

The Hanging Tree

A novel by

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1805

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner (1897-1962)
Requiem for a Nun (1951)



One

“This ain't right, Jedediah.”

The dark countryside was filled with a thunderous roar as two large horses pulled a small waggon down the narrow tracks. The three occupants of the cart were soaked by a torrential, freezing, wind-whipped rain; the large water drops buffeting them with such force that it seemed as if each droplet was trying to pierce their clothing in an attempt to penetrate their flesh.

“This ain't right, Jed,” repeated one of the passengers to the driver, his voice necessarily loud to compete with the pounding hooves from up front and the roar of a thunderclap overhead. “Turn the cart around. I can't do this.”

“You've no other choice, Will,” Jed called back, making no attempt to slow their progress. “The master told you it needed to be done, so you'd better do as he says. You can't go against his orders.”

“Fuck the master,” Will returned angrily. “And fuck his freak of a son as well.”

Jed shook his head and water flew from the long strands of his dark, straggly hair. “That's dangerous talk, boy, and I won't hear no more of it.” He turned to look at the passengers. “Nor will the lass,” he added, nodding towards the small girl crumpled on the floor of the waggon. “She doesn't need to hear that kind of language.”

Edith, a fourteen-year-old scullery maid, was huddled next to Will. Her face was wetted by both the relentless rain and the constant flood of tears that flowed from her eyes. Will had known her since they were both small children, had grown up with her in the same village. Usually bright and full of life, she sat with her knees drawn up and her head down. Her mouth continually moved as though she was repeating the same thing over and over to herself. However, the sound of the words she uttered did not reach her companions, for her mutterings were whipped away by the blustering wind as soon as they passed her lips.

“How can you let it be so, Jed?” Will asked, his voice now pleading with the older man. “What's been done to her, it's an abomination.”

The horses continued to pound through the filthy night, splashing continually through deep, muddy puddles. With the torrential downpour falling on them from above and the horses kicking up the dirty water from below, the waggon seemed enclosed in a tunnel of wetness.

“If I'd known what was going on I would have stopped it.” Will continued. “I would have put an end to it all.”

Steering the steeds along the lane, Jedediah Smith laughed loudly, shook his head again. “And how would you have done that, boy? Hey? You're a bloody fool, William Cooper. You think you're smart just 'cause you can read and write, but you ain't no smarter than the pigs that sit all day in their own shit.” He gave another harsh, loud laugh. “You're just like the rest of us. You do what you're told and you keep your mouth shut.”

The horses galloped on, Jed pulling on the reins as they rounded a tight corner. “There's now't that can be done,” he added. “Especially by a runt of a lad like you.”

“What about you then?” Will returned angrily. “You call yourself a man, don't you? Why don't you stop them?”

“Why should I?” Jed replied. “They ain't doing me any harm. And the master pays me well for my trouble.”

Rage swelled inside Will, but he held his tongue. Jedediah was right, there was nothing he could do except try to protect Edith from any more hurt.

Keeping the cart straight as they rattled through the countryside, Jed was more anxious than ever to reach their destination. He desired nothing more than to get rid of the girl and return to the manor, wanted nothing more than to get out of the foul night and into somewhere dry and warm. He slapped the reins on the horses' backs, shouted at them to get moving, pushed them as hard as he could.

Ahead through the ever shifting curtain of rain, he suddenly saw a pinprick of light.

"Not long now. The farm is just a ways up the track," he shouted to the others, relief in his voice.

Edith's sobs increased.

Despair flowed through Will. He hated seeing Edith like this. She had been hurt so much already and now he was adding to her misery by helping to take her to Cyrus Wilkins. They all knew what that meant. To comfort Edith, Will tried placing an arm around her, tried to draw her close to him, but she pulled away from him, huddled herself down even further in the bottom of the cart.

"Edith," Will said, his voice gentle. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what they were like. I promise you. I didn't know."

When she lifted her head and looked up at him, there was fear and loathing in her eyes. Will backed away. He felt scared and useless.

As the waggon came to a halt in the farmyard, a mountain of a man, covered in a dark, heavy, woollen coat and with a large-brimmed hat pulled low over his face, exited the house. He walked slowly towards them, a lantern held out in front of him, a musket tuck under his arm.

"You'll be all right now, Edith," Jed told the girl. "Cyrus knows how to look after you. You'll get sorted here."

"Aye, just like the others," Will said, a hard edge to his words.

