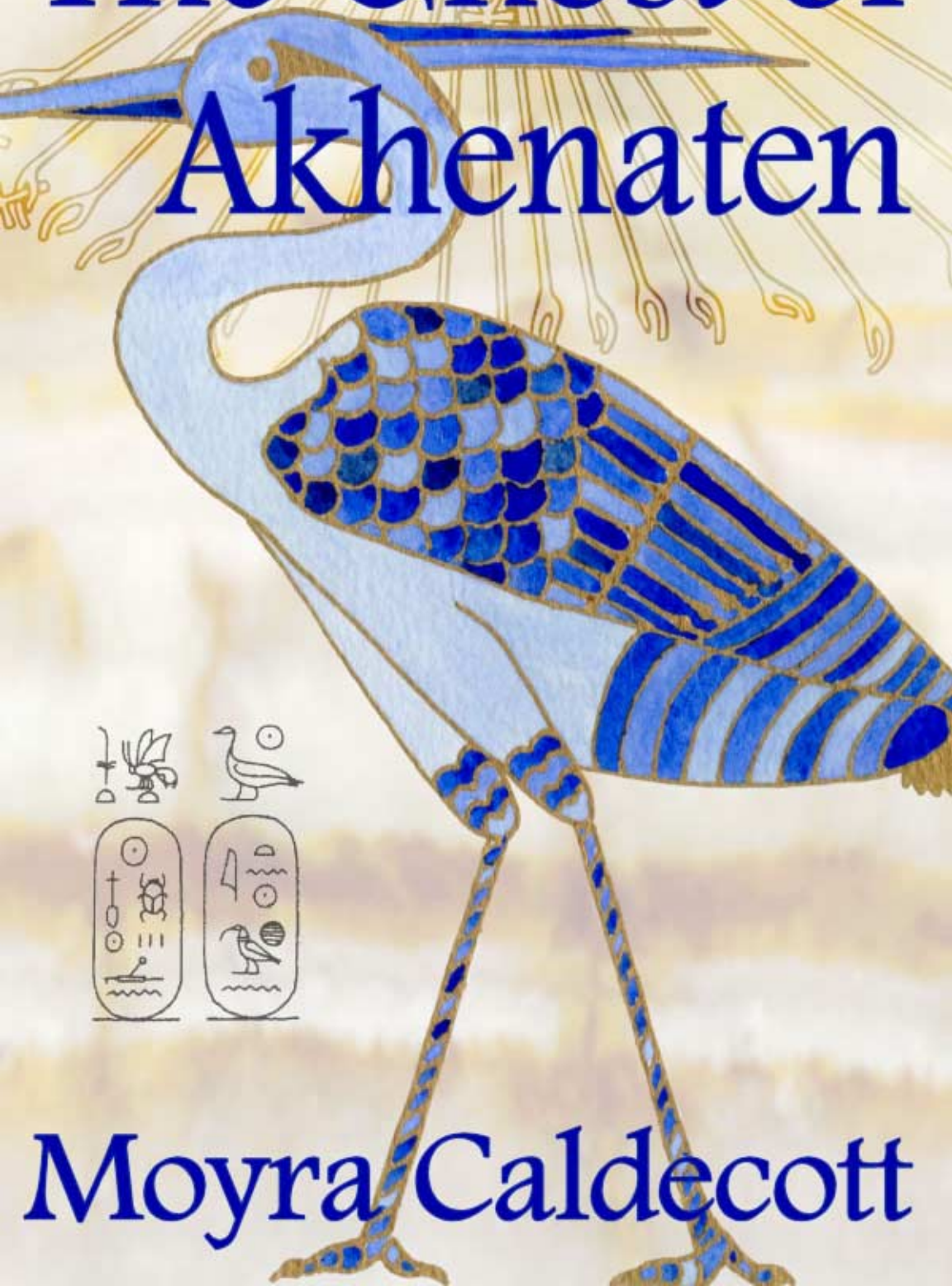


The Ghost of Akhenaten



Moyra Caldecott

The Ghost of Akhenaten

A Novel by

Moyra Caldecott

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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INTRODUCTION

The Pharaoh Akhenaten reigned in Egypt from c.1353-1335 BC.

He was the son of the powerful Pharaoh Amenhotep III, and succeeded his father as Amenhotep IV. However, early in his reign he changed his name to Akhenaten, indicating that he revered the god Aten instead of Amun. Within a few years he had virtually dismantled the elaborate religious system of ancient Egypt, abolishing the worship of its many gods, demolishing their temples, and dispossessing their priesthoods. He declared the Aten, represented by the Sun's Disk, the only true god, and himself and his wife, Nefertiti, the sole channels for its influence on earth.

No one knows how he died, but after his sudden death his successors declared his name anathema and everything he had put in place was destroyed. The temples of the other gods were rebuilt and the power of their priesthoods reinstated. His name was removed from the King Lists and it was as though he had never

been. It is only in recent years that the persistent curiosity of archaeologists has uncovered his story. The city he built to the glory of his One God was excavated and an archive found that tells us much about his life.

There has been much speculation as to whether he was assassinated by the powerful priests of Amun who had suffered so much during his reign, and more than one source mentions a curse that doomed him to wander as a ghost for the rest of Time as punishment for his heretical deeds.

While I was writing the novel *Akhenaten: The Son of the Sun* many strange and extraordinary experiences in dreams and through mediums led me to believe in this curse, and after the book was published I came upon someone who claimed to have personally encountered the ghost of Akhenaten in the Egyptian desert. A friend lent me *Tombs, Temples and Ancient Art* by Joseph and Corrina Lindon Smith, who describe a mysterious encounter they themselves had with the priests of Amun when they tried to set Akhenaten's soul free from the curse in 1909. The archaeologist Arthur Weidgal who witnessed it also reported the incident.

In response to my novel about Akhenaten I received many letters from around the world claiming to be from reincarnations of Akhenaten or of members of his family. I also received reports of channelled messages from Akhenaten. It seems that whatever happened at his death, and in spite of all the efforts to wipe his name from history, Akhenaten is very much an active force in the world today. The books about him run into

many hundreds – from cautious archaeology to wild speculation.

In this novel I hope to tread a path between the two extremes, never losing sight of the fact that there are many different realities.

1

THE DREAMS BEGIN

The man lay on the desert sand, his body twisted and broken.

Dark shapes circled around him like jackals around a lion's kill.

Deep voices intoned the malevolent words of a curse.

'This man will not rise again.

This man will not go to the stars.

This man will lie forever in the desert cut off from those who loved him and those whom he loved.

His god will have no access to him.

HIS GOD IS DEAD.'

The sky deepened from the colour of fire to the colour of blood.

One broke off from the circle, crouched and wrote hieroglyphs in the sand – each one reversed.

The chanting continued.

‘May you never enter the barque that glides among the unwearying stars.

May you forget the names of those who guard the seven doors, the fourteen gates, the twenty-one mounds of the Otherworld, and may you never be vindicated in the presence of the forty-two assessors. May your heart weigh heavy against the feather of Maat in the Hall of Osiris, and Ammut, the Devourer of the Dead, feed on it. You have denied the gods of your ancestors, may they in the Everlasting deny you.’

Darkness fell and absorbed the figures of the priests who chanted these fearsome words, as though they were part of the darkness itself.

When the dawn came and the sun rose in a splendour of blue and gold, the man who lay, twisted and broken, alone at the centre of a vast and featureless desert, did not witness it.

*** *** ***

Eliot rang the bell in shabby Swallow Street and Emma looked around curiously. She had never visited Eliot’s friend Jack before. The place did not look promising. The door paint was peeling and scuffed, the wall grimy, and the beautiful honey-coloured stone almost unrecognisable. The whole street resembled the back of a stage set that no one had time to tidy up before the play started,

while just around the corner – the front of the stage – was resplendent with reproduction Roman buildings housing a genuine ancient Roman bathing and temple complex.

At last, a disembodied voice greeted them and a buzz indicated that the door was unlocked. A steep, dark staircase confronted them, and they started to climb. The first indication Emma had that she had not entered the den of some impoverished troglodyte was the shine of leaves caught in sunlight from a skylight high above the landing. From then on the place was a delight.

A life sized Egyptian statue of worm-eaten wood that had once guarded the secret entrance to a tomb in ancient Egypt, stood beside the door to the living room. The statue held a staff that was irreverently draped with Jack's red winter scarf, and a ski hat graced the forbidding head.

The front room, the living room, was large and light, with a view of chimneys and rooftops.

Emma knew that Jack had inherited money from his father, and many of the precious artefacts in his apartment from his great-grandfather, Ben Wilson, an archaeologist. He was in the enviable position of not having to work too hard at making a living. He fancied himself as a writer, but had never written a book, though he had a drawer full of titles and discarded first chapters. However, he had had some travel articles published and, if anyone asked, he claimed to be a freelance travel writer.

The tomb guardian had been inherited from his great-grandfather, taken out of Egypt, no doubt, before the authorities fully worked out their strategy for preventing heritage artefacts leaving the country. He also had from his great-grandfather an old leather suitcase stuffed full of ancient manuscript fragments on papyrus. He only looked at them when he was showing off to a visitor and had no idea what they were. Since they had come into his possession he had intended to have them deciphered by an expert, but never got around to it. He and his friends enjoyed speculating on their origins and meaning.

