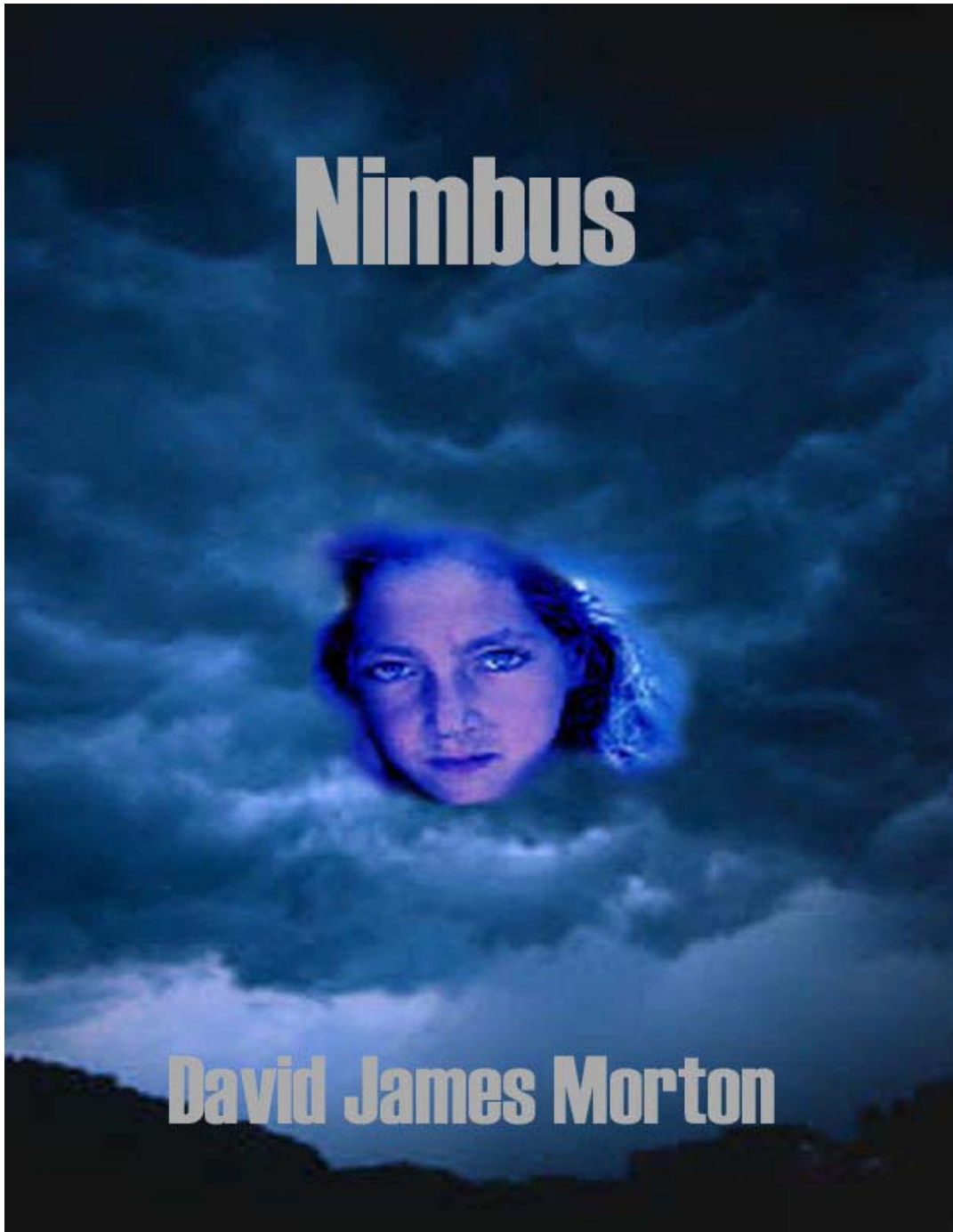


Nimbus



David James Morton

NIMBUS

© Copyright 2004
David James Morton

The right of David James Morton to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All Right Reserved

No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with the written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended).

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damage.

First Published in 2004

NIMBUS

...a heavy grey rain-bearing cloud...

...a luminous vapour, cloud, or atmosphere surrounding a god or goddess...

...a luminous circle about the head of a representation of a god, saint, or sovereign

CHAPTER 1 – ARBOR LOW, DERBYSHIRE PEAK DISTRICT, MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, AFTERNOON

Along a winding trunk road between Buxton and Ashbourne, lies a place of revelation...

‘Ouch!’ cried Faith Littlechild as the bullying Petra Savage whacked the crown of her head with a full plastic lunchbox.

‘Silence her,’ said Petra as her two stooges refastened their grips upon the frail, freckled, Faith.

Petra hit Faith again; this time with more force but her “fun” had to stop for their coach had reached its destination. Whilst Petra and her cronies were now busy collecting their bags and checking how many cigarettes they’d got left, 11-year-old red-haired Faith cautiously touched the top of her head.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll *really* smash it next time,’ said Petra as she stepped past Faith.

Making sure everyone was filing down the aisle, Faith buttoned up her brown mackintosh and followed them.

