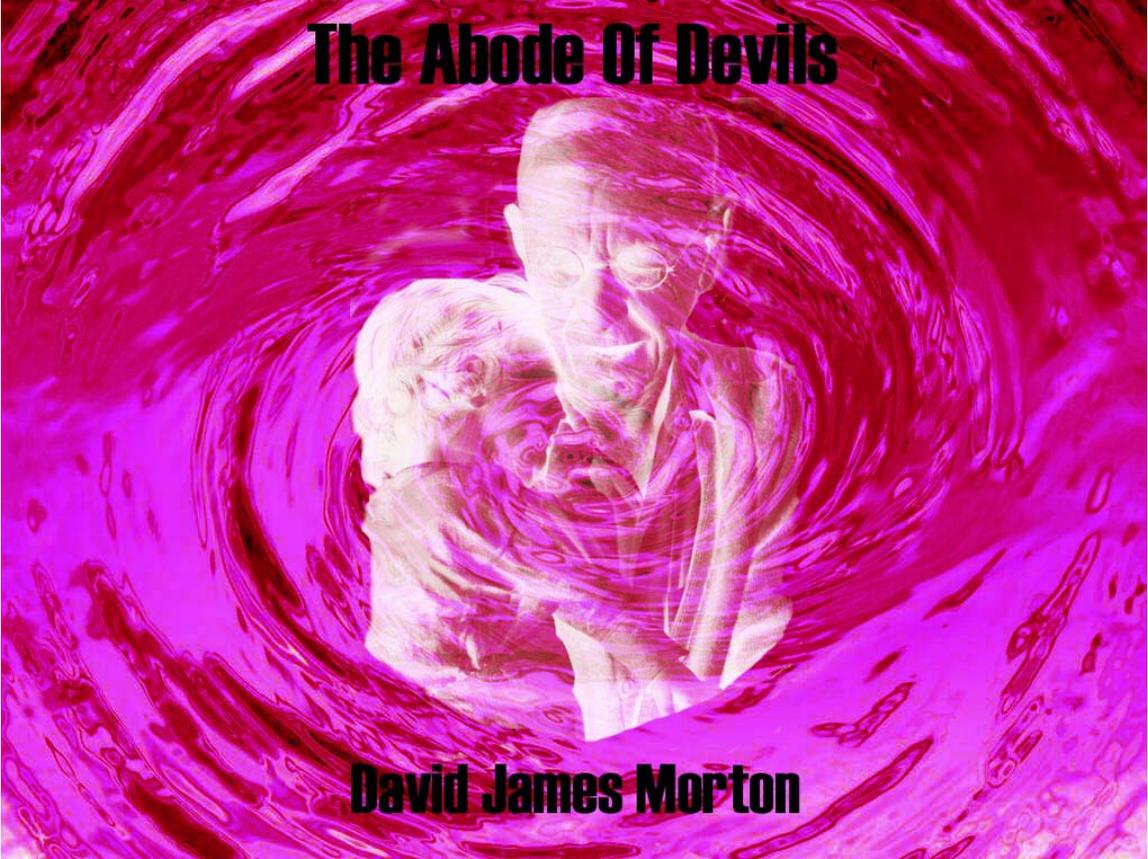


The Abode Of Devils



David James Morton

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CHAPTER 1 – BLACKWATER, NORTHERN ENGLAND, AUTUMN 1940

‘Stop slacking, Conscie!’ sniped Taff, a sharp-featured man with the physique of a heavyweight boxer.

Andrew Meek, to whom the disparaging nickname was aimed, was undercutting coal by hand as the machine wasn’t working. Andrew could use the machine but his weedy body was more suited to academic study than to hewing coal with a heavy, sweat-greased pickaxe.

‘Hurry up, Conscie!’ spat Taff, who, Andrew surmised, had dug the “black stuff” out with his bare hands in days gone by. Ever since he’d started down the mine they’d called him “Conscie” but that didn’t bother him too much. It was the threats of violence that frightened him. They’d had a “Conscie” before but he’d had a terrible accident, and so Andrew now watched them all with great mistrust, even his own dear brother, Ernest.

