstep... "'

"Exactly. About 8.30 in the morning. No one rings my doorbell at that time of day – we're out in the sticks, so the postman and the delivery drivers never arrive till nearer lunchtime.

"I opened the door. My jaw must have hit the floor. I didn't actually get to say anything daft like 'What are you doing here?' She just said 'Sorry I'm so late, but as I can't drive I had to wait for the first bus, and then it's good walk to get here. But I sent you some calming thoughts so I think you slept OK.'"

'Bejeesus or whoever! If you weren't spooked out about all this before then, surely you were then? Ask a skull to help and someone gets up at the crack of sparrow to catch the first bus.'

"You've missed something significant."

'What's that?'

"I'd never told her where I lived."

'Yes, but there's Google. There can't be that many people called Alan King in Wiltshire. Come on, that's not even part-way to being psychic.'

"I'd never told her my name either."

'Well perhaps she asked in the pub. Folk there might have known you.'

"Seems unlikely. I rarely drink in there and to the best of my knowledge there's no one who even calls me by nickname, still less knows my surname."

'OK, so you think she worked this out all by myself?'

"Well for a starter not many folk realise that Al isn't short for Alan. It's short for Alfred."

'No. No, I didn't. And how long I have I known you?'

“Well has to be said I’m not at all that fond of Alfred as a name, so I tend not to correct people if they call me Alan. But she went the whole way, a hole in one. When I asked her, she just said ‘Shall I call you King Alfred or King James? Which do you prefer?’”

‘Eh?’ Simon was clearly struggling to keep up.

“Yes, with a surname like ‘King’ there’s all sorts of boy’s names which produce a snigger. My parents simply decided that in for a penny, in for a pound, they’d give me double trouble. My full name, as it appears on my birth certificate and what have you, is James Alfred King.”

Simon was clearly trying hard not to smirk. ‘A bit of a curse, really. No wonder you’re happy to be just Al.’

“I did ask her how she knew. She just said with a name like that she couldn’t help but know. But you are part-way right. She did Google for my address. There aren’t any other chartered surveyors anywhere, let alone Wiltshire, listed as ‘G.A. King’.”

‘She knew you are a surveyor...’

“Well, she’d could have sussed that when I told her how I’d come to acquire the skull.”

‘Ah, yes, of course.’

“But I still have no idea how she knew my name. I may just have referred to myself as ‘Al’, but I doubt it. And there’s no way I would have mentioned any of my real names. And unless she can pick wallets out of pockets, rifle through them, and put them back – all without me noticing while I’m sitting the other side of a pub table and looking right at her – then I can’t think how else she might know.”

‘So you might just have to accept that she really can read your mind.’

“Yes. And that seems to be exactly what she did. And, even more disturbingly, she seems to have got me thinking about my

name even before she walked over. Right before she came over to speak to me I'd begun reminiscing in my own mind about when I started out the lads on the building sites got into the habit of calling me 'Green King', usually followed by some remark to effect I was short of a full pint. Bad joke but accurate. I was pretty naïve back then. One of the lads took the joke a step further and always called me 'I.P.A.' instead of 'Green King'. Good lad really, no idea what happened to him.

"The nickname annoyed me only because I didn't much like Greene King beers, least of all their IPA. Fullers was so much better. Anyway, do I have to tell you? The least-worst option in that pub was Greene King IPA. And it was actually a good pint too, much to my surprise. So, in a roundabout kind of way, I'd started thinking about my name in the moments before she walked over to speak."

'Well, I'm not sure if that really explains anything. But there's a way of thinking in which it makes more sense than any other option.'

"Isn't that where all your ontological malarky comes to the fore. You can decide what's really real, and what's just some naïve idea of what seems to be real?"

'If only. No, it's more a case of looking at what someone thinks is real and telling them it's only real because of their prior assumptions, and it's not "really real" at all. Not that the prior assumptions go away that easily, it has to be said. Rather too many folk think that they've got reality well and truly sussed. Especially ones who invoke science, the laws of nature, and all that.

'All your doubts and uncertainties about what's really real mean that you're closer to where I'm at than those scientists and such like. In some ways I wish I was having these paranormal encounters. Not that I envy the premonitions of car crashes, though. I can begin to see that would cause some sleeplessness.'

Al asked if Simon knew of any ontology which fitted in with what he'd been describing. 'Not really', responded Simon trying to be as helpful as he could. 'It's more a case of whose ontology rules.

'Even here in modern Western society there's all sorts of ontological choices. There's the hard-headed scientists, rationalists, reductionists and all-round secularists. Then there's all sorts of religions and the various denominations within each of those. You could fill a very large room with people representing all the different options. Indeed, protestant Christians often have a particular mix of ideas which is unique to that individual, although generally overlapping in some ways with other Christians.

'Christians see the world through an ontology of God and Jesus and Heaven

and angels and souls and – well the list can get rather endless.'

"Never had that much time for all that myself," confided Al.

"Not sure there's any such place as Heaven. Or Hell."

'Exactly. That's the difference between their ontology and yours. It's largely what you assume about the nature of everything, the "Big Picture", whatever you want to call the whole shebang. Religious folk see it the way that their religion sets things out – and each religion has its own take on such matters. Scientists and their ilk see things quite differently. They mostly claim that their way is the only true way – especially scientists, who can be very strong-minded about this – and everyone else is wrong.'

"So what you're saying is that nobody is right, not even the scientists?"

'That's pretty much the gist of it. Apart from some fancy footwork which allows the ontology of ontologists to outrank everyone else's ontologies.' Simon looked Al in the eye to make sure he realised that remark was overloaded with irony.

“So there’s no way of knowing what’s real any more. It really has become just a word. Or an ever-changing theory.”

‘Maybe. But that means we never did know anything about anything anyways. Which isn’t why the human race got to be where it is now. We got to where we are with a whole bunch of just-about-good-enough ontologies, and we’ll carry on into the future in exactly the same manner. If the work of my department makes any difference then it is about being aware of multiplicity of ontologies which are out there, and thereby making it easier to see the world through other societies’ assumptions.’

“Stepping into their shoes and all that.”

‘Slipping into their minds, I like to think. But whatever. It’s all down to whose ontology rules. If you only see things through the mindset you were brought up in – the shoes you were brought up in, if you prefer – then you will simply assume that people who see things differently are plain wrong, “primitive” or frankly mad. What I try to teach is being able step in and out of different worldviews, seeing things from “inside” rather than merely “outside”. Suspend disbelief in what they believe in, at least for a time.’

“I guess that’s what I need to do. Suspend disbelief about what Elfmund seems able to do. But that’s easier said than done.”

