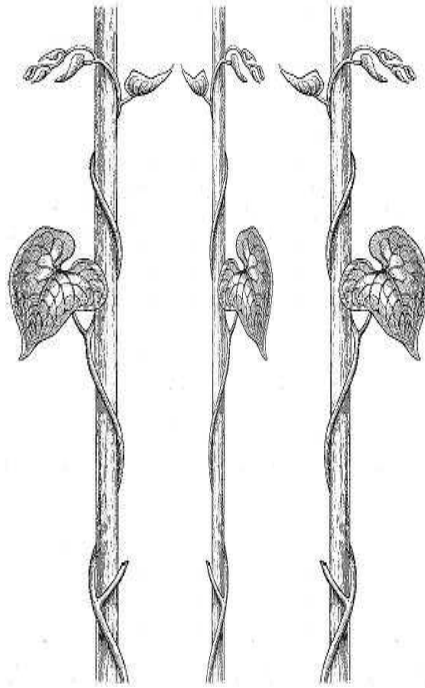


Now We  
Are  
Green

Luke  
Andreski

*Now we are green*

For my father  
1919 - 2007



*Now we are green*

# **Chapter One**

## *Marshal*

12.30 a.m. – strung out across the landscape of his parent’s lounge like Gulliver caught in a Lilliputian trap.

12.30 a.m. – bream, perch, roach drift through the depths of the blighted River Avon.

12.30 a.m. – and the wind, the wind, the tireless wind is chafing and fretting and scraping and scratching, snuffling and gasping and grunting and gnawing, clawing and tearing and poking and pawing at the roofs and the doors and the windows and walls of the shops and the factories of the city of Bristol.

12.30 a.m.

Tower blocks and terraced streets.

Six cemeteries, two castles, four hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants.

In Victoria Park breezes like demons lay siege to the trees.

In Bedminster and Southville the wind, the wind, the raucous wind rattles at windows, hammers at walls, sets off alarms, pounds at doors.

In Clifton and Redland and Westbury Park the wind – the wind? – the devious wind slips into cat-flaps, wriggles through keyholes, gutters in chimneys, plummets down flews.

In St. Andrews, St. Pauls, Montpellier and Clifton the outlets of sinks and the drainpipes of baths gurgle obscenities, ejaculate cold.

Down in the docks the stays of the yachts – and the awnings of ferries moored by the locks – snap like whips, rattle like drums, whine like cats, stutter like guns.

Citizens of Bristol – the time has come!

Surrender your defences! Sacrifice your children!

Succumb to the encroachment of the pestilential sky!

Cold inhabits Bristol: lip-splitting, face-numbing, bone-chilling. Ice rimes railings, lines telephone wires, grimes skylights, mires cars, holds tight to anything cold.

The homeless have no intention of staying homeless. They gather in hostels and wrestle with agoraphobia – or scrounge warm hideaways from relatives and friends. Either that... or they’re dead.

Petrol stations dwindle. Bars fall prey to loneliness. All-night

*Tenets of New  
Creationism*

*This is my religion.  
The exultant  
embrace of the  
natural world –  
within which death  
is everywhere,  
within which life  
never dies.*

*Now we are green*

supermarkets wither on the vine.

Marshal was here long ago, in his parent's lounge, shrugging his shoulders at the mass of humanity, giving up on Amy Roberts and her night-club culture, retreating through vampire-ridden streets, their warmth-imbibing fangs bared, sometimes running, sometimes walking, impatient with the wind, angry at the cold, bitter at the arctic landscape Bristol has become.

Marshal is here now, occupying the sofa in his parent's lounge, comatose and intransigent, bellicose as a giant in a Lilliputian world.

Bitter?

Is Marshal bitter?

He feels more than bitter.

He feels abandoned, forgotten about, displaced, ignored.

His legs straddle the room like someone else's legs – like Gulliver's legs, pinned down and useless – while Lilliputians cavort and frolic and have their day.

Poor Marshal!

Adrift, disconnected, disposed of, cast aside, discarded, distraught, locked out, pent up, put away.

His arms ricochet to either side, graceless and unimposing, cast there by some absent-minded tide.

He feels...

...thinks...

He doesn't know what to feel...

...doesn't know what to think...

*Gulliver! The utter fool! What was he hoping to achieve? What had he expected as he stumbled through this halfling-inhabited, half-imagined world – manipulated and deceived by diminutive people and horse-bodied men?*

*What did he think he might find?*

*Meaning? Transcendence? Distraction? Release?*

*Is his longed-for gargantuan truth nothing more, after all, than a Lilliputian dream?*

12.30 a.m. and this is who I am:

***university drop out***  
***ex-scientologist***  
***supermarket employee***  
***un-medicated***  
***intemperate***

***Tenets of New  
Creationism***

Your ego, your narcissism, your self-interest – are not important now. You are one with your species. You have nothing to fear...

*Now we are green*

*dabbler in philosophy*  
*scrabblor in mathematics*  
*seeker of meaning in a meaningless world*  
*burden to my parents*  
*wasted*  
*benighted*  
*lost*

The night offers insight – offers clarity cold as ice.

He's shut out the night. He's shut out the cold.

Clarity creeps beneath the door.

– halfway through his travels, trapped by the machinations of a preposterous species of dwarf, and Gulliver feels worse than any traveller ought. He's brought this on himself, he's well aware of that. He is responsible for his destiny, he's well aware of that. Yet he feels as if meaning is catching like a fishbone in his throat.

The only other object in this landscape of domestic bliss – the only other object with the gravitas and heft of the recumbent Gulliver – is Marshal's parent's television.

The television is a beast.

It glowers from its pinnacle and all before it tremble. It is priest and temple to the modern age – and tonight it is in full throttle. Tonight his parent's television is in gut-churning, stomach-clenching, rip-roaring fettle.

Fifty inches of charisma.

A million decibels of hubris.

It rants.

It rages.

It stutters and raves.

*This is important. **This is massively important.** This is extremely important. **More important than that.***

This evening, of all evenings, it has something to say.

*Terrorists!*

*Terrorists!*

**Pay attention!**

*Terrorists!*

*Now we are green*

Gulliver's arms are thrown calamitously across the township of Mildendo. He is as much a terrorist as anyone, thoughtlessly striding from place to place, lying down wherever he likes, unaware of the damage he might do, careless of the terror he might inspire...

He thinks: *You can't shout me down.*

*I can switch you off as easily as crushing a fly, but you can't shout me down.*

Was *meaning* something he had thought you could pin to the earth, definite and unimpeachable, bound there by a thousand horse-hide ropes and forever held secure?

The wind sighs like a lover at the door and the television howls like a sorely abandoned lover, yet Gulliver hears nothing beyond his own inner voice. He pay no attention to the television at all. Why should he? Why should he? Where's the compulsion, the obligation, the imperative? Why should anyone, in fact? And how *could* they? The pace of the news is so slow! Its self-important oratory meanders, wanders, retreads, repeats! Yes: over and over! Over and over! Over and over! Over and over! And its oh-so-crucial words are pumped full of botox and drawn rigid behind the ears...

Why should Gulliver of all people succumb to its mediocritising froth?

And anyway... yes, anyway – there's a light shining from high above him, from somewhere high above him, illuminating the room, lighting up the furniture, irradiating the recumbent Gulliver, whiting-out the television.

In the light of his inner life Marshal sees right through – or does not see at all – the media's avalanche of dross.

He is above and beyond all that.

He feels almost calm.

He has been calm for weeks now, even months. He has been level spirited, his spirit on the level, his mind laid flat and made impregnable by the spirit level of the soul.

Emotional equilibrium – there for the taking.

Calm as Siddhartha resting beneath the palms.

Calm as Moses gazing out across the sea.

Until now.

Now things are different. Gulliver is self-medicating, a beer in one hand, the TV remote in the other. Drunk, angry, taller and stronger than his stepfather upstairs in bed – and he is asserting control. He presses his thumb to the remote. That's all he has to do to become master of the beast. The remote is a whip. He can hear the lash crack. The beast won't resist. How can it? Infrared light spurts across the room. Modulated 980nm. The television – piteous hubristic beast – is programmed to obey. It rolls over. It shows its other side. It can't help but

*Now we are green*

go on shouting **Pay attention! Pay attention!** but now it's message relates to something else entirely.

Not terrorists.

Something worse.

When Marshal chose a week or so ago to abandon his medication he believed with impregnable certainty he would find himself on an upward slope. He had thought it beyond dispute that his position in the cyclic history of his mind was poised upon the brink of thrilling hyperactivity.

Emotionally, psychologically: heading upward.

That was what he had wanted. The upward lift. The existential thrill.

