



An extract from...

JEFF NOON

CREEPING JENNY

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**ANGRY
ROBOT**

FOOL'S CHARM

Nyquist wiped his mouth and pulled his coat and scarf tighter around him and tilted his trilby further down over his brow, giving himself a shadow to hide within. It wasn't enough and so he closed his eyes, adding darkness. It still wasn't enough. He couldn't shut down all his senses. Birdsong, the constant play of the wind. The great outdoors. He felt sick. And Christ, what was that smell, some kind of animal dung? Or rotting plants, or dead flesh? He tried looking round again and felt just as faint. He needed something to focus on, one thing, and all he could choose was the hedge lining one side of the road. He stared at the twigs and the thorns and the remains of a spider's web, and he kept them all in view for as long as possible, until his heart settled.

He turned at the sound of a voice. Two other passengers had alighted from the bus and they were looking at him now. He gave them a nod and his best attempt at a smile, but they continued to gaze at him, their expressions unreadable, and then without a word they moved to the door of a roadside cottage.

Nyquist took in his surroundings. There was a signpost that pointed in three directions: up and down the country road to Lockhampton and Bligh, and across a field towards Hoxley. And everywhere he looked, on all sides, the moors stretched away. His mind reeled. There was too much open space, too much sky. Perhaps his business would be finished quickly and he'd soon be standing here again, waiting for the bus to take him back to the train station.

Perhaps the whole thing had been a mistake. Or a joke. A terrible joke. Battered suitcase in hand he set off across the field, following a pathway. The clouds were mottled grey and black, threatening rain. He kept his head down and walked on, hoping the village wouldn't be too far, and at last he reached a stretch of woodland. He breathed a little easier here, in the shadowed interior. Fallen leaves had turned to mulch underfoot. Branches

creaked, twigs rustled against each other. A lone bird chattered. It sounded like a tiny engine winding up and winding back down. The pathway merged into the undergrowth and he was soon entirely surrounded by trees. He really didn't know where he was going.

He stepped into a clearing, and he stood where he was, unmoving.

The sky was visible above the circle of trees, even cloudier now, heavier.

A moment of silence took him over. No, not quite silence. He could hear a fluttering sound. He listened closely and then peered into the knotted branches, where he spied a small white object. It was a card, a plain white card, dangling at the end of a length of thread. The thread was tied at the other end around a twig. He peered into the tangle of the trees and saw that two words were written on the card, on one side only. The words were visible and then not, as the card turned and turned in the breeze.

Broken Bone...

Broken Bone...

Broken Bone...

And now that he'd seen one card others became apparent to him, hanging from other branches of this tree, and from the branches and twigs of all the trees around. Nyquist could only imagine they had been placed here by children from the village, a game or spell of some kind. Each card held a word or phrase of its own: *Scatter Seed, Witch's Knot, Waving Hands, Aerial, Silver Shiver, Pretty Pattern, Long to Depart, Spider's Home*. Hundreds of the cards were visible. *Wormwood, Motionless, Shape of Wings...*

He moved on at random, hoping to locate the path once more, but had taken only a few steps when he heard another sound, a human sound. A single cry of anguish. He spun round, in time to see something moving, low down among the branches. Nyquist approached and a figure darted aside in a snap and clatter of twigs.

"Who's there?"

There was no answer, only the sound of the wood settling back into a slow trembling state. And then the figure announced, "I'm alone here."

Nyquist replied quickly. "So am I."

A moment passed and then the voice announced, "We can't both be alone, otherwise we wouldn't be alone."

Nyquist considered in turn: "We were alone, but now we're not."

It was enough of an answer, for now the figure stood upright and stepped forward. It was a woman of singular aspect, entirely at home in the evening shade. She had wild and ragged hair and her hands were tipped with fingernails which were long, sharp, and dirty with shreds of bark. It was impossible to tell how old she was. The woods stirred, stirred again, and there she was, standing in front of him, using the branches around her as a set of levers by which she propelled herself forward. Nyquist was fascinated. She might easily be mistaken for a creature of myth, until she came close enough to show her eyes, which were a quite startling blue, and entirely human.

“Good evening, sir. My name is Sylvia.”