‘You’ve got beautiful long hair, Faith,’ said Mr Ashbourne as Faith passed him. She smiled and prayed the others hadn’t heard his comment, but, inevitably, they had.

‘Beautiful hair,’ mocked Petra and winked her eye in a spiteful way. ‘Beautiful freckles...’

Faith didn’t like her freckles. In summer, if the sun was strong, her face would explode with them and even in the dim wintry light her brown blotches were visible above her pasty skin. Last year, Faith had been so upset by their cruel remarks that she’d tried cutting them from her face with a needle.

‘Don’t listen to them, Faith,’ said Mr Ashbourne but it was best, she thought, to ignore him.

'I'm bored already,' said Petra. 'Can I stay on the coach?' Mr Ashbourne shook his head then made for the entrance to Arbor Low with Miss Bansall, a fellow teacher, and their fifteen pupils.

'Sir, this *really* is boring,' piped the podgy Petra, ripping a button from Faith's brown mackintosh before trying to insert it into the collection tin which was nailed to a stone wall by the entrance. Petra was used to getting her own way. She was the same age as Faith but twice the size, and liked to think of herself as top dog, a rather pathetic honour for a school of barely thirty pupils. With her makeup and dyed black hair, Petra was attractive to older boys and had already lost her virginity, never mind her dignity.

'What do you see?' said Mr Ashbourne as they reached a rather nondescript earth mound.

'I see nothing,' said Petra, her cronies hurriedly agreeing. 'I can smell things though...'

'What can you smell?' asked Mr Ashbourne.

'Her!' jeered Petra, stabbing a finger and the lonely, isolated, Faith. 'Bitch... Slag...' she cursed but already the diminutive Faith was somewhere else. It was high summer and she was flying her kite in a clear blue sky. And she was running so fast, no-one could catch her. She was free...

'*Only one hour and six minutes to go,*' she thought, counting, as usual, the minutes left in the school day.

'The Saxons called this place Eordburg-hlaw - "earth-castle-hill",' said Mr Ashbourne, reading from memory for history was a particular passion and the trip to Arbor Low, his idea. 'Arbor Low is the finest Stone Age "henge" in the North of England, a site of unique archaeological and scientific interest.'

'What's a henge, sir?' murmured Faith, moving closer to the clump of people who'd once been her friends.

'It's a circular earthwork,' said Mr Ashbourne. 'No-one knows why this henge or its sister henge at Dove Holes were constructed or

what they were used for, but they must have been important focal points for the people at the time. The henge was constructed about 2500 BC and consists of—'

'Big deal,' said Petra, scuffing grass with her shoe.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' he said as Petra scowled back. 'This place has special powers,' he added but his gawping unsettled Petra.

'Don't look at me, you freak,' she spat whilst the others followed Ashbourne to the centre of the circle.

'This central area contains 46 large and 13 smaller stones, arranged in a circle with a group at the centre,' he said in a faintly malevolent voice. 'The surprise is that all the stones are lying flat and no-one knows for certain whether this was how they were originally or whether they were once upright and have been toppled.'

At once, a wind came snarling and hissing over the bleak, unforgiving moors, disturbing the group like a swarm of angry bees. And throughout the gust, Ashbourne had an oddly pleasurable look upon his face.

'One theory is that early Christians laid them flat in order to "de-sanctify" the site, but no archaeological evidence supports this,' he continued, encouraging the children to wander around and touch the stones.

'All the stones lie tragically prone and have weathered into fantastic shapes over the millennia. The Neolithic builders would use only the simplest of tools, such as antler picks and animal shoulder-blade shovels in its building.'

Falling silent, Ashbourne watched their young faces and knew their minds were tumbling back centuries as they embraced the ancient stone.

'The stones would not have been visible from outside the enclosing henge bank,' he said. 'Naturally, this would add an air of mystery to the rituals and ceremonies that took place inside, which only those taking part could witness. It may have been used for

meetings of tribespeople at important seasons of the year, or for special events.'

'Did people die here?' asked Faith, stepping close to Mr Ashbourne.

'Yes,' he replied.

'Mr Ashbourne,' groaned Miss Bansall, who was getting cold.

'Just one more thing,' he said, giving her a warm, yet mischievous, smile. 'Two hundred metres away to the south-east is Gib Hill, a Bronze Age burial mound which may once have been connected with Arbor Low by an earth bank. It was excavated many years ago and many bodies were found inside.'

'That's disgusting!' whined Petra releasing her hand from a stone as if it had just become white-hot.

'Everyone dies,' said Mr Ashbourne before Miss Bansall advised it might be time to return to the coach.

Worryingly, she'd heard him use the phrase before, several times. Although she didn't know him, or want to know him, Miss Bansall was nonetheless troubled by him.

Sensing another bout of bullying approaching, Faith asked a question; if nothing else, it would delay her pain.

'Mr Ashbourne,' she said as the others starting filing away, 'you said this place had special powers.'

'It's been said that necromancy was performed here,' he replied.

'Necromancy?' puzzled Faith.

'Mr Ashbourne,' groaned Miss Bansall, for such subjects were not part of the agreed script.

'It is the conjuring of spirits of the dead,' he said then saw that the children had stopped moving.