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Even though Simon had not given Al the reassurances he was hoping for, the conversation had helped. At least Simon hadn't accused him of going barmy, or simply laughed out of disbelief. He wanted to talk again to Elfmund but pushed the idea out of his mind. If just thinking of her – well asking the universe via a skull that no longer sat on his desk – was enough to get her out of bed in time to catch the first bus then he really didn't want to trigger a second such arrival. It simply wasn't fair on her, she clearly had mobility issues. Her walking stick certainly wasn't just for swank.

He'd done what he needed to do in town, and the weather had just started to get warm enough again to make strolling around a pleasure. There was time left on the parking ticket so no reason to rush. He headed out of the market place to go the long way round back to the car. Just as he was looking to the right to check there was no traffic and get across the road he saw the corner of the museum. He'd not been in there for a while, and there would be something new in the temporary exhibition area. He stayed on the pavement and walked in.

There she was. Manning the reception desk. "Hello, I really wasn't expecting to see you here," was the best he could manage by way of a greeting."

'Hi Al', Elfmund said, smiling at him. 'Yes I volunteer here on Mondays. I get to meet all sorts of people. What made you stop by?'

He looked her in the eye and smiled. "I thought you knew all you needed to know about me? As I'm sure you're well aware" – he was testing as much as teasing – "I hadn't the slightest thought of coming here until about a minute ago." He almost said 'But you had crossed my mind yesterday evening' then opted not to. She probably knew that already. Had she even put the seemingly spontaneous thought into his mind just then?

Other people were coming in and needed to be sold tickets. He reached for his wallet and pulled out his membership card

which enabled him to come in for free. With his full name on, he realised, thinking back to the conversation with Simon last week. While Elfmund was selling tickets he pretended to take an interest in the books for sale in small shop area. Nothing really grabbed his attention.

When she'd finished serving several visitors, she walked over. He took the initiative. "I hope I'm not being too pushy, and please don't think there's any other reason for asking than what I say. But it would be helpful to me if we could have a conversation somewhat along the lines of the ones your grandmother had with you. Not that I'm 'gifted' in the way you are, but I just feel you could help me understand better."

'Yes, if you think it would help you.' Elfmund seemed to retreat into herself a little, as if she'd wrapped some sort of shawl around her, just mentally. He was well aware that her smile had gone and she was being quite neutral. Oh dear, he thought, she thinks I'm just trying to seduce her or something. And that's not what I'd got in mind at all.

Elfmund looked over her shoulder to see if anyone was waiting at the reception desk. A colleague had walked past, seen her talking quietly to me, and taken over at the desk without so much as a glance being exchanged, still less a word spoken.

'The deal with the Gentry is that I don't ever advertise or put it about that I can help. But if, for whatever unlikely reason, someone asks me to help then I can't refuse. Even if I don't like the person or whatever.'

He let the last remark pass by, but nevertheless was well aware it was not a casual one.

"But you get paid?"

'No. At least I can't ask for payment. That's just part of the tradition. If someone wants to give me something, whether it's money or a meal or a "something" then I should just accept whatever they offer. Just occasionally they are too generous for

their own means and I end up giving back some or all of the gift. But usually it's all OK.'

"And they are, who did you say, the Gentry?"

'It's not their real name. You would never call them by their real name. Just as I would not want you to know my birth name. It's exactly the same as when an Irishman talks about the "wee folk" or the "good neighbours" but would never use the f-word. In a manner of speaking... ' The smile briefly flitted across her face, making her eyes light up. As if eyes did light up. Especially ones almost as black as coal.

'They are the ancestors. They are always near me. It's why I was aware of the skull that was on your desk when we first spoke. You would find it hard to understand. Please just accept that they are more part of my life than the real people who come and go.'

"That's very much why I want to meet up. I want to – what word did you just use?"

'Accept.'

"Yes, 'just accept'. I find that very hard to do. I think I've given up trying to understand, that just seems too difficult. But if you could just help me to accept."

He hadn't thought about it all in such a way before. She had helped already without, it seemed, even trying. But a split-second later he realised that if she did indeed know what concerned him most, then she was also quite capable of saying what was most appropriate.

'Would it help if I was to teach you about "on" and "off" switches?' she asked. 'It's just a metaphor I use. There's no real switch. But it's like having one. You can switch from one way of thinking about things to another, without getting everything mixed up.'

“Well, yes, I suppose that would be a big help. I do seem to be getting my thoughts well and truly mixed up, at least when I’m not wrapped up in working.”

‘OK. If we meet again at the pub in the middle of the stone circle then that will be convenient for me as well as you. The full moon’s on Thursday. Are you free about five in the afternoon?’

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Al had met up with Elfmund on that Thursday and encountered her again at the museum. But after a few months she told Al she needed to move to be near her ageing parents. It was a couple of hundred miles away, to a part of the country he had no reason to visit. And, although it was not done in a pointed way, Elfmund made no suggestion that they should keep in touch.

However she had said she was halfway through writing a series of books, which a friend was publishing. She looked at him in that way that seemed to see right into him, and said that Al might want to read them. He took this as a predictable ploy by an author to get their books bought and thought little more of it. But the titles of some of them were snappy enough to have stuck in his mind.

Nearly a year had passed. Al parked up in the car park for the henge and walked to the place where Elfmund had taken him. He did his best to remember what she had said and done. Much to his surprise it all seemed to come back into his mind. His memory just didn’t work like that – he needed a crib sheet or a some other sort of prompt to remember more than the odd sentence. He twigged and said, out loud but *sotto voce* “Thanks Elfmund. So you’re still here.’

After he felt that he had honoured the spirits of place, the ancestors as Elfmund referred to them, Al walked on. It was late

February but there was a clear blue sky and it was warm in the sun – although only in the sun. The tour of the stone circle brought him close to the café and gift shop but he just picked up the path to the car park. A sudden thought reminded him that in a month or so he would need a present for a long-standing friend. They hardly ever met up and had little idea of her tastes. But he might get some inspiration.

The gifts and such like in the shop were, by and large, not as tacky as he had expected. Indeed, some of the mugs were rather stylish and included the trees at the south entrance. He decided to buy one, if only to have a connection with Elfmund. He stopped, realising that his was getting a bit too fixated, almost like he was trying to 'own' her in some way. But, even after that thought had crossed his mind, there was a strong sense of 'That's OK, go for it.'

Across the shop was a woman with a couple of young children. One of the youngsters was clearly giving its parent a bit of grief and it's repeated cries of 'It's not fair...' got loud enough to distract him. The mother had been trying to read one of the books for sale. As she put it back on the shelf Al caught sight of the title. It was another of those oh-erh moments. Surely it wasn't?