She was dressed in black rags and her hair was woven with twigs and stems and leaves and husks and burrs, either caught there in her travels or threaded on purpose.

“I’m guessing you’re lost,” she said.

“That might be the case.”

The woman shuffled forward, causing the branches to groan and rasp. “You’re my first guest this evening. But that’s usually the case, on this particular day. I used to be a midwife, you know?”

“Is that a fact?”

Nyquist found it difficult to follow her logic.

“It is a fact.” Sylvia danced from foot to foot. “But then I lost one brother to sickness, and another to the war. Only my sister remains to me.”

“And this stopped you from being a midwife, because...”

“Careful now. Please don’t disturb the names.”

It took him a moment to understand her warning – one of the name tags had snagged on his scarf and was being pulled away from the branch, the thread almost breaking. He stepped forward, relieving the pressure. Sylvia came to him to unhook the card from his clothing.

“It takes me a long time to make them up.”

She carried a small bag slung across her shoulder. She dipped into this and pulled out another card and a wax crayon. She choose a nearby branch seemingly at random, thought for a moment and then prepared to write on the card. “*Forked Tongue?* No, *Oberon’s Favourite?* No. Let me think... *The One who Talks With the Sky.* Argh, no. Too much, far too much, who do you think you are, Wordsworth?! No. Come on, Sylvia. Think, woman!”

“What are you doing?”

She looked at Nyquist sideways on. “Deciding on a name, what else?”

“You’re naming the tree?”

“No, a name for the branch, of course, the branch! Every branch has a different name.”

“Why?”

“Because every branch is different, why else? A unique object in the universe.” Her arms spread out wide. “The tree has a name, a central name, and the trunk has a name, each visible root has a name. And each and every branch will have a name, once I’ve finished. And I’ve already made a start on the twigs, one by one. Hopefully I’ll be done by springtime, and then I’ll start on the leaves and the buds, one by one by one, naming each in turn. Oh, I am so looking forward to the spring!”

Nyquist started to ask for the way to the village, but Sylvia held up a hand, urging him to silence.

“Ah, I have it.” Now she wrote, pressing hard with the crayon to darken the mark as much as possible. “There it is. Perfect. What do you think?” She held the card out for him to look at: *Tangled Hair*.

He nodded. “It’s a good name.”

“Oh, but wait, what about *Sun Pointer*? Isn’t that better?”

“Maybe...”

Sylvia frowned. “Well, I’ve made the card out now, so I’ll stick with it.” She tied the thread around the branch, allowing the card to dangle down. It spun and spun and then settled. “Actually, now it’s in place, I like it. *Tangled Hair*. Yes, I am pleased with that one.”

They both looked on as the naming card moved in the breeze.

“Now then.” She turned to Nyquist. “Where are you heading? Perhaps I can help.”

“Hoxley-on-the-Hale.”

“Good choice.” She smiled. “Take the middle path.”

Nyquist stared into the trees of the clearing.

“Can’t you see it?”

“Not quite.”

Sylvia danced again. “Come, I’ll show you. Step lightly. And don’t disturb my cards!”

He followed her through a gap between the trees and soon a clear path could be made out. He thanked Sylvia and was about to tell her his name when she stopped him with a finger to his lips

“Hush! Now just hush. I don’t need to know your name.”

“Why’s that?”

“I have already given you a name. A new name. A proper name. Here, let

me write it down for you.” She wrote with her crayon on a fresh card and presented it to him, face-down. “Don’t look at it now. Later, later, give it one hour to act upon itself, and upon your person. And then gaze at it for fully ten minutes. Go on, hide it away, put it in your pocket. Here, let me.” She slipped the card into an inside pocket of his overcoat.

Nyquist went on his way. The branches waved their tags at him: *Perfect Perch, Twig For Sale, Lady Anna’s Fan, Not Quite an Oak, Billy Splinters, Birds Come Hither*. Nyquist recited each name to himself, whispering: the poem of the woods.

Soon he came a stile in a fence, with open land beyond. Night was slowly falling. He climbed over. A field sloped down into a valley and for a good few moments he stood where he was, staring into the dim air. A carrier pigeon was sitting on a fence post nearby. A tiny metal tube was attached to its leg.