Jed jumped down from the vehicle as the farmer approached.

"This another one?"

"Aye, Cyrus."

Looking the girl over, his eyes fixed in a hard stare, the huge man said, "Better bring the lass on then."

Turning away, the farmer headed towards a row of outbuildings. Jed glanced over at Will, nodded his head. He half expected the younger man to defy him, to counter the master's orders, but instead Will seemed resigned to the girl's fate. The lad sighed, placed a hand on Edith's arm. "Best you get going," he told her.

At first she refused to move. Hunkering low in the bottom of the waggon, she tried to hide, tried to make herself invisible. Her body was trembling from head to toe and Will was unsure if it was the cold that made her shudder so or fear.

He held out his hand towards her, but Edith ignored him.

Loosing patience with the girl, Jed grabbed her arm, but she twisted herself loose.

"It ain't going to do no good resisting," Jed told her.

"Please, Sir," Edith pleaded through deep sobs, her eyes wide and red. "Take me back to the manor. Let me be. I won't cause no trouble."

"Don't go asking what can't be done, girl," Jedediah replied. "You know the master's right."

"Please, Sir," Edith persisted.

"You're wasting your breath, Edith," Will spat out. "That bastard ain't got no better nature to plead to. He's just his master's puppet. Gets his strings pulled and away he goes."

"Shut your mouth now, Will," Jed threatened. "You've said too much already this night. Now give me a hand."

Together, they pulled Edith out of the waggon and got her standing on unsteady legs in the thick mud of the farmyard. The heavy raindrops exploded around them, splashes of dirty water adding to

the filth already coating their boots and garments. The night air smelled musty, almost rotten, and a whiff of sulphur reached them on the back of the gusting wind. Overhead, an almighty roar of thunder boomed, causing the horses to rear and whinny, to pull against their harnesses.

The girl screamed, covered her face with trembling hands.

“Come on,” Cyrus called. “I ain't got all night to waste.”

He disappeared inside the nearest shed while Will and Jed led the frightened girl across the farmyard. When they reached the entrance to the outhouse and looked inside, the interior was dark, full of deep shadow.

“Over this way.”

The farmer stood at the back of the room. Flickering light from the lantern danced around the walls and roof space, casting pools of blackness that ebbed and flowed, causing grotesque shadows to grow and recede as the flame was teased by the stirring air. Above, whispered voices rushed around the rafters, echoing through the shed. Glancing upwards, Will realised that the hushed words were just the chattering nonsense of the strong wind chasing itself through the beams.

“Raise her on this,” Cyrus told the men, pointing to a table of rough oak planks. “Lay her on her back.”

“No. *Please*. No,” Edith cried.

Will and Jed hesitated.

“Do as I say,” the farmer said.

Will faced the huge man towering above him. “Why has she to lay on there?” he asked.

“Cause I say so.” Cyrus raised the musket, pointed it at the young boy. “Now do it,” he commanded.

Will did not back away. He shook with fear, but he did not cower. As he was about to say more, Jed hit him on the arm. “Just do as you're told, boy. Let's get this done and get gone. I've had enough of this wretched night.”

Against the girls constant struggles, they did as ordered. They lifted her up and placed her carefully on the makeshift table. When Edith saw Cyrus preparing the restraining irons, she gasped, screamed out loud, struggled even harder to break away from the men's grip. Although Will released his hold, as shocked as Edith to see what the farmer intended, Jed held tight.

“Grab her arms, boy,” Jed told him. “This has to be done. The master will have us flogged if we fail.”

“A curse on John Poulton,” Will replied, but he grasped Edith's arms again and held her against the rough wooden boards.

Cyrus clamped the irons on the girl's limbs, her slim wrists and ankles marked instantly by the weight of the heavy metal. A new bout of crying erupted from her, but soon abated to sniffs and sobs as she realised the hopelessness of her situation.

“You gents can leave us to it now,” the farmer told them, his eyes on the helpless girl, a smile on his face.

Jed turned to leave, but Will strode towards Cyrus, stared up at huge man with hatred in his eyes. “The Devil pays your wages, Sir,” he accused.

The farmer did not look away, but simply broadened his smile. “Aye, you runt. The self same Devil that puts food in your belly and a roof over your head.” he pushed the boy away from him. “Now get gone before I decide to kill you.”

Despite the anger inside him, Will turned away, knowing he was no match for the farmer, had not the strength nor the weaponry to compete. The rage he felt burned fiercely, was almost a physical pain to endure, and he silently promise Edith that he would seek revenge for the torment she was suffering.