Dissatisfied with Andrew’s progress, Taff kicked him out of the way with a heavy boot and got to work with his own pickaxe. Detaching from his skull, Andrew’s battered pit hat reeled away and into the path of a full tub of hewn coal that crushed the hat and snuffed out its light.

‘Why do we have to fight?’ thought Andrew for he hated war and the destruction it wrought.

Before the war, he had got a place at Cambridge University. He was an exceptional student, but now, because of man’s greed, he was forced to dig coal out of the ground. It was better, though, than enlisting then being shot in the back for desertion. Besides, he wasn’t an entertainer or cook or medic, so, despite his great promise he’d just be conscripted by the army then positioned like a puppet for the enemy to shoot at. Andrew didn’t wish to die at twenty but feared that an outstanding career would be trampled by the age he’d have to spend down here in the mine.

'Maybe I should have done physics?' he mused, trying to retrieve the trodden hat once the tub had rolled away, but dithering almost got him his wrists severed under the wheels of another tub. *'Physics is where the money is,'* he considered for while he was aware of the intent to build an atomic bomb his own future lay along more esoteric lines. Andrew was a cosmologist, a follower of Swiss astrophysicist Fritz Zwicky. Through his observation of the number of stars in the galaxy and their brightness, Zwicky had concluded that there must be some other form of matter existent in the galaxy which we had not detected and which provided enough of the mass to hold the galaxy together. If Andrew had one goal in life, it would be to find this missing or "dark" matter. Presently, however, he would be finding it difficult to get a new pit hat!

'What's wrong now, Conscie?' whined Taff, wiping his sweaty black brow with a forearm.

'He's never done a day's work in his life,' said Bert, a man even more massive than Taff but hampered by a dull mind, damaged, although never admitted, by an abusive father.

'Why aren't you out on the frontline?' posed Andrew, whacking his tattered hat on a wooden prop to bend it back into shape. *'Then again, the Krauts don't need much target practice.'*

'Listen here, Conscie!' shouted Taff, forcing Andrew back and ramming his spine against the coalface. *'This face is riddled with shot holes,'* he warned, shoving the handle of his pickaxe to Andrew's throat. *'You'll be in a right mess if they just happened to go off.'*

'You bastard!' snarled Andrew, spitting into Taff's face.

Taff smiled evilly.

'I warned you,' he said, then, after checking that no bosses were loitering, told the others to hold the scoundrel fast.

'You're not some lawless ship's captain,' said Andrew as Taff slowly removed the scuffed leather belt from his trousers. Making sure the hook on the buckle was pointing outward he then started

hitting Andrew about the face until his victim was bruised and bleeding.

'Had enough now, Conscie?'

With Andrew bent over and gasping for breath, Taff tossed a couple of steel tokens at him. The tokens were given out at the start of a shift and given in at the end. It was a means of tallying if anyone was lost.

'They're not gambling chips, you know,' croaked Andrew.

'Don't we take a gamble every time we come down here?'

Andrew scooped up the tokens then tossed them back.

'I thought you could put them on your eyes,' said Taff.

'Why?'

'Because you'll be dead soon, Conscie,' he spat, booting the tokens back Andrew's way.

'I'm stronger than I look,' said Andrew making Taff and Bert hoot with laughter.

'But not as strong as *us*,' said Taff.

'If we'd wanted to work with yellow-bellies, we'd have gone to China,' said Bert.

'You don't know me at all,' said Andrew.

'And we don't want to,' said Taff, dropping another token on the ground. 'That one's for your mouth,' he explained before finally getting back to work.

It was purgatory, thought Andrew. Man, it seemed, had found a way to form Hell right here, down this shadowy pit or on Europe's battlefields, or in the minds of scientists seeking to create a weapon of inhuman might. Andrew sought Heaven and felt that summer would *never* arrive at this grimy little village until the war was over.

'She's dying!' he yelled as a cry issued from the rocks.

'What the hell are you talking about?' groaned Taff.

'She's crying out...' wheezed Andrew. 'I can hear her.'

'Taff, what's he talking about your Joyce for?' joked Bert.

Taff, never one to consider his actions, cuffed Bert round the ear.