The distant crack of a shotgun sent the bird flapping away.

The gun sounded another two times. Far off, muffled. In the city the noise would make him duck for cover, but here it was probably hunters taking advantage of the last of the light, some poor hare or rabbit or grouse their target. Country life. Blood and guts and tooth and claw. Nyquist swore to himself. This wasn’t his kind of place, not at all. He was a child of the city, of narrow streets and neon signs and people who came alive at night, or in the fierce heat of day, stalkers, hawkers, crooks and hookers, crazy-eyed teenagers scrawling their names on the walls, the fierce hustle and bustle of life pressed up close. And specimens like himself – investigators, seekers after clues, grubbing around in the dark in hope of a sparkle. Still, there was no choice in the matter. He had to see this through.

Below, cradled in the vale, lay the village of Hoxley.

The first drops of rain fell as he picked up his case and set off down the slope.

THE BATTLE OF THE TEACUP

It was a tiny place. A high street, a dozen or so houses on each side, a pub and a corner shop, a few other streets and lanes leading off the first but all in one direction only, and that was about it. A church at one end, a school at the other. Two street lamps. Nyquist stood at the head of the road, under one of the lamps, and he took an envelope from his suitcase. He drew out a set of photographs, and found one depicting the street. The edges of the image were faded and details were lost here and there, blurred over, but yes, it was the same location. In fact the photograph had been taken from somewhere near

this exact spot. And he was sure then, for the first time, that he had come to the right place: Hoxley-on-the-Hale.

He was nervous. What would he find here?

The rain had come and gone, a short but violent downpour, enough to soak him though and to drive people indoors. The street was deserted. He walked along, passing the shop and the pub, both closed, and the expanse of a village green with a circular pond and an oak tree that looked as old as the village itself. A maypole stood at the centre of the green, its revelries long passed. The clock on the church tower crept towards six. The cold set in deep and his breath silvered the air.

He crossed over a stone bridge. The waters of the river Hale passed beneath, and the church and its graveyard waited for him on the other side. He walked around the building, left to right. It was a small church. The tombstones were laid out without pattern, many of them cracked or fallen over, pushed up by the roots of trees. The newest addition seemed to be *Gladys Coombes*. She'd died in the spring of this year, aged 38. A fresh bunch of flowers lay at her graveside. The doors to the church were locked. Beyond the church the woods took up again; no more houses. He walked back over the bridge onto the high street. The pub was called The Swan With Two Necks. It would probably open up soon and he could see if they had a room available. And a drink. He sat down on a bench. He was tired and dirty, having travelled all day long to get here. What could he do next? Perhaps one of the customers in the pub would help him? Yes, that was it, he'd ask everyone about the person he had to find. But then he thought again: would such a move be wise? Maybe it was best to play it tight.

Across the way a light came on in the downstairs room of a house.

Nyquist examined the photographs by the glow of the street lamp. Each was dark in places, or spotted with white dots, or blurred.

A village street.

A church.

A corner shop.

A field with a tower visible in the distance.

Two people standing outside a house. Male, female. Talking to each other, their faces turned from the camera.

Another man, older, mid-fifties. The face as subject matter: a portrait of sorts. But his features were slightly distorted in parts, smeared across the surface.

Six images, each one taken through the same damaged lens.

The church was the same church he had walked round, and the shop across the street was identical to the one in the photo. *Featherstonehaugh's Store*. The

letters were squashed and tiny, in order to fit on the board.

A pair of winter moths fluttered above his head: his thoughts taking flight. Nyquist slid the photographs back into their envelope, all except for one, the image of the couple standing outside a house. Perhaps if he found this residence, it would give him a way forward. He stood up and walked from end of the high street to the other, checking each house in turn against the one in the image, but none of them matched.

He took the first of the side streets, nearest the school. It was called Hodgepodge Lane: just six houses and then open country, the meagre light of the village waning quickly into a grey landscape. None of the houses corresponded to the one in the photograph. He moved on, exploring each side street in turn. One of them, Pyke Road, was much longer than the others, allowing the village to continue up the gentle slopes of the valley. He walked up, looking into one tiny side street after another. He was about to give up and head back down the village centre, when at last he found the cottage he was looking for. He'd already passed it once. He held the photograph up to his eye line, to match each feature and decoration in turn. The house was called *Yew Tree Cottage*. Nyquist rapped the crow's head knocker against the door.