Instead...

Instead he lies here incapacitated, pinned down by Lilliputian concerns, the beast of a television pressing down upon him like the atmosphere of an entire world funnelled and compressed into a leaden weight. Not the adrenalin-fuelled rush of hyperactivity, his brain fizzing and spitting like spark plugs in some gargantuan machine. Not that, but desolation.

He takes a swig of beer.

The television beast has something to tell him.

**Pay attention!**

It tells him about a unique South African cure for AIDS.

Virgin child rape.

What an evil conception!

What a vile fabrication!

*Fuck*, Gulliver ruminates. *I'm not having this*,

**Crack** goes the whip.

Infrared light, invisible to the eye, spurts through the air. The channel changes. There's something almost godlike in Marshal's powers. His legs stretch halfway across the world. His arms are the Himalayas. The sofa is childishly small beneath him. The floor sags and buckles with the weight of his habitation. The room is simply much too small. His home is quite simply far too small.

*His family is too small.*

Marshal often feels this way late in the evening, beer in hand, as if there's something numinous hanging over his head, as if there's something wonderful that he needs to do but that his home, his family, the world, the whole intractable universe is impeding him, is tying him down, like a thousand tiny ropes pinning him to the furniture or the floor... as if his lungs

## *Now we are green*

are bellows and he's on the edge of blowing up a storm, as if he's on the brink of discovering something amazing, something he can't make out but knows is there – a feeling of unfolding power and unimaginable strength – but a strength and promise and potential that are undermined, his will utterly foiled, his circumnavigation of the globe halted and circumscribed, his intentions trivialised by motive-dismantling, ill-defined and meanly meant obstacles and interventions.

The cluster of pills is still in his jean pocket. Hadn't he flung them into the river on his way home?

*Anything is possible. I am capable of anything.*

That's what he had imagined, out there in the cold.

But not tonight.

Gulliver is raging and straining against the ropes that pin him down – but wasn't it Gulliver who placed himself here? – just here, in this place, at this time, intentionally? Like a hare presenting itself to the poacher? – intending to be trapped, defeat already in his heart?

Somewhere outside, amongst the schools and the churches and offices and shops of the city of Bristol, the wind whickers and whines. In the bosom of his parent's home Michael cracks his infrared whip and the world transforms. Now the beast boasts of something else entirely.

### **SuperCrib.**

Unctuous presenters undress the homes of the rich for the mouth-watering envy of anyone less wealthy.

Television at its most salacious.

The subterranean home cinema.

A Juke box, a pin ball machine, an iconic Hollywood prop, crossed Samurai swords.

Bedrooms with ceiling mirrors.

Bathrooms with floor mirrors.

Kitchens with wall mirrors.

Lounge bar décor.

Here the mirrored, unused swimming pool, the gleaming, unused cars, the acres of unused garden with gurning gulag walls.

Rock stars, pop stars, porn stars, film stars.

Old wealth, new wealth, financiers, oligarchs.

The super-rich.

*They make me sick.*

*Now we are green*

So Marshal exerts his powers again. Worlds change again. He swigs his drink again.  
Holds the liquid on his tongue, lets the alcohol evaporate into his sinuses, drift into his lungs.  
Listens as the beast shouts and shouts, this time about blighted nature.

**Pay attention!**

**Pay attention!**

Polar icecaps are calving. An icy continent is dwindling to nothing. A calm voice states –  
no, *shouts* – that Hugh Maxwell of NASA is concerned.

Then Hugh himself is shouting. He is more than concerned. He is very, very concerned.  
'Bloody hell,' whispers Gulliver, 'it's the end of the fucking world.'

*Insight: The Tree of Life*

The tree of life is full of strife  
Each leaf is a disaster  
And when its boughs come tumbling down  
Our hopes follow swiftly after

*Shifting Perspectives*

Marshal flicks from channel to channel.

He is lord and master of this world – of *these* worlds. He is lord and master of this late  
night winter wonderland.

Beyond the walls of his home the city of Bristol descends into timorous somnolence.

Upstairs his parents sleep the sleep of the bored.

He certainly hopes they're asleep, though the TV beast is so loud that he won't hear them  
if they aren't.

The television is frantic with rage. Across its plasma wasteland worlds of every type  
collide and rebound, cartwheel, cavort.

*Now we are green*

Slick presenters, cool presenters, pretty presenters, narcissistic presenters, splenetic presenters, frenetic presenters vie for viewers.

*They are the Lilliputians and I am their Gulliver.*

*I am reaching for a destiny I can neither see nor understand but only yearn for, a destiny I know is there, at the periphery of my vision, on the edge of my horizon. A destiny I have sensed for my entire life. But the Lilliputians are in my way, stopping me, pinning me down, holding me back, laying me low.*

Marshal's parents are not sleeping.

The door opens.

It's Marshal's mother.

~ Marshal?

Gulliver squeezes the remote controls. Stuttering infrared light forms a binary message and squirts like tomato ketchup across the room – splashes over the lips of a beautiful presenter falling suddenly mute. At Gulliver's command the beast is reduced to glowering from its precipitous cliff. What is it, after all, but a dumb machine?

~ Marshal?

He's in the wrong place in his cycle. He senses nothing but depression – and depression is not the place he had hoped to be.

The Schleer-branded 5ml sodium valproate mood-modifying pills have bored him rigid.

But kept him on the level.

Held his spirit in check.

No longer.

He twists on the sofa, angry and unworthy, irritated by the interruption, twists to look at his mother – feels the old unexplained pain in his left side just beneath his ribs *and*

***Christ...***

*Christ.*

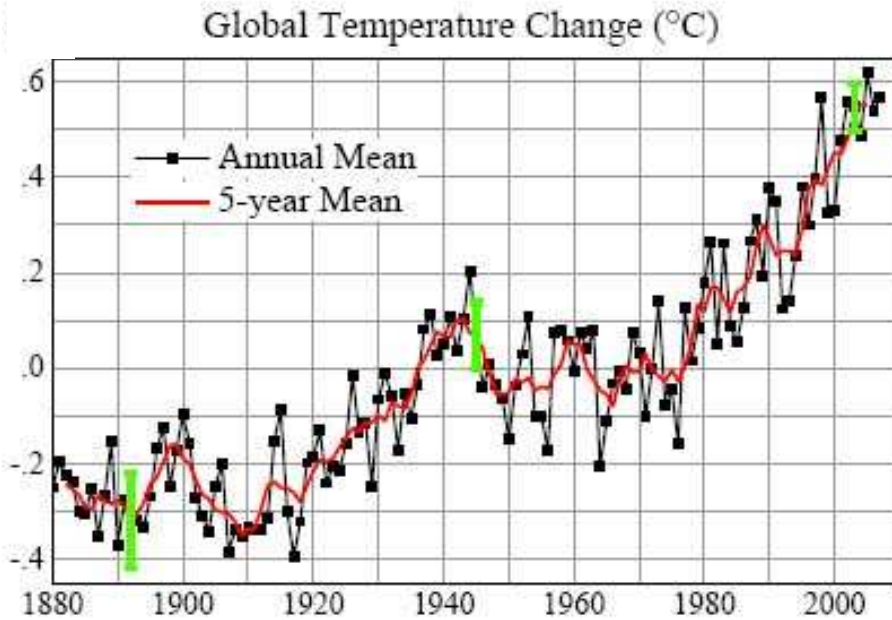
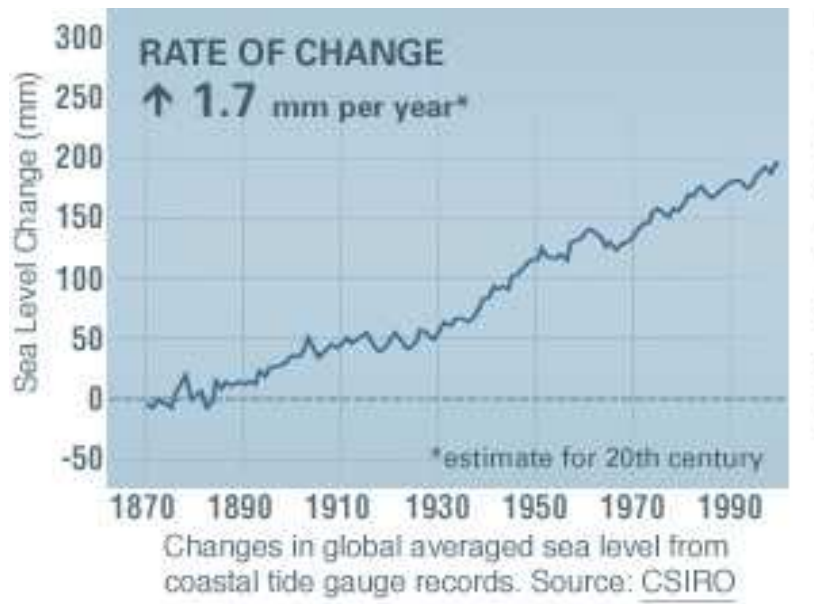
Sometimes it happens, just like that. The whole world turns on its side.