'Conscie, I'm telling you to return to your post!' he yelled.

'Can't you hear her cry out?' bawled Andrew, his voice barely audible above the concerto of axes, drills, cutters, conveyors, stubborn ponies and rusty tubs.

'Who's *her*?' growled Taff then shivered as a chill gust entered the seam.

'The...Earth,' panted Andrew leaning over Taff who was undercutting coal with his pickaxe. 'She's screaming, Taff! And I can...hear her heartbeat too.'

'You can hear the *nothing*,' spat Taff yet when he next sank his axe into ground that had lain undisturbed for millions of years, the rock felt like human flesh and he'd pounded enough runts in his time to know. Stopping suddenly, he shook the sweat from his brow then held his pickaxe high, ready to strike again. 'You heard *nothing*,' he brooded yet no matter how hard he wanted to cut into the coal he simply couldn't.

'It's a heartbeat!' cried Andrew, so loudly everyone stopped their work.

Cuttermen, duffers, drillers, fillers, drawers and the stonemen all stared at him.

'Can't you hear it? She's alive! She's right beneath us! We must stop digging else she'll die!'

Dropping his pickaxe disgustedly, Taff surged at Andrew. It was then that the roof slipped, shattering a prop that flew at Taff and knocked him down dead. Seconds later, the Earth crashed upon them.

Andrew believed that he'd died and gone to Hell where those steel tokens would no doubt be true payment of the toll to be ferried across the river of Styx. Close to him, and far away, he could hear men groan, scream, beg for mercy, and call out to their loved ones then, one-by-one, become still. He heard too, the distinct neighs of ponies as they fought to breathe before the sheer burden of what was upon them made them submit.

'I've finally reached the frontline,' cried Andrew before his mouth filled with choking dust.

CHAPTER 2 – BLACKWATER, SEPTEMBER 2000

Andrew Meek survived that horrific collapse yet had relived the incident every single day since. He'd continued reviving the event in his mind in the hope that proceedings would someday not result in the deaths of his colleagues. There was no disputing that he'd longed to perish with them but somehow he'd remained alive for three days, without food, water and with only dirty air to breathe.

Andrew was old now, nearly eighty, and since that day sixty years ago he'd never been down another mine. Moreover, he'd discontinued his academic career and just lived an ordinary life when he'd always envisaged living an extraordinary one.

Of course, the newspapers, in the aftermath of the tragedy, made him out as someone special, particularly in light of his story that he'd heard the Earth cry out just before the roof collapsed. Nonetheless, cynics were soon blaming him for the disaster, and Andrew had had to deal with that clinging unease ever since.

Claustrophobia was another affliction he had to cope with. Wherever he went, he needed an escape route, a place of refuge. He therefore avoided lifts, crowded rooms, buses and aeroplanes. So, whenever possible, he would sit in the conservatory of his dark-bricked bungalow home. The conservatory was built at the front of the house and let him see the world go by yet feel protected from it. And if that got a little too much he could retreat to his bedroom but still, the faces of Taff, Bert and Ernest would never be far away.

'I'm haunted,' muttered Andrew, dunking a biscuit into a hot cup of tea while watching the television news. The programme had already flaunted the usual array of kidnappings, murders, hit-and-runs, bullyings, suicides, torturings and embezzlements, and was now focussing on some lighter stories to warm the blood. One such story regarded the little-known religious sect, The Order of Light, and its belief that their Lord would soon arrive and save everyone

from Hell. 'I'm haunted,' he said again letting the story wash over him.

'Pardon?' said Emily, his loyal wife of forty years.

'Nothing,' he replied then wondered why the hand holding the biscuit felt lighter. 'Blast!'

'Well, you shouldn't dunk them in so long.'

'Everything decays,' huffed Andrew.

'Want me to get you another one?'

'Just don't fuss,' he said, flapping with both arms.

'Darling, why don't you go out? The council have done a lovely job with the country park.'

'You mean the *mine*,' he growled.

Coal was no longer a staple of northern England and a majority of its mines had been closed and its slagheaps smoothed into landscapes and trails ideal for walking dogs upon. Even so, the deep, dark, feelings buried down Shaft Number 1 would remain unquiet. Yet he would not leave Blackwater for it was as if the enduring years were penance for what had happened that momentous day.