He waited for the mother and children to move away. There was a surprising number of books for a heritage book shop, not all of them the sort of bland ones typical of such outlets. Whoever bought the stock for here must be quite an interesting person. He turned around to glance at the person behind the till. No, she was not the sort to read some of these books.

It was, Al had to say, quite unnerving to find that the title of the book that had caught his attention was indeed the title of one of the books Elfmund had said she had been writing. And another four books in the series were sitting alongside. Seems Elfmund did have a proper name – or at least a name that looked like it was proper. Al remembered that Elfmund had been adamant

that he did not know her name, so suspected that the books were published under a pseudonym.

He left with all five books, a pair of mugs and a key ring made from a semi-precious stone. As he then made his way to the car he realised that only ten minutes before he'd had no intention to buy any of them. He smiled at himself.

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"How's the new book going Simon?" Al was interested and was always intrigued about people who could sit down and anything more complex than a risk assessment.

'Well the book's going OK. Just the title that's a problem.'

"In what way?"

'Well, I've been working on the ideas for this for so long it's not true. And the title in my mind has always been same. But my publisher says I can't use it because its been used as the name of a book – or a series of books even – by some neo-pagan writer.'

"What did you want to call it?"

*'Living in a Magical World.'*

Al felt the colour in his cheeks drain into a lump in his throat.

"Simon, you're not going to believe this."

'Go on. Just don't tell me your friend, what was her name, Elf-thing, has told you about this already.'

"Well, no she hasn't told be about it – as such. Elfmund... " – and Al looked at Simon to make sure he'd picked up on her name, and then had to stop and swallow before he could continue. "Elfmund is the author of that series of books."

'No!' cried out Simon in a voice loud enough to make several people at nearby tables outside the pub look round. 'No, no

way. I forget the name of the person who wrote the books but it's not elf-anything.'

"Well authors do use pseudonyms you know. And whatever Elfmund is really called then as sure as eggs is eggs she won't let anyone know. So my best guess is that Beatrice Walditch..."

'Yes, that's it. Sounds just like a flakey new agey name to me...' '

Al scowled, but continued what he'd been saying anyway.

"Beatrice is almost certainly a pen name. Not that I've put it to her as, to all intents and purposes, we've lost touch since she moved away."

'Oh, didn't know that.'

"No reason why you should know – you and I've not seen each other since then."

'Hang on, though. Why is your Elfmund writing neo-pagan books? Just to make money?'

"Who said she was writing neo-pagan books, Simon?" Al paused and smiled wryly at Simon.

'But...' Simon got as far as realising Al was winding him up but that was as far as he could get. 'Come on then, out with it...' '

"It's only your assumption – or maybe your publisher's – that they're neo-pagan."

'OK, OK, I've been caught out with my assumptions around my ankles and my arse out for anyone to admire...' '

Al smiled. For as long as he could remember, one of Simon's best-loved phrases had been about avoiding 'showing your arse on the town hall steps'. Seems he'd found some witty alliterations on the same theme.

"Actually you're part-way right. Elfmund does try to make the books seem like they're neo-pagan. But it's just a sleight of mind, what she is actually saying is largely quite different."

'Ah, so you've read them then? I was beginning to guess you must have done. Are they any good?'

"Well, you'll have to read them and make up your own mind. Especially the sections where she's writing about ontology..." "

'In what way is she writing about ontology?' Simon asked, clearly intrigued.

"Tricky for me to summarise to the likes of you, but certainly in the sentences where she uses the word 'ontology'..." "

'*What!*' Several of the nearby people looked around again.

'*What,*' Simon continued more quietly but still quite animated.

'*Nobody* but *nobody* uses the word ontology outside the hallowed world of academe. Who is this friend of yours? '

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Turkish restaurants were not exactly common in this part of the world – unlike Indian restaurants. Al had discovered this one essentially by chance when he'd been staying at a hotel a couple of streets away. The manager and staff were friendly and the food was excellent, so well worth a repeat visit. He wasn't that fond of eating on his own but popping in soon after they opened at six – and he was more than hungry enough – would mean he would be away by the time most of the customers arrived. Or so he thought. But within half an hour the tables were steadily filling up, and the waiter had moved most of the rest together to accommodate a booking for ten people. Which meant a couple of women had little choice other than to sit next to him.

Al broke the ice by making some half-witty remark to the effect that he'd soon be going so they'd be able get on with the serious gossip without him over-hearing. However they immediately started up a lively conversation. Seems that they were there to

celebrate one of them having a 'birthday with a nought at the end' a few days before. It took little to guess that it must have been her fiftieth, although to be fair both of them only looked in their forties.

In the way polite conversation between strangers tends to go, they knew some of the places where he had worked. One of the women – the one who presumably had yet to reach her fiftieth birthday – offered various anecdotes about local history and folklore. Then she veered the conversation towards ghost stories. Once it was clear that Al wasn't going to poo-poo such matters, she said that her father – seemingly no longer with us – had been something of a 'diviner'. He was called upon several times to sort out presences and such like at a hotel. 'Did he say which hotel it was?' Al asked. 'Oh yes. It was the Durham Ox out on the A46.' Al managed to say 'That's very interesting' without, he hoped, giving away that this was Seriously Interesting.

Al left the two women to celebrate together soon after. Al then recalled exactly why he had taken an interest in this inn named after a legendary ox. It was after his friend had emailed him about how he and his daughter had both encountered apparitions of the long-since extinct aurochs just a few miles away – but perhaps within the area which would have once been thought of as the *nemeton*. The Durham Ox Inn was right at the 'centre of the action' so to speak. Little wonder that anyone who was in the least psychic might have picked up some sort of 'presences'.

He must make contact with Elfmund to see if she knew about the place, or at least that the inn was in some way 'haunted'. After all, she had lived not that far from here before she moved to Wessex and since then headed off to her parents.

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Curious as Al was to know if Elfmund knew about the Durham Ox, he didn't feel he should 'Ask the universe' to make contact with her. The thought of her trying to get to him by public transport from halfway across the country just wasn't fair. He had the email address for her publisher and used that to make contact.

She responded promptly and cheerfully. Yes, of course she knew about the Durham Ox – she said the staff she used for some of her rituals was made from a branch she had purloined from the wood nearby. And that she'd had more than one strange experience there, which she might tell me about. But, and this had piqued Al's interest, she told him to be very careful of the guardians of the place and not to just wander around there without 'the right sort of protection'.

Al then realised he'd not let on to her that he'd read the books she'd published under the name Beatrice Walditch. But then he realised she must have guessed as he'd contacted her via the publisher of those books. And, anyway, she'd seemed more than capable of reading his mind whenever they'd met. So, Al assumed, she knew he'd read the book where she explained how to create protective guardians.