It took a while. It took a long while. Until at last he heard someone moving around inside and a voice calling out, "Go away. No visitors today."

Nyquist rapped again, louder this time. "Hello. I need to talk to you. It's important."

Minutes passed. He was tempted to knock a third time, but then the door opened and a man peered out at him through a gap. One eye was visible.

"Yes, what do you want?" "I'm trying to find someone."

"There's no one here to find."

"You might be able to help. I was given this address." It wasn't quite true, but Nyquist needed to act.

The visible eye blinked a few times. "Who are you?"

"Can I come in, please? It's freezing out here, and I got caught in the rain."

"Quickly then, before someone sees you!"

The door opened wider and the man grabbed Nyquist by the arm and pulled him inside, dragging him roughly into the hallway. The door closed immediately. The man's face loomed close. "What were you doing out there? You shouldn't be outside, not today." He gestured to an inner doorway. "Well then, make yourself at home. I'll be with you in a minute."

The householder walked off towards the kitchen at the back of the house,

where the kettle was already whistling. Nyquist entered the living room. It was softly lit by a standard lamp, and it took him a few moments to realise he wasn't alone. A woman was sitting in an armchair, facing the radio. He nodded to her. She remained as she was, perfectly still, staring at the radio's grille with eyes that never seemed to move. But the apparatus was silent: no voices, no music.

Nyquist coughed and looked around the room, taking in the sideboard complete with a set of decorative plates, a birdcage on a tall stand, a painting showing a dismal seascape. He went over to the fireplace and warmed his hands.

The woman sat in silence.

The clock on the mantel ticked gently.

He turned to the birdcage, peering through the bars at a blue and yellow budgerigar. He made a chirruping noise, but the bird was too busy examining itself in a small oval mirror.

He looked again at the woman: she was as still as before, staring, staring, staring.

The man who had let him in came into the room, carrying a teapot and cups on a tray.

He put these down on a side table and poured Nyquist a cup of tea. Biscuits were offered. The woman in the chair was ignored. The two men sat adjacent to each other at a table and drank their tea and ate their custard creams. Introductions were made: "We are the Bainbridges. Ian, and Hilda." He nodded to the woman in the armchair, but she didn't turn to look his way.

"My wife." He said it with a heavy heart.

Nyquist gave his name in turn. Then he said, "I need your help." He knew of no other opening.

Bainbridge looked nervous and he spoke in a sudden rush, "As you might ascertain I am a man of some intelligence, but really, this is beyond my comprehension, that such a thing might happen on today of all days." He was in his forties, yet he seemed older in his speech patterns, his mannerisms, and the way he dressed: a brown jumper over a check shirt, cavalry twill trousers and polished brogues. His hair was shiny with brilliantine, a lot of it. He was healthy looking, well-bred, yet his eyes were the oldest part of him: all the pains of his life had collected here. He rubbed at them now, spreading tears on his cheeks, and he repeated: "Today of all days!"

"It's a Thursday," Nyquist said. "I don't understand." "Not any old Thursday. It's Saint Switten's Day."

The very mention of the saint was enough to cause Bainbridge's head to bow down so low that his chin was tucked into his chest. He was mumbling a prayer, the words unheard until the final amen. The budgerigar sang sweetly in its cage.

Bainbridge looked up, a calmness on his face as he explained: "We're not supposed to go outside on Switten's Day, not until midnight."

"That's when the curfew ends?"

"It's not a curfew. It is time put aside for silent contemplation. Of course, not everyone follows this to the letter, darting from house to pub and back, thinking a few minutes here and there don't count. Or else they cover their heads with an umbrella, so the sunrays or the moonlight doesn't touch them." He tutted. "Ridiculous."

"What's the punishment?"

The man showed a set of yellowing teeth. "This is not a day for flippancy." Nyquist was scrutinised. The table was cleared of crumbs. More tea was poured. The Queen's face smiled demurely from the curve of the cup, a souvenir of the coronation.