'Why don't you take a walk up there? You need fresh air,' said Emily, her eyes flicking onto her husband's full teacup as she sensed his anxiety build. He was sweating, shaking and had begun to over-breathe, not easy with lungs caked with coal dust.

'It's too painful,' said Andrew as Emily took the teacup away from him.

'It was *never* your fault,' she said, trying to lay her warm palm onto his bony hand.

'It was! I was a Conscie...a bad omen. I brought misery to this village. You still can't comprehend how it feels to live here.'

'Well why don't we move?' said Emily. 'Heaven knows how many times I've asked you.'

'The Meeks have lived in Blackwater for centuries. I have to stay here, Emily.'

Andrew showed most emotions yet rarely shed tears, but with several budding just behind his eyes he ran to the bedroom.

— ♦ —

‘I’ll leave you for a couple of hours,’ said Emily, brushing his earlobe with a finger. Andrew pretended to be asleep, but wasn’t. ‘I can help you only so much,’ she whispered.

CHAPTER 3 – BLACKWATER, LATER THAT DAY

It wasn't far to the old pit. During the frequent troughs in his life, Andrew had walked partway there many times but never reached the epicentre, the point where Shaft Number 1 disappeared into the deeps.

Down a steep road, he turned left into a modern housing estate that overlooked a lush green playing field. The playing field was empty bar clumps of paper and supermarket bags blown by a gentle wind. A man with a limp and an aluminium walking cane was throwing a small red ball for his frisky dog to chase. The dog was light grey in colour and its short coat allowed contours of muscle and bone to show through. In a strange way, the dog reminded Andrew of the ponies they used down the mine. And without thinking, he found himself leaning heavily on a mouldy wooden fence, gazing at the man. Andrew felt that he knew him but chose not to raise his hand or voice in the dread that the man might react badly.

Turning, he trudged by a fenced playground. It had brightly-painted rides and its floor was covered in soft brown tree bark. It was empty too yet he'd hoped that someone was there, a grandmother perhaps, placing her precious one on the seat of a swing before gently rocking them to-and-fro. It would at least delay him, for ahead lay a decision.

At the junction, he could stride on, letting the road smoothly loop until he was back home. Alternatively, he could bear right and follow a rustic track. For some minutes, he stood there, his anxiety escalating each time he glanced at the track, that even in the early afternoon, seemed dark and full of ghosts.

In his left hand, Andrew held a bunch of red roses, clipped from his garden and wrapped in a white cotton handkerchief. He'd intended to lay them at Shaft Number 1 but his mind was telling him to leave. He'd managed, through fair means and foul, to avoid the

mine for sixty years yet knew that sooner, not later, he'd have to confront his terror. Death was just round the corner and he didn't want to leave Earth and be judged by anyone other than God.

Humming a stirring tune, Andrew at last began his painful slog over the track, a melange of mud, broken bricks, decaying dog turds and builder's rubble.

'It's hardly changed,' he whispered, gazing at the tall trees, their ample canopies overarching the track and making it dark. The air was funereally still and suffused with subtle odours that had nothing to do with the mine, yet reminded him of that time. Amid the trees grew clutches of bramble, nettle, hawthorn and wild grass. And beyond these were derelict houses standing like vast skulls, their eyes dark and open, baring the grief he'd brought to them.

Finally, and shockingly, Andrew saw a rounded green hump.

'What do I do?' he fretted, staring down at his hand which had locked solid around the roses. Their thorns had punctured the thin handkerchief and were now fixed into his skin. He'd bled a little but he needed to bleed much more.

In the rear of a passing car, two black retrievers were playing but on seeing Andrew they stood upright, their tails erect, their hackles raised and their necks extended forwards before each mouth opened with a snarl.

While the car drove on ahead, Andrew scurried to a narrow gate.

'I'm finally here,' he said, but he wasn't quite.

Two lakes, largely empty of fish, stood either side of the track which continued as a winding path. Several unmoving anglers, their dark attire making them nothing more than shadows, sat asleep around the stagnant water.