Emma stared at his mantelpiece, which was full of ancient Egyptian artefacts – a couple of ushabtis, faience slaves waiting to labour for the deceased in the afterlife, a blue pottery hippopotamus painted with flowering lotus on its sides, and several exquisite stone bowls filled with paper clips and boxes of matches. Most impressive of all were a pair of tiny ancient Egyptian silver statues of gods: Anubis, the jackal headed protector of the necropolis, and Isis, the Queen of Heaven.

On the wall above the mantelpiece was a flat piece of white chalk-like stone with the symbol of the sun painted in thin black lines, each ray ending in the stylised drawing of a hand holding an *ankh*, the Egyptian sign for eternal life. Something was scrawled under it in hieroglyphs, but the end sign was broken off and so the inscription, whatever it was, was incomplete. Beside it a similar shard of stone was carved in

relief. It was of a hand with long, sensitive fingers reaching out to touch something that had been broken off and lost.

The hand had pride of place, mounted so that the best light in the room fell on it.

Eliot and Emma were visiting Jack because they were worried about him. Jack and Eliot had been close friends since Jack visited the United States as a teenager, and had stayed at Eliot's home as part of an educational exchange programme. They kept up their friendship at long distance until Eliot decided to come to England, to Jack's home town, to work.

Jack had recently been having disturbing dreams.

The first dream that he told Eliot about had occurred about a month before. In the dream the ancient Egyptian hand seemed to be beckoning, instead of reaching out. He was in a desert among the columns of ruined Egyptian temples. Whenever he looked directly at the figures painted and carved on the columns and walls they were still and lifeless, but as soon as he turned his head away, out of the corner of his eye, he could see them move.

He had lain awake for some time after this dream feeling uneasy, as though he had woken too soon and missed something very important. When he went into the living room his eye went straight to the hand. It appeared as it had always done – inanimate. And yet he sensed a subtle difference.

Eliot had laughed.

‘You really ought to write that novel you’re always talking about,’ he said. ‘Your imagination is getting out of hand!’

‘I didn’t imagine it,’ he had protested. ‘I really felt...’

But already he was not certain how he had felt – and the dreams kept coming.

Some were only made up of the flotsam and jetsam of his ordinary day-to-day life, but others were more disturbing and powerful. He seemed to be recalling, in great detail, people and places in what seemed to be ancient Egypt.

Emma, an ardent New Ager, had pricked up her ears at once when Eliot told her that Jack was having disturbing dreams about ancient Egypt.

Eliot himself had no time for the New Age and had often indulged in jeering at it before he met Emma. She had not converted him or even lessened his scepticism and distaste, but he was prepared to humour her.

Emma paused a long time beside the battered old leather case containing the papyrus manuscripts. Eliot was talking, but Jack was watching Emma. Tentatively she put out her hand and touched the case. She withdrew it at once, but then put it back again and left it there for a long time, frowning in concentration.

‘What is this?’ she asked at last.

‘Oh, that’s a lot of old useless stuff from Egypt – bits and pieces of papyrus no one can read,’ Eliot answered for Jack. ‘I don’t know why he doesn’t just chuck it away or give it to some old museum.’

Emma looked at Jack. 'It must have come into your possession for a purpose,' she said. 'You should have it translated.'

'The case has been in my family for ages,' he replied. 'It contains mostly fragments. I can't see that any sense could be made of them.'

'Perhaps one of them would explain your dreams.'

Jack glanced at Eliot crossly. So he had been spreading it around about the dreams!

There was an awkward pause, and Emma moved away from the case. To break the tension she lifted up a small earthenware lamp.

'This is Roman. Was it found in Bath?'

'I don't know. I bought it at the flea market in the old tram sheds in Walcot Street.'

She held it up and turned it over, examining it closely.

'Perhaps you should rub it,' Eliot mocked, 'and a genii will come out and grant your every wish!'

'What would be your wish?' Emma asked seriously, holding the lamp up, her hand poised ready to rub it.

Even Jack laughed, and then, because she seemed so earnest and was so beautiful, he said: 'I'd wish to understand what is going on in my dreams.'

Emma rubbed the lamp.

Nothing happened. Of course!

She put it down and returned thoughtfully to the leather case.

'I sense very strongly that this is a key to something,'

she said. 'You really should have the fragments translated.'

Jack crossed the room and opened the case. Inside lay the yellowing scrolls, half worm-eaten, covered in strange markings – writing, but to him indecipherable.

'They are powerful,' she said. 'I'm not surprised you have strange dreams!'

He frowned, shutting the case. He had been finding his attention drawn to it more and more recently. In several of the dreams he had about Egypt it seemed as though someone was calling him, urgently, as though there was some danger. He had the feeling he was expected to do something he did not want to do.

If he had a second chance to wish on the Roman lamp he would wish for the dreams to go away, not for him to understand them.

'Aren't you going to offer us a drink?' Eliot asked, impatient with what he would term a 'spooky' turn to the conversation.

Jack left the room at once.

'You were supposed to be trying to help him,' Eliot said accusingly. 'Not freak him out even more.'

Emma moved reluctantly away from the case.

When Jack returned with three glasses and a bottle of wine, she told him she knew someone in Glastonbury who might be able to interpret his dreams for him.

'She might even be able to give you a past life reading,' she added.

Jack shrugged. He was uneasy that they were having

this conversation about something so personal, and was not about to expose himself further to a total stranger. He knew enough about Freud to be very wary of letting anyone loose on his inner motivations. Who knew what an 'expert' would make of what happened to him at night in the privacy of his subconscious!

No. Emma was well meaning, but he needed no witch at Glastonbury to analyse him. He was irritated with Eliot for dragging her into it, and wished he had told his friend nothing about the strange events he was experiencing in the 'twilight zone'.

Luckily Emma did not press the point, and the conversation turned to what Eliot had been doing since he last saw him. It seemed he might go to Chile soon to attend the wedding of his sister to a rich rancher.

Emma sat quietly, cross-legged on a cushion on the floor, and seemed removed from the conversation. Jack glanced at her frequently and saw that she was gazing at his Egyptian treasures intently. Eliot was lucky, he thought. Her hair was brown and long but shining like fire in the sunlight that had now suddenly broken through the rain clouds. Her eyes were deeply grey, her lashes long. She wore a tight jumper that did not meet her jeans, and had kicked off her sodden shoes to reveal beautifully shaped feet. The wine glass was on the floor in front of her and she was meditatively drawing her finger around the rim, listening for the high, fine sound she hoped it would make.

Eliot's voice seemed further and further away. Jack

felt he and Emma were alone in the room. The sound started on the glass and it seemed to him it was a thread drawing him away, like the voice calling in his dreams.

He struggled to free himself from the web he felt tightening around him, and turned his eyes to Eliot – good, solid, down-to-earth Eliot.

** *** **

That night he dreamed again.

*‘Will this exile never end ...will there be no pity ...
Other men have failed, but their punishment has had a
season and then it has passed and gone, and they have
sailed the golden barque among the stars...
I reach up ... I cry ... but even the God I have served so
faithfully has deserted me ... Ai-i ... Ai-i...’*

*The voice was in the wind that wailed over the desert
dunes, lifting the sand like fog around the bleak and lonely
figure.*

Jack in his bed reached out his arms, but he could not touch him.

When he woke he found that tears were streaming down his cheeks.

** *** **

He dressed and went out. He walked by the river and stared at it long and hard. The water rushing over the curved weir almost mesmerized him, but not quite. He could hear the early rush hour traffic building up behind him, the coaches with their air brakes breathing heavily as they stopped for the lights. The covered market was already busy and bustling. A lone canoe came into sight, but turned and left before the rough white water of the weir. Along the far bank, downstream, the houseboats sent up little signals of smoke as their inhabitants boiled water for their morning coffee. The rugby field on the other side lay silent, wet with dew, and beyond it the wooded hills rose, holding the town, nesting, between them.

At last he walked away, hands in pockets, head down. He could not go on living like this. He had to know the meaning of those dreams.

He found a phone box and dialled Eliot's number. Emma answered. He invited himself to breakfast and put the phone down before she could demur.

When he arrived Eliot was about to leave for work in smart suit and impeccable tie. Emma was still in her dressing gown with her hair tangled and unbrushed. He scarcely noticed how lovely she looked.

'You know that interpreter of dreams in Glastonbury you mentioned?' he said. 'I've decided. There's nothing for it. I have to see her.'

'She's away for a few days,' Emma said. 'Have some camomile tea.'

He was disappointed. Having made the decision, he was impatient to get started.

‘You look terrible,’ Eliot said cheerfully, slapping him on the shoulder. ‘Give him some strong coffee Emma. He needs it.’

Emma looked as though she might argue, but gave in and poured him a strong black coffee. He sipped it distractedly.

‘I’ve got to go,’ Eliot said. ‘Emma will set you right.’ And he leaned down and kissed her as he left.

‘Ciao!’ he called at the door and was gone.

Emma looked at Jack thoughtfully.

‘Sit down,’ she said. ‘Have some fruit. You look unhealthy.’

‘I feel unhealthy,’ he said. ‘I think I’m going mad. Half the time I don’t know whether I am dreaming when I’m asleep or dreaming when I’m awake. Which is the reality?’

She laughed. ‘Probably both,’ she said.