With the cloud-laden sky still unburdening its load, he and Jed walked back across the farmyard towards the waggon. They climbed aboard, not once looking behind at the shed in which they had left the girl to her fate.

Taking up the reins, Jed shook them hard, goaded the horses on.

As they began the journey back along the flooding road, another flash of lightening cleaved through the blackness and the ground shook with the rolling thunder that followed. But only for a second did this great volume of sound block out the shrill cries of Edith's screaming that echoed through William Cooper's mind.

Present Day

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

George Santayana (1863-1952)
The Life of Reason (1905)

Bleasby Farm

1

“Quick, give me your hand.”

He turns his attention from the road ahead to his wife sitting by his side. She has a broad grin on her face and her beautiful, blue eyes sparkle.

“*Quick,*” she says impatiently.

Releasing the steering wheel with his left hand, he holds it out. Abbie grabs his fingers and places his palm on her swollen belly.

“Can you feel the baby?”

“What the hell is he doing in there?”

“It feels as if he, *or* she, is doing an Irish jig,” Abigail replies.

“Ah, another creative and expressive person in the family. It must be in the genes.”

“This baby is bound to be brilliant at whatever it decides to do,” she tells him with joy in her voice. “Just look at the parents. How could it not be a genius?”

“That’s very true,” he agrees nodding. “And *he’s* sure to be lucky as well.”

“I’m not certain luck can be passed on from one generation to another, Patrick?”

“With the amount of good fortune I’ve had, there must be a chance that some of it will rub off on our son.”

Placing his hand back on the steering wheel, he concentrates on navigating the twisting lanes once more. Since leaving Market Rasen the roads have gradually grown smaller. Each turn the vehicle takes brings them to a lesser thoroughfare, each narrow lane they travel along appears to taper away to nothing in front of them. The tracks are now lined with hedgerows of hazel, hawthorn and bramble, making it impossible for two cars to pass each other should they meet.

“We *are* lucky, aren’t we?” Abbie asks, her voice now serious.

“I am,” he replies. “I’ve got everything I’ve ever wanted in life. A beautiful wife, who I love and adore, a new son, *or* daughter, only a few weeks away, and the type of house I’ve always dreamed of.”

“And the money from the lottery win,” she adds.

“That too.” He stares out at the lush, green landscape of the Lincolnshire Wolds. The sun is high and bright, the sky a perfect, undisturbed azure all the way to the horizon. “But even if we hadn’t won the money, even if it was just you, me and baby, still living in the flat, with its dodgy heating and water stained ceiling, I’d still consider myself the luckiest man alive.”

Abigail gives his arm a gentle squeeze. “Is there much further to go?”

“About five miles,” he replies.

“I can’t wait to see the place again. See how it looks after all the work has been completed.”

Patrick looks at his wife, sees the excitement on her face. Her bright eyes are sparkling, her smile wide. There is the familiar wrinkle at the top of her small, button nose that he finds so endearing his heart skips a beat and he wants to reach out and take her in his arms. He resists the urge and when he turns back to look at the road, he stamps down hard on the brake. The car skids noisily to a halt, forcing both of them violently against the restraint of their seat belts.

“*Shit,*” he says.

“What are you doing?” Panic is evident in Abbie’s voice.

“Didn’t you see it?” Patrick scans the road in front of them. There is nothing now but the countryside.

“See what?” Abbie turns to stare at him. “There’s nothing out there.”

“I saw . . .” He looks behind him, then to the side, trying to glimpse the dark shadow that he had

witnessed run across the road directly in front of their car. "I don't know," he eventually says, shaking his head. "Something ran out in front of us. I saw it from the corner of my eye."

"Well I didn't see anything." Abbie is rubbing her belly, the safety belt having dug into her.

"It was right there," Patrick replies pointing through the windscreen, although his voice sounds less certain. Continuing to search the lane, the fields and the hedgerows, he tells Abbie, "It was right there. Right in front of us."

Abbie sighs, sits back in the seat, continues to rub her abdomen. "Well there's nothing there now," she tells him.

Shaking his head once more, and with one final glance at the open countryside, he puts the car in gear and continues the journey.

2

When they pull up in front of the recently renovated property, a smile spreads on his face. The farmhouse is perfect, better even than he'd imagined it would be from the architects drawings. Standing in front of the large front door is Steven Cawley from the estate agents. He gives them a little wave as the vehicle stops.