Perspectives alter.

Everything changes.

Now we are green

## Climate Change



## Marshal's Mother

~ Can't you sleep?

'I haven't been to bed.'

~ Don't you think it's bed time?

'Not really.'

~ It's awfully late.

*I know. I know.*

Mattie Anderson's face, tilted to one side so that she can peer into the room, is so lovely, so beautiful, that for a moment Marshal can't find it in himself to breathe. Her hair is brushed back from her forehead, pushed behind her ears, falls over one shoulder – and her foolish, unworthy son is thrashing around on the mud banks of astonishment like an air-breathing fish that hasn't yet learnt to take its first lungful of air – jerking through its last death spasms, filled with self loathing at its unattainable goals but seeing, drawing towards it, almost like a rising sun, the hope and meaning of inhalation – dying in juddering, gill-flapping, tail slamming panic until suddenly, like a solar flare, it's there: like the beauty of his mother's face: the knowledge of how to breathe.

*I love you, Marshal thinks. I have always loved you. All my life has been about nothing but this. The worry lines around your eyes, the half-smile-half-questioning-whether-you-dare-to-smile turn of your lips, the pale glimmer of your forehead, the expression of understanding and compassion in your eyes, makes my floundering seem so stupid, so base, so overtly abstract and irrelevant, so tangential to anything that really matters... Forty-five years old and twenty-four of those years are a gift to me, borne lightly as if they weren't a burden, as if they were not a cross to bear, a son with a mental condition, now up, now down, now neither up nor down – and in this moment of descent into darkness I glance towards some distant light and see that I am utterly and totally loved, that this gentle face gazing at me, tilted sideways around the door, is saintly in its empathy and love, that she has always put me first, high above herself, that I have had so much more than any other son has had, my entire life held and nurtured like a flame in the cusp of her hand...*

After a moment, he asks, 'Why awful? Why *awfully* late?'

~ It... It's just so late at night... It'll be morning in no time at all. You'll be so tired...

Pills can never take this away: this moment of immutable perception.

~ So... you're alright, then?

'Alright?'

He's twisting on the sofa, turning to look at her. She's peering around the door, both of them gazing at each other sideways, the world tilted over, unhinged and out of balance. 'Alright?' Marshal asks again. He turns away. Holds up the remote controls to take the TV back off mute. 'Of course I'm not alright. How can you ask that? How the fuck can I be alright after what you've done to me?'

*Now we are green*

# Intermission

Popcorn

Ice cream

Chocolate

& **Sweets**

Cola,

Candyfloss

& other fine **Treats**

That's what our attention span

is made of

*Now we are green*

## **Chapter Two**

## *Theraspian Dean*

There is no legal support for abduction or extraction – for freeing someone from the clutches of unscrupulous individuals like the Agnowskis – so where possible he has to use persuasion. Sometimes it works. Theraspian looks at the girl. She is dressed in a plain shift, a pattern of flowers and stems embroidered at the sleeves. She is barefoot, bare of make up, probably naked beneath the shift, her hair woven into a plait and drawn forward across her shoulder, her eyes serene.

*She's little more than a child. What can she know of happiness? How can she imagine she can tell me what happiness really is?*

He twists in his chair to look behind him. Madam Agnowski is leaving, pulling the door shut behind her. She is that confident of her grip upon the girl. The room, now empty apart from Theraspian and the girl, is some sort of gymnasium. There are wooden bars up one wall, a stack of mats in one corner, a box of ropes, skipping ropes, perhaps, with handles at each end.

The floor is wooden. Polished. Well kept. Smells of polish. The whole hall smells of polish and incense.

The far wall displays a stained glass window. The image is of the First Ones, their stony, alien faces mooning down into the room, something melancholic and childlike in their eyes.

The girl herself is little more than a child. Nineteen. Australian. Travelling in the UK. Intercepted by cultists.

There are only two chairs. Wooden, unadorned.

The one Theraspian sits in.

The one occupied by the girl.

‘Your sister is literally ten minutes drive from here. She’s taking the plane back to Canberra tomorrow. All she wants is to talk to you, face to face, for a few minutes. Before she goes home. There are important things she needs to share with you. And she has a message from your parents.’ He stands up. Surveys the hall. Draws out his mobile and keys into it *15 mins*. Then he picks up his chair, carries it to the side of the room and sets it against the wall. Resuming an earlier conversation he says, ‘You haven’t found happiness here, no matter what you say. No matter what they tell you. I can see it in your face. All you’ve found here is deception. Deception is the Agnowski’s great gift to mankind.’

The girl smiles serenely at him. She is waiting for him to leave.

*Now we are green*

He woke early that morning, before dawn, knowing that the BBC were coming. Woke up thinking about the attractive journalist Sarah. Knowing he was going to be confronting two of the founding members of the Church of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Veil, leaders of the United Kingdom chapter of the House of Light. A challenge – waking up to a challenge – what could be better? He leapt from bed in a eureka moment, stumbled into his study, pushed aside the massed papers and documents, unearthed his manuscript for Extraction Within The Law – only to find he had already written a note in the margins of the chapter on *The Ethics of Abduction* that said almost exactly what he'd woken up thinking was a brand new idea. *We are replacing certainty with uncertainty – and uncertainty, in the form of science, is at the very heart of the culture and civilisation of the Western world.*

With a certain chagrin he showered, shaved, breakfasted, set off for Soho.

The thought returns to him now as he turns back to look at the girl.

'Rachel?'

She blanks him. No botox could be better than this. Certainty has given her serenity, has removed her humanity.

'Rachel!'

'Please stop calling me that. It's no longer my name.'

'Stealing your name is standard cult practice. The elimination of personal history. The separation of the victim from their past.'

Rachel blanks him again. Serenity is a 3<sup>rd</sup> Veil trademark.

'Your name *is* Rachel. You went to school at Canberra Grammar School. Your parents know you as Rachel and only as Rachel, as do many other people – and the Rachel that they know is loved and missed by them.'

'Why are you standing?'

'Why – ?' He smiles to himself. She has been well trained. *To intimidate you, that's why.*  
'It will break your sister's heart if she doesn't see you before she leaves.'

'I have no sister... No... I have many sisters. Here. In the House of Light. I have no other sisters. Not on the outside.'

'You feel you are part of a privileged inner circle...'

No answer.

'There are *us* and then there are the others: the poor brain-washed mass of humanity who will never see what we see, who will never understand... The lost... The damned...'

Again, no answer.

'Madam Agnowski has a history of setting up cults. This isn't her first attempt. In fact it's something like the Agnowski's fifth. When they've made their money, or when the

*Now we are green*

authorities close them down, they abandon people like you and move on to find fresh victims.'

'Your heart is full of anger.'

'Julie has seen the inside of a prison, Rachel. Mrs Agnowski. For fraud. And she's rich. Richer than you could possibly imagine. I've tracked down property owned by her in South Africa, Namibia, France, New Zealand, half a dozen other places. She's a serial exploiter. Andrei – Aggi – is no better. They've been working this scam for years. The last religion they preached stated that we are all ghosts of a real world call Razaan. They'll say anything, preach anything, just to gain a hold on people. On susceptible people looking for something to give a structure and meaning to their lives. You've got to break free of them, Rachel, before they destroy you.'

'My name is Furnace. I am a beacon of light.'

'You think I don't understand.'

'Of course you don't understand.'

'It's called empathy, Rachel. Everyone can understand everyone, no matter what they believe in, no matter what class, race or creed, no matter their age, sex, education, anything, if they only try. That's what I believe. In empathy. In our common humanity.'

'You are cynical and unhappy.' And she repeated what she'd said before: 'I am happy here. I love Julie and Aggi. I have never been happier – if I was ever happy before... The House of Light has given me happiness. Tell that to my sister. The House of Light has given me a happiness that she can't. And tell her to leave me alone.'

Theraspian Dean: Her sister has power of attorney. Committal proceedings in Australia have determined that Rachel –

Madame Agnowski: Furnace.

Theraspian Dean: That Rachel is not in a position to make decisions for herself. You must therefore pass her on to her sister, who will take her home.

Madame Agnowski: You are talking about judgements made in another world.

Theraspian Dean: You are getting confused with your own religions, Julie. No. These are judgements made in this world. The real world. The only world that really counts.