‘I dread going to sleep. Or rather...’ He hesitated. ‘I both dread and long for it.’ He began to pace, frowning.

‘Sit down, for heaven’s sake; you’re making me dizzy! Have an apple while I go and get dressed. Calm yourself.’

Jack sat down and poured himself another strong coffee.

He tapped his fingers on the table while she was gone, thinking of Egypt. He had been there only once, briefly, and only to Cairo – busy, noisy Cairo which gave no hint

of its ancient past. He had not even been to the Museum there. He was writing an article on its restaurants and hotels and he had felt no urge to sample anything else. Islamic Cairo had been visible with its mosques and the way the men washed and prayed so often in the day, but the Egypt of the Pharaohs was another country. He had promised himself he would visit it one day, but that day had not yet come.

When Emma returned they talked about his sudden impatience to have the dreams interpreted, and the fact that the woman she knew in Glastonbury was not yet available.

‘I have a friend here who might be able to help you,’ she said. ‘She isn’t a professional past-life reader and she won’t even admit to being a psychic, but she has visited Egypt many times and some pretty strange things have happened to her!’

‘I’m not sure that I want to spread it around that I’m going crazy,’ Jack said cautiously. ‘A professional is one thing...’

‘Believe me, she won’t spread it around.’

He looked doubtful.

‘It’s worth a shot,’ she urged. ‘If you don’t feel comfortable with her you don’t need to tell her anything. We’ll just visit. I often do. I enjoy her company. And her house is even more cluttered than yours with beautiful and interesting things to look at.’

Eventually he agreed, and she rang Mary Brown. She could see them that very day.

They drove almost to the southern limits of the city before they stopped at a house half hidden behind a high shaggy privet hedge in urgent need of cutting. The gate was tall and solidly panelled with grey and splintering wood, so they could see nothing of the garden until they opened it and stepped inside. Jack almost gasped. It was a tangle of wonderful plants and colours. Oriental poppies gleamed and shone in the sunlight. Peonies leant untidily against the hedge in brilliant crimson. There did not seem an inch that was not burgeoning and blooming. When the gate shut behind them, they were in a magical and private place – a miniature nature reserve in the city.

Emma rang the bell and while they waited Jack gazed into the conservatory, which was a jungle of exotic plants that he recognised from his travels abroad – bougainvillea and plumbago, hibiscus and lemon, a ten-foot tall Egyptian papyrus plant and several African aloes.

Through the glass door he saw Mary approaching. She was an old lady leaning heavily on two sticks.

She greeted Emma warmly and ushered them into her home. In the small front room two of the walls were lined with books up to the ceiling. The other walls were covered with real pictures – not prints. The windows glowed and gleamed with the vibrant colours of stained glass.

If his own home was deceptive from the outside, hers was even more so. He had passed down this road many times and never thought that the people who lived there might be like this.

She offered tea and while she was away in the kitchen Emma showed him round, pointing out that the pictures were all painted by members of her family; the blown glass was made by her son-in-law, and the stained glass in the windows was by Mary herself. She showed him the books Mary had written and the extensive library she kept for research.

‘Everything in this room has personal significance,’ Emma said enthusiastically. ‘That is why it feels so good. I knew you would like it!’ she added triumphantly, reading his face.

‘You wouldn’t think such an old woman would...’ Jack began, but stopped at once when she came back into the room.

Mary laughed.

‘It’s my disguise,’ she said. ‘We all use disguises to hide the fact that we are eternal beings on a journey through the universe! Yours is of a rather feckless young man intent on nothing but a good time.’

‘I may have used that disguise once, but not any more,’ Jack said. ‘Things have changed a lot lately.’

‘Which is why Emma has brought you to me. Do you have milk and sugar?’

He nodded and there was a pause while milk and sugar were dispensed and biscuits offered. He was

impatient to get to the crux of his visit and would gladly have forgone the tea and biscuits. But Mary seemed intent on playing out the little ritual, as though it had some importance.

‘Perhaps she holds to these little ordinary things to keep her sane,’ he thought, feeling that in her presence he could very easily leave this reality behind and swing off into unknown realms.

Emma smiled at him, amused, as though she sensed his impatience.

He tried to be patient.

At last the cups were put away, Emma carrying them through to the kitchen.

He met Mary’s eyes expectantly.

She smiled.

‘Tell me about your dreams,’ she said.

The floodgates burst open and out came the torrent.

She heard how he had never been particularly interested in Egyptian history, but now almost every night he seemed to be in ancient Egypt. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, listening and waiting. Emma held her breath. She began to feel a strangeness growing in the room as though the world outside had ceased to exist.

‘I can never make the dreams come,’ he said, ‘and they rarely come in sequence. They seem to be scattered fragments of another life I am beginning to think I once had, and yet I don’t believe in reincarnation.’

Emma spoke for the first time.

‘His apartment is full of things from Egypt left to him by his great-grandfather.’

Mary’s eyes flicked over to Emma when she spoke, and then back to Jack.

And then she stood up and limped across the room. She pulled out a book of astronomy and handed it to him without a word. Puzzled, he turned the pages. The most wonderful photographs of the universe he had ever seen were there, taken through the most advanced telescopes, some based on satellites above the earth’s pollution. The whole magnificent panoply of what surrounded us in outer space, but which could not be seen with the naked eye, filled him with awe.

‘Take this picture,’ she said, pointing. ‘All these stars look as though they are clustered together, yet what we are seeing is actually an illusion. Our experience of them is simultaneous, yet they are separated from each other by millions of years.’

He studied the picture carefully. He could see no difference between them.

She watched his reaction.

‘Do you understand what I am trying to say?’

He hesitated. He was not sure. Something was glimmering at the back of his mind, but he could not bring it into focus.

‘There is a sense in which we experience events as simultaneous, although they are in fact separated in time by millennia,’ she said. ‘Our minds are skilled beyond belief at surfing the ocean of consciousness in

which we have our being.’ She paused. ‘Everything that has ever been is still present, though we may not be aware of it because it is in a form usually inaccessible to us. Some call it the Akashic records, but perhaps we should not use the word “records” because it suggests something inanimate, stored on shelves, gathering dust. The Akashic is rather an imprint from life in dynamic motion, interacting, interrelating, influencing. Eternal and yet ever present...’

Jack struggled to come to terms with what she had just said.

‘We are just part of the choreography of that universe,’ she continued, indicating the pictures once more. ‘We are, it is true, hurtling through space on the surface of a very small planet, but our consciousness is free of time and space. You can experience ancient Egypt as though it is present in your life now because you can see the bigger picture where everything that has ever happened still exists in some form. You are in a sense seeing two stars separated by millions of light years, simultaneously...’

‘Whew!’ Jack laughed nervously. He needed to think about this. The unfamiliar ideas were crowding in too fast.

After a long pause when each sat wrapped in their own thoughts, Jack spoke again.

‘You mean you don’t think I actually *lived* in ancient Egypt, but am just picking up impressions floating around?’

‘But why does he just pick up *those* impressions?’ Emma asked. ‘Why are we not continually bombarded by all sorts of things so that we don’t know what is now and what is not?’

‘Because we could not live like that,’ Mary said. ‘We have filters. We have screens to protect us. When you walk down a street you don’t notice everything that is there. A baby in a pram might notice only the dogs and the other babies. A gardener might notice only the gardens. A young girl the clothes in the shops ... a young man the cars ... Not one of us sees everything. Only occasionally we focus on one or two of the host of impressions that are with us all the time. When we are in a relaxed state, sleeping for instance, we may lower our screens, and extend our range.’

‘But why do I feel that I am personally in ancient Egypt experiencing those things?’

Mary shook her head. ‘You must not think I am claiming to know for sure everything about the nature of reality. No one does. But I see no reason why we can’t access the past, because it is part of the universal consciousness, and we are part of that. Even in the physical universe nothing is ever destroyed, but only changes form.’

Jack had heard that every cell in the body changes every seven years. If this was so, he could not be the person born to his mother – yet he knew that he was. Something continued through all the physical changes, something that was not physical. This non-physical

element could be in touch with a non-physical universe.

‘The ancient Egyptians believed that the human being is made up of nine parts, or aspects,’ Mary continued. ‘I understand the *Khu*, or *Akh*, as the Spirit, the original and eternal Being of a person. The pharaoh Akhenaten incorporated that word into his name to indicate that he, as eternal spirit, was in touch with his god, the Aten. In ancient Egyptian iconography it is represented by the sacred crested ibis, a bird whose feathers are iridescent. Through it we are in touch with Eternity, for Eternity is where it actually dwells. It only temporarily overlaps, as it were, with this world, while we are in the body. By becoming conscious of the *Akh* we can communicate mystically with what is normally beyond our comprehension.

‘The *Ba*, or soul, is more local to oneself as a personality formed in time. It is represented aptly by a migrating bird, a stork, standing beside a pot with a flame burning brightly, or, perhaps more frequently, by a human headed bird. This *Ba* is judged after the death of the body. If its thoughts and actions in life can balance against Maat, the ultimate arbiter of truth and justice, it could pass on to rejoin the *Akh*, or eternal spirit. If it is judged not to be ready and has failed in some way to satisfy Maat, the ancient Egyptians believed it had to return to earth and try again as a reincarnated being, or, in some extreme cases, be flung back into the void where it ceased to have any individuality at all.