'Ugh!' cried Faith as Mr Ashbourne took her tiny hand then placed it on one of the stones.

'It's not the same as conjuring demons or devils to do one's bidding or to cast spells. It's the seeking of contact with those spirits who have passed into another plane of existence,' he said then found

Miss Bansall and the others were ringing him and Faith. It was intriguing that Petra, without her own audience, looked very uncomfortable.

'What did these people use it for?' asked Faith as he let go of her hand.

'Many purposes...including such things as understanding a person's death, or finding something important that is missing. Spirits who have passed are not limited by time, and so are able to have knowledge of both past, present and future events.'

'Crap!' whined Petra as she stomped off towards the bus.

'There's something behind you,' he said.

Petra froze, her skin puckering with fear before she slowly turned to confront the others with a salt-white face. Mr Ashbourne took sickly delight in her apprehension. 'Is it nonsense?' he asked, refusing to use her crude term.

'Freak,' muttered Petra then saw the others giggle into their coats.

'How do we communicate?' Faith quizzed.

'I *really* think we should be going,' said Miss Bansall. 'We can talk on the bus. Come on kids.'

'With lodestones,' he replied as Miss Bansall sighed. 'A lodestone is any rock which contains naturally magnetic iron ore. Many centuries ago they were called "magic stones" when people noticed they pointed north or south while suspended from a string. Some believe that the only way a lodestone occurs naturally is when an iron-containing rock is struck by lightning.' Disturbed, Petra glared at the churning grey skies.

'I want to go,' she nagged then screamed on hearing a horrid clap of thunder. 'What are you all laughing at?' she cried then noticed an unroadworthy quarry truck pass by, its engine blaring, and grunting, like an unruly bull.

'Did it spook you?' he asked.

'I'm scared of nothing,' said Petra. 'I'm just cold and my dad will have you if I get a chill.'

'I guess you like your conditioned world too much,' he said, stepping up to her. 'Back in Neolithic times, the earth was a dangerous place but it's no less dangerous today.'

'Especially with freaks like *you* in it,' said Petra.

Whilst he was raging beneath his slight frame, Mr Ashbourne knew that he had no choice but to walk away.

As he and Miss Bansall watched the children funnel onto the coach he saw Petra dig her knuckles into Faith's spine.

'No-one should underestimate the fear a bullied child feels...' he whispered.

'And you'd know?' said Miss Bansall who was flustered and badly wanted the warmth.

'I was bullied at school,' he replied, masking the tiniest trace of a snivel. 'Stop that!' he cried as Petra stabbed Faith a little harder with her knuckle. 'I wish I could just grab her. Doesn't it frustrate you?'

'Always,' said Miss Bansall.

'Faith just looks so thin and tired.'

'We've tried to help but her mother won't listen. She won't let us near the farm or come into school,' she said.

'But that's no reason to abandon her,' he stated but Miss Bansall wouldn't react.

As the two of them sat down at the front of the coach, farther back, Petra was punting Faith towards the rear. Petra was hurting for feeling humiliated back at the stone circle, and little Faith was, once again, her voodoo doll.

'Get in there,' hissed Petra shoving Faith into the seat next to the emergency door.

'Quiet!' yelled Miss Bansall unaware of the unfolding maltreatment.

'I want to help,' mumbled Mr Ashbourne to her, 'but sometimes I just want to put my feet up.'

'You'll soon learn that that's the best policy,' she said then shut her eyes as the coach idled out of the car park.

'You're mine,' said Petra spitting at Faith's long red hair. 'I wonder what'd happen if we threw you out now?'

'Please don't. What have I ever done to you?' said Faith, deliberately tightening her frame.

'You smell,' said Petra, pinching her stubby nose with two fingers. 'You must have messed your pants,' she smirked as her fearful clique surrounded them in an attempt to mask what was going on. Pressing Faith into the seat, Petra lifted Faith's skirt and found a holey pair of dull white knickers.

'Stop it,' begged Faith, but couldn't thwart the bulky Petra from yanking the knickers down her legs.

'Catch!' shouted Petra as she tossed the garment towards the front of the coach.

'Why'd you do these things to me?' sobbed Faith, bolting as one of the boys had collected her knickers and was walking towards Miss Bansall. Faith scuttled up the aisle but didn't see a large black shoe slither out from one of the seats. Tripping, she fell forward and cracked her nose on the greasy, throbbing, floor. Such an act, instead of sponsoring concern, provoked a chorus of catlike screeches and manic laughs. Now, the boy who had been walking towards the teachers returned and dropped the knickers onto Faith's head.

'What are you playing at, Faith?' asked Mr Ashbourne while she observed his muddy brown brogues.

'It wasn't me, sir,' said Faith, snatching her knickers before stuffing them into a coat pocket.

'So what happened?' he asked, settling to his haunches.

'Nothing, sir,' said Faith as the children puckered their lips as if ready to kiss.

'Do you love her, sir?' one of the boys asked.

'Ignore them,' he told Faith then took her arm and helped her to her feet. 'Do you want to sit at the front?'

'I want to get off now,' said Faith amid taunts and jeers from her peers.

'Are you sure?'