Madame Agnowski: You are an extremist, Mr Dean. My husband is calling the police.

Theraspian Dean: Calling the real world to the rescue? I must see her, Julie, or the police will be knocking at your door without your calling them. I have a writ. Charges will be laid at your door if you don't grant me access. You and High Priest Aggi will find yourselves in court, here in London, and even if you get off with nothing more than a fine

*Now we are green*

- you'll be exposed in the press. It's not the sort of publicity you enjoy. In fact, it's probably a trajectory you know very well...
- Madame Agnowski: I sense evil in your aura. You are an evil and angry man.
- Theraspian Dean: Whatever you sense, I *will* have access to Rachel Humboldt.
- Madame Agnowski: It has never been my wish to seclude Furnace from the temptations of her past. You can see her. Of course you can. That has always been my intention. But not you. And certainly not *you*.
- Theraspian Dean: Jason is my assistant. I need him with me. And these two ladies are from the BBC. I'm sure you would not wish to alienate the BBC...
- Madame Agnowski: (Laughs delightedly) Alienation! Yes! That is precisely what the Church of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Veil wishes for us all! To draw us closer to the First Ones! No. Only you, Mr Dean. No one else.

So he walked alone into the benighted outpost of the House of Light, leaving the BBC journalist and her camerawoman in the competent care of Jason in the street outside.

'Rachel?'

Forgetting herself: 'Yes?'

'Time's up.'

Return of the serene gaze.

'You have to make your mind up now. I'm leaving in a few minutes. Your sister's leaving for Australia within the hour. You could be with her. Just think of that. Just think of the look of joy on your parent's faces when you return. But, if that's a step too far, at least meet her. Your sister. Before she goes.'

The serene gaze.

The serene hall.

The smell of incense.

Moon-faced aliens.

The polished floor.

'Rachel?'

'Furnace.'

'Are you coming?'

A small shake of her head. The hint of a smile. *She pities me.*

'Goodbye, then,' Theraspian says. And he can't help but pity the girl in return, appalled at the gulf the House of Light has so quickly manufactured between the person she is now and the child she must have been. 'Goodbye,' he says. 'And...' He glances back at her over his shoulder, his hand on the door. 'And... I wish you luck.'

*Now we are green*

There is time for one last confrontation before he leaves. Julie Agnowski, barefoot and dressed with the same simple elegance adopted by her disciple, is waiting for him in the corridor. ‘You heard all that?’ he asks.

She is almost beautiful. She smiles at him. *She smiles like a piranha.* She says, ‘What interest could we possibly have in what you have to say?’ She runs slender fingers through long blond hair. ‘We trust Light-of-Furnace implicitly. Her spiritual resources are far greater than you might imagine.’

‘I’m sure her resources are precisely what interests you. Do you have a bidding figure I can give to her parents?’

‘We pity you, Mr Dean.’

‘Five thousand Australian dollars?’

Sebastian Agnowski, High Priest Aggi to his victims, is waiting at the main entrance, two 3<sup>rd</sup> Veil acolytes at his side. Aggi’s beard trembles like the burning bush just prior to ignition. He’s in a godly rage. He throws open the door. ‘Go!’ he rumbles. ‘Go! Go! Go!’

The great wooden doors slam shut behind Theraspian. It feels as if he has stepped out of a fantasy world, luckily unscathed. ‘Did you catch all that?’

Sarah Leigh, the BBC journalist, is smiling, waving at her colleague. ‘Helen was ready and waiting. Your expulsion from the temple is all on film.’

‘Go! Go! Go!’ laughs Jason, striding up from the van. ‘Go! Go! Go!’

‘Perfect... Okay, we can do the interview on that later. Now we’d better see the boy.’

Jason looms over them. ‘Young Mr Anderson?’

‘Marshal Anderson. Same age as Rachel. Good family. Some undisclosed mental health issues I suspect. Fallen prey – like so many others – to the Tottenham Court Road scientologists...’

*Now we are green*

Intercession

***He's coming...***

*Now we are green*

## **Chapter Three**

## *The Child*

He didn't see it then. Of course he didn't. Only afterwards, looking back. That is what innocence is. Innocence doesn't recognise its Use By date. It is far too innocent for that.

He remembered her cartwheeling over the grass in the park. He remembered his sense of awe at the beauty of things, at the immensity of what people are capable of, at his sister's cleverness, at the possibilities of life.

Naturally, it wasn't in those terms that he thought of things back then. But that is how he interpreted his memories later, looking back.

In the upswing of his bipolar cycle he never looks back.

Looking back is for losers.

Looking forward from the *now* is what matters.

What matters is what we can and will achieve in the *now*.

What matters is what the world can do to sort itself out. Now.

The future is what matters. And what the *now* is going to make that future be.

He remembers his sister's cleverness at cards, at Monopoly, at any game they played.

He remembers the way she made up stories, knowing he didn't believe her but not caring, knowing how desperately he wanted to believe her.

A few years can make a big difference.

He worshipped his clever, beautiful, enchanting big sister.

She was the most beautiful creature he could imagine ever existing, the most beautiful thing that could possibly be. Even more beautiful than his mother.

Perhaps he wished he could be a girl too. Perhaps he envied that beauty. The attention it brought her. The constant praise.

Innocence is a state of ignorance. When the ignorance is gone, the innocence dissolves too.

So, looking back, as he sometimes did late at night, when he had finally turned off the television and was thinking of forcing himself up from the sofa – if he could somehow find the strength – to drag himself upstairs to brush his teeth and go to bed... looking back in that moment of pre-activity, of pause, of weakness before the gathering of will power, just prior to the teeth-clenching lurch into verticality, in that moment it would come back to him: the formative moments of his life, the events that made him what he was, that underpinned his weaknesses and failures, the things that were to blame, inside him, outside of him, like a terrible weight that he could not escape – not, at least, in this part of his disturbed

*Now we are green*

psychological cycle. Maybe later. Maybe when the chemical imbalance in his brain changed, allowing in a glimpse of something more positive, then, perhaps, it would be different. Why shouldn't it be? At those times the future came back into focus.

But now?

Now he remembers the moment that his sister began to predate.

Of course he loved every second of it.

The intimacy. The attention.

What was there not to love in all of that, after all?

He was lying in the bath. He had developed a certain shyness about his body but Molly never paid any attention to that. 'We've all got bodies,' she laughed when he drew himself down beneath the bubbles, as she burst in and rattled through the medicine cabinet looking for something or other, Marshal would never remember what. Nail scissors or plasters or something. Then suddenly she stopped and he saw her looking at him in the mirror, the steam blurring her face. She reached up, wiped the glass with the side of her hand.

'Hm,' she said, turning from the mirror to look at him.

She had a hair-band around her wrist. She often wore hair-bands as bracelets, half a dozen of them, all different colours. It was something a girl could do. Something a boy couldn't.

She was wearing a t-shirt. Jeans. Bare feet.

She had a lovely face. Really beautiful.

She was always beautiful. Like an angel.

Still is.

Long blond hair floating like mist about her shoulders.

She pushed her hair back behind her ears, pulled it into a pony tail, doubled it up, tied it there with deft confident movements using the hair-band from her wrist.

He asked her what she was looking at.

'You've used my bubble bath.'

'It's not your bubble bath.'

'It doesn't matter.'

She knelt down next to the bath. Rested her elbows on the side. Looked at him with a slightly mysterious expression. She seemed... he didn't know how she seemed. Not like herself. Slightly different. Like a different girl. A little bit older.

'Well, you won't mind if I take some of my bubbles back, then,' she said.

She used her bare arms to scoop some of the bubbles from the centre of the bath, leaving clear water behind. He was ten. He felt a little shy.

*Now we are green*

‘What do you want bubbles for?’ he asked. ‘You can’t do anything with them. They’ll just pop if you try to pick them up.’

‘I’m going to make you a beard,’ Molly said.

He remembered her looking at his body as she collected more bubbles – for longer than he felt completely comfortable with – but he didn’t dare say anything. Didn’t want to appear foolish. Didn’t want her thinking he was just a silly shy little boy. She said, ‘Lie still,’ then she swept all the bubbles she’d collected up over his chest to his chin and began her bubble sculpture of a beard.

It was funny. She thought he looked terribly funny. Like a boy with a beard, she said.

He was flattered by the attention, snorting as the bubbles went up his nose.

He was flattered by the way her interest in him massively increased from then on and for a long time – for months, even. Past his eleventh birthday, into the following summer.

‘You’re lucky,’ his mother said. ‘Not many sisters are as nice to their little brothers as yours.’

Quite often Molly would tuck him into bed at bedtime, kissing him goodnight on the lips.