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The next day Elfmund emailed again. 'Don't go there on your own – I'll arrange to come over and go with you.' There was something about the tone of her email which made it clear she wasn't happy with Al going to the Durham Ox on his own. He'd no idea why, though truth to tell he'd not really thought too much about creating protective guardians. He surmised that she'd picked up that he might 'pick up' on something that he wouldn't know how to deal with. Too true, he thought, he'd absolutely no idea what to do if he 'picked up' on presences or

unwelcoming guardians of place. But memories of the strange feelings of dread in the pit of his stomach gave him some inkling of what it might be like. He took no more persuading to keep a safe distance until Elfmund could make it over. He rather liked the idea that they would meet up again – even if the circumstances would be almost inexplicable to almost anyone else, even Simon.

In the event it took some time for Elfmund to make the necessary arrangements. Seems she has two cats, both of which had come back from catteries unnourished and with assorted ailments. So to go away she had to rely on a friend to look after them, which added further complications to her travel arrangements.

When all these uncertainties had played out, Elmund arranged to catch the train to the nearest station. Al would wait for her then they'd drive to the Durham Ox. All well and good. The train was on time. Lots of folk got off, but Al realised Elfmund would be one of the last to get to the turnstile as she walked with a stick so would prefer the more fleet of foot to get ahead of her.

Then Al froze. There was Elfmund. With Simon carrying her bag and chatting. They both looked up and saw Al. Elfmund beamed and Simon smiled but looked a little sheepish at the same time. 'Sorry for being a gooseberry, but Elfmund said it would be fine...' he blurted out. They came through the turnstile and both greeted Al more conventionally before curiosity got the better of Al and he said to Simon, 'But why are you here too?'

Seems Elfmund had been one of the last to get on the train and, predictably, there weren't many seats left. She'd sat down next to Simon, who was trying to read what even he considered to be a fairly dense academic paper. When he'd put it down and looked out the window for a moment, Elfmund had broken the silence by asking some quite profound question about what he'd just been reading. No apologies for reading 'over his shoulder', so to speak, as he wryly noted to Al.

Understandably surprised that someone had made more sense of the obscure paper than he had, he happily entered into conversation. He was more than little surprised that this somewhat strange, decidedly alternative-looking woman knew so much about ontology. He asked which university she was at, and was dumbfounded that she said she'd never studied the subject academically. 'But I have written popularist books which touch upon it', she volunteered. Something like a switch clicked in his mind. Remembering the discussions with his publisher about the title of the book his was still struggling to finalise, and Al's remarks, he asked, "Have you come across a series of books called 'Living in a magical world'?"

'In a manner of speaking, yes,' she replied, then smiled and paused. 'I wrote them. Have you read any of them, then?'

"Erh, no," responded Simon, "just that for several years I've been writing a book which I planned to call by that name but my publisher says I can't use because of your series. But," he smiled and maintained eye contact, "that means you know my friend Al."

'Indeed. I'm on my way to meet up with him.'

Simon explained to Al that he was on his way back home from a conference in Liverpool so could afford to break his journey, so long as Al could drop him back at the station later. Elfmund was adamant that it was fine for Simon to come with them.

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Simon asks 'What's that?' as they pass a church all-but hidden behind trees. 'It's a house now but was the parish church,' answered Al. 'Converting that church to a house was the first job around here I worked on,' Al reminisced. 'Just about every job around here – before I moved to Wiltshire – came from recommendations after doing that conversion.'

Elfmund managed to speak. 'Well, that's interesting, at least because it shows that Al made a connection to this locality right at the beginning. But before it was ever a church it was some sort of boundary shrine.' Simon responded with 'By Toutatis!' and Elfmund laughed, although Al didn't know why. 'Who's Toutatis?' Al asked. 'Don't you remember Asterix the Gaul,' responded Simon, 'his battle cry was "By Toutatis!"' 'Oh, yes, vaguely,' replied Al, none the wiser. 'And', said Elfmund, 'the deity Toutatis takes his name from "protective guardian" – just the sort of *genii loci* that might have been honoured there.' Al understood why Simon's remark had made Elfmund laugh. But he had no idea why Elfmund thought it had been a pagan shrine – she must have intuitively known.

'I think there was a ring of these boundary shrines around where we are going. They were so travellers could pay their respects to the local guardian spirits,' continued Elfmund. 'I don't know why but there was a large herd of sacred cattle living in the area between the shrines. They were white with red ears and very large, much larger than any cattle are now.' Al thought for a moment. Had he ever told Elfmund about the paranormal encounters with aurochs just a few miles away? He didn't think so. Had she been reading his mind again? Perhaps. More likely she was just picking up on something – goodness knows what. 'The whole area was woodland, but not dense like woods are today. The shrines on the boundary were there as protection for the cattle and the rites that took place in the woodland.'

'Are you taking us along the little back lane?' Elfmund asked Al as they drove into the next village. 'There's what used to be a

farm tucked down on the right. About thirty years ago the couple who lived there did B&B for a short while.’ It was Elfmund’s turn to reminisce. ‘My partner at the time came up from Sussex for the weekend and we stayed there, just the once. Because we got lost in the next village, he saw the sign for a house up for sale which I wouldn’t otherwise have known about. I bought it. Odd that – if it wasn’t for staying at that B&B and getting lost – I would have carried on looking for property about ten to twenty miles away.’

‘When I walked out into the fields – it was before my accident – there was an overwhelming feeling that “in here” and “out there” are not easily distinguishable,’ continued Elfmund, addressing the remark more to Simon than Al. ‘When my partner and I made love at that B&B it was as if we were communing with the land itself. I’ve never had quite the same experience before or after.’

Elfmund pointed out the farm where she had stayed. Al remarked that he only knew it when it had been run as some sort of alternative therapy place, and that was some time ago. They drove on before parking up then walked into the woods. Elfmund and Simon were talking, and Al followed behind. He didn’t hear Elfmund’s question but Simon’s voice carried better in the open air. ‘We don’t even have a half-decent ontology for what we consider to be normal, so there’s no chance of an adequate ontological explanation for what is deemed abnormal or paranormal. Indeed defining the boundary – by deeming something “paranormal” – is essentially how a culture defines what is “within” its concepts of normal and what is beyond the pale.’

Al felt he was a little outclassed by his companions. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand what Simon was saying – far from it – but he couldn’t think of any appropriate remarks to make. Clearly this was not a problem shared by Elfmund, who had responded with another question for Simon, which – and Al noticed with a smile – had given Simon pause to think. ‘That’s a

good point! I'll have to give that a little consideration. Thank you for that,' Simon responded to his interrogator.