Faith nodded, fearful that if she spoke, she'd collapse into tears.

'Pull yourself together Faith,' Miss Bansall said as Faith reached the front.

'You must stay,' insisted Mr Ashbourne. 'It's still a long way to your home.'

'Everywhere is a long way from home,' said Faith. 'I want to get off!'

'Can't you see she's distressed?' he posed to Miss Bansall then fixed on Petra who was grinning evilly.

'Mr Ashbourne, we have a duty of care,' she said but nonetheless he told the coach driver to pull over.

'I'm aware of that,' he said as Faith fled so fast she almost got caught as the doors folded back.

'Careful,' said Miss Bansall, shaking her head intolerantly. 'Silly girl,' she fussed as Ashbourne sat down beside her, his eyes stuck on Faith. 'I may have to report this,' she mumbled but he ignored her.

'We'll get *you* tomorrow,' Petra sneered as she thumped on the window but Faith didn't look up until the bus was out of sight. It was a forlorn winter's day but Faith was pleased to be finally alone. And she wasn't in the least scared.

Faith knew the area well and calculated that if she skipped across the dozen or so fields which lay ahead, she'd be home in twenty minutes. About to commit to her first step, that sudden wind she'd experienced earlier lashed her face, forcing her eyes to focus the now distant Arbor Low.

'Who's there?' she panted, startled by a rumbling voice. 'Mr Ashbourne?' she asked. 'I know you're hiding,' she said as the sound rolled to her again. It seemed to be a human voice but it was not

speaking in English. Curiously, the accent wasn't dissimilar to Faith's own.

'Eordburg-hlaw,' she muttered then repeated it several times for she still imagined Mr Ashbourne had somehow got off the bus and was close by. 'Eordburg-hlaw, that's what he said,' she mused as the voice vanished.

Leaping over a rusty iron gate, Faith began the long, sludgy, walk home. Delving into her coat pocket, she found, beneath the bundled pair of knickers, a scrap of paper, the last sheet of a small calendar. Faith didn't entrust her thoughts to a diary but used this calendar to count off the days, for one more day meant less days of torture at school. On this dog-eared scrap, smeared with fingerprints, one particular date was circled in red ink. Christmas had lately been a miserable time but she hoped this year would be a time of reconciliation with her mother. Smiling, she was putting the paper back into her pocket when the wind quickened and took it from her fingers. In the deepening wintry dusk, she chased after the page which fluttered like a small bird, but it was always out of reach.

'Come back!' she cried as the wind took it so far away it was invisible.

As Faith slowly accepted that she'd lost her calendar she wondered if anything would ever come right for her...

CHAPTER 2 – NIMBUS, MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, EVENING

Faith lived outside the village of Lifwell, with her mother, Jackie, in a decaying, and haunted, farmhouse that sat on Dark Peak Moor. The house, Nimbus, was Jackie's parent's home and a place where Faith once received great comfort.

Jackie's parents had laboured hard on their farm but Jackie had desired a career. After excelling at school, she went to university to study business but it was there she unexpectedly fell pregnant. Mortified that she was both pregnant, and intent on having an abortion, her parents took her back to Nimbus where they watched her night and day to make sure she didn't do anything to harm her unborn child.

Several months later, Faith was born in Jackie's old room; a place she never sets foot in now. But with her "burden" offloaded, Jackie planned to return to university but her parents insisted she brought the child up. Bowing to this insistence, she felt her life had been ruined and never returned to university. Feeling that Faith had robbed her of a career, Jackie even now could not bear her daughter's presence. And there'd been many times in the past when she'd left Faith in doorways, toilets and other places in a bid to get rid of her, but Faith was always found, and returned.

But just as her mood appeared to be lightening, Jackie received an unrecoverable shock. While travelling to a cattle market during Christmas three years ago, her parents were killed in a car crash. Since then, she'd never left the farm. Alas, the buildings had gone to ruin. The fields were overgrown and all livestock, bar a small herd of cows, had been sold. Lastly, the money bequeathed by her parents had nearly run out. This coming Christmas was likely to be the last at Nimbus as she would be forced to sell up early in the New Year.

—◇—

It was dark outside but Jackie would not hoist herself from her chair and turn a light on. As she sat there, her elbows digging into its arms, she pondered deeply. On the tip of her chair's left arm was a letter whilst at the other was a cutthroat razor. The letter was no ordinary letter, for it was from Paradise Developments and they had offered her a good price for Nimbus. But the razor was no ordinary razor as it had been pilfered from her father's shaving kit. For most of the past three years, it had been hidden under her bed and occasionally dusted down and observed when she was low. However, this exact mood was the darkest she'd experienced and the blade wasn't far from her scrawny wrist.

'Why can't I just die,' said Jackie, 'it would be much simpler.'

'Because you don't want to,' replied Faith clicking on the light switch and flooding the room in a pale yellow glow. Jackie brushed the cutthroat razor from the chair's arm and pushed it down the side of the seat cushion. She'd been fast but Faith had seen it and lunged across the chair, rammed her hand past the cushion and pulled it out.

'Leave it!' cried Jackie, slapping Faith's face but her daughter soon escaped to the adjoining kitchen.