‘The third aspect of the non-material part of us was named the *Ka*, this was represented by two upraised arms. It seems it was thought of as being much more earthbound than the spirit or the soul. It may be what sometimes appears to us as a ghost, or helps us in invisible form as our guiding spirit. In the tomb, a false door was placed for its convenience so that it could pass in and out of this world after the death of the physical body. Food and drink were left for it, sometimes in a literal sense, but mostly in picture form. The ancient Egyptians had much more of a sense of the vital essence, the life, of a thing, not only residing in its material form, but in the idea of it. We might call the *Ka* the astral body – but that would not be totally accurate.’

‘What on earth is the astral body?’ Jack asked, groaning inwardly at all this mumbo-jumbo.

Mary laughed and threw up her hands. Where to begin!

Emma helped her out.

‘We also believe our physical bodies are not all there is of us. The astral body is a sort of invisible envelope around us while we are in this world, operating on a different vibrational wavelength to the physical or the spiritual, but nevertheless connecting the two. Healers can sense it and use it for diagnosing and healing what is wrong with us. When people have out-of-body experiences it is usually believed that it is this astral or etheric body that detaches itself from the physical,

floats away and observes the physical from a distance. This could happen during the shock of a near death experience, or under the influence of drugs. A friend of mine experienced astral travel under morphine during the long labour to deliver her first child. I have experienced it, without drugs, unexpectedly. There are stories of saints experiencing it in states of high mystical ecstasy, and Eastern holy men inducing it deliberately by practising certain esoteric disciplines.'

'The other six aspects the ancient Egyptians believed in are easier to comprehend,' Mary said, laughing.

'I'm glad to hear it!' Jack said thankfully.

'The Name had special significance because it was the one thing that held all these disparate elements together in the minds of others, identifying an individual. The Heart represents the motives, the will of the individual. The Shadow we might call the subconscious; the Double, the template given at birth to guide the individual into what it *should* become.'

'You mean like that story, "The Portrait of Dorian Gray",' Jack asked, 'where the portrait kept in the attic changes throughout the man's life into a hideous monster to reveal at last what he is really like, as opposed to what he pretends to be?'

Mary smiled.

'Well, that would be the principle working the opposite way! But it just shows how these ancient beliefs are still part of our culture, though we may distort them or deny them.'

‘I have seen Egyptian images of a potter god fashioning newborn twins on a potters wheel,’ Jack said.

‘Not twins,’ Mary corrected him, ‘but the newborn and its Double. Some Christians believe one’s guardian angel is assigned to one at birth. Perhaps this is what the Double is – not just a template which holds the image of us as we ought to be, but someone who helps us to fulfil that potential.’

But Jack had had enough. He was becoming confused and uneasy. He felt that the ground that had always seemed so firm and solid under his feet was shifting and dissolving. He needed to get away.

He stood up.

Emma seemed surprised.

‘Are we going?’

‘Yes, I have another appointment,’ he lied.

Mary smiled and stood up at once, leaning on her stick. She knew he was running away, but she knew also that he would be back.

‘But we haven’t told Mary about the papyrus fragments you have,’ Emma cried. They had been uppermost in her mind when she had arranged the meeting. She knew that Mary had studied hieroglyphics at evening classes, and, although she was no expert, she might have been able to decipher enough to tell them if they were worth getting properly translated.

Mary shook her head.

‘Another time,’ she said. ‘We must not make Jack late for his appointment.’

He could see that she did not believe that he had an appointment, but she spoke in a way that suggested she might know of an appointment that *he* did not yet know he had.

They left, Jack not looking back. Emma turned at the gate to wave at the old lady still smiling in the doorway.

** *** **

That night he dreamed again. Was this the appointment he had to keep?

He found himself walking in a beautiful garden, but one unlike any he had seen in England. The trees were tamarisk and sycamore fig, with tall palms against the perimeter walls, bushes scarlet with pomegranate flowers, and lilies everywhere. The sun was low in the sky but still blazing hot.

He turned a corner and found himself looking at a rectangular pool lined with flowering shrubs. On the water a variety of water lilies rested – an exquisite waxy blue the most common. At the far side, a lotus raised its long stalk and held up a luminous white flower in the fragrant air. He glanced down at his feet and was surprised to see his legs were bare and he was wearing a pair of flimsy sandals. A white linen kilt was fastened around his waist.

A slight sound made him lift his head.

On the far side, just emerging from a leafy avenue, was a woman. He caught his breath. He had no doubt now

where he was. He had seen paintings of ancient Egyptian gardens and women dressed in that way, finely pleated, almost transparent fabric revealing every curve. As she paused beside the pool, the sunlight, shining through the leaves, flickered over her, turning her skin to gold and black like a leopard's...

'Ah, but she is beautiful,' he thought.

'Will she turn? Will she see me standing here ... waiting?'

'Will her eyes – deep as the Great Green Ocean – look into mine and smile?'

There have not been many smiles lately.

She will turn to me, but her eyes will be cold and sad... Will I ever bring back the light to them?

2 GLASTONBURY

Soon after the visit to Mary Brown, Emma set up an appointment with Denise, the dream-interpreter and past-life reader she knew in Glastonbury.

As they sped along the road in his red sports car they hardly spoke a word to each other. They had not met since the visit to Mary, but Emma knew that Jack had been dissatisfied with what she had said. He did not want to find that he was only in touch with a vague 'sea of events' preserved in some unspecified way outside time. He, who would never have given mind-space to the possibility of reincarnation before, now wanted it to be true. The dreams were so vivid he had begun to believe they were memories, and wanted more than anything else to have a clear storyline from ancient Egypt with himself as protagonist. He pressed Emma to make the appointment with Denise in spite of his former resistance to the meeting.

Emma glanced at him sideways and a strand of hair blew across her face. He was staring straight ahead,

driving too fast. When she looked back at the road she found that they were approaching her favourite stretch of the route.

They were on the crest of a hill and were looking down on a wide vista of what had once been low-lying marshland punctuated by islands. Glastonbury Tor, an extraordinary hill, rose high above the flat farmland, crowned by an abandoned church tower.

Emma could see that Jack was impressed with the distant view of the Tor, but was anxious to keep his appointment, and did not slow down.

‘I don’t wonder there are so many legends about Glastonbury,’ Emma said. ‘From this distance it looks such a magical place – and when it was an island rising above the marshes with the mist swirling among the reeds below it, it would have been easy to imagine it as the gateway to the Otherworld. I can almost see the mighty figure of Gwynn ab Nudd greeting the souls of the Celtic Dead as they are ferried across the waters and through the mist...’

She stopped speaking, dreaming of a later time when Glastonbury was thought to be King Arthur’s Avalon. She imagined Arthur and his knights riding out in search of the Holy Grail, when, according to another legend, the sacred chalice was lying hidden nearby all the time, placed in the well at the foot of the Tor by Joseph of Arimathea after the crucifixion. She dreamed of Merlin weaving his spells and teaching his Druidic wisdom ... of Guinevere meeting her lover... She

wondered if the monks had indeed found the grave of Arthur and Guinevere in 1190 as they claimed, re-interring their bodies before the High Altar in the Abbey.

The road dipped and the Tor disappeared. They were coming down the long slope of the hill towards the town of Wells. They passed through a green tunnel where the trees on either side knit their canopies together, to emerge where houses lined the road, and Jack had to slow down for buses and cars. The great Cathedral of Wells rose impressively before them.

‘This must have been how Glastonbury Abbey once looked,’ Emma thought, and decided she preferred the romantic ruin to the busy building with coach loads of tourists crawling all around it like ants. The architecture of Wells Cathedral was certainly grand, but her favourite thing was a tiny panel on one of the walls inside that Mary Brown had once pointed out to her. It was a relief carving of the Ascension of Christ to Heaven – a group of astonished people were gathered on the ground staring upwards to where a pair of feet comically disappeared into a cloud!

She would have liked to show it to Jack, but she was not sure he would be willing to stop. There was something of awkwardness in their friendship. She was, after all, his best friend’s lover, and although Eliot seemed happy enough for her to help him with the mysterious dreams, she did not know how he would react if they seemed to be getting too friendly. Jack

himself seemed obsessed with solving the puzzle of his dreams and, although she caught him looking at her occasionally in a way that might have worried Eliot, he glanced away at once when her eyes met his, and kept the conversation strictly to the matter in hand.

Emma always felt she was entering a special realm when she entered Glastonbury. Not only did it resonate with its extraordinary history, but also the contemporary scene itself was like nowhere else she had ever encountered.

Eliot was cynical about Glastonbury. He claimed that it was all sham and fake. He hated the vegetarian cafes, the shops that sold crystals at exorbitant prices just because they were supposed to be impregnated with healing energies. He hated the women who had substituted one gender of an impossible god for another, and the statues of gross fat women purporting to be images of the Earth Goddess. But most of all he hated the ragged unemployed who hung about the streets like hippies left over from the sixties, with matted hair, earrings and dogs on leads of frayed string.

Emma saw it as an exciting mix of many different cultures. The farmers used it as a market town. The Christians earnestly paraded through the streets with crosses and candles on certain days of the church calendar. Then there were the New Agers who built invisible temples and walked an invisible maze on the Tor, who had rituals they believed dated back to ancient times. Shops sold Christian icons beside

images of pagan gods and goddesses, magnificent reproductions of Medieval and Renaissance archangels beside impossibly fey paintings of tree devas and angels looking like winged Barbie dolls. And on every notice board were advertisements promising alternative and complementary healing.