Al, to be honest, was feeling a little uncomfortable. Not with the walking – that was straightforward enough. Just a feeling. Simon asked Elfmund 'Where are you taking us? Are you sure you know the way?' To which Elfmund replied 'Are you beginning to feel it too? Whatever protection was put in place here is still very strong. We'll be alright, I've been preparing for this. But if you're not used to rituals then it's going to feel more than a little strange.'

Al had never done any sort of ritual – if you don't count going to church or being at a birthday party, and he was fairly sure that what Elfmund had in mind was not at the same end of the spectrum. More than a little strange was indeed how he was beginning to feel. It was a pervading sense of fear, though of what Al could not fathom. It was almost a fear of the fear. No, that's not sensible, Al thought. But he could come up with no better description.

'What sort of ritual had you planned,' asked Al, trying to sound more nonchalant than he actually felt.

'I call it the "Moment of the Storm", replied Elfmund, 'when everything becomes clear.' Al thought he knew what she might mean and started to feel chilled inside. 'I hope that's something like the white *satori* and not the dark *satori*?' Simon responded to her. 'Or had you something else in mind?'

'Well I suppose it is rather akin to dark *satori* now you mention it. The Moment of the Storm is when you enter the whirlpool deep enough to be part of the emerging chaos, where the future is still about to take shape,' replied Elfmund. Al was lost for words, and his feeling of unease became something close to a diffuse sense of panic. Simon seemed less phased, he noticed.

'"The still point at the turning of the world" as T.S. Eliot tried to describe it, perhaps?' Simon asked Elfmund. 'A bit of a lame-ass way of putting it,' retorted Elfmund, 'so I guess he'd never been

there. In Daoism it's known as "holding fast to the one". If I've understood correctly, it's the understanding that the ten thousand things and,' Elfmund looked at Al, 'and "ten thousand things" in Chinese is just a poetic term for "everything that exists", then looked back at Simon, 'it's when the ten thousand things come to be understood not as ten thousand *things* but as ten thousand *differentiations*.'

'Ah ha, making a distinction as the primary function of human cognition,' responded Simon. 'It's possible to create a whole system of mathematics just from the basic principle of making a distinction,' he continued. 'Do you mean Spencer-Brown's work in the 1960s?' replied Elfmund. Simon smiled – there's not that many people who know about *Laws of Form*, and most of those would not be leading him into some seemingly non-trivial ritual in the centre of a prehistoric sacred grove with active guardian spirits.

Elfmund turned to Al and then back to Simon. 'I'm afraid I've brought you both here without either warning you what I have in mind. Forgive me. You will survive, you will not be harmed. But you will find it very transformative. The Moment of the Storm is frightening in several ways. You will be afraid you have lost control of what is happening. You will not be able to construct any sort of coherent narrative about what is happening – and won't be able to afterwards, for that matter. And you will be afraid of doing something impulsive that could make things much worse. And that is indeed a real threat, but it is down to me to deal with that. And after the ritual you will be chilled to the core from shock. I have brought something to deal with that too.'

Simon began to realise that he probably wasn't going to get home till the next day. Elfmund, in her usual mysterious manner, just looked at him – almost through him, and smiled a 'yes'...

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They have arrived in a linear clearing in the wood. Elfmund stands, eyes closed, with her strangely-carved walking stick clenched in both fists before her. Al and Simon stand a few feet away, and a few feet from each other, facing Elfmund. Without opening her eyes, Elfmund speaks, sonorously but as if speaking to herself.

“May there be peace in the heavens, peace in the skies  
and peace on Earth.  
May the waters be plentiful.  
May the grasses and herbs bring peace to all creatures,  
And may the plants be at peace also.  
May the beneficent beings bring us peace,  
And may the way of all creation bring peace throughout  
the world.  
May all things be peaceful, and may that peace itself  
bring further peace.  
May we also bring peace to all.”

Elfmund remains stationary with her eyes closed and, for at least another minute, silent. In the same clear but quiet voice she intones:

‘We honour the spirits of this place, the spirits of the  
rocks deep beneath our feet, deposited over  
millions of years.

We honour the spirits of the soil of this place, upon  
which life depends.

We honour the spirits of the trees and plants of this place  
– the wild maple, the blackthorn, the rose, the  
brambles, all the wild flowers and the grasses.

We honour the spirits of the creatures, the birds, the  
animals and the insects of this place.’

After another pause Elfmund opens her eyes, turns to her right, then spreads her arms wide. Al and Simon spontaneously turn to face the same direction. In a surprisingly loud voice Elfmund

calls out 'Guardian of the east! We ask you to manifest beside us! Hail and welcome!' Al becomes aware of a growing sense of something invisible making itself present. But Elfmund has already turned again and he has the strong sense that he needs to turn the same way too.

Once again Elfmund calls out. 'Guardian of the south! We request you to manifest beside us! Hail and welcome!' The sense of something invisible increases.

Without prompting Al and Simon then turn again and Elfmund calls out 'Guardian of the west! We request you to manifest beside us! Hail and welcome!'

After another quarter turn Elfmund calls out 'Guardian of the north! We request your presence beside us! Hail and welcome!'

Without any undue delay Elfmund turns again to the east and Al and Simon follow. Al's knees nearly buckled. He feels – more than hears – an inner voice telling him to keep calm, he has nothing to fear. He realises this is Elfmund reassuring him. But it is hard to comply with her wishes. Not much more than ten yards away is the biggest bull he had ever seen. He is average height for a man but the top of his head is level with the top of the beast's shoulders. The head alone must weigh nearly as much as he does – and that's without taking into account the most massive pair of horns imaginable. Al guesses they have the same span as his outstretched arms. It seems real enough. As does the impressive amount of steam forming from the breath exhaled from its nostrils. But, surely it's not really real thinks Al, trying to rationalise away his fear. It is uncannily white, apart from the inside of the ears being strikingly red.

Elfmund is speaking again. 'Spirit of the east. Spirit of inspiration. Spirit of all that is about to be made manifest. Know that you are honoured here! Hail and welcome.'

A large cockerel – splendid shades of russet on his body with a black underbelly and tail, with almost luminous red around his head – walks along the back of the bull, up his neck and

perches between the horns. The bull seems aware of the bird's presence but makes no attempt to shake it off.

Elfmund turns to the south and Al and Simon do likewise. Al's knees nearly buckle again. Another bull, not much different to the first one, is about the same distance away. And, again, with steam forming from its breath in prodigious quantities. Something clicks in Al's mind. These aren't bulls. They're aurochs. Except aurochs have been extinct for... He can't remember whether it was before the Romans or after. But they are extinct. Except, seemingly, for these two.