"Tell me about Saint Switten's Day."

"We have our traditions. Our ritual observances. This one goes back to when Switten himself walked these fields around, centuries past." Bainbridge tapped on the birdcage, causing the occupant to flap its wings uselessly. "Abel Switten was punished terribly for his beliefs, stripped bare and staked out in the dirt." He made a blessing, his hands descending from brow to stomach, tapping at five points in between in a serpentine curve. "We are beholden to our benefactors." Nyquist felt the day was getting the better of him. He said, "I've been travelling by train since eight this morning. I haven't eaten, not properly. And then a long wait for a bus, and a ride across country. Another hour of that.

And then I had to walk through the fields, through a wood! A goddamn wood! In the rain."

Bainbridge shook his head in wonder.

Nyquist cursed. "I've never stood in a field before, not one so large."

"Never?"

"The sky hurts me."

The budgerigar started pecking at the bars of its cage repeatedly, making a racket. Mr Bainbridge tried to calm the bird, rubbing fingers and thumb together and speaking softly: "Here, Bertie. Here, Bertie, Bertie." And so on. It had a suitable effect and the creature was quiet once more.

Nyquist placed the photograph of the house on the table. Bainbridge looked surprised. "That is my house. Yew Tree Cottage. Why do you have a picture of my house?"

"And this is you?" Nyquist's tapped at one of the two people depicted. "It looks like you. And the other person looks very like your wife."

Bainbridge picked up the photograph and studied it more closely.

“I’m sorry, Mr Nyquist. I’m afraid I don’t understand what you’re asking—”

The radio crackled suddenly. Hilda Bainbridge bent forward slightly in response to the single burst of static.

Her husband held his breath.

Nyquist looked from one person to the other, expecting a deeper reaction or a speech. But none came.

The budgerigar sang the same few notes over and over, like a broken recording.

Nyquist decided to tell the truth. He took the other five photographs from the envelope and laid them out on the tablecloth so that each image was visible. “I received these in the post a few days ago. There was no accompanying letter. So I don’t know who sent them. Or why.” He paused. “But I intend to find out.”

Bainbridge looked at the photographs without speaking.

Nyquist carried on: “All of them show scenes from this village. Look.” He showed the postmark on the envelope: “Hoxley. There are a number of villages called that, so I had to do a little detective work. The name of the church, and the shop, and this delivery van, here.” He pointed to the photograph of the high street, to a parked van. “Sutton’s. A bakers. You can make out the address painted on the side. I needed a magnifying glass to read it.”

“The Suttons are well known around these parts,” Mr Bainbridge said. He pointed out the brand name on the one remaining custard cream. “They’re a local firm.”

“Exactly. A *local* firm.” Nyquist’s eye passed over each photograph. “So I did a bit of digging, and I put it all together.”

“I’m impressed.”

“It’s my job. How I make my living.”

Bainbridge looked at him in a new way. “You’re a police officer?” “A private investigator.”

“I see. So this a case you’re working on, for a client?”

Nyquist took a moment to answer. “This is for me. Entirely for me.”

Bainbridge turned his attention to another image, the one showing the tower in a field. He said, “I’ve never seen this building before. I don’t think it’s from around here.”

“It’s not very clear in the shot.”

“Still, I don’t recognise it.”

Nyquist turned one of the photographs over. “What about this? The photographer’s mark. It’s on all six pictures.” It was small pale blue-inked

rectangle, somewhat faded, the stamp damaged. "But I can't see the name properly. Nor the address."

Bainbridge squinted. "No. It's too faint."

"There aren't any photographers in the village, professional ones, I mean?" "Oh, maybe, yes, but I don't believe they live here anymore. I think they left the village a little while ago."

"What were they called?"

"I really can't remember. I don't like having my photograph taken, neither does Hilda. We're very private people."

"But somebody took this picture of you and your wife."

Bainbridge looked puzzled. "As you can see, it was taken without our knowledge. Why would anyone do that? It scares me, to think of it."

"You've no idea?"

"Hilda and I, we lead ordinary lives. It sounds ridiculous to say it, but there is nothing to spy upon. Nothing at all."