Emma believed that there were genuine seekers after enlightenment there, and inexplicable miracles of healing. She claimed that for every charlatan overcharging for bogus alternative healing there was one who was truly in touch with the spiritual dimension that brings wholeness to the fractured psyche. She believed that tucked away among the bookshelves in shops and libraries housing so many superficial panaceas for the ills of the world, there were genuine gems of wisdom that could change your life for the better and divert the world from destruction.

** *** **

The trees surrounding the house of Denise, the Psychic, were hung with wind chimes. Jack and Emma approached the front door setting off a discreet and delicate cacophony of fairy sound. Huge white roses brushed against them, and white doves circled above their heads.

Jack took hold of Emma's elbow.

'Let's go,' he whispered urgently. 'I don't want to do this.'

‘We can’t go back now,’ she replied, shaking her arm free of his clutch. ‘She probably knows we’re here.’

‘I don’t care.’

He turned to go, but the door opened and a woman in a flowing robe stood squarely in the doorway.

‘Welcome!’ she cried in a voice that could not be disobeyed.

Like a child caught in a naughty act, he turned and stood before her. He scarcely heard Emma introducing them.

She had pitch-black hair flowing almost to her waist, and a huge Egyptian ankh studded with semi-precious stones rising and falling on her ample bosom.

‘Come!’ she said, and reached out her bejewelled hands to him.

He stepped meekly forward and entered the house.

Surrounded by portraits of her spirit guides – wispy Tibetans, stern ancient Egyptians and one magnificent Amerindian in full feathered head-dress – he was offered herbal tea, and sat, sipping it out of a bone china cup, as Emma and Denise talked.

Emma had promised she would not tell Denise any details about his dreams, but just that he needed a past life reading to see if they had any relevance to his present life. He wanted to see what she could pick up psychically.

He soon felt uneasy under the stare of the disembodied beings she believed communicated with her. Emma and Mary seemed to be unperturbed by the belief that

they were surrounded by invisible beings of various species and orders – some the dead who chose to return to try to help the living, others who had never lived on earth yet interacted with it in a dynamic way... Had not Abraham been visited by angels, and Paul heard voices on the road to Damascus? But what if Denise's voices were mischievous or ignorant? Enlightenment might not come as an automatic result of dying, but have to be won by passing further trials and tests in the Afterlife.

After tea Denise told Emma to stay where she was and took Jack alone into her inner sanctuary, a small room resplendent with crystals. A candle burned inside a giant half geode of amethyst. There was no furniture, only a rich Indian rug on the floor.

She indicated that he should sit, and he sat, cross-legged, in front of her. A narrow arched window was the only daylight source. The sun was shining directly through it, illuminating with unearthly beauty one huge quartz crystal ball on a silver stand close in front of her.

He was feeling extremely nervous and not a little resentful. Emma had not prepared him for the weirdness of everything in this house.

'I don't want to be here!' he thought.

He was just about to rise and leave when she started to speak, and the power of her voice gave him pause. Like a wild animal held transfixed by the headlights of a car, he stayed where he was.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ she said. ‘You are held in the heart of Spirit. No harm will come to you.’

Out of nowhere soft music started to pervade the room.

‘Listen to the music. Relax. Stop fighting.’

He shut his eyes and tried to accept what was happening. Emma had been so sure that Denise would be able to help him.

‘I have come all this way, I might as well give it a try,’ he decided. ‘But as soon as I feel her taking over my mind, I’ll leave!’

She had started intoning strange sounding words, and at first he let the sound wash over him, but then, when the power of her voice became almost unbearable, he opened his eyes, alarmed.

Her appearance seemed to have changed. Her pale blue eyes were dark and unfathomable. There was a kind of beauty about her he had not noticed before. The voice that he heard seemed not to be her own.

‘Oh God!’ he thought. ‘She has gone into trance!’

But he was now too curious to leave.

She claimed to be Isis, the Great Goddess of the Two Lands.

‘Egypt!’ he thought. Had Emma disobeyed him and told her more than he had wanted to tell her?

‘You have come to ask a question. Ask it, my child.’

He hesitated. If she was indeed the Goddess Isis surely she should know without being told what his question was. Those dark eyes certainly seemed to be

gazing into his very soul! He must be careful what he said out loud if he wanted to test if she was really who she said she was.

‘I am having strange dreams. I wanted to know the meaning...’

‘Let your mind form images,’ she commanded.

‘Of the dreams?’ he asked.

‘You are resisting – fighting against yourself. You don’t want to know what they are trying to tell you. Stop fighting ... let your mind drift... It will take you where you need to go.’

‘I would rather be guided by you.’

‘If the answer comes from me, you will not believe it. You have to find the answer yourself. Drift ... let images come ... first the water will be muddy from the tap ... then it will run pure...’

It crossed his mind that an ancient Egyptian would not know about taps.

‘I am not in ancient Egypt now,’ she said in answer to his thought.

He sat up straight. He would try to do what she said but the images that floated like smoke through his mind were at first of the landscape he and Emma had just driven through ... then Mary Brown’s room with all the glass gleaming in the sunlight... He even saw an image of his old school playground. But gradually other images came ... ships tossed on a stormy sea ... a Roman villa in a Roman town ... the columns of an Egyptian temple ... the carving of the Egyptian hand in

his room in Bath ... the graffiti of the sun with all the rays ending in little hands ... a man and women raising their arms in adoration to it...

She listened impassively as he talked on, warming to his theme, having no idea if he was remembering things or just imagining them...

At last she raised her hand and stopped the flow.

‘You have had many lives,’ she said in that strange voice. ‘But the one you are describing now is the one that troubles you most.’

He was puzzled. It did not seem to him that he was describing a life, but the objects in his room and drifting images they evoked.

‘I sense you are holding back because you are afraid of the truth. The sun’s rays ending in hands is the symbol of Akhenaten, the symbol of his God. The hand you describe is the hand of Akhenaten reaching out to his God. You have something in your possession that proves to you who you are.’

‘But...’ Jack started, and then lapsed into silence.

He felt very strange as though he was standing at the edge of a precipice about to be pushed over.

Was she implying that he had been Akhenaten in a past life?

‘You cannot avoid your destiny,’ she said. ‘The more you try to do so, the more it will pursue you.’

‘What is my destiny? I’m not trying to avoid it. I just don’t know what it is.’

‘You will.’

He began to feel angry. He was to pay a hundred pounds for this 'reading' and so far he had done all the work and was nowhere nearer enlightenment.

'Will you tell me who I am, and why I am having these dreams about Egypt?' She must have heard the impatience in his voice, but she took no notice.

'Does the hand on your wall feel like your own hand?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said at once without thinking. 'No. I don't know. It is an old fragment of sculpture, of course it can't be my hand! In the dreams it beckons me as though it belongs to someone else. But sometimes I have felt it is mine...'

She smiled pointedly.

'Are you implying that I was Akhenaten in a past life?' he demanded angrily.

If she did not give him a straight answer now he would get up and leave, strange feelings or no strange feelings!

'Do you think you were Akhenaten?' She asked.

He had been to a psychiatrist once who had persisted in asking questions and giving him no answers. He was annoyed then, and he was annoyed now. With an exclamation of disgust he rose to his feet and strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him. A hundred tinkling mobiles moved and spun.

Emma looked up, startled, from the book she had been reading.

'Let's go!' he snapped. He put his hand into his

wallet and pulled out two fifty-pound notes and flung them on the coffee table. One missed and fluttered to the floor. He did not wait to pick it up but made for the outer door without a backward glance.

Emma looked anxiously back at the door he had just slammed, but hesitated only a moment before she followed him out of the house.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked as he furiously started up the engine.

‘Nothing!’ he snapped. ‘A waste of time. I don’t know why I let you talk me into it!’

Emma gritted her teeth and prayed to her Guardian Angels for protection as they hit the road much too fast.

3

THE TOMB GUARDIAN

Several weeks passed in which Jack resisted any discussion on the matter with Emma. He tried to get his life back as it had been before the dreams started. He went drinking with Eliot and his other friends and treated Emma, when she was in their company, like a stranger, except when he made barbed jokes about the New Age, which she interpreted as criticisms of herself.

At first she was hurt and upset by his treatment of her, and then began to resent it. By the time he was ready to ask her help again she did not want anything to do with him, and told Eliot that if he wanted to see Jack he would have to see him alone.

Jack made sure he drank so much he fell into bed in a stupor most nights, and if he had any nocturnal adventures, he certainly could not remember them in the morning. He was just beginning to believe he had imagined the whole thing, when, one night, he inadvertently went to bed without drinking, and he dreamed one of 'those' dreams again.

He found himself in a vast desert, featureless to every horizon. The feeling of loneliness and aloneness was overwhelming. The sun was directly overhead, casting no shadow. He had no idea whether he was facing north, south, east or west.

He was near to despair when he spotted a tiny smudge on one horizon, which steadily manifested itself as a figure walking towards him. He was greatly relieved. Rescue was at hand.