'I can do this,' he muttered before edging on.

The path was slender, the shrubs and trees seemingly embracing his arrival, or were they wantonly stabbing and slashing him before infusing their venom?

Already, he was light-headed and nauseous and had begun to totter. Then, he collapsed, the impact with the cold, sodden, ground hurling his black-rimmed spectacles from his face.

'I'm here!' he exclaimed, for the pageant of dense foliage had broken and before him was a grassy hillock, shaped, it had to be said, like a pert breast. 'Shaft Number 1,' he said reverently, placing his spectacles back onto his nose. Moisture from the wiry grass had dappled each lens but the vision flooding into his eyes was unmistakable.

'I don't feel too bad,' said Andrew, but was nonetheless shaken from his fall. Then, he heard the black retrievers panting hard. Starting to his feet, he hiked up the hillock's smooth face and was quickly at the summit. It was there he knelt, his body trembling, and began clawing at the soil. He dug down a couple of inches then carefully laid the twenty-one roses he'd picked from his garden in the jerry-rigged grave before infilling the soil. Finally, he raised his eyes to a large bronze plaque, shaped like a lump of coal. On it, in alphabetical order, were the names of the fallen. Twenty people died in the mining disaster but Andrew knew the total *should* have been twenty-one.

'Ernest, why didn't you protect your younger brother?' he sniffled then saw that his own name had been carved into the plaque with a screwdriver. 'People still hate me, Emily,' he whined noting a man, cast into gloom by the shrubbery, bend low to slip the leashes of his two hellish dogs. Crying out, Andrew lost his footing and slid over the far side of the hillock.

'Don't hurt me,' he pleaded as the dogs bounded after him.

Flat on his back, Andrew collected a gnarled stick and began waving it about. He nearly hit one dog on its muzzle but the other jumped on him before simply licking him, soothing him until such point he realised that they were not his enemy.

'Are you alright?' their master asked. 'Here, let me help.'

Leaning over Andrew, the short and slightly-built man pulled him to his feet.

'Mr Meek?' he posed.

For a moment, Andrew wasn't sure how to reply.

'I thought it was you when I passed you earlier. It's Taff Rees. My dad—'

'I remember your dad,' said Andrew wincing, for he couldn't stop seeing the man's father's angry face barking out "Conscie!" over and over again.

'Well, he used to tell me a lot about you.'

'Look, I just came for a stroll. I don't wish to have an argument,' fretted Andrew.

'He said you had lots of crazy ideas but he liked you.'

'He liked me?' Andrew scoffed. 'I don't think so.'

'He *really* did,' said Taff.

'He didn't show it. How old were you when your father...'

'I was five-years-old,' said Taff, glancing at the monument that stood proudly on the knoll. 'I'm sixty-six next birthday. Look, Mr Meek,' he added after noting distress on Andrew's face, 'I know a lot about mining and I also know that you still feel responsible for what happened down there but it was an accident and you just happened to be the lucky one.'

'*Lucky one?*' thought Andrew.

'Yes, I guess you could look at it like that,' he said aloud.

'I've walked my dogs around the village for years but never seen you here before,' said Taff.

'It's my first time here,' said Andrew and felt ashamed. 'I find it hard to...to...' he stuttered, staring at a man who was the spitting image of his father. 'I find it hard to accept that I was not to blame. I wish everyone in the village felt that way.'

Taff slapped him vigorously on the shoulder.

'I don't think they blame you. It's just that you shut yourself off. I'll be honest and say that if it wasn't for these naughty boys,' he said, pointing at his dogs, 'I'd have gone my separate way too.' Andrew

smiled and stroked the dogs' necks. 'Are you back in the stables?' posed Taff, surmising what Andrew was daydreaming.

'Yes,' said Andrew picturing the wild and open moors on which each pony was reared. 'The ponies weren't chosen for the mine until they were three-years-old. Then they were trained very carefully, first on the surface and then in the mine.'

'My father took lots of pictures of the ponies. It was his hobby.'

'I didn't know that,' said Andrew.