There was an awkward moment. Neither man spoke. Nyquist glanced at the clock on the mantel: ten past seven.

"What I don't understand," Bainbridge said, "is why you've come all this way? I mean to say, why is this so important to you?"

Nyquist gathered up the photographs until only one was left on the table, the portrait of the middle-aged man.

"Tell me, do you know this person?"

Bainbridge glanced at the image and shook his head. "No."

"Take a closer look."

"I've told you. I don't know him."

There was a noise from the corner of the room and Nyquist looked that way, hoping the woman was alert now, that she might have something to offer. But she was sitting there as before, gazing intently at the now silent radio set. Perhaps her eyes moved slightly, perhaps they flickered?

Bainbridge picked up the photograph. "I can see a family resemblance." "Yes. It's my father."

Nyquist could feel his heart being wound up tight, a fragile half-broken machine. "I haven't seen him since I was a child. A boy. Twenty-four years have passed. I thought he was dead. And now..." He looked at the photograph. "And now this."

Ian Bainbridge stared at his guest. This stranger, a wanderer, someone who didn't know the rules, a lost soul. He said, "I swear. I swear on Saint Switten's unmarked grave, in all my years I have never seen this man."

Nyquist frowned. He gazed at his father's face. Then he swallowed the last gulp of tea and said, "There's something in my cup."

"There is?"

"Christ. It's moving about."

Bainbridge was puzzled. "You know my mother used to read the shapes in tea leaves. She could view a person's future through them."

Nyquist was irritated. "What would she make of this?"

Bainbridge looked into the offered receptacle. "I cannot say." But his eyes widened, as Nyquist reached into the cup and made to pull out the worm or insect or whatever it was. The creature's squirming body stretched out, one end of it still clinging to the cup's interior.

"What the hell are you feeding me?"

"I'm really sorry about this," Bainbridge answered. "I don't know what to say."

The worm or whatever it was was still clinging on, lengthening as Nyquist tried to pull it loose. He leaned forward to examine the foreign body.

"I don't think it's a worm. It's the wrong colour. Unless you have green worms around here?"

"No, of course not. Green? No. Nothing like that. Just normal worms, nothing special."

"I think this is more like a plant." "A plant? Really?"

"It's a tendril, or a piece of root." Nyquist turned the teacup this way and that under the light. He said, "But the way it moves, it's more like a living creature." Bainbridge looked worried, terrified almost. His voice rose in pitch. "We only bring the coronation tea set out when we have guests, which is very rarely these days. And anyway, I keep a clean house!"

Now the two men were both looking at the strange fibrous substance held between cup, and Nyquist's forefinger and thumb. It had stretched to about a foot in length and was still clinging onto the china by its suckered end. Queen Elizabeth II continued to smile gracefully from the cup's outer surface.

"I can feel it pulling back at me," Nyquist said. He felt lightheaded. His eyes couldn't quite stay in focus. His tongue was thick in his mouth.

"I don't feel well."

The dark green fibre was wet and sticky. Tiny burrs hooked at his skin. He gave it a sharp tug, but instead of the sucker coming loose from the cup, the tendril extended itself even further and wrapped itself around his fingers.

“It’s got you!”

“The thing’s digging in.” It was beginning to hurt. “It’s tightening.” Nyquist pulled with all his strength, watching in a kind of horrified fascination as the tendril stretched out, further and further.

“I think it likes you,” Bainbridge whispered. The fear had left him. Now he had a look of wonder in his eyes. “It doesn’t like me. And it doesn’t like Hilda. It likes you.”

“Hold the cup!”

Bainbridge did so, as Nyquist backed away from the table, until he reached the limits of the creature’s physical hold. There was a bureau in the corner of the room, and his free hand scrabbled around until it closed on the handle of a paper knife. Bainbridge gasped, and he whispered, “Don’t hurt it.” Nyquist swore at him. Or tried to. Nothing made sense, not a single thought or word. Had he been poisoned? Was he hallucinating? Only one thing mattered now. He placed the blade against the tendril and started to slice into it. It was awkward using his left hand, and the thing was resilient, but eventually the knife did its work and the tendril snapped in two. Bainbridge groaned aloud. His wife looked on, her eyes turned at last to the scene before her, a lone silent member of the audience at an absurdist drama.