Elfmund was speaking once more. 'Spirit of the south. Spirit of all that is most manifest. Spirit of all life and energy. Know that you are honoured here! Hail and welcome.'

Seemingly out of nowhere an eagle come towards the aurochs, spreads its wings – they might even be wider than the aurochs' horns – and settles directly on its head. The aurochs lowers its head a few feet, perhaps out of discomfort for bearing the thrust of the bird's landing, but just as possibly as a bow of obsequience to the immense bird. This can't be real, Al tells himself. But, apart from the implausibility, there is nothing to suggest it isn't.

Elfmund turns again and Al and Simon once more do the same. Al is much less surprised to see a third aurochs, just as massive as the other two, just the same excess of breath collecting in the air – it seemingly does not dissipate but just collects above the horns of each of the beasts. The steam or breath seems to have a distinctive smell. Not sandalwood. Not cinnamon. Is it frankincense? Al struggles to think if he'd ever knowingly smelt pure frankincense burning. For all he knew, Al muses, it could be myrrh. Indeed, what does myrrh smell like, he asked himself.

Elfmund speaks once more. 'Spirit of the west. Spirit of all that is in decline, all that must be cast aside, all that must be renewed. Know that you are honoured here! Hail and welcome.' This time a swan, wings at full stretch matching the span of the horns

lands on the hindquarters of the aurochs, folds its wings and settles into a comfortable resting position.

The final quarter turn to the north reveals they are now surrounded by four full-grown aurochs, all similar in appearance, with the white hides almost glowing against the increasing darkness of the surrounding woods. Elfmund voice calls out. 'Spirit of the north. Spirit of all that is yet to be made manifest. Spirit of all that is dark and unknown. Know that you are honoured here! Hail and welcome.'

Two huge black birds – much too big to be rooks so Al realises they must be ravens – land in quick succession on the aurochs' head, one on each of his horns.

Elfmund ask Al and Simon to face outwards. Al can see both the cockerel and the eagle – and the two aurochs supporting them – almost at the same time. Simon is just out of sight to his right, so Al realises must be able to see the eagle and the swan. Elfmund is behind them both, presumably facing the ravens. But her voice is too clear. She must be facing inwards, unlike Al and Simon.

Al then sees Elfmund. She is walking in a circle, outside of Al and Simon and closer to the aurochs. The steam from their breath is getting more extensive, almost meeting between the animals. It is as if Elfmund's walking is making the steam move in her wake, slowly stirring in a clockwise direction.

The steam seems to have a life of its own, constantly regenerating and reforming, swirling close to Elfmund then rising up. To Al the strangely-smelling steam seems to have an almost cat-like quality in the way it moves and all-but licks the aurochs and the birds. And all-but licking Elfmund too. Al realises this is nothing like the wafty mists of special effects for theatre and film. This isn't merely mist, it's living breath. At least, in its own way, it gives off a sense of being alive. Unprompted, the thought that it was some sort of gift came into Al's mind. And then the notion not to mess with it as it might have 'attitude'. Although a

somewhat charismatic 'attitude' rather than a malign one. Exact thoughts fail to form in Al's mind and a sense of passive acceptance takes over. Whatever it is, it is what it is.

After a couple more circuits by Elfmund the seemingly sentient steam has become denser and slowly but steadily circulates, rising higher yet coming together towards the middle. A few circuits later the steam seems like an almost complete dome and the sense of swirling is palpable. Elfmund raises her *leac seax* skywards at arm's length and once more circumambulates, this time a little faster. She stops in front of the aurochs with the eagle, with her back to him, and – in a little more than an instant – the dome of steam becomes an intense electric blue. Al goes 'WTF!' inwardly to himself.

And then a huge 'WTF!' passes through him like a wave. It feels like a ball of light has rapidly risen the length of his spine before passing out through his skin as thousands of pin-pricks which have left him with a tingling sensation. One that in another context would be incredibly sexy. And leaves behind a sense of timeless compassion for, well, everybody, everything and going back into the distant past. Al mentally steps outside these experiences to briefly think that, this is one heck of a crash-course on taking part in rituals.

'Guardians of this country', Elfmund immediately announces. 'We are here. We are here to serve in whatever ways we can.'

'Really?' thinks Al. I don't recall signing up for that. But I guess Elfmund has her own notions of consensuality... He has the sense of a door slamming in his mind.

Elfmund continues to circle and speak. 'The ancestors have told me that the dragons of Far East have foreseen a pestilence they may not be able to bring to heel.' The aurochs in front of Al lowers his head momentarily. 'This is getting seriously spooky,' Al says inwardly.

'The ancestors have also told me the bears of the Far West are concerned that more and more of the humans they live nearest

to are eating less and less. The bears fear that the old War might resume again if the Federation fails to agree on a new leader.’ This time both aurochs in Al’s field of view seem more pensive.

Elfmund was still walking in the circle between the others and the four aurochs and their avian ‘spirit riders’. Elfmund’s voice is still clear. But, as she walks in front of Al once more, with a shudder he realises she is not opening her mouth. And her eyes are closed. What is real? Is all this something Elfmund is ‘transmitting’ to him mentally? The door slams again, this time harder and leaving him with a dull headache. OK, get the message, Al thinks to himself.

Elfmund continues to circle and walks behind Al before her voice resumes. ‘We are of course well aware that the Union which at one time embraced this country is fragmenting us back to an archipelago and that may even fracture the unity of the islands themselves. But these are mostly practical matters which are less of your concern.’ The aurochs seem impassive, but still attentive.

‘We understand that what will come to pass with be known to those who survive as the Perfect Storm. We know this divination is irrevocable. However we understand – at least to some extent – that the future is still malleable.

‘We know you will do everything in your powers to guard this country and its people,’ Elfmund continues. Both aurochs in his field of vision again lower their heads, this time almost as a salute. What was it, Al wonders, that had fostered their loyalty to a different species? What had humans done to help aurochs? Didn’t humans drive them to extinction? Could this the last place in the country – in the world – where they were still living, perhaps thanks to people like Elfmund?

Elfmund’s voice resumes as she continues to circle. ‘The ancestors said you fear the Perfect Storm and summoned us to the centre. We are here. We came by our own free will. We are here to serve you in whatever ways we can. We are well aware

you can act in ways humans cannot. But the ways of the human world as it now manifests make it difficult for you. We live in that manifest world, the material world – “the world of metals” as you deem it – so can, in our own limited ways, sometimes be of assistance. You are free to ask for such assistance as we can provide, either now or at some future time.

‘We know that you may need us to break the taboo on eating and drinking your food.’ Eflmund pauses. ‘We are willing to commune.’ Another pause. ‘I say once more: We are willing to commune.’ After another pause she speaks again, louder still. ‘I say for the third time: We vow that we are willing to commune.’