"Welcome home," Steve calls as he walks towards them. "It's all ready. As arranged, the furniture removal people have been and everything is in order. All you've got to do is settle yourselves in and enjoy your marvellous new house."

Getting out of the car, Patrick shakes the estate agent's hand, and then moves around the vehicle to help Abbie out. Although the Mercedes is not small, she still struggles to extricate herself from its confines, the large bump swelling her abdomen hampering her movement.

"Here's the keys." Steve hands the bunch over to him as they make their way to the entrance of their new home. "Do you need me to show you around?"

"We'll be fine," Patrick tells him. "I know the layout well. I helped to design it. And we've been up to see it a couple of times during its renovation."

"Of course." Steve looks up at the building. "You've done a really good job," he tells them. "The place is beautiful."

They smile.

"Well, I'll leave you to it then." The estate agent extends his hand. Patrick shakes it.

"Thanks for all your help, Steve," Abbie says.

"My pleasure. And if there's anything else I can do for you, just call."

They watch him get into his vehicle and drive away. Then Patrick turns to look at the farmhouse. Once again he is overwhelmed by how lucky he is. Abbie, too, is taking in the building's façade, the lovely surroundings. The smile on her face never falters.

"Shall we?" He nods towards the door.

"I think we shall," she replies, the smile broadening to a wide grin.

Sounding a fanfare, he turns the handle and pushes open the door. The interior is bright and welcoming.

Swooping low, with an exaggerated bow, he says, "After you, My Lady."

"Thank you, My Lord," she returns.

They enter their new home.

Although rich beyond their imaginings, there is still a reluctance in Patrick to sever all connections with their old lives, their old careers. Because of their sudden transition from barely managing to get by, to having more cash than either of them have ever dreamed of, there is a lingering shadow of fear within him that casts darkness over his happiness. Often, since winning the lottery money, he has woken scared and sweating during the night, forced awake by a terrible dream where their new wealth has been snatched away from them as swiftly and as unexpectedly as it had been handed to them. In this nightmare they are left destitute, poorer even than before their good fortune.

Patrick is prone to such pessimistic thoughts. He suffered similar nightmares when he had first met Abigail, finding it hard to come to terms with the notion that a woman as beautiful as her would want to spend the rest of her life with someone like him.

He is well aware that his deep insecurity has been brought about by his troubled life, by events that have shaped the course of his existence, causing a flaw in the nature of his character. Without exception experience has taught him that good fortune inevitably resulted in some kind of payback. That the accountancy book of his life has always to be brought to balance. That the status of equilibrium forever needs to be maintained. It has always been the case that something good happening to him will ultimately have to be countered by something equally as bad.

Even when he thinks back to his childhood, remembering the scattered events that have managed to avoid being deleted by the passage of time, it seems that he has always been given great blessings with one hand only for them to be snatched quickly away by another.

That is the way it has always been and he expects nothing now to change.

He is well aware that this predilection towards pessimism is a weakness within his character, but he is unable to combat it, so deeply is it rooted. So he continually counts his fortunes, appraising the good things in his life, and then, like a meticulous accountant, stacking them up against the misfortunes that have befallen him. Or, more likely, he worries about the adversities that still await him to ensure that the scales that measure his life are brought to balance.

And he knows that at present the scales are far from being level.

When Abbie told him she was pregnant, it brought fresh anxieties to Patrick, ones he knew he had to face alone. Unable to voice his concerns to his wife, he let them fester and grow within his own mind. He fully understands that his fears are misguided, maybe even superstitious in their nature, but he only has life's experience with which to be guided, with which to base his opinions on, and that experience has taught him to be guarded about any situation that favours him in any way.

So it was inevitable that the news of Abigail's pregnancy brought more wakeful nights, more mental accountancy. It was yet another entry in the credit column waiting to be balanced by a debit of equal magnitude. Another reason to wake and worry in the dark hours of the night, his mind filled with conspiracies of disaster, consumed with thoughts of atonement.

Then, luck upon luck, they had won the lottery. Three-point-five million pounds of incredible fortune. He could hardly believe it, was numb with shock. They celebrated, they made their plans, they laughed. But deep within Patrick, the happiness darkened, the worries increased. He knew, without a shred of doubt, that the imaginary expected retribution had become a reality of immense probability.

According to the columns in the accounting book of his life, the debt now due to maintain the equilibrium of his existence was an almost immeasurable amount.