'If you want it, you've got to get it,' she said, waving the razor in front of her.

'Come here!' yelled Jackie, rooted to her chair.

'You come here,' replied Faith, well accustomed to her mother's volatility and nastiness.

'You know I can't,' said Jackie, weaving her head from side-to-side.

'Why?'

'Do as I say,' said Jackie but on blinking found the doorway was empty. 'Damned girl...never does what I tell her. Why can't you go and leave me? I don't want you.'

With the light on, Jackie was drawn irresistibly to the letter. It was probably the sixth she'd received although it could be more; and each time, the offer was higher.

—◇—

‘Hello Flossie,’ whispered Faith, pushing her nose through the bars of Flossie’s pen. Flossie was a Holstein-Fresian, a distinctive breed whose white bodies were peppered with black cowspots. Flossie wasn’t the cow’s real name, just a label Faith used. In fact, she’d given names to the other twelve cows in this rotten shed. To the unaware they all looked the same but Faith remembered their names by picturing various shapes on their flanks or noses. Flossie had a patch stretching from her back right down to her udder which looked like the continent of Africa. Jezebel had a white mark above her nose which reminded Faith of a lampshade whilst Gigi had a black smudge on her rump that looked like Petra. Kissing Flossie’s pink nose, Faith received a lick from a coarse tongue in return. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ she said, stroking Flossie’s forehead. ‘Can I sleep here tonight?’ she asked as Flossie widened her eyes as if understanding the plea but after a short reflection Faith turned off the light and wished them all pleasant dreams.

—◇—

‘What are you reading?’ asked Faith as she re-entered the house.

‘Where’s my...my...’ said Jackie.

‘I buried it,’ said Faith, assuming her mother was referring to the cutthroat razor.

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Well, why don’t you find out,’ said Faith.

‘You know I can’t,’ said Jackie then tore her letter to pieces. Faith scampered over to collect the shreds but Jackie fenced out with her leg. ‘Get the dinner on.’ Faith bit her lip and, with great reluctance, ambled to the stove. In a large steel pot on top of a black and cream range cooker was a thick chicken broth she’d made last night.

‘It won’t be long,’ said Faith, lighting a gas ring with a match.

Faith wished her mother would help with the chores but each time she’d asked, the reaction was fierce. She didn’t want her fingers

trapped in doors, her ears pulled, or her face slapped, so, when she got back from school, she'd have to cook and clean and wait on her mother like a slave. Jackie was most adept at making her daughter feel worthless.

'Can I sit down here?' asked Faith. Jackie shook her head. 'I was b...' she whimpered but couldn't finish.

'I was bullied,' she said in thought yet now she'd uttered it, it seemed nothing more than irony for her mother was doing the same. Sometimes, Faith wished she could drink a magic potion at bedtime that would turn her into an adult. It was heartbreaking that she wanted to skip her childhood for a little peace and stability.

'What is it?' snarled Jackie.

Faith longed to share experiences with her mother, to show her what she'd been doing at school but her mother wasn't interested, she'd shut herself down, totally. If she could ring bells or blow whistles instead of communicating with words, she'd do it.

'The soup will be ready in a few minutes,' said Faith.

'Why are you looking at me like that? Have I got green skin or something?'

Faith swallowed with difficulty and mumbled several disjointed words.

'I'm worried about you,' she said but kept her distance. Jackie huffed loudly, dismissing the notion. 'I love you.'

'No you don't! You're only after my money...but it's mine...and you're not getting a penny!'

'I do love you, you know,' Faith restated.

'Get the phone,' said Jackie. 'Get the phone, goddamn you!' she cried, grabbing her father's shepherd's crook then striking Faith on the back of the hand where there was very little flesh above the bone. Faith tried to disguise how much pain was buzzing in her body, but it was tough. 'They've hung up now, you stupid girl!'

'Mummy, we have no phone,' Faith said slowly.

So much time had been wasted the soup was gurgling like a hot mud spring. Faith just wanted a little rest but knew she'd be on her

feet until ten. She was exhausted and it was only Monday. Of course, she didn't unwind at the weekends, just that school was an added inconvenience during weekdays.

Like a serving wench, she waited while her mother slurped her chicken soup. Lately, her mother's movements had measurably slowed but Faith was shocked when she found the bowl was still half full. As she took the bowl away, her mother looked up guiltily then hardened her face as if to deter comment. But as Faith poured the soup into the sink she found red streaks in it. Careful to conceal what she was doing, she dipped her little finger into the soup then placed it to her nose before quailing at the metallic odour of blood. Coughing loudly, Jackie disturbed Faith, causing her to drop the bowl into the sink.

Once Faith had finished cleaning up, she wasn't hungry. Often she was too tired to eat and would go to bed on an empty and grumbling stomach. As a result of this neglect, she was short for her age, underweight and sickly.

Putting the last plate in the rack, and folding the tea towel over the oven door handle, she turned to her mother.

'Why'd you have to look like *him*?' said Jackie with such force Faith took a pace back.

'It's not my fault,' she snivelled and even now she didn't know *his* name. In a strange way *his* existence had complicated things and there were times she wished she'd been a "test tube baby", a lie she'd told more than once.