Often she would just happen to be in his room when he was getting dressed or getting ready for bed. Looking back, he remembered her looking at him with his bath towel wrapped around his waist, and saying, ‘I wish I had a boy’s body. Girls’ bodies are all complicated and messy and soft. Boys’ bodies are just skinny and nice.’

That had been flattering, too.

Grooming.

She’d been a natural.

‘Girls’ bodies are nice,’ he’d said. ‘Nicer, if you ask me.’

Molly started to give him back-scratches as he fell asleep at night, so long as he’d done what she told him to do in the day. Little jobs for her, like fetching her a drink of water while she was doing her homework, bowed over the laptop in her bedroom, or finding something for her when she was in a hurry to get to school.

It was a nice way to fall asleep, with her small hand pushed under his top to get to his shoulder blades, her fingernails circling over his skin or tracing the outline of his spine.

‘You should leave your top off when I’m scratching your back. It would be easier.’

She would brush her long shining hair while sitting on the edge of his mattress, watching him get ready for bed. That was a memory that was always with him. For him it was the definition of feminine beauty – though of course it was only later that he conceptualised his memories like that. The languid, methodical, practiced strokes of the hairbrush as she turned her already lovely hair into spun gold – he could have spent hours just watching her. Watching her watch him. Wondering why she was so interested, why she cared.

## *Now we are green*

He would do things deliberately slowly to stretch out the time, so he could watch her brush her hair for longer. That was another thing only a girl could do. Have hair that beautiful. Brush it in such a careless, methodical way. And look so beautiful as she brushed it. The very matter-of-factness of her movements somehow emphasised her loveliness. Her beauty was taken for granted in everything she did.

Few little boys had a sister as lovely as Molly.

Molly had a favourite hairbrush. It had a long wooden handle and bristles all the way round.

He asked her once – his heart racing in his chest – if he could brush her hair for her, but she never let him.

He would sometimes dream of her, even now; dream of her sitting there, brushing her hair, watching him.

They were good dreams, and bad dreams, both at once.

‘Leave all your clothes off,’ she said one night, ‘and I’ll give you an all over body rub.’

He remembers that night in particular.

Often remembers it.

He thought it strange that she had put on lipstick, holding a little mirror in front of her as she pursed her lips.

‘Not *all* over...’ he snorted, obeying her and climbing into bed naked.

‘Of course not *all* over... Don’t be silly. Just all the back of your body.’

She hadn’t put her hair up that time. He remembered it tickling his spine, touching his buttocks, her small strong hands digging into him, kneading him, working out the shape of his muscles, finding where his ribs flared beneath his shoulder blades, working their way down, over his bum, down the backs of his legs.

That became routine for a while.

He remembered falling asleep sometimes before she had finished.

It was heavenly.

If ever she didn’t put him to bed but left it to their mum he had to bite back the disappointment, trying desperately not to show that he liked being put to bed by his sister more.

He didn’t want to hurt his mum’s feelings.

He had a wonderful mum.

A wonderful sister.

His father – his original father, before Dougie – well, he was not so wonderful.

Marshal’s feeling towards him were far from clear.

*Now we are green*

Later Marshal would recall – would suddenly register, in the way that memories sometimes gain new meaning; a pattern, good or bad, falling into place – later he would recall that their home, when his father had been alive, had reeked of sex.

Which explained a lot.

He sometimes remembers the noises that used to frighten him when he was young, coming from his parent's bedroom. 'Don't worry,' Molly had whispered (those were in the days that they had shared a room), 'they're just playing monsters and fairies.'

It had sounded like his father was doing something to his mother. Something not nice. Something that hurt.

And his father had about him a kind of brute physicality – or at least remembered by Marshal as that, even if only dimly sensed by a timid little boy. His real father had been quick with his hands. The children and even Mattie had tip-toed around him when his mood was black. He had always been quick to take what he wanted – and Marshal had often seen him grab his mother by the hair and kiss her, even in front of the children – or even, it sometimes seemed, because the children were there, wincing witnesses to their father's power and potency.

Sometimes Marshal remembered his father being nice. The bicycle stuff. Learning to ride. Laughing. Falling off. Crying. Being consoled. Roller skates. Stuff like that. Then sometimes he had seemed a lord of darkness in their small terraced home.

Darkness and light.

Upswing and downturn.

It explained a lot.

Dougie was a much nicer man.

Marshal had always been grateful that his mother found Dougie, after his true father died.

All of that, no doubt, brought them closer. There was a big age difference; Molly was fourteen, Marshal was only ten, going on eleven. Their father had died a year earlier. Someone's transplanted kidneys had pined for their old owner and withered and died. So Dad died too, after a long time of being hooked into spinning and gurgling machines. His powerful physicality drew inwards like a shadow, settled in the lines of his face and in the great dark pouches beneath his eyes.

It was a consolation having a sister like Molly take an interest in him, after all that. Looking after him. Scratching his back.

Not something he could talk about to his friends. Not really. How much he adored his big sister. It would have been embarrassing.

'Roll over.'

*Now we are green*

'Roll over?'

'Yes. Roll over.'

He had been feeling really sleepy. Didn't really want to roll over.

It didn't feel quite right.

He wasn't really sure what Molly was doing or planning, what she wanted.

So he rolled over.

'You shouldn't really touch me there... Should you?'

'Do you want me to stop? No more scratches for ever?'

'No.'

'Then hush. Just close your eyes.'

There was a change then.

Something you couldn't quite put your finger on, and something he only slowly became aware of.

Before it had felt alright.

From then on it felt a little wrong.

Maybe exciting.

But definitely a little wrong.

'You mustn't tell anyone.'

'I won't tell anyone. That would be embarrassing.'

'But you like it, don't you?'

He had to say yes. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. And maybe he did like it. In fact... he remembers... he definitely liked it. He liked Molly's undivided attention. He liked every moment she spent with him. He was jealous whenever she wasn't there. He was ever so jealous of her friends at school.

'I'm going to come back later, when Mum's asleep.'

'Alright.' His stomach tingled with a sense of something important happening. Something very grown up.

'You don't have to wake up.'

'Alright.'

And from then on he would wake up almost every night, at twelve o' clock or one, to find her next to him, slipping off his pyjamas if he'd put them on, kissing the nape of his neck, her small hand stroking his small erection, her small breasts pressed against his back.

*Now we are green*

Interdiction

***The Green Messiah...***

*Now we are green*

## **Chapter Four**

## Boxes

*Sisyphus: I have been struggling with this burden for a very long time. As hard as I push, my burden pushes back. The vertebrae of my spine are compacting, my knees are imploding bone against bone, my hips are grinding into the heads of my thigh bones... Soon I will be a dwarf.*

Mattie Anderson is in the garden. Coat, hat, gardening gloves, scarf. She works her way down the flower bed, cutting back the dead perennials, pulling up weeds, her mind floating somewhere outside of her body, away from this terraced home and the quiet street, away from the sounds of school children, away from distractions and concerns of any kind, drifting high above the park, the bowling green, the Methodist chapel. She moves on auto-pilot between hibernating plants, careful of where she treads, throwing winter's detritus out onto the lawn, instinctively assessing what needs to be done before spring, what needs to be planted now, what may need planting in March or April – and at the same time distant from any such consideration, utterly detached, in a place where she needn't think about her life, her past, about her troubled daughter, her son.

Her mind is a flying Chinese lantern rising up towards the sun, and the garden and the park and the roads of the city fall away beneath her like the landscape of a dream.

- Lightness is all she wants.
- To float above the world.
- To drift with the wind.
- To be as light as a helium balloon.
- To be lighter than the air.
- Incredibly light. Radiantly light.
- An explosion of light.
- Ethereal as light. Untouchable as light.
- And calm...

Calmness is all she wants. A life without upset. A life without its ups and downs. A life where the late arrival of Spring seems momentous, and nothing else really matters...

In the end she finds herself standing alone in her garden, using her secateurs to snip thin air.

~ Don't look so glum.

Mr Crawford: store manager at the supermarket where Marshal works. He's a small man with a beaked nose and eyes that express something gentle and almost sorrowful

C	V
a	e
t	l
a	c
c	o
l	r
y	e
s	t
r	o
a	t
w	h
a	e
i	b
t	a
s	t
u	t
s	t
-	l
T	e
h	f
e	o
r	r
r	t
o	h
r	e
e	n
n	t
t	f
o	u
f	t
c	u
h	r
o	e
i	o
c	f
e	t
i	h
s	e
a	h
t	u
h	r
a	a
n	n
d	r
-	a
V	c
e	e
l	.
c	.
o	.
r	.
e	.