'The underground stables had a proper shoeing smith. Sometimes there were a hundred ponies in the stables and a lot of people were needed for feeding, grooming, washing, and the countless little attentions they got,' said Taff, staring at the memorial. 'The pictures of the brick and concrete stables that I've still got...the cleanliness of the columns made me think they were ivory...they were *so* white. And they were well ventilated and lit, and had fresh running water for drinking and washing. "Must keep those ponies in perfect condition" he used to say. I do miss him.'

'*Wish I could say the same,*' thought Andrew.

'I do too,' he said, hoping someday that he'd mean it.

'I don't know who scrawled your name on there but it was wrong,' said Taff.

'I think they were right,' snivelled Andrew. 'That seam collapsed because of me.'

'How often do you go to church?'

'I don't believe anymore,' said Andrew gravely.

'Well maybe you should go along one day and let God re-enter your heart?'

'I'm only going to one place and it's *not* Heaven,' said Andrew, dabbing cold tears from his weathered cheeks with the handkerchief that he'd carried the roses in. 'I lost God when I found science...and then I lost science...and then I lost myself...' he muttered.

'How can a man of science not love God? The physical laws that bind us are so perfect, only the mind of God could have conceived them, don't you agree?'

'No I don't,' said Andrew. Inwardly, however, he did agree.

'Anyway, you mustn't blame yourself, take all that weight on your shoulders,' said Taff.

'That's easy for you to say. Everything turned to dust at that moment. I've not been able to dream since. How can you be so forgiving about what I did?'

'Go and see God,' said Taff. 'God will give you the power to dream again.'

'Not sure if I do want to dream again. Dreams only brought me nightmares,' said Andrew.

'Nonsense, my friend,' said Taff, patting Andrew's slight paunch with the flat of his hand.

After saying his goodbye's, Taff wandered down one of the many trails the landscapers had formed, his dogs faithfully by his side, their hot breath forming clouds before vanishing. Seeing this, Andrew lit up a part of his brain that had been dormant for sixty years. Of course, there was nothing odd about water vapour dispersing, but his old head was again pondering about the invisible matter which held the galaxy together.

'Dark Matter,' he murmured before clamping his mouth shut. 'Now why did I say that? Because I wanted to, I suppose. Where would I be now if *this* tragedy hadn't happened? Or maybe it happened *because* I thought of Dark Matter...and dared to unlock the universe's secrets?'

It was then Andrew remembered his paternal grandmother, her hair permanently enmeshed in a thin net. She used to read tealeaves, in the days when tea was bought loose. He'd not drunk from the cup she was reading his fortune from, but he wasn't arguing for her wrinkled face scared him a little.

As his grandmother read the leaves, her ancient features froze.

Coming closer to him, she smiled at the infant.

“Andrew, you are destined for greatness. An ancient light shines so brightly inside you, and, one day, you will use this God-given gift,” she’d said.

Those words had remained with him right to this very day. He’d tried hard to extinguish the torch his grandmother had lit for him but it was still there, and briefly, he wished to rekindle it.

‘Greatness,’ he sighed. ‘I’m glad you can’t see me now.’

‘But I did hear a heartbeat,’ he thought. Yet if he went to the press, they would just think that he was a sad recluse trying to exorcise his demons. Such action would be of no merit and only lead Andrew to a deeper pit of despair.

‘But I’ve never heard *you* again, have I?’ he posed, staring harshly at the ground. ‘I thought you were calling me, but maybe I was looking for something too hard and interpreted the wrong sign...and just look...just look what it led to! I guess I was fool enough to think you were alive.’

Simmering now, Andrew stamped repeatedly on the soil.

‘Come on, let’s hear you!’ he cried. ‘Nothing. I guess you really are dead.’

Spitting on a hand, he drew his palm across the moist grass and bestowed a little blood to his dead colleagues. Presently, he wasn’t sure if it had been judicious to come here, but time would tell. It always did.

CHAPTER 4 – BLACKWATER, LATER THAT EVENING

‘You look as if you want to tell me something,’ said Emily while knitting a green and yellow pullover for her grandson, Liam. ‘It’s either that or you’re constipated. Have you been taking your tablets as I keep finding them in the strangest spots?’

‘Stop fussing,’ said Andrew then shook the newspaper he was holding.