For a moment Al begins to get the same sensation of the ball of light travelling up his spine. But this time it doesn’t explode. It’s as if the energy inside him is being absorbed from the slowly swirling ‘steam’, the aurochs’ breath, the same substance as the intense blue dome still above their heads. Instead of exploding it feels as if the whatever-it-is-that-it-is is rising up his spine but this time continuing from the top of his head up into that dome. And continues. And continues. The thought briefly passes through Al’s mind that if you asked him to describe it then he would say it’s the longest and most satisfying orgasm he’s ever had.

The sensation slowly fades. There is silence for some moments. Except it is not silence. There’s the sound of many tiny bells, tinkling at a frequency almost too high for humans to hear.

Al presumes that they have just communed with the guardians and spirits. Eflmund breaks the silence and instructs Al and Simon to turn round and kneel. Between where the three of them had been standing at the start of the ritual – and so equidistant from each of the four aurochs – is a tweedy sort of cloth. On which is a ceramic bowl with liquid in it – seemingly a clear golden colour, though the vessel makes it difficult to determine – and a wooden platter with approximate cubes of a white substance that is crumbly but seemingly not bread or

cake. Al thinks it may have red seeds mixed in. Quite how Elfmund had managed to lay out this behind their backs perplexes Al as she seemed to have been continually walking in a circle nearer to the beasts.

‘What you are both about to do is irrevocable. You must tell no one alive what you have done – not even that you came here. You are about to share food and drink with the Gentry. You will, at least to a certain extent, become one of the Gentry. In due course they will tell you what you need to know. But never any more than you need to know. Always do as they ask, never let them down, and you will be safe.’

Elfmund says ‘Take this, both of you, and eat of it’ before offering the platter first to Simon and then to Al before taking a small morsel herself. Al realises there is no flour in it. It might be made from ground hazelnuts but the small seeds – they seem to be white in the middle and red on the outside – impart a subtle flavour which masks the taste of the nuts.

After allowing time to eat the portion of food they had taken, Elfmund says ‘Take this, both of you, and drink of it’ before offering the bowl to Simon and, after turning the vessel around by about a quarter-turn, to Al, then taking the vessel back and turning it once more before sipping. The smell is of honey. But the taste is of pine resin. Or is it heather? Al could not recall ever tasting heather. The sense of warmth as it descends down his throat suggests to Al there is a useful amount of alcohol in it.

Elfmund is speaking, but more quietly. ‘To avoid confusing the Gentry unduly, when in communication with them you must use names known only to each other and the Gentry. Al already has an apt forename as “Aelfrad” means “elf counselled” so continuing to use Al and Alan as his everyday cognomen means Alfred is acceptable as a shadow name, though Elfred would be the better way to pronounce it.’ Elfmund then told Simon he should use the shadow name of Smeanmund as this denotes “protected by thought”.

The three remain kneeling. Al and Simon look at Elfmund. She then speaks in a slightly different tone. 'We are now with you in spirit while we live in the manifest world. We proclaim we are alive but henceforth willingly walk in both realms. We proclaim we fervently wish to remain alive but henceforth walk in both realms. We vow do your bidding to the limits of our abilities. Our only request is that you are compassionate to Elfred and Smeanmund at all times. We await your instructions.'

She speaks, quieter than before. 'It might be best if you both close your eyes.' Al does so. Soon after the high-pitched tinkling resumes, slightly intermittently before fading away. 'You can open your eyes now,' Elfmund says in her earlier tone of voice. The cloth, the platter and the bowl are no longer there, nor any evidence they ever had been. Elfmund is not near her bag and there seems no way she could have concealed the vessels and cloth. 'Stand up, turn around and face outwards again.' Elfmund then resumes circling around them but this time counter-clockwise. Starting at the north she thanks the spirits and guardians then bids them farewell. By the time Elfmund is visible to Al she has reached the aurochs in the south. The blue steam-like breath has already merged rather rapidly into the body of the aurochs. As she bids the aurochs and the eagle farewell the aurochs in front of Al begins to shrink in size and the eagle seemingly melts into the aurochs, leaving its wings protruding from the shoulders.

In very quick succession the combined beings take on the appearance of almost-normal animals, allowing for the anomalous presence of wings. Al thought he saw a horse, lion, leopard, puma, wolf and badger before the illusory beings become both too small and too translucent to identify. And, between being an aurochs and a horse, the horns seem to fold together and face forwards. If there was such a thing as a winged unicorn then I've just briefly seen one, Al thinks. Although, thinking about it again, Al muses, it could have been a unicorn without wings with a dragon on its back. It was just too brief an

instant before transforming again into what might have been a succession of big cats and then the smaller creatures.

As the steam dissipates the darkness of the night sky is revealed. So many stars. Al has never seen so many. The Milky Way is quite distinct. Elfmund notices that Al is transfixed by the night sky and almost whispers to him. 'Think of each of those stars as the soul of one of the ancestors. Or as the soul of someone yet to be born. It's the same thing, just two sides of the same coin – so to speak.'

There is an aggressive series of noises. Moments later at least twenty geese, honking to each other as they maintain their 'V'-formation, become visible – at least as silhouettes against the stars – over the nearest trees, then fly away beyond the clearing. 'So many,' Elfmund says, seemingly to herself, 'I would never have believed that death could have undone so many in so short a span.'

Turning to Al she asks if he realised which direction the birds were flying towards. 'No, I can't say I did. But it must be roughly to the north,' he replies. 'Yes. "North beyond the North Wind" is the expression.' Elfmund pauses for a moment before continuing. 'You will be ever-aware of the passing of souls. When necessary, you must always assist, as you did with the reburial of the skull. That was your apprenticeship. You hesitated then. That's understandable. But henceforth you must act more immediately. There are many things the Gentry can do that we cannot. But at the same time there are things we can do, especially in what they call 'the realm of metals', which they cannot.' She pauses and beckons to Simon to come closer.

'Al, there is much that I need to explain to you. And to Simon. There is time while we walk back to your car. But... ' Elfmund reaches into her back and brings out a thermos flask '... first you both need to have some of this soup. I made it myself. It's real, not a gift from The Gentry. It won't disappear in the blink of an eye.'

At this point Al hesitates. It is pitch dark, apart from the stars. And yet he can see sufficiently clearly. Everything's deep shadow but it is as if different shadows have their own identity. He can differentiate the darkness, but Al realises it only seems like sight, he's not actually seeing. Elfmund just says wryly 'You've got a lot of adjustments to make to what you think is real. And what you think is possible. And perhaps best to quickly forget where you used to try to draw the line with the impossible.'