*Now we are green*

in their gaze. Marshal likes Mr Crawford, feels indebted to him, just about manages to smile.

~ That's better. Now tell me, where is Mr Rajid hiding?

'I... I haven't seen him.'

Marshal is pushing a high-sided trolley through the yellow light of the warehouse. The trolley is filled with cardboard boxes filled with tin cans filled with unbranded baked beans. Each box in the trolley contains twenty-four cans. Each can in each box contains 320g of bean and sauce and sugar and salt. Marshal is pushing the trolley away from the recently arrived delivery truck, deeper into the storerooms, seeking the shelves labelled **Beans**. There he will be greeted by Heinz baked beans and supermarket-branded baked beans and refried beans and Thompson's Organic baked beans. He will find himself ambushed by flageolet beans and kidney beans, haricot beans and broad beans. And waiting in the wings: tins of sweetcorn, diced carrot, tins of peas, spinach. As Marshal manoeuvres the trolley into an aisle comprising rack upon rack of tinned goods Mr Crawford continues to walk beside him, blowing air through his teeth. The manager's gait is birdlike. He flings each leg forward without bending it much at the knee. He walks with his chest pushed out, his chin held high. Puts an arm around Marshal's back, not quite tall enough to reach Marshal's shoulders.

~ He's probably hiding from me. As is his way. He's a sly one, that Mr Rajid.

Marshal tries not to look glum, no matter how he feels. No matter that his mind is sinking down towards some deep and gloomy abyss, far beneath the realm where ordinary people live. He nods, attempts another smile, tries not to feel uncomfortable.

~ Speak up, petal. Don't be shy. If you've got an opinion, voice it.

Marshal wonders: *An opinion on what?*

In the pecking order of branch ascendancy Mr Crawford is as high as he can be – and he makes no bones about it. He walks with an avian swagger. He displays, like a peacock's plumage, an imperious nonchalance. Finds giving orders easy. Loves to see people jump. But at the same time he nurtures his staff like fledglings cast prematurely from their nests. He takes them under his wing. He quite obviously cares about each and every one of his employees – worries about their well-being, their home life, their social lives, their ability to cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fate. It's only because Marshal's mother came here to talk to Mr Crawford that Marshal got the job. Not overqualified – no one's overqualified at the supermarket – but Marshal is fatally honest in his applications for work. Every other job he ever applied for saw honesty as a qualification for unemployment... In their letters of rejection they as good as wrote, 'Why employ someone who is three quarters mad?'

So his mother called on Mr Crawford and played the compassion card.

It worked.

*Now we are green*

Mr Crawford took the bait.

Marshal's work ethic, his good manners, his *presentability* did the rest.

*Relax your guard, let your burden slip from your grasp, and you will never be able to bring it to a halt. The boulder will roll right over you. It will roll all the way down the mountain, leaving you crushed in its path, nothing more than a blood and flesh veneer upon the stony soil – and everything you have ever cared for will be over and done with and demolished – every memory eviscerated, every experience made pointless, every aspiration repudiated, the genetic pathway stretching back into the past, stretching forward only so far as this moment, personified at last in the handsome form of Sisyphus, brought abruptly to an end.*

He arrives at the shelves set aside for beans, pulls his trolley to a halt. Mr Crawford reaches high to slap him on the shoulder.

~ Keep your pecker up, Marshal. Stand tall. Don't let the bastards grind you down.

Marshal nods as if he understands what his manager is crowing about – but none of it makes sense. With every passing minute everything is more and more vacuous, every decision, every movement more of an effort. The world is receding and Mr Crawford's voice sounds far away and insincere. The warehouse around him is draining of colour... The smell of cardboard boxes, the noise of the other warehouse staff, the exciting hum of life – are draining of meaning. When Marshal had flushed his medication into the Bristol sewers it at first seemed an act of liberation, a step forward into a positive future, then it opened the doors not of heaven but of hell...

Mr Crawford puffs out his chest, stalks on towards the metal stairs leading up to the administrative cabin nesting in the roofspace. Mr Rajid will be up there, laptop open, checking the figures for Goods In and Out, awaiting the moral support of his manager and friend.

Marshal takes the first box from the trolley. Forces it up onto the highest shelf for **Beans**. Takes the next. Fights the unremitting resistance of gravity. Stacks the third box next to the second. Keeps on going. Keeping on going is easier than stopping and starting. There's a momentum you can build up with very boring tasks. You can take pleasure in the momentum even if not in the task itself. He stops to allow his friend Jack to pass with another trolley, resumes his work. After that the momentum is gone but he finishes nonetheless.

Circles the trolley, prepares for the journey back towards the loading bays.

He thinks he's winning – but he's not. The undiagnosed and inexplicable pain beneath his left ribs pulses in warning then suddenly increases. He staggers backward, falling against **Tinned Soups**, clutching his side, unable to breath.

*Now we are green*

His phone rings. He hardly knows what a phone is. Glances at the pocket of his overalls. Ignores the ringing.

Sisyphus was not a nice man. He bears no similarity to Marshal at all. Seducer of nieces, wheeler and dealer of antiquities in ancient antiquity, haggler exemplar, devious and sly – but in the end he had to pay.

He had to pay by pushing a boulder up the side of an ancient Greek mountain beneath the sclerotic gaze of an ancient Greek god, the gorse bloodying his shins, the boulder threatening at any instant to roll back and crush him, the sun beating relentlessly upon his shoulders and head, only to reach the top of the mountain and find his burden slipping from his grip, rolling past him as he flails and weeps, tumbling headlong down the sun-bleached slopes towards the shadow of the sea, stopping only when it ploughs into the shallow blue water, to stand there incongruous, accursed, a monument to human futility, waiting for its slave to stagger down the mountain behind it and resume his perilous toil all over again.

And then again.

And then again.

Marshal catches his breath. The pain subsides. He wheels his empty trolley back to the truck, reloads, repeats.

The warehouse smells of cardboard.

*Machines could do this better. Could do almost everything better... Could live better lives without pain, without suffering... Could stack shelves with unthinking commitment, with a kind of mechanical joy.*

*Machines could run our world for us.*

*They would do it better.*

*I think they soon will.*

Survives until tea-break, thrusts the trolley to one side, staggers out into the open air. Jack finds him. Hands him a machine-made coffee.

~ You look like shit.

‘Is this what it’s all about? Hour after hour of this? I feel like Sisyphus, pushing his boulder up some fucking mountainside.’

Jack studies him over the lip of his polystyrene cup.

~ Life’s about whatever you want it to be about. You write the book.

A truck reverses past. It bleats in warning like a stuck pig. The sound is in colour: jagged white on sullen black. The sky is steel grey.

~ Amy’s on the till.

‘Amy?’

## *Now we are green*

Marshal's forgotten her already. His coruscating burden, threatening to roll back the way he's come, threatening to extinguish his identity and leave him utterly crushed, has divided him from his past. He scalds his tongue with coffee, forces his mind away from the glowering sky that threatens to engulf him.

Amy.

Amy graduated from Bristol with a First Class honours degree. A million miles from unintelligent, one of the first at the university to take Politics, Philosophy and Economics, she isn't the sort of person who trumpets their IQ. Her close-cut brown hair frames a face of such engaging alertness that Marshal found himself irresistibly drawn to her like a mosquito to warm skin. When he first stumbled across her, arriving one morning at the supermarket, he hadn't been able to tear his gaze away from her face. He'd hung around for hours after shifts just to catch a glimpse of the new girl. It seemed to him that her very existence – the fact that someone like her could even exist – made medicated equilibrium seem tolerable. Her easy smile lit up the mundane world. Half the middle-aged male customers had long since been in love with her. Half the female customers, too.

Deadened by the tide of his emotions, had he really almost forgotten her?

The sky is steel grey, still in thrall to winter... but the memory of Amy is a beam of light shining down from somewhere very high. Amy is redemption. Amy is love, affirmation, sex, seduction, every good thing, rolled into one.

Redeemed – at least for a moment – Sisyphus fills his chest. He straightens his creaking spine, hauls himself erect, throws his half-finished coffee into the bin, actually smiles.

'Once more unto the breach,' he says.

Walks back into the store.

## *The Clinch*

'I'm worried about Marshal.'

'Why worry? There's nothing you can do. That boy was always going to be a problem. You knew that when you took him on.'

'He's very withdrawn today. Depressed, I dare say.'

'And far too pretty for my liking.'

Richard Crawford is looking down from the warehouse office high above the aisles. He reaches out, wipes at a patch of glass with the tips of his fingers, winces and draws back his

hand. 'When did anyone last clean in here?' He turns from the window to inspect the tops of the filing cabinets, the surface of the amenities table, Rajid's desk.