'I could love you...to an extent,' Jackie mused, 'if you looked a little like me but you don't!'

'What will it take to make you love me?' asked Faith, begging with her hands.

'Don't tempt me,' said Jackie. 'Well, let me see... What about a white Christmas?'

'A white Christmas?' puzzled Faith.

'But they *never* happen. So I guess I'll *never* love you. What a shame,' said Jackie staring into the dying coal fire.

CHAPTER 3 – LIFWELL JUNIOR SCHOOL, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, MORNING

It's often said that your schooldays are the happiest of your life. If true, then Faith could not imagine the horrors that she'd suffer in adulthood. Besides, she had to get through today, and that was no certainty. On the plus side, there were just twenty days to Christmas, or 19 days, 15 hours and 1 minute to be precise.

Lifwell Junior School was neat and sturdy, being made from large rectangular slabs of gritstone which were fatter at the foot and thinner to the eaves. It looked not too dissimilar to a church with its centre promontory jutting out proudly beneath the hood of a steep A-shaped roof. This square snout was Faith's classroom and the white-framed windows were set so high into the walls she could only see out by jumping up. The school's exterior doors and guttering were painted dark green as was the fence which walled the small tarmac playground. The fence's lower section was a picket whilst the higher mesh part grew to double Faith's own height. Sometimes it felt like prison and she longed to go out on Dark Peak Moor with her kite. She couldn't understand why the others wished to play computer games or, more worryingly, hurt her.

—◇—

With a handful of seconds until the start of school, Faith finally slipped into the playground. The area was teeming with thirty youngsters, all merrily playing their games. No-one noticed the tiny girl inch into the yard, except one.

'Slag,' taunted Petra. Faith wanted to react just as acidically but couldn't bring herself to it. Instead, she gazed at the brightly-painted hopscotch and large snake patterns on the ground. Faith was scared to run on the snakes, especially over their mouths, which had been made more terrifying by Petra's embellishments.

'Please go away,' she sniffled, fearing Petra may hurl her in the green refuse hopper that stood a couple of metres behind.

'Stop crying, you wimp,' hissed Petra as the main door opened and the children began trooping inside.

Whilst the others hung up their coats, scarves and mittens, Faith kept hers for she'd had items stolen before and her mother couldn't afford replacements. After registration in her class, she attended a short assembly with Mrs Gibbs, the head teacher, before lessons began.

Lifwell Junior School had three classrooms - one each for years 4 to 6. It also had a hall in which children and their parents would gather for worship and plays. In addition there was Mrs Gibbs' study, a cramped staffroom, cloakroom, toilets and various closets but sadly no secret labyrinth, dungeons to imprison Petra, or gateway to Dark Peak Moor.

Faith was in the same class as Petra and their first lesson was with Mr Ashbourne.

'If there was anything you could do what would it be, Faith?' he asked, as she was too coy to have her hand raised. Petra looked on nervously while Faith composed her answer.

'I wish I could control the clouds so they would gather over people I don't like and part for those I do.'

'Have you ever been in the clouds?' he asked.

'Have you ever married, sir?' said Petra.

'Are you...?' mumbled another girl.

'Am I what?' he flustered.

'You know...' the girl teased.

'I don't know what you mean,' he retorted.

'You know what we mean, sir,' said Petra.

Mr Ashbourne was fifty-years-old and had never married. He'd always been a patient and meek man but these features had meant that the love of his life slipped through his fingers and now she was loved by someone else. He was short in stature and had thinning

hair which he tried desperately to cover but the children's incessant ridicule meant that he was terrified of leaning too much in case his hair fell out of place. He was a quiet man and thought that by coming to Lifwell he'd get a quiet life, but he was wrong.

'Faith, have you ever been in the clouds?' he asked again.

'She's never been out the village,' said Petra.

'Let Faith answer for herself!'

'Keep you hair on,' said Petra, raising her eyes to Mr Ashbourne's twitching brow.

'Petra, I've been to places you'll *never* see,' said Faith.

'I've been there too,' whispered Mr Ashbourne as the two smiled at each other. 'And you can control the clouds if you want to. You can do anything...'

CHAPTER 4 – LIFWELL JUNIOR SCHOOL, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, AFTERNOON

‘Relax,’ said Miss O’Rourke noting Ashbourne standing at the staffroom window and overlooking the playground. ‘You were a kid once,’ she added but it didn’t lighten his mood.

‘Stop it!’ he shouted, beating a fist at the window then halted on realising it wasn’t a very safe thing to do.

‘Your coffee’s going cold,’ said Miss Bansall.

Ashbourne waited until he was satisfied Faith’s systematic hounding had ceased before joining the others.

‘I feel sorry for that little girl,’ he sighed.

‘She can stick up for herself,’ said Miss O’Rourke, class teacher to the youngest pupils.

‘But we have a duty of care,’ he replied then remembered those were the words he’d ignored when letting Faith off the coach the previous day.

‘You have to be careful how to handle Petra,’ said Miss Bansall.

‘Why’s that?’ he asked, slurping his coffee.

‘Her father’s a powerful man,’ said Miss O’Rourke.