One section of the tendril was still wrapped around Nyquist’s fingers, but it was weaker now. He pulled it loose and threw it to the floor.

“I felt that.” He could speak again, after a fashion.

“What? You’re mumbling. I can’t hear you.”

Nyquist rubbed at the fingers of his hand. “When I cut into it, it really dug in. Holding on for dear life.” He grabbed the cup from Bainbridge’s hands, and examined the remaining half of the tendril. There was a green ooze seeping from the severed end.

“Is that blood?” Bainbridge asked.

“It’s green. Like sap.”

“So it is a plant then.” Bainbridge’s mood had changed again. He now looked like a man in a puzzle palace, trying to find his way out.

Nyquist put the cup down on the table. “I killed one half of it. But this section’s still alive. It’s like a worm that’s been cut in two.”

“You said it wasn’t a worm.”

“Well then, I don’t know...” Nyquist couldn’t finish the sentence. He tried to gather up the photographs, but his hands wouldn’t quite do what he asked of them.

“I’m sorry I can’t help you further,” Bainbridge said.

“I can taste it.”

“What?”

“That thing you put in my tea.” He steadied himself against the table’s edge. “I didn’t put—”

“It’s nasty. Bitter. It tastes like...”

“Like what?”

“Like biting into a moth. Not that I’ve ever...”

Bainbridge grinned. “Oh, I’m sure the effects are temporary.” “I don’t feel too good.”

“You see, I’m just trying to...”

“Yes?”

“To live my life. And to look after Hilda, that’s all.”

Nyquist felt sick in his stomach. “All I need is... all I need is information... relating to my father.” His body was slowing down.

“I’ve told you everything I know.”

He looked into Bainbridge’s face. “I’ve interviewed lots of men.” He had put on an act, forcing the words out. “Tougher guys than you.”

“You have?”

One last effort: “I know when someone’s lying.”

Hilda Bainbridge clapped her hands together, just the once. The sound was shocking.

It set the budgerigar fluttering and chirping madly. It took Nyquist’s every last ounce of strength, just to stay upright. He looked at the woman in the armchair. She was staring at him intently, without a flicker of her eyelids. The room trembled.

One shiver, a second shiver.

He placed a hand against the wall, holding on.

Like so. Concentrate. You can...

The third shiver.

The budgie started to ring its little silver bell, over and over and over.

THE MAYPOLE DANCE

He looked up and saw the moon and the overarching swathe of stars, more than he had ever seen in his life, and for a moment he felt unsteady. Drops of rain fell on his face, refreshing him. A drink from the gods. Nyquist stayed like this for a while, until he felt steady on his feet and able to move on. He walked

towards Pyke Road and then turned to head back down the hill. By his watch it was past eight o'clock. The streets were deserted, not a soul was seen, no cars drove by. He remembered what Ian Bainbridge had told him, that nobody was supposed to be outside on Saint Switten's Day. He passed lighted and darkened windows, curtained and uncurtained, and on occasion he glanced in and saw families in living rooms, gathered around the radio or playing board games, or old men and women alone, or young couples sitting together on the settee. One life after another, so many doors to be knocked upon, so many questions to be asked. *Have you see this man, he's called George, he's my father, do you know where he his?* But Nyquist walked on. He could not intrude, not yet.

Ahead he saw the village green. He was approaching it from a new direction: the oak tree, the pond, the maypole, they all seemed in a different relationship to each other. But he was relieved and he stopped to take in the scene. The public house was visible from here, its windows glowing with a welcoming light. He realised the significance of the pub's name. In his city of his birth, people used different names for the night sky constellations, and one of the most famous was the Swan With Two Necks. Surely, this was a good omen. He could remember standing in the back yard and his father pointing out the visible stars to him, and calling out the names of the patterns one by one.

The Hooded Man

Dove with Broken Wing and Olive Branch

The Music Box

Maiden in Waiting

The Swan With Two Necks

Nyquist set off across across the remains of a cricket field, the white markings barely seen in the browning grass. A circle of burnt earth marked the remains of a bonfire. There were no lights on the green, and he could hardly see where to step.