Rajid closes his laptop, stands up, stretches out his arms and yawns. 'Why should anyone care? No one ever comes up here.'

'I care. Senior management would care.'

'On the day they deign to visit I'll get the place cleaned up.'

'You mean, *I* will.'

'You bring it on yourself. You're too conscientious. Do you think that your efforts will make an iota of a difference when they decide to sell us to another supermarket chain? Do you think they'll care whether you have the happiest, cleanest, best run supermarket in the South West? They probably won't even remember your name.'

'Don't be cruel.' Crawford steps away from the window. He feels insignificant perched up here, high above the stores; much less comfortable than when he's bustling about in-store knowing every eye is on him, sensing staff start and jump at the sound of his voice, enjoying the spectacle of customers wringing their hands before they dare to approach him. In-store, he is akin to God. Out here, amongst the heathens, things are very different.

And this little eyrie in particular is just far too masculine.

'I'll send a couple of the lads up here. Blitz the place. Install a vase and some flowers. It'll be nicer for you. The window will let more light in, for a start.'

'Exposure to sunlight, you know that can kill me.'

'Have you done the month-end report?'

'Is that why you're here?'

'Amongst other things.'

'I'm a creature of the night, not a bureaucrat. Of course I haven't done your report.'

'Then I'll have to do that too, will I?'

Rajid languidly circles his desk. He has big dark eyes with girlish lashes. His teeth are very white and glitter when he smiles. Crawford likes to see Rajid smile. A smiling employee is a good employee.

*I'll put that on a noticeboard somewhere.*

'So you're going to clean my office, write my report and what else? You're my manager, not my secretary.'

'Managing you is quite an ordeal.'

'But you enjoy a challenge.'

'Oh yes.'

The two men are facing each other. Crawford looks up into Rajid's face. Rajid is very manly. Crawford feels his heart beating like the wings of bird inside his chest.

Suddenly they step closer.

*Now we are green*

Passionately clinch.

‘Why, Mr Rajid!’

Crawford can’t help but giggle, his hand on Rajid’s crotch.

‘Mr Rajid! You’re rigid!’

## *Cold Goods*

*Sisyphus: My longing for meaning is doing this to me. The weight of my hunger for the numinous is doing this to me. The weight of my desperation to penetrate the mundane and reach right into the heart of the world, into whatever it is that really matters – that’s what’s doing this to me. That’s what’s turning my blood into some strange slow liquid that my heart can barely pump. Each step and I’m reduced. Each step without meaning and I diminish. When they come looking for me at the end of my shift, when I turn back to face the way I’ve come, looking down towards the sea, when I pause at last, I will suddenly be extinguished, I will be nothing more than a blemish on the storeroom floor – and in my place will stand a boulder, the burden of all mankind, representation of all our hopes and dreams, stony encapsulation of our longing for meaning... the burden I’ve been pushing up a mountainside for all eternity.*

Marshal is working his way down Cold Goods. It’s tedious work. He’s wearing long-sleeved gloves and a supermarket jacket with its collar buttoned up. At each freezer he pulls the older boxes or cartons to the front, throws an occasional out-of-date carton into the wheelie bin at his side. Each movement is a struggle. He knows he’s pushing a terrible burden up some joyless slope. His breath condenses as he breathes. Sometimes he stops to look around him but through the fog of his emotions he’s unable to see very much at all. The warehouse rings with the squeal of trolleys, with the skewered bleating of reversing trucks, with half-hearted conversations, the blare of the tannoy, the clattering footsteps of in-store staff desperately hunting for items requested by customers. Marshal no longer finds the noise relevant, if that’s what it ever was. It’s just a landscape from which he is becoming detached. There’s the threat of pain – the threat that’s always been there – but it’s internal, incidental, physical, inexplicable. He’s seen half a dozen different doctors, been ultrasounded, x-rayed, irradiated, scanned, but no one’s been able to work out where the pain comes from or why it happens.

*Now we are green*

Some people think it's all in his mind.

Imagine that.

*Imaginary.*

Imagine their arrogance.

But right now he's barely able to care.

He pushes his wheelie bin round to the next aisle. Frozen fruit. Frozen puddings. Frozen vegetables. Chips.

He's too cold to stand still, which is good in a way.

Stop and he might never re-start.

Stop and he might remain there forever, mute and lifeless, watching his identity roll away from him like a boulder down a mountainside.

He's trying to force his mind along positive lines as he works.

He's trying to think of Amy – but instead he's thinking about a man called Theraspian Dean.

The belief thief.

The killer of faith and hope.

Enemy of Scientologists everywhere.

What did his parents think they were doing?

How could anyone point a man like Theraspian – a media-hungry, manipulative, soulless and irresponsible atheist – at their own son?

How could anyone do that and still call themselves family?

Sisyphus loves his family all the same, so he continues to struggle up the mountainside, though his feet are sore and his brain numb.

Ice cubes and pizzas. Ice cream and frozen meringues.

He tries to think of Amy.

It seems like only days ago he was looking down at the swallow-wing tattoo imprinted at the base of her spine, revelling in the sensation of his hands measuring her waist, almost forefinger to forefinger, thumb-tip to thumb-tip, his hips pushing hard against her pert bum, saying out aloud, for the whole world to hear: 'I can't believe this. I can't believe I'm this lucky. I can't believe this is me. I can't believe it. I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe I'm with you. I can't –'

And, 'I – you know – I – I only feel this good – I only normally feel this good – when I'm off my medication –

'I only feel this good – when my thoughts start to – sizzle and sparkle like – there's a firecracker in my skull...

'I can't believe I'm this –

*Now we are green*

‘When – when I’m feeling this lucky – ’ and he draws back and thrusts so hard he’s almost afraid he might hurt her, then draws back again – and thrusts – and stops there, hard against her, hard inside her, inside intelligent, transcendent Amy, his hands gripping her hips, trying to take her in entirely, taking in her tattoo, her back, the nape of her neck – smelling her, tasting her, the taste of her vulva still on his tongue, unable to stop thinking of how lucky he is, unable to stop celebrating his luck, and he can’t stop speaking – says, ‘When I – when I’m feeling – this lucky – it’s like I’m on the edge of a discovery – like I’m about to – about to uncover – something wonderful – just beyond my reach, a fundamental meaning that – that will make sense of everything, that – that will make sense of concentration camps and – and electric trains and – and spiritual beauty and – and moral ugliness and – and  $E=MC^2$  and – I don’t know, and – landing on the moon and – and 3D films and – global warming – and famines and – and happiness and love and – ’ and now he’s thrusting in time to his words and Amy’s thrusting back, breathing more and more quickly, her lovely body glowing like fire, her skin glowing like she’s on fire, her slender lovely figure glowing – but he can’t stop talking and ranting, ‘and – and photosynthesis and – and differential equations and – and ghettos and – and nuclear fission and – skyscrapers and – oceans of tarmac and – forests of windmills and – Sargasso seas and – subterranean swimming pools – and Afghan black – and crack cocaine – and growing up – and getting old and – biology and philology – and nuclear physics and – and – ’

And Amy pauses for a second and looks back at him over her shoulder. Then she grins and says, ‘Just shut up and fuck me.’

It almost hurts to inhale.

Memories of high points hardly help when lead seeps through your veins instead of blood.

Sisyphus’ world is inverted. Suddenly he’s pushing the boulder in the wrong direction, downhill towards some abyss, downhill into darkness, and the boulder – always larger than it was only moments before – is trying to roll back upwards and over him. It still wants to crush him, but it wants to crush him in reverse. He is the burden against which the boulder strains.

After his adolescent catalogue of longed-for girls, strangers he hungered for from a distance but never dared approach, or did so falteringly, stammering and embarrassed, and who quickly learnt to avoid him – after all of that he was hardly able to believe his luck. It felt a little like Molly all over again. Amy saw in him something exciting, something worth loving, despite how different they were, despite his condition.

Affection and love.

Sex and affection and love.

*Now we are green*

Molly had certainly succeeded in muddling them up.

And Amy wouldn't like him for long.

How can anyone like anyone who feels like they're spending half their life dying?

He finishes with Cold Goods, then Mr Crawford makes him take a bucket of soapy water up to the warehouse office to wash the windows, for all the good it does. Most of the dirt is on the outside, years of fine dust settled like snow.

When his shift ends he can hardly pull on his jacket.

~ Marshal?

It's Jack.

~ It's ok, Marshal. Come on. You'll manage.

Jack takes him home.

It's not depression he's suffering from. Not sadness. Not even melancholia.

It's a kind of murk that rises up within him, filling even his ears and his mouth, so he can hardly hear and hardly speak. Filling even his eyes.