Contemplating these things now, he knows that life has become too easy. Despite there being no signs as such, he is positive that something infelicitous awaits him. So, despite all the good fortune, he continues to look over his shoulder, waiting for the disaster that he is convinced is inevitable.

As a result, during the design of their new house, Patrick had dedicated rooms to both his and

Abbie's previous employment.

Abigail has a sewing room, somewhere she can spend her time designing and creating dresses and outfits. This is what she does, a designer and seamstress, although as yet she has failed to make the big time. In truth, she has not yet even returned a profit from her labours. For the years they have been together, Patrick's meagre monthly wage has supplemented the loss she has constantly made on the materials used for unsold garments. But it is what she enjoys and can now afford to continue enjoying. Although the time she will be able to spend in that room will be greatly reduced when their son is born.

He has his own room too. His study. His computer room. Having started out as a web designer, he's lately been writing apps for Apple products. Despite having achieved some success in his chosen career, he's always struggled to keep up with the rapidly changing world of technology. No sooner has he learnt one new piece of software than something more advanced, more expensive, comes along to replace it. Inevitably, this means more of his income being taken up with just keeping pace.

It is a never ending battle to make enough money for them to live on.

Or, at least, it used to be.

Now, thanks to their good fortune, he has all the time and all the money he needs to become better acquainted with the latest packages, the newest techniques and technologies. It is ironic that his desire to do so has waned considerably, however.

"Hey. How's it going?"

The sound of his wife's voice, breaks through Patrick's thoughts. Turning to look at Abbie, he is once again struck by her beauty. If anything, the pregnancy has given her a glow that enhances her naturally pretty features. Once more, he counts his blessings, once more he ponders the ultimate price to pay.

"All set up," he tells her. "Although the internet here is *really* slow."

"That's the price you pay for the peace and quiet of the countryside," she replies.

Another example of the balancing of the scales, he thinks.

"Do you like what we've done with the house?"

"I love it." She holds out her hand. "Come on. Let's go exploring."

For weeks, the days have been blessed with a warm sun and clear skies. Today is no different. It seems that ever since Abbie told him she was expecting their first child, the sun has come out and shone brightly down upon them. As they exit the cool shade of the house, a cocoon of July warmth envelopes them. They stroll across the courtyard, hand in hand, turning around to look at the freshly rendered exterior of their new home.

"I still can't believe it," Abbie says, squeezing his hand tightly. "The house is lovely."

"It's better than I ever imagined it would be," he confesses.

Walking further away from the main building, they come to a row of outhouses. These, too, have been rendered and painted white, although the interior of these small buildings have been largely untouched.

"What will we do with them?"

"I thought I might create a workshop," he muses. "Buy a lathe, a bandsaw, some tools to do woodworking."

Abbie frowns at him. "We'll see. There's plenty of time to decide."

They turn and head towards the back of their property and both of them draw in breaths of amazement at the panoramic view.

"My God, it's *so* beautiful," Abbie utters.

Before them is the rolling hills of the Lincolnshire Wolds; a patchwork of variegated greens and golds, all edged with neat hedgerows and drainage dykes.

"It almost looks handmade," he exclaims. "As though its design has been planned out to perfection."

"How much of it belongs to us?" Abbie asks eagerly.

He can hear the excitement in his wife's voice.

Pointing into the distance, he tells her, "You see those trees over there? That's Scrubb Wood. It joins on to Lady Wood and then Bleasby Wood. We own all the land to them."

Abbie looks at him in amazement. "What are we going to with it all?"

"Horses, I thought. It would be great for our son to learn to ride. Us too."

"Or our daughter," she reminds him. "Anyway, you won't get me on the back of a horse."

"We could rent the land out, then."

"We'll think about it. For now it would be nice to just stroll through the countryside, enjoy what we own."

Unable to decide which sight he prefers, the wonderful landscape that stretches on forever, or his beautiful wife by his side, Patrick sighs. He tries to push the bad thoughts away, but they insist on creeping into his mind anyway. "It's almost too good to be true," he mutters, sadness tainting the words.

"But it *is* true," Abbie tells him. "And why shouldn't good things happen to us? I *know* you, Patrick Norris. You always think you don't deserve good stuff to happen to you. But look at us. We're happy, we're rich, but more importantly, we are *good* people. Good things should happen to good people. Right?"