‘Well you went out, didn’t you? Did you have an argument with somebody? If you did, I’ll find out the next time I’m in the village.’

‘I didn’t go to the village,’ he grumbled, trying to focus on an article about vandalism in a neighbouring parish.

‘So where did you go then? You can’t have walked round and round the garden?’

‘And what if I did? It’d only confirm to you that I’m senile,’ he said.

‘It’s not something to laugh about,’ said Emily, putting down her knitting.

‘Not unless you’ve gone gaga already,’ he muttered.

‘Is this what it’s going to be like for the rest of the evening?’

‘Probably,’ he miserably replied.

‘A marriage is supposed to mature like a good wine,’ she said brightly.

‘I thought it was more like a cheese? After a while it goes mouldy and begins to smell.’

Bundling up the beginnings of Liam’s pullover, Emily threw it at her grouchy husband.

‘Sometimes it feels more like we’re cellmates than partners,’ she said.

‘I’m going to church tomorrow,’ said Andrew collecting the pullover and knitting needles from the carpet and handing them back to his dumbstruck wife. ‘I said—’

'I heard what you said. And what's brought all this on?'
'Nothing in particular,' he sighed.
'Come on, what's brought it on?'
'Nothing!' he snapped. 'I just want to believe in something.'
'Don't you believe in *me*?'
'Of course I do,' he said glancing pensively at his tiny wife on the red sofa.
'Would you like me to come with you?'
'*Why'd you always want to meddle?*' he thought.
'I'd like that, I really would,' he said.

— ◇ —

With conjugal relations lacking of late, both of the small bungalow's two bedrooms were in use. Emily slept in the larger room while Andrew had the other.

He had a restless night, continually adjusting his posture and turning his pillow over for hours until finally regressing into sleep. He cried too during those hours for the scattered images of that ghastly disaster were at their sharpest in the stillest part of the night.

— ◇ —

Andrew woke to the sound of church bells.

'What are you doing?' he posed groggily. 'Why are you in here?'

'Letting some light and air in,' said Emily flinging the dark curtains wide-open to flood the dank room with yellow light. While Andrew filtered some of the glare with a hand he could not help but notice Emily was perfumed and dressed smartly. She was wearing a hat too.

'We're going to church, remember?' she said.

CHAPTER 5 – BLACKWATER, SUNDAY

The church was almost empty when Andrew and Emily shuffled in. He wanted to sit at the back but she insisted on dragging him halfway to the front.

‘I’m not feeling too well,’ he grumbled.

‘Here,’ said Emily, giving him an unwrapped mint. ‘That’ll take your mind off it.’

‘Take my mind off what?’

‘The thing that’s making you anxious,’ said Emily.

‘Nothing is—’ he started as the scanty congregation rose to groan hymn 409.

Just like school, Andrew kept his mouth firmly shut during the dirge. Emily, however, was enjoying herself and sang loudly, albeit in the wrong key. And during the final verse, Taff turned to smile at Andrew.

As they sat down, Andrew noticed a small board made of light-coloured wood to the right of the priest. Numerals slotted into the board appertained to the hymns they would be singing that morning. Already bored, he started all manner of gymnastics with these numbers.

‘God will give you the power to dream again,’ said the priest, shattering Andrew’s musings.

‘What did he say?’ he asked Emily before they rose to sing another hymn. This time, much to her surprise, he opened his mouth and hummed along to the ditty.

‘How you feeling now?’ she asked once they’d sat down again.

‘A little better,’ he answered.

After a prayer and another hymn the service ended.

Grabbing Emily’s arm, Andrew tried to bundle her out of the church but wasn’t quite quick enough.

'Hello again, Mr Meek,' said Taff standing at the end of the pew and blocking any exit. 'Glad you could make it,' he added while Andrew shrivelled from the attention.

'It's Taff, isn't it?' said Emily as Andrew yanked her arm again.

'And I was only talking to Andrew yesterday,' said Taff.

'Oh,' said Emily, 'he didn't tell me. Did you two meet in the village?'

'I think we need to be going,' fussed Andrew.

'No,' said Taff, opening his eyes wide, 'we met by the old mine.'