But when the figure was near enough to distinguish, he was startled to see that it was the figure of the tomb guardian he had in his apartment – worm-eaten, black painted wood with gold belt, gold painted staff and eyes of black onyx. There was a bitter taste of disappointment and fear in his throat. He turned to run, but his feet sank into the sand.

He braced himself and waited.

The striding figure reached him and passed him. Its eyes, staring straight ahead, showed no recognition. It moved like an automaton.

Jack stared, astonished, as the statue strode past him, making no indentation on the soft sand into which his own feet were sinking, each step precisely the same length as the last.

‘Wait!’ he cried, suddenly realising that he would be alone and lost again when the figure had reached the other horizon. Anything was better than that!

He stumbled after him and was still stumbling and sweating, struggling and calling, when he awoke...

** *** **

It took another week of heavy drinking to ward off further disturbing encounters.

Meanwhile the statue of the tomb guardian was becoming a problem.

Occasional visitors had complained that it was frightening, but Jack had never found it so. Now he was aware of it all the time he was not drunk. Its eyes seemed to follow him whenever he passed it, and on more than one occasion he swung round in the bedroom or the living room convinced it had followed him and was standing behind him.

He threw a patchwork quilt over it, one his grandmother had made for him when he was a child, but this only made things worse. He *knew* its eyes could still see him through the fabric.

At one time he almost threw it down the stairs, wanting to break it into a thousand pieces, but he could not bring himself to touch it.

'I'll sell it to a museum,' he thought, and phoned an archaeological friend of his fathers, saying the matter was urgent, as he needed money desperately. The man, Colin Meredith, was excited at the prospect of getting his hands on a genuine ancient Egyptian tomb guardian and made an appointment to come to see him the following Friday.

Jack decided to stay with Eliot until his visit. He

could not face sharing his apartment another night with the ghostly figure. He was determined to tell no one of this latest turn of events. Not even Emma, picking up that something dramatic had happened, could wheedle a word out of him.

Every evening he and Eliot drank a lot and she went to bed early to escape the maudlin songs and the exaggerated memories of the time they had spent travelling the States on a Greyhound bus before she had met either of them.

** *** **

When Colin Meredith arrived to view the statue he was tremendously excited and said at once he would take it to Sotheby's for valuation and possible auction.

'But I'm afraid I can't get you a buyer quickly and easily. We will have to have documentation of provenance, and I'm sure there will be questions about the legality of your great-grandfather taking it out of Egypt.'

'I thought there were no such laws in his day.'

'Certainly not as strict. But this is a very valuable piece and I very much fear your right to hold it privately may be questioned. Are you sure you want to start all this? Would you not rather just keep it away from the limelight as your great-grandfather did?'

'I need the money,' Jack lied stubbornly.

'You have a lot of treasures I see,' Meredith said,

glancing appreciatively around the room. 'Perhaps something else, less controversial, will bring you in the required amount.'

Jack frowned. He did not want to admit to his fear of the statue. He imagined an ironic glint in its eyes as though it were listening to the conversation and knew that he would not be able to get rid of it as easily as he wished.

He tried to pull himself together. He had lived with the statue most of his life and had never felt this way about it before.

Meredith was meanwhile exploring and had come across the leather-covered case left by Jack's great-grandfather. His initials were embossed in faded gold on the top and were recognized at once by the young archaeologist.

'Some old papyrus manuscripts. Mostly fragments,' Jack said abstractedly.

Meredith opened it and started to riffle through it carefully, but with growing excitement.

In the dust at the bottom he found an insignificant looking dull silver ring with a flattened turquoise bezel, and put it aside on the coffee table while he examined the documents.

'Not much in hieroglyphs,' Jack said apologetically, 'so they can't be very old.'

'Hieroglyphs were mostly used for formal or magical texts. They themselves were believed to carry a direct magical charge. A much easier writing developed for

everyday use called hieratic, and, in the seventh century BC, it became what we call demotic. These are mostly demotic, but still very interesting.'

He held up one of the larger fragments covered with hieroglyphs.

'This looks pretty old,' he said. 'It looks like ... it looks like a list of names... a genealogy perhaps.'

He held it up to the light by the window. Many of the characters were faded and some eaten away by insects.

'I see the name Wa-en-ra,' he said thoughtfully, and then looked round at Jack, his face astonished. 'One of the names of Akhenaten,' he cried.

'Oh, no!' Jack thought. 'Not that again!'

'I really think you should have these properly translated and evaluated,' Meredith continued, his eyes alight. 'I don't know enough to do them justice. But there are plenty of scholars I know who would appreciate a chance to study them.'

'Take them if you want,' Jack said impatiently. 'They are no use to me as they are now.'

The archaeologist could not believe his good luck. He started immediately to pick up the papyri, before Jack could change his mind. It was clear they would deteriorate further without proper care, and who knew what information they would reveal about the 'heretic' king!

'It's the statue I really want to get rid of,' Jack said suddenly. 'It's too big for this apartment and it frightens my guests.'

‘I don’t wonder,’ Meredith laughed. ‘Those tomb guardians were fortified with all sorts of magical spells.’

He did not notice Jack’s expression, because he was still poring over the papyrus fragments.

‘If this is a genealogy,’ he mused aloud. ‘We might finally be able to solve the mystery of Tutankhamun’s antecedents, and whether Smenkhkare was a separate male king or just the throne name of Nefertiti... There might even be something about what happened to his daughters after his death...’

But Jack was not listening.

‘The statue has to go today,’ he announced.

‘What?’ Meredith exclaimed, looking at Jack in surprise.

‘I really want to get started on selling it at once,’ Jack insisted.

‘But...’

‘You can take the papyri to translate,’ Jack said stubbornly, ‘only if you take the statue away today.’

Meredith looked at him as though he had gone mad.

‘You must know that is impossible.’

‘We could wrap it up and put it in your car. No one will know what it is. We could phone Sotheby’s to tell them it is coming...’

‘I’m sorry. It is priceless. It must be properly crated and transported. There are procedures...’

‘I tell you. I’m fed up with it. I want it out of the house. If you don’t take it today, I’ll crate it up myself

and put it in storage somewhere where it will not be seen again until I die.’

** *** **

And so it was that Colin Meredith found himself driving down the motorway towards London in his Vauxhall station wagon with an ancient Egyptian tomb guardian wrapped in a blanket in the back, and a box of precious papyrus fragments on the seat beside him.

** *** **

That night Jack went to sleep in his own bed, sober, and had no dreams. He had not noticed that Meredith had left the ancient ring on the coffee table. It was Emma who found it on her next visit with Eliot.

Since the departure of the statue Jack had almost returned to his former self. He was not drinking so much and was good company again. She did not ask if he was still having the dreams, although she longed to.

As she put her coffee cup down on the low glass tabletop the ring was knocked off onto the floor. She picked it up and examined it curiously.

‘What’s this?’ she asked.

Jack peered at it without interest.

‘Oh, just some old ring that came with the papyri,’ he said. ‘Meredith must have left it behind. He could probably see it was of no value.’

‘But it looks old,’ Emma mused, turning it over and over.

‘Oh, I’m sure it is old!’ Jack laughed.

‘There is a cartouche. It must be the name of a pharaoh!’

Jack shrugged. ‘I have no idea who it belonged to.’

‘Mary Brown has lots of books on Egypt,’ she said. ‘She will probably be able to find out.’

She put the ring on her finger and held her hand up to admire it. The ring fitted well, but her finger began to tingle uncomfortably. She removed it and returned it to the table.

Jack’s coffee table was one of those display units, consisting of a heavy piece of thick glass over a wooden base. In the tray under the glass he had a good many fossils displayed – whorled ammonites, bi-valves changed to shining pyrites, ancient shark’s teeth, and skeletal fish caught in a moment of graceful movement and locked in stone forever. Emma stared down at it, and, in the glass, she could see her own reflection and, behind her, that of Jack.

A strange shift in focus occurred and suddenly she was aware of the fossils that had been living creatures millions of years ago, the ring worn on the hand of a living being several thousands of years ago, and she and Jack living and breathing at this time, yet all part now of the same moment. She remembered Mary Brown’s image of the starry heavens to illustrate the interconnectedness and simultaneity of everything.

She glanced up, eager to pass on her insight to Jack, but he and Eliot were laughing at some joke and she knew it would not be appropriate.

When they were ready to leave, Emma managed to extract a reluctant agreement from Jack that together they would take the ring to Mary for an interpretation of the cartouche.

Over the next few days Jack heard from Meredith, who was handling the sale of the statue at Sotheby's, that most of the difficulties had been ironed out and that it would not be long before it was put up for auction. He also reported that the papyrus fragments were well on the way to being translated. He had found just the scholar for the case. Jack listened with only half his attention. The only news he wanted from Meredith was that the statue had been sold and was out of his life forever.

** *** **

And then he had another of 'those' dreams. This time it concerned the ring. He dreamed he put it on and could not get it off. Someone was demanding it of him and he tried to pass it over, but tug as he might it would not budge. Suddenly he saw the flash of a blade, and the shadowy figure before him cut his ring finger off. For a moment he stood there, in agony, watching the blood spurt out, and then he awoke.

Shuddering, he climbed out of bed, and, in the light,

examined his hands. All his fingers were intact. He went to the living room and looked for the ring. Emma had put it on the mantel shelf, saying it would be safer there than on the coffee table.