The bright ribbons, wrapped around the maypole for the winter months, had come loose and were flapping in the wind.

The rain fell softly, a caress on his skin.

The water in the pond looked like black ink. The branches of the oak tree creaked and rustled and he thought again of Sylvia of the Woods and her naming tags. His hand reached into his pocket to pull out the card she had placed there: his new name. He stopped to read it but it was too dark to see clearly, and the wording seemed to be out of focus.

Nyquist placed his suitcase on the ground.

A large bird had landed on the top of the maypole, a raven. It flapped

and hopped and settled, and made its raucous call, the notes loud enough to call out the dead. In response, two nebulous shapes now danced around the pole: shadows, nothing more. Another joined them, and one more. Children. Boys and girls. One by one until six were gathered altogether, each clothed in moonlight. He could hear their voices singing from afar. Their bodies had travelled a great distance to get here, months, or years even, to appear as phantoms of spring in the wintertime. Hazy figures. Was he seeing things? Was this another effect of the poison in the teacup?

Nyquist stood his ground. He remembered Bainbridge's final words to him, at the door of the cottage; "Whatever you do, don't talk to anyone. If they're out tonight, they're up to no good. Or ghosts." Still, something had to be done. He spoke softly.

"Who are you?"

The shadows danced on. The ribbons slapped and hissed, winding and unwinding. A strange clattering sound was heard, perhaps an effect of the wind on the pole.

Nyquist stepped closer and tried to peer into the gloom.

The dancers circled around each other, and around the pole. Their song continued, its words audible now, or nearly so, floating in the dark air.

Sing along a Sally, O

The moon is in the valley, O

He couldn't help but be drawn forth by the sight and the sound, close enough to feel the shadow children as they passed by, close enough almost to be a dancer himself, caught in a game. And even this close to he was still unsure: were the children real, or imagined? The music, the slap of the ribbons and the shrieks of joy or terror, the motion of the wind writing its own story across the surface of the pond, he saw it all, and saw nothing, and reached out, steady now, steady, and he brushed against one child, a young boy, and felt hardly anything from the contact other than a breath. Their song had more substance than their bodies.

Come to grief or come what may,

Tolly Man, Tolly Man, come out to play!

And then they were gone, in an instant. He heard only the cries of the children as they raced across the green, he saw only their white tunics in the dark night.

Now all was silent, and pure. The drug from the plant in the teacup in the cottage in the village in the landscape: all these things were in his mind.

Nyquist felt dizzy. He reached out with both hands, holding the naming card aloft.

This world... this world is waiting for you...

He gathered moonlight in the eyes.

He gathered life from the pond's black depths, from whatever stirred there, and from the oak tree, the branches, the roots.

He gathered the silent song from the maypole where a night bird was perched.

He gathered time from the cricketers who played here in the summer months, the chock of ball on bat and the cheers of the crowd and the sound of lemonade poured into glasses, here, in the cold early days of December, 1959.

He gathered the night and the blood and the breath and the games. Nyquist felt it all, all in that place, all in that one moment collected together.

And his father's face appeared before him, dark and clouded, floating as a mist, blown hither and fro by the wind but always buffeted back to where it now was. Almost pulled apart by a sudden gust, but returning, returning to its shapes, its form of dust and shadow.

Voices echoed across the green.

Tolly Man, O Tolly Man... Nyquist could not move.

Come to grief or come what may...

The ghost of his father whispered, catching the last of the children's cries

Come out to play...

The apparition was drifting away, scattering. Nyquist moved at last, only to be attacked by the raven as it flew down from its perch, circling around him, cawing, flashing its wings, making mock, pecking at his clothes and the skin of his hands.

He battered it away. The wind cut through him. And then he was alone once more.

The children had gone, his father also.

The maypole was silent, its ribbons tightly bound.

He shivered to his soul. The back of his hand was bleeding.

The bird sat atop the pole, as before. Something was held in its beak, a white object. Nyquist squinted into the moonlight. He could see that the

raven had stolen his naming card. It brought a sadness to him. He reached up, but the pole was too high. He called out in some ridiculous fashion, making noises.

The bird flew off, over to the trees that lined the far end of the green.