'Really?' said Emily, gazing quizzically at her husband. 'That explains a lot.'

Andrew popped a mint into his mouth and began sucking it noisily.

'It must be a time of revelation,' she said.

'Why do you say that?' said Taff.

'Visiting the mine and now coming here. You're not ill, are you, Andrew?' she said.

— ♦ —

'I still love you, you know,' said Emily, watching the kettle bring water to the boil. 'So,' she whispered, 'are you ill? Is there something you *still* haven't told me?'

'I have a lot of thoughts in my head,' said Andrew and began to rub his temples.

'The same ones that've been buzzing around for as long as we've been married?' said Emily.

'Probably,' he muttered.

'And are you finally going to do something about them?'

'Probably,' he moaned, letting go of his temples.

'You can't change the past, darling.'

'Thanks for telling me,' he whined, studying what harm boiling water might have on his skin.

'It wasn't meant as criticism,' said Emily pouring the water into a white teapot. 'Above and beyond anything else, you must mend all that's broken here before—'

'Before I go?'

'I wanted to phrase it differently but...didn't,' she admitted. 'Heal the wounds before you die, Andrew. You've driven Marie away, you know.'

'No I haven't.'

'Andrew, you just don't realise how hateful you are to your family!'

'I do want to change,' he said after a long think.

'And you've already overcome two hurdles,' said Emily. 'I'm *very* proud of you. But the next thing you must do is speak with Marie and get to know little Liam better.'

Unfolding his long arms, Andrew then curled them around his petite Emily.

'You smell lovely,' he remarked, holding her in a tight, protective, grip.

'It's—' she started but his thin, cool, lips were soon upon her own. 'That's better,' she said, leaning back to catch him smile. 'How do you feel now?'

'Happy,' said Andrew then cooed as Emily reached down to his groin.

'Keep it that way.'

'I'll...try,' he whispered before kissing her again.

— ♦ —

Andrew slept the whole night and did not wake in a cold sweat or with an uncomfortable stomach. Emily was by his side when he opened his eyes and that feeling of happiness continued until noon. But once she'd gone, he started brooding about the life he *could* have had.

It was shameful to virtually dismiss your wife and child as second-best, but by habitually sulking about the disaster “ruining his life”, Andrew was doing just that. Emily and Marie were anything but second-best. Emily was a loving, if naïve, woman while Marie was a most able scholar who now led a busy and fulfilling life as a barrister, and, more importantly, a mum.

‘Why don’t you look like *me?*’ whined Andrew as he glared out from his conservatory.

Marie was a carbon copy of her mother so he believed that her prowess descended entirely from *her*, not him. He’d married late in life. Emily was almost twenty years younger and barely half his age when they were wed. She was a local girl. Her father was the village doctor and he’d been present at the pithead when the injured and the dead were brought to the surface. Emily was newly-born when it happened and later wasn’t prone to accepting gossip as truth. She was a willowy girl with a dark, gypsy look and had many strapping lads swooning over her, yet the haunted Andrew Meek fascinated her, still did.

With Andrew holding down menial jobs, the couple stayed with his father until they could afford the dark-bricked bungalow they still lived in. Marie had long since left the nest, but rather than use the newfound space to cement their bond, Andrew and Emily had grown apart.

“Andrew, you are destined for greatness.”

‘Gran!’ he cried, rising from his nap like a pan of milking boiling over. ‘Greatness,’ he griped while straightening his glasses and running fingers through thinning grey hair. ‘Everyone except me,’ he lamented as a passing squall spat its malicious rain at the conservatory windows.

‘I was on the verge of something, wasn’t I?’ he said, tipping a glance at the grey skies. ‘Dark Matter,’ he mused, rubbing his rosy chin which was dotted with white stubble.

Lurching from the mine all those years ago, he’d raced home and to his cramped room where he collected all his textbooks and cast

them into a tea chest. He then dragged the chest down the bare wooden steps and to the hearth where he stoked a roaring fire then made certain every single page was burned.

'Dark Matter,' said Andrew yet was instantly disheartened, for generations of scientists had no doubt been working on the theory. 'Fate took away my chance, didn't it?'