During the walk back through the wood Elfmund spoke almost continuously. When they had to fall to single-file Al and Simon went ahead so they could still clearly hear her voice. When the path opened out Eldmund again moved to the right of the others.

'The Perfect Storm will cause many deaths. Many more than has arisen in these isles since the famines took their uncounted toll in Ireland. The dead cannot bury themselves. The living will have more pressing matters than to bury the dead. Indeed they will fear the dead more than any other threat.

'But despite everything we must ensure the dead are honoured and respected. The Gentry will do their best – there are far more of them than us three. Though even the Gentry fear there may not be enough geese to take all the souls during the Storm. We must assist the Gentry – and any souls who need assistance – to the best of our abilities. Though I fear my frailties may mean I become as much a liability as an asset.

'The Gentry are unable to do themselves as much as they would like because of the prevalence of metals in the modern world. Much as the Gentry may want to drive a fleet of JCBs, this is simply impossible for them. But they can change those things

we find more difficult to change, such as the way people think they think.’ Simon smiled and nodded.

‘You need not fear death, even when it is all about you. The communion food offered to you by the Gentry is their way of making you, at least in part, one of them. You two and I walk in both worlds. I have known no other way, although it took a long time for me to understand just how different other people are. You two need to quickly learn how different it is to walk in two worlds. You will take time to adjust, but the Storm is still in the future so you have enough time. But don’t dillydally, as my grandmother might have put it.

‘Our role, at least for the Gentry, is to help the souls of the deceased pass over. The problem is that what passes for the real world, at least in the West, has forgotten that each person has two souls. One is the sense of who we are – our personality, if you must. But the other soul persists for longer. It is the sense of identity still residing in the bones, or indeed any other remnants of the body. For convenience only I think of it as the “bone soul”. Remember how Christians used to think that on the day of resurrection their soul – the ghostly bit – needed to meet up with their bones? But that isn’t the case anymore. First the whole skeleton was reduced to the skull and two long bones. Then the bones were all-but forgotten when Christian creeds evolved even further away from their origins.’

‘If we were Chinese,’ remarked Simon, ‘then you wouldn’t have to explain any of that. Their worldview is very much as you describe. And not just the Chinese.’ Al responded for once, saying he was beginning to understand why the skull had needed to be honoured with reburial.

Elfmund resumed. ‘Remember the rules of “engagement”. They must never be knowingly broken. Firstly, you cannot make people aware of the Gentry or your communion with them. Secondly, you cannot refuse a request for assistance, except that a greater need is more pressing. Finally, you cannot ask for

payment – although neither should you refuse what is offered. Accept graciously unless it is beyond the means of the donor.'

Al asks how the Gentry will communicate with them. 'The Gentry will communicate as they feel best,' responded Elfmund with a laugh. 'You will be aware. Birds are willing messengers as they two travel in two worlds – those of land and air. Some of course also travel in the third world of water. Al – you will need to pay special attention to corvids and especially jackdaws. From what you once said while we were at the henge I know you have a special affection and can distinguish them from crows.' Al nodded. 'Simon – as you live close to water then waterfowl of all kinds will be significant. But pay especial attention to sightings of herons.'



In the following weeks Simon would find work increasingly difficult. His unbidden ability to glimpse someone's future would come to depress him as this would make him briefly aware that even some of the best of his students would have futile or brief lives after graduating. Al would gain a reputation with work colleagues for having hunches which proved to be uncannily prescient. Never anything too serious – typically just thoughts that when loading the car before going on site he'd need a tool or item of clothing that he never normally used. He'd dismiss such thoughts as unlikely, only to find that some entirely unexpected problem would arise which could have been easily sorted if he'd brought the item concerned.

As the weeks passed into months neither Simon nor Al would find it any easier to walk in both worlds. They would never welcome the frequent sense that everything around them was the result of so many generations of human endeavour. Least welcome of all would be the awareness that some of those people were still all-but present. The ability to distinguish the

shadows in darkness would soon enough be treated with considerable caution as, outside carefully guarded places such as the sacred grove, then the shadows would more likely be the shades of the dead rather than inert objects.

Simon and Al would both need to seek advice from Elfmund on several occasions. She would tell them that *leac* was like time which too flowed steadily through everything, only sometimes becoming an 'issue', either for good or bad. Simon would understand this readily but Al would never get past thinking this only added a further level of complexity. But, as Elfmund would discover, Al had the innate ability to channel *leac* into himself.

Elfmund would come to wonder if she had been wrong to arrange for these two people to commune with the Gentry. But she would come to fully understand that the Gentry had been right to arrange this as and when they did – but only after the Storm arrived.



## Acknowledgements and end notes

Firstly, more a case of apologies than thanks. To all my friends and acquaintances who recognise some aspect of their lives or appearance and are confused by how they have been blended to create composite characters. I'm assuming you'd prefer not be all be listed by name. But you know who you are. To each of you a big thanks. And an even more massive apology.

Sue and Jill – or maybe Gill – did sit down next to me at the Anatolia restaurant in Stoneycote one evening and pass on the information about the presences at the Durham Ox. In the 1960s this pub became a hotel and changed then, more recently, has ceased to be a hotel. It is now a centre for 'transformative retreats' – although that's not what the sign actually says.

'The moment of the storm' is a key motif in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. 'Holding fast to the one' and related ideas are key to early Taoism – read Harold Roth's *Original Tao* if you want to understand more.

The quotation starting 'May there be peace in the heavens, peace in the skies and peace on Earth' is from the *Yajur Veda*.

'I would never have believed that death could have undone so many...' is simultaneously a paraphrase of a line in Dante's *Inferno* and T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*.

Simon Danser and Beatrice Walditch have published books in the 'real world' (or what people think is the real world... ). Except they are both 'pen names' of the author of this fictional story. This blurring of 'reality' and 'fiction' to create a different reality was partly inspired by the introduction to Jeffrey J. Kripal's truly mind-changing book, *Authors of the Impossible: The paranormal and the sacred* (Chicago UP 2010) and its conjoined twin, *Mutants and Mystics: Science fiction, superhero*

*comics and the paranormal* (Chicago UP 2011). On page 241 of the latter book you will find the section about an author's 'tulpa' teaching a baffled human about their own 'tulpa'. It may or may not help you make sense of this story.

The characters and overall events in this story are fictional. However most of the 'paranormal experiences' have been recounted to me first-hand by friends and acquaintances or happened to me personally.

The main part was drafted around Yule 2015 when I was still living in the only house on the line of the prehistoric henge bank at Avebury in Wiltshire. The following Spring my own 'Moment of the Storm' arose. Only in the weeks before Hallowe'en 2020, after I'd returned to the village less than three miles from the *nemeton*, did I write the final sections.