It's a kind of listlessness, a kind of helplessness – not really a *something* at all. More like a *nothing*. An absence, tangible and impossible to unknot.

Amy waves a hand as Jack takes him past the storefront.

He's so blind he's not even sure if it's her. *Amy?*

Even if it is Amy he hasn't got the strength to lift his hand and wave in return. There's a pain somewhere but he's not sure it belongs to him. He can't even feel the thorns raking at his ankles. He's leaving a trail of blood behind him for all to see, all the way up the mountainside. Then all the way back down. But it doesn't hurt anymore.

Something inside him is saying something.

Something inside him is saying

**Stop**

*We are all of us crushed by the weight of our aspirations. Our legs are leaden. Our selves are base. Our souls are mired. The sphere of the sky is no shining globe but a dull and glowering orb. No heavenly burden, here. A hellish curse.*

Mrs Anderson: Oh... Jack.

Jack: I've brought him home.

Mrs Anderson: Marshal?

Marshal:

Jack: He's stopped talking.

*Now we are green*

Mrs Anderson: You'd better bring him in.  
Jack: Shall I take him to his room?  
Mrs Anderson: How long – how long has he been like this?  
Jack: All day, I think. He wasn't right when he came in.  
Mrs Anderson: I knew something was going on. To be honest, I knew *this* was going on. I knew last night. He might as well have waved a flag.  
Jack: Don't worry, Mrs Anderson. He'll be alright.  
Mrs Anderson: Do you think so?  
Jack: He always comes round in the end.  
Mrs Anderson: Does he?  
Jack: You know he does.

*Voices – like fingernails scratching glass.*

Marshal: Has she gone?  
Jack: No need to whisper. Yes, she's gone. Making me a cup of tea, I think.  
Marshal: She likes you.  
Jack: Mum's always do.  
Marshal: I've thought of a new way...  
Jack: Sorry?  
Marshal: I've thought of a better way.

*Everything comes to an end.*

*In fact, everything comes to the same end. Why should you think otherwise? What else could there be?*

*Death is the great equaliser. It is our sole destination. No one, ever, goes anywhere else.*

Mrs Anderson: I've brought you a cup of tea, Jack.  
Jack: That's very kind of you. Thank you.  
Mrs Anderson: How is he?  
Jack: Almost asleep, I think.  
Mrs Anderson: He's stopped taking his pills again. That's what this is about.  
Jack: I suppose... he gets bored.  
Mrs Anderson: And this is better?  
Jack: I'm sorry, Mrs Anderson –  
Mrs Anderson: Mattie.  
Jack: I – I didn't mean...

*Now we are green*

Mrs Anderson: It's alright, Jack. Of course you didn't. It's just – you can't know how it is. How bad it can be. When you have a son, perhaps... If it was your child doing this... going through this...

Jack: No. I –

Mrs Anderson: It's alright, Jack... This isn't your problem. You're a good boy, but there's really nothing anyone can do.

Jack is in Marshal's bedroom. There's nowhere to sit so he's sitting on the end of Marshal's bed. Marshal is lying on top of the duvet, curled on his side. His arms hug his ribs, his knees are drawn up towards his chin. Though Marshal's face is pale Jack thinks he looks utterly beautiful all the same: a tuberculotic poet devoured by his own masterpiece; a martyr dying from his wounds.

As Mrs Anderson closes the door Jack looks around the room. The bookcase overflows with a mixture of literature: Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy; works of mathematics; Greek tragedies; philosophy. A poster on the wall shows a faux Greek statue, a man of marble with a stone book open in his hands. A real laurel wreath circles the statue's head and a real bird, its wings half outstretched, has settled on its shoulder. The skin of the marble philosopher is no more pale than Marshal's. Jack leans forward, pushes the hair back from Marshal's eyes. Marshal's eyes are shut.

~ Marshal?

Jack studies the movement beneath the vulnerable skin of Marshal's eyelids.

*He's listening. He's just not speaking.*

~ You should try not to think those things. About dying. About ways to die.

Marshal whispers, 'I'll seal all the windows. And the door. And create a vacuum, here in this room. Like in Total Recall. Do you remember? The Schwarzenegger film? Just imagine them coming in. Finding me here with my eyeballs popping out, my tongue bursting from my mouth, my body twice its usual size... Just imagine the look on their faces...'

~ Marshal, it's your parents you're talking about. Your mum. You heard her. She's upset enough already. You should try not to think those things.

'I think about different ways of dying all the time.'

~ And some of them are quite funny, I know.

Jack stands up, walks around the bed.

The crucifixion. The drowning. The embalming. The electricity pylon. The leap from the suspension bridge. The HiFi in the bath. You could laugh 'til you cried.

Lol.

He lies down behind Marshal, puts an arm around his chest.

## *Now we are green*

~ Go to sleep, Marshal. Don't even think those thoughts. Don't think about anything, anything at all. Let it all go. Let it all just seep away.

Asleep?

Not asleep?

It makes little difference when Marshal's depressions really kick in. Jack has seen him like this before. The same strange obsessions: the avant-garde suicide plans; the speeches for his own funeral; how people will react to the news; how pointless everything is; the weird and inexplicable pain in his side.

~ Go to sleep. Stop thinking those thoughts. They're absurd anyway. How could you create a proper vacuum in here? And why would you want to? You love your parents. Life's not as bad as you think it is... It's just your brain putting a skew on things, screwing things up a bit. Just go to sleep. In the morning everything will look better. Just go to sleep. Let it all go...

Beneath his arm he can feel Marshal breathing. Slow and steady.

Marshal's really asleep.

Better asleep than dreaming of new ways to die.

Jack closes his eyes. Wishes he could sleep too.

## *The Cunt*

Douglas Anderson: home from the pub. The light is on in his bedroom but the rest of the house is dark and everything quiet. He climbs the stairs. Mattie wants him to redecorate. Strip the yellowing wallpaper. Put up something a bit more cheerful. And new. The stair carpet is so worn that in places you can see the underlay. Mattie wants a new carpet, too. He doesn't mind the cost, it's the effort. Actually, he doesn't mind the effort, it's the disruption. The wallpaper paste, the paint brushes, the choices to be made. He'll do it. Of course he will. He'll do anything for Mattie. He'll do anything for Mattie's son and daughter, too. He's already done a lot. He's already sacrificed one hell of a lot. He doesn't like to think about that too much. Better not to think about it too much, after an evening at the pub. He had another family once. He chose this family instead. The bedroom door needs a lick of paint – or maybe dipping and treating with wood stain. He doesn't mind. Mattie can choose. Pushes open the door. Mattie's in bed, her eyes bloodshot from crying. 'Oh, sweetheart...' Then she's sobbing on his shoulder.

He doesn't need to ask her what it's about.

She'd woken him up the night before, whispered, 'It's started.'

*Now we are green*

Half asleep: 'What's started?'

'Marshal.'

He dries Mattie's tears, sees her into bed, turns out the light, strokes her forehead, eases away the stress. With thick, clumsy fingers he massages her cheek bones, her eyebrows, her temples, the bridge of her nose. Then he undresses and steps into the bathroom to wash his face, brush his teeth.

He shuts the door. He shuts the door so Mattie can't hear him. He runs the tap. Good and hard. A torrent of water swirling around the sink, spiralling down the outlet. Staring into the mirror, gripping the sink, he recites his catechism.

'The little cunt.'

That's how it always begins.

Then it goes: 'The self-indulgent prick. Can't he see what he's doing? He's killing his mother one bit at a time... The stupid little prick. The pathetic, stupid, weak, stupid, fucking little cunt. I could – ' He's gripping the edge of the sink so hard his knuckles are white. 'Christ – '

Forces himself to be calm. He doesn't like how wild and worn out and old he looks when he caves in to these sorts of emotions. He squeezes toothpaste onto his toothbrush. Straightens his back. Raises his chin. Then he stabs the toothbrush into his mouth like a swab into an open wound.

*Mr Rajid*

Jack falls asleep in the end. In his clothes, on Marshal's bed.

In the morning he slips out of the house, before even Mr Anderson gets up – hurries home for a shower, goes to work.

'Is Marshal coming in?' Mr Rajid asks.

Jack shakes his head. 'I think he's ill.'

Mr Rajid inspects Jack closely – sees the shadows under his eyes, the look of exhaustion. 'No one's ever too ill to work,' he says. 'Unless they're dead.'

*Now we are green*

Intercostal

**Don't strip it** bare

Make it bigger

*better*

**fatter**

full of *splendour*

Don't leave it lying there

Make it grow

*Now we are green*

Copyright © Luke Andreski 2010

The right of Luke Andreski to be identified as the author of **Now We Are Green** has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.