He stared at it where it lay, but did not pick it up.

Next morning he phoned Emma and they made an appointment to visit Mary Brown.

** *** **

Mary examined the ring with great interest, and Emma noticed, if Jack did not, that there was a growing excitement expressed in her face as she began to translate the glyphs. But before she would tell them what she had discovered she drew out several books from her shelves and consulted them.

At last she held it up and declared with conviction that it was the seal ring of the pharaoh Akhenaten.

Emma gasped, for Jack had told her that Meredith had isolated one of the names of Akhenaten on the papyrus fragments.

There was silence in the room. Both Emma and Jack felt a chill down their spines, Emma remembering the tingling she had felt in her finger when she had worn the ring, and Jack remembering Denise's suggestion that he himself was a reincarnation of Akhenaten. Mary seemed deep in thought.

'It is strange that Akhenaten's ring should come our way,' she murmured. 'It seems as though something

connected with him is stirring again and we are being drawn into it.'

'An archaeologist friend of Jack's said the name of Akhenaten was on one of those papyrus fragments of his,' Emma said eagerly.

Mary looked up at Jack sharply.

'Are you having them translated?'

'Yes.'

'I would very much like to see the translation.'

'Of course I'll let you see it,' Jack said. 'But...' He paused.

Mary looked at him steadily, enquiringly.

'But ... I don't really want to get involved in anything spooky...'

'You are involved!' Emma cried. 'Tell Mary what Denise said!'

As he hesitated to speak, Emma took the initiative.

'A famous psychic and past-life reader in Glastonbury said he was a reincarnation of Akhenaten!' she cried.

'She didn't say it, she implied it,' Jack said testily, wishing he had not given in and told Emma what had occurred between Denise and himself. 'She was pushing me towards admitting it, but I knew it was nonsense. She was absolutely off the mark.'

Mary was listening intently, her hands resting in her lap, still holding the ring.

'We will know more perhaps when those manuscripts are decoded,' she said quietly.

Jack frowned, convinced he did not want anything more to do with Akhenaten and his mysteries.

As though she had heard his thoughts she said sympathetically: 'I know how you feel, but once something like this has "chosen" us, we cannot escape. It's better to see it through to its end. I know from my own experience how mercilessly one is hunted until one capitulates.'

He did not like the sound of this, and rose to go.

'Do you believe Jack is Akhenaten?' Emma asked eagerly, not at all keen to end the conversation.

Mary smiled.

'I have met at least five people who claim to have been Akhenaten in a past life, some of them with very good credentials.'

'There you see!' cried Jack. 'The whole thing is absurd.'

'I would not say that it is absurd,' Mary said, 'but that something is going on that needs investigation.'

'It might just be a matter of people trying to give their own pathetic lives some kind of significance,' he said scornfully.

'Is that what you are trying to do?' she asked.

He flushed angrily.

'I didn't *ask* for these dreams! I didn't *ask* for all these things to be happening! And I absolutely deny that I was Akhenaten in a past life. Denise is a manipulative, misguided woman with no more psychic ability than a horse!'

Mary laughed. 'They say horses have very strong psychic abilities,' she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Jack glared at Emma and jerked his head towards the door.

'Whatever!' he snapped.

Mary rose to her feet and led the way to the door. Emma followed reluctantly.

As they parted Mary reached out the ring to him.

'Keep it,' he said brusquely. 'It probably means more to you than to me.'

'I don't think so,' she said softly, and pressed it into his hand.

4

THE WINDOW OF APPEARANCES

He was in a city – in a street where a throng of people pushed and crowded around him. All were facing one way, steadily making their way towards the east where a bridge spanned the street from one building to another. It was a city he knew well although he had never seen anything like it in his life as Jack Wilson. The buildings were low and angular. Flags fluttered from tall flag poles in front of angular stone pylons, while gigantic statues guarded the gates of the temples – each one the divine pharaoh himself.

Over all the sun was blazing down, the one round object in all these straight lines.

As the crowd pushed him near the bridge, the small figures that were standing on it became clearer. The royal family ... Akhenaten, the Son of the Sun, Nefe-Kheperu-Re, sole one of Ra, and the beautiful wife of the God, Nefertiti ... both naked but their skin gleaming with gold dust. Ranged beside them were their six daughters, the three

youngest chattering and pointing at the crowds like excited children anywhere, the three eldest standing quietly, somewhat bored. High officials were dispensing gifts from the King – gold collars – jewels – fine transparent alabaster goblets and jars of precious ointment...

People were falling into the dust in obeisance.

Jack was awed. He was witnessing the love and generosity of a god towards his people.

With tears in his eyes he fell to the ground and put his forehead in the dust. If he died now there would have been no better moment in his life.

He felt a hand under his shoulder, raising him. He looked up and it seemed to him Akhenaten himself was gazing straight into his eyes with a knowing tenderness that melted his heart.

Ah, Wa-en-ra Akhenaten, Saviour of the World, Lord from Everlasting to Everlasting...

He scarcely noticed the official putting a jewelled menat around his neck.

Weeping he knew that he would serve his lord until the end of time.

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‘No!’ he shouted, leaping up and pacing about the room. The dreams had started up again.

The noise of drunken revellers in the street gave him pause for a moment. Had the sound of crowds rejoicing in the street below his apartment influenced his dream?

He banged his knee against a chair in the darkened room and swore. Now he had no doubt where he was and who he was, yet the experience in Egypt had been so vivid he could not believe that it was only a dream. Were Mary Brown and Emma right about there being more than one type of reality?

He calmed down after a while and pulled a beer out of the fridge, sitting in the kitchen, drinking and thinking.

Then he went to the living room and picked up the ring Mary Brown had said was the seal ring of Akhenaten, and stared at it long and hard.

Jack knew very little about the history of Egypt and he decided, for the first time, to open a book that Emma had lent him. He found a list of pharaohs. Akhenaten was given the dates 1353-1335 BC.

It seemed Akhenaten had turned his back on the ancient Gods of Egypt, and instituted what amounted to monotheism. He moved his court from the traditional royal cities of Memphis and Thebes, and built a brand new one in the desert uncontaminated by the old religious cults of Egypt. Akhetaten, City of the Sun. From the line drawings based on ancient tomb reliefs he could see how it once was, and it was remarkably like the city he had seen in his dream. There had been 'a window of appearances' on a bridge across the main street where Akhenaten and his family appeared from time to time to greet their people and dispense rewards.

Jack shivered. He felt he was being drawn inexorably closer and closer into a web. He felt someone was setting him puzzles and watching to see how he solved them. He felt that every move he made, awake or asleep, was somehow being observed.

‘What do you want with me?’ he shouted aloud in the oppressive stillness of the night now that the revellers had gone. ‘What do you want me to do?’

Someone was playing games with him – but they were not children’s games.

He paced the rest of the night away alternately angry and afraid. When first light came he fell on his bed into a dreamless stupor and was still sleeping when Emma rang the bell at noon.

Bleary eyed and dazed he pressed the intercom button. Emma’s voice, bright and cheerful, seared a path through his head. Groaning, he pressed the button to activate the door opening and leaned against the wall with his eyes shut as she opened the door and stepped lightly up the stairs.

Where was he? Part of him was aware of his room, curtains still drawn shut, a dim light diffusing over familiar objects – but somewhere else in his consciousness he heard a voice calling – a voice he had heard before but did not recognize.

‘What’s happened? You look like hell!’ were Emma’s first words.

She stared at him for a moment, and then went straight to the kitchen and put on the kettle.

When she came back he was gone, and there was the sound of water splashing in the bathroom. Emma decided he must have had another of those dreams, and was impatient to hear about it. But she knew she would have to wait.

When the water stopped running, she called out the question she had come to ask.

‘Have you heard from Meredith yet?’

‘What?’

‘The papyri? Have they been translated?’

He grunted his reply, which she could not catch.

‘Sotheby’s? When is the auction of the statue?’

This time she got an audible reply.

‘Next month. The 20th.’

‘And the papyri?’ She tried again.

‘Haven’t heard. I think he has found someone, but nothing has come my way yet.’

Later, after three cups of strong black coffee, he volunteered a description of his latest dream.

‘At least it proves I was not Akhenaten himself,’ he said with relief.

‘But you *did* live in Akhenaten’s time!’

He frowned.

‘I don’t understand why it is all happening to *me*. You would be a much better candidate for these things!’

‘All the more reason to believe it is all really happening. It cannot be a case of manifestation caused by wishful thinking. I would love it to happen to me. Yet it does not.’

‘Perhaps if we slept together I could pass the dreams on to you!’ He looked at her in such a way that she could not be sure if he was just joking or not. She decided the only way to react was to pretend she thought he was.

She laughed, but a bit nervously. His hair was still damp and ruffled from the shower, his shirt open. She noticed a trickle of water tracing its way slowly from his neck to his waist. She stood up quickly and drew the curtains aside vigorously, letting in the bright sunlight.

He was still looking at her, quizzically, when she turned around. She could not meet his eyes.

‘We should see Mary Brown again,’ she said briskly. ‘Or perhaps Denise. One of them might be able to make sense of what is now emerging.’

‘I don’t want to go back to Denise,’ he said firmly. ‘And I don’t think we should see Mary again until I have the translations of the papyri. There would be something definite to report then.’