He stares at the scenery. Abbie nudges him. "*Right?*"

"Right," he replies, although there is no sincerity in his answer.

They are silent for a while. The day is silent with them.

Then, "Is it how you remember it?" she asks.

Smiling, he replies, "That was a long time ago. I was only a boy when I lived around here. You know how time can mess with your memory, make things far better, or even far worse, than they really were." He shrugs his shoulders, sighs. Then he turns and takes in the landscape once more. "But, yes. It is exactly how I remember. The green countryside, the warm sun, the buzzing bees. I was happy here, despite what happened. I was really happy. For a while, anyway."

"And now you are happy again," Abbie says, putting her arms around him.

"Yes," he replies.

"And perhaps you will tell me about your upbringing, about what happened to you all those years ago?"

"Perhaps," he replies and kisses her.

The night is humid and Patrick struggles to sleep; new bed, new surrounds, his mind active. Abbie lies next to him, her breathing steady, her body having found a comfortable position despite the baby.

Carefully he climbs from their bed and makes his way along the landing towards the stairs. He listens to the sounds of the house, the creaking floorboards, the settling beams. He thinks it is like hearing an old man arching his aching back, stretching his fragile limbs.

In the darkness his surroundings are unfamiliar, but he will learn, in time, where everything is, he is sure. Soon he will be able to roam around at night with no fear of collision. Now though, he progresses steadily, hands out in front, his eyes not yet adjusted to night vision.

As he walks, bare feet, across the kitchen floor, he feels a slight give beneath him. At first he wonders if there is a damaged board or joist, but then he remembers the cellar below the kitchen, a room for storing preserves and pickles, and the trap door that leads to it beneath the rug on which he stands. The space will come in handy; a storage area to house all the unused items that will inevitably gather during their life here.

He pours himself a glass of milk and sits at the large oak table that occupies a good third of the kitchen. One day my family will be seated around here, he thinks. Abbie, him and their children, however many that turns out to be, will be chatting, laughing, eating their meals and enjoying each others' company. A *real* family, blood relatives, something he has never experienced.

Turning to the large window that looks out onto the courtyard, he sees the sky has an unusual hue to it. Not yet dawn, but not night either, there is an expectant glow on the horizon as though the world is pregnant and waiting patiently for the birth of a new day. Once again he is struck by the beauty of the landscape surrounding their house.

A sudden flare of harsh brightness causes him to stand up quickly, spilling his milk. He rushes to the window, stares out at the courtyard now brilliantly illuminated by the piercing security lights. He searches the area for movement, his heart racing, his nerves on edge. But there is nothing out there, nothing moving but fleeing shadows desperate to escape the brightness, searching for any nook or cranny to hide in.

Not realising that he is holding his breath, he watches the empty night for a long while, until the lights fade, until his pulse relaxes, until the semi-dark is reinstated, until his heartbeat settles, until his lungs scream out for oxygen. He exhales and then drags fresh air into his chest.

All remains still now.

Darkness descends once more.

He releases a long sigh, shakes his head as though scolding himself for being so jumpy. There's nothing to be afraid of, he tells himself. There's nothing out there.

Returning to the table, he mops up the spilt milk, places the empty glass in the sink.

Wild animals, he considers, foxes, rabbits, badgers, the area must be teeming with them. Any one of them could have strayed into the circle of the sensor's eye-line. It's just something he will have to get used to, just part of living in the country.

There is nothing to fear.

He gives a short, uncertain laugh.

As his worries begin to subside, as the night returns to its quiet, peaceful ways, a sudden loud scream cuts through the silence. Within the cry he hears pain and anguish and his heart slams in his chest again, the hairs at the nape of his neck stand erect and his skin crawls.

“Abbie!”

He bolts from the kitchen, takes the stairs two at a time.

In the bedroom his wife is still, her breathing even, regular, where his is ragged. He feels like weeping even though he can hear nothing now but his own pounding heart and laboured breath. His mind races as he tries to understand what is happening this night.

Tears do then flow and his new life seems dark and full of danger. *I'm just tired*, he tells himself, *things always look worse at night. Everything will be all right in the morning, after a few hours sleep.*

Exhaustion washes over him.

He climbs back in bed, careful not to disturb Abbie, and closes his eyes, tries to close his mind. *Everything will be all right in the morning*, he tells himself again and then the phrase, *it is always darkest before the dawn*, springs to his mind.

Stop it. Just sleep.

Eventually he does and he dreams of unbalanced scales.