‘Sicilian is he?’ sniggered Ashbourne.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Miss O’Rourke.

‘It’s nothing,’ he replied. ‘I guess he’s also a pillar of the community and a school governor?’

‘Afraid so,’ said Miss Bansall then checked her watch for break was almost over. ‘All the new houses you see springing up around the village are built by his company, Paradise Developments. He brings a lot of prosperity to Lifwell,’ she said as Ashbourne purred. ‘I’ve tried to tackle her before but some people won’t let me take it further.’

‘Mrs Gibbs?’ he suggested but no-one would answer.

‘It’s viewed that Faith, *not* Petra, is the odd one out,’ said Miss O’Rourke.

‘So we just leave her?’ he groaned. ‘Part of the fun that bullies get comes from the reaction of bystanders. If you do nothing the bullies may think that you approve of what they are doing.’

Opening the white-panelled staffroom door, Mrs Gibbs stepped in, a calculating look stretched across her face.

‘Everything running to plan, Mr Ashbourne?’ she asked. Nodding, he sprung up from an old chair then washed his mug in the sink. Inescapably, his eyes refocused on the playground.

‘Isn’t it a beautiful place?’ offered the portly Mrs Gibbs while placing papers and envelopes into a pigeonhole rack. ‘Mr Ashbourne?’

‘Exquisite,’ he replied watching Petra tug Faith’s hair and kick her shins out of view from two classroom assistants who seemed more absorbed with their mobile phones to worry about their duty.

Seething, more from his cowardice and inactivity, Ashbourne was prickly through the rest of the afternoon. And in quieter moments, he tried to rationalise why Faith was persecuted.

‘You’re all fat,’ he muttered, forcing several children at the front of his class to raise their heads from their books.

‘You’re all fat,’ he thought after tensely clearing his throat. ‘*And the teachers too, except me.*’

It was estimated that a sixth of UK children were obese or overweight. In Lifwell, the inverse was true. As the fat kid in a school full of “skinnies”, he’d been bullied mercilessly and took to dieting and exercise to fit in with the norm. Scared of the penalties if he lapsed, he’d maintained his weight within a kilo or two over the last three decades. Now, it didn’t seem to matter if you were podgy. Actually, he felt pangs as to why they weren’t picking on him. And he wanted to preach, to raise them from their indolent and sedentary lifestyles.

‘*I bet your parents are fat too,*’ he mused, ogling the children’s “Shar Pei” faces. It was no surprise that the soaring rates of obesity coincided with a general failure to achieve the necessary amount of

activity for good health. We had been conditioned since Victorian times to find easier ways of living and a serious shift in attitude was essential so that exercise wasn't seen as an enemy but as a friend. *'I guess if you knew that you ran the risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, bowel cancer, and high blood pressure you wouldn't eat so much junk. Why do your parents use food to comfort you? Why don't they give attention, listen and provide hugs instead?'*

'It's rarely to do with an underlying medical condition,' said Ashbourne, back in the staffroom.

'What is?' queried Miss Bansall.

'Just thinking aloud,' he replied, blushing.

'Nothing's a secret in this school,' hummed Miss O'Rourke, reading a newspaper's sports pages.

'Obesity,' he stated, 'is rarely to do with an underlying medical condition.'

'Really?' said Miss Bansall, proud of her paunch. 'You have a lot of opinions, Mr Ashbourne. And I dare say you don't approve of my Rubenesque figure? And I was just starting to like you...'

'It's easier than ever to become overweight,' he said. 'High-calorie foods are abundant, relatively cheap and heavily promoted, especially at children. Exercise is no longer a regular part of everyone's day. Some children *never* walk or cycle to school, or play sport of any kind. They're spending too much time in front of the TV or computer.'

'Do you have any children of your own?' asked Miss Bansall.

'No,' he replied with considerable regret.

'Then you wouldn't know the pressures,' she added.

'Then why have them?' he thought.

—◇—

Within a minute of the bell chiming the day's end, the classroom was empty. Ashbourne did his usual routine of tidying desks and

was filling a black latex satchel with books and folders when a voice crackled from the open doorway.

'Mrs Gibbs,' he gasped, spilling several books onto the brown herringbone floor.

'Sorry to startle you,' said Mrs Gibbs edging her matronly figure into the room. 'How are things?' she posed, as he caught that same conscious look in her narrow, almost birdlike, eyes.

'If it's something to do with my comments in the staffroom, then I've already apologised.'

'Which comments were they?' asked Mrs Gibbs and was troubled to note a pencil sketch slip out from one of his folders. 'That's nice, is it Faith Littlechild?'

'I've done nothing wrong,' he fussed, ramming the last of his papers, including the portrait, into his satchel.

'I never said you had, I was just remarking on the picture. But you can never be too careful these days.'

Ashbourne agreed, for this job was his first break for several months and he wasn't going to sacrifice himself. The "break" had not been foreseen, nor was his arrest and cross-examination for alleged sexual assault on a female pupil. It had been a traumatic time and when the girl eventually disclosed it was a total fabrication he was a nervous wreck. Whilst he'd been cleared of all accusations, he felt a pariah and it was only now he was finding his feet.

'However I feel I must give you my view on something,' stated Mrs Gibbs, stepping up close to him.

'Petra Savage?' he said. Mrs Gibbs nodded gently.

'I know she's a little boisterous but don't make waves.'

'But she's making one girl's life a misery,' he huffed. 'Do you actually have a policy on bullying?'

'We do,' said Mrs Gibbs.

'Well it needs to be applied. There isn't enough discipline at the school. There isn't enough supervision. You need procedures for investigating incidents. We know bullying goes on in all schools but

it's how it's dealt with which makes the difference between life being tolerable or miserable.'

'Mr Ashbourne, please don't tell me my job,' said Mrs Gibbs.

'Mrs Gibbs, as the head teacher and loco parentis, you have a duty of care.'

'In a couple of terms, Petra will be at another school where she'll be a small fish in a big pond,' she stated.

'So you want me to turn a blind eye? But Faith could get seriously hurt.'

'It would be very much easier for us all if you did,' she said then bid him good evening.

'Duty of care,' muttered Ashbourne when alone. 'I'll sort you out,' he asserted, speaking of Petra.

'Don't forget to turn a blind eye,' whispered Mrs Gibbs.

Dashing out of the classroom, he expected to find her in the corridor but there was no-one.

'I'm losing it already,' he muttered then locked the classroom door.

CHAPTER 5 – LIFWELL JUNIOR SCHOOL, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7, END OF SCHOOL

Faith had had a difficult day but as the bell sounded, her heart lifted. After watching everybody leave, she scurried to the cloakroom and buried her body beneath a clump of coats which had lain unclaimed for weeks. Outside there was the usual hubbub of smothering parents in vastly mutated cars waiting for their loved ones to jump inside before revving off. Lifwell was hardly Time Square or as big as Texas but the mums and dads, in a way, viewed it as such in their demeanour. Faith was jealous for no-one collected her or was interested in her paintings or what she'd done.

Only one person was in the schoolyard now, and, inevitably, it was Petra. Impatient, she flicked her smouldering cigarette to the ground then glared at the cloakroom window. Panicking, Faith fell backwards then scampered into the toilets until certain she'd not been seen. Returning, she heard an engine gurgle then watched a mammoth black jeep park outside the school gates.

'Mr Savage,' whispered Faith but didn't know for certain he was inside. In the time Petra had been at the school, Faith had never seen Mr Savage despite him collecting his daughter daily. The jeep's windows were blacked out, and even with the winter sun dipping behind it, Faith was only able to see his outline. To her, Mr Savage was a mystical being, a man of power and influence whom she'd never met, and that odd enchantment grew in her each day. Even the others, whom Petra let sleep over, *never* saw him. He was either away on business, or working in his study and wasn't to be disturbed. Like her own father, Faith wondered if Mr Savage really existed. But who was driving the jeep if he didn't?

Whilst Mr Savage never ventured from his jeep, Faith always felt he was watching her but she was terrified of approaching him. There'd been many times when she'd wanted to run across the

playground and yank his door but feared that there'd be no-one there or that his presence would be instantly at her back.

'Mr Savage?' Faith said, the hairs rising on her neck.

'Hello, Faith.'

Shocked, Faith stumbled backwards but Mr Ashbourne caught her.

'Goodnight Mr Ashbourne,' said Mrs Gibbs but no matter where he looked, he couldn't see her.

'Guess we're both hiding,' he said. 'Is your mum a little late?' Faith briefly looked at the black-tiled floor before gazing up at him. 'Is your father coming?'

'I have no father,' Faith replied glumly.

'I'm sorry.'

'I do have one really but I've never met him. Mum says I look like him but I've never seen a picture,' said Faith.

'Is your mum coming soon?'

'She's probably forgotten so I'll have to walk home,' said Faith.

'Would you like a lift?' he asked.

Understandably, she was reluctant to consent but nevertheless followed him out of the school before scuttling to a side street where a compact fawn-coloured Japanese car was parked.

'Is that yours?' she inquired.

'It's not much,' he said.

'It's nice,' she replied, smiling at the pockets of rust and huddles of minor dents and scratches. There was something refreshingly normal about Mr Ashbourne's car.

'Anyway you've conveniently got me off the subject,' he grumbled then melted into a smile.

'So I have,' she giggled into a small colourless hand. 'I always walk home,' she said as it began to spot with rain.

'Would you still like a lift?' he asked as she rolled out the hood of her brown mackintosh to cover her long red hair. 'It's dangerous for you to be out alone.'

'I'll be fine, sir,' she shivered as cold beads of rain began smacking her face. 'Sir,' she said after a long think, 'when we were at Arb...Arb...'

'Arbor Low,' he informed.

'I felt something...some power...I...I just can't describe it...but it was as if those old people were there...doing their things...speaking to the dead...but I felt something else...'

'What did you feel?' he asked gawping at the churning grey masses above their heads.

'I didn't know until you said something to me today,' said Faith.

'And what was that?'

'They controlled the clouds...they talked to them...they talked to them,' murmured Faith.

Ashbourne coiled his lips into a smile for he didn't want to dispel her dreams.

'I want to do that,' said Faith then, finally, she ran from him.