‘You have something definite to report now,’ Emma insisted, not wanting to wait before another piece of the puzzle was fitted into place.

He shrugged. ‘Who knows,’ he said, ‘it is all probably just imagination!’

‘I hate that phrase “just imagination”! Imagination helps us to extend our understanding beyond our own limited experience. Mary says it is the greatest learning tool we have.’

‘Okay!’ Jack laughed. ‘Okay. I admit imagination may have its uses.’

‘Mary says there are three main types of consciousness. The super, or higher consciousness, in which we are in touch with what she was trying to describe the other day, the Inter-Related. Everything. Then there is the ordinary practical consciousness with which we operate day by day in our immediate lives on this earth – which has shields up against too much input. The subconscious is the third type. It draws on both of these and is the hidden agenda we all have whether we are aware of it or not, the half forgotten memories, needs and desires that influence our decisions and our actions.’

‘So, you are saying...?’

‘I am saying that even if the dreams you are having spring from your subconscious and are given form by your imagination, that does not mean they are not expressing or revealing a significant truth. They may be coming from the Higher Consciousness via the Subconscious, because your Ordinary Consciousness will not listen.’

Jack rose and crossed the room. He moved an object on the mantelpiece to a different position, and then back again.

Emma watched him, waiting. Would he turn the matter aside with a joke, or make some excuse to be somewhere else?

He looked at his watch, but before he could dismiss her with a lie, she herself said she must go.

‘Let me know when you hear from Meredith,’ she said at the door. ‘Especially about the papyrus with Akhenaten’s name.’

‘That will probably turn out to be someone’s laundry list,’ he said. And they parted with a laugh.

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Jack did in fact speak to Mary Brown again before he received the translation from Meredith. He was crossing the Abbey courtyard and saw her sitting on one of the benches, staring up at the ‘Jacob’s ladders’ that were carved on the twin towers of the Medieval church. He could have passed without her noticing him, and at first he quickened his pace hoping to avoid recognition. But then he stopped and glanced back at her, remembering her remark that it was only her disguise that made her look like an old lady.

He followed her gaze up at the ladders on the towers. Angels were going up and down as in Jacob’s dream. He had seen, or rather half-seen, these ladders and these angels hundreds of times without paying them much attention. But now, experiencing, as he was, the power and significance of dreams, he paused and stared at them with new eyes.

He walked back to Mary and sat down beside her. She lowered her eyes to his and smiled without surprise.

‘It seems Jacob had interesting dreams too,’ she said.

He grinned. ‘Do you think he really saw angels?’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Why not?’

‘Well...’

‘You don’t believe in angels?’

‘Not ones that have to climb ladders!’

She laughed. ‘Metaphors and analogies are always crude compared to the real thing,’ she said. ‘How else can we express what we feel to be spiritually higher or lower? Of course we know heaven is not *up there*. The other realms of being are simultaneously with us. They are around us in this courtyard even as we speak.’ She waved her hand to indicate the passing throng of tourists, the stone buildings, the busker dressed in eighteenth century costume playing his flute at the abbey door. ‘We may not see them but they are here as surely as those people there...’

As she spoke Jack could almost see the invisible worlds around him passing through him like smoke. How many tourists were aware that what they could see was only a very small part of what was actually there? How many would go home thinking thoughts that changed their lives, never knowing how they had come by them? How many others would go home carrying no more than dull photographs of themselves posed before buildings.

‘Dreams and interpretations of dreams come a lot into the Bible,’ Jack said thoughtfully after a long pause. ‘People in ancient times were always altering their lives because of a dream. I grew up believing that we knew better.’

‘We know nothing. We are still in kindergarten.’

There was a long silence between them, Jack pondering Jacob seeing beings from another reality.

Mary spoke first.

‘Emma tells me you have had another dream about Akhenaten,’ she said.

He experienced a moment’s irritation. He was not sure he wanted his private dreams discussed behind his back.

‘Its funny,’ she continued musingly,’ that Jacob, whose dream we see in stone before us here, had a connection with Egypt too, and possibly with Akhenaten.’

Jack looked surprised.

‘Jacob was the father of Joseph of the many coloured coat who was sold to slavers by his jealous brothers, sojourned in Egypt, and was thrown into prison when he was falsely accused of seducing Potiphor’s wife. Then he interpreted pharaoh’s dreams and became a power behind the throne in Egypt. Jacob himself visited him there. Genesis chapter 46.’

Jack tried to recall the story from his Sunday school days. He could only remember the musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber, ‘Joseph and the amazing technicolour dream coat’. One of the songs started to run through his mind, blotting out everything else.

‘I would give anything to know who the pharaoh was,’ Mary said. ‘Some say it could have been Akhenaten, in which case the idea of the one God could have

come from Joseph. People have noticed the similarities between Psalm 104 in the Bible and Akhenaten's hymn to the Sun. But it is impossible to tell from the Biblical story, and the Egyptians themselves left no record of the event.'

'Can't we tell by the dates?'

Mary shrugged. 'The dating of ancient events is mostly inaccurate. Each pharaoh's reign began at year one, and the next one that followed also began at year one. Egyptologists make neat lists, but they are mostly approximate based on incomplete data. They frequently find evidence of pharaohs they hadn't known existed! Even comparison with other events in other ancient civilisations is suspect. And as for the Old Testament! We don't know how lucky we are to have a fixed date in the Birth of Christ on which to base our historical records.'

'I believe even the date of the birth of Christ is controversial.'

'It is based on the known dates of Herod the Great and the massacre of infants that was supposed to have taken place near the end of his reign. We have no independent confirmation of the massacre, but Herod from all reports was quite capable of such a monstrous act.'

'If I've learned anything over the past few months,' Jack said, 'it is not to take anything at face value.'

She smiled, and Jack suspected she was thinking: 'I hope you have learned more than that!' But she said nothing.

He stood up.

‘Will you be staying?’ he asked.

‘No. I’m going now too. But you go ahead. I’m so slow.’

He hesitated, but she waved him on, and he turned to go.

A busker at the other end of the forecourt was playing the theme tune from Lloyd Webber’s ‘Joseph’ that had been running through Jack’s mind a few minutes before!

5

THE SHEMSU BENU

Meredith returned in early September with some of the papyrus pieces translated. They were, he said, fragments from many different times and places, written sometimes in old Egyptian demotic, some Greek or Latin, with a smattering of hieroglyphs from earlier times.

‘Do any of them make sense?’ Jack asked.

‘My friend concentrated most on the largest fragment. Some of it had been eaten away by insects, and it seemed to have been added to from time to time. Mostly it was a list of names, starting with reference to Akhenaten. At first we thought it might be a genealogy, but the names don’t seem to have any royal family significance except, possibly, Setepenra, which was the name of one of his younger daughters. But that may be coincidence. However there does seem to be a hereditary element in the list, for many of the names are apparently sons or daughters, or even grandsons and granddaughters, of the people named earlier on the list.

‘As far as we could make out they all seemed to be “Companions of the Benu”. The words Shemsu Benu appeared frequently and there seems to have been a strong connection with Akhenaten because many of the phrases used are typically Atenist.

‘Other fragments were just bits and pieces we know from other texts, spells from the Book of the Dead, and something that seemed to be part of a judgement in Roman times against one Ra-hotep who had been plotting against the Prefect.’

Jack picked up the transcript of the fragment that mentioned Akhenaten and read it carefully. He found it maddening that so much of it was missing. Who were these Companions of the Benu? Why was there a prickle down his spine as he whispered the words ‘Shemsu Benu’?

‘Time we went for a spot of lunch,’ Meredith said briskly. ‘Any good places around here?’

‘We’ll go to the Crystal Palace pub around the corner,’ Jack said. ‘Its not bad.’ He would be glad to get away from the list that was inexplicably bothering him, as though a memory was just hovering out of reach.

They walked around the corner to Abbey Green dominated by a huge old plane tree, the girth of its trunk formidable, its uppermost branches almost touching the buildings on every side of the tiny square, its roots stitching the buildings together underground.

It was a fine day and they chose to sit in the open area at the rear of the pub in the dappled light that

penetrated through vine leaves. Jack recovered his equilibrium and ate a hearty meal.

Meredith told him one of the smaller fragments had been part of a Gnostic Gospel missing from those found at Nag Hammadi.

‘You’ll get a good price for that,’ he said. ‘Scholars will jump at a chance to fit it into the jigsaw.’

‘What is a Gnostic Gospel?’ Jack asked.

‘You’ve heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls?’ Meredith asked.

‘Of course – early Essene writings from about the time of Jesus found in Israel.’

‘Well, it is less well known that very early Christian writings were found in Egypt in 1945, in caves in the mountains near the town of Nag Hammadi, dating from the first and second centuries AD. They must have been hidden when the Gnostics were declared heretics by the emerging Christian Church, probably at the time of Constantine in the fourth century when the penalties for being a heretic were severe. One of their more controversial beliefs was that there was an ultimate unknown god who started off everything, and that the god described in the Old Testament, the jealous, punishing god, was actually only a demiurge, a lesser being. The Gnostics believed our lives should be devoted to discovering the Real God, and we could do this through our own efforts, through the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom inspired by the spark of Divine Fire from the Real God, which is in all of us, waiting to

return ultimately to its Source. To the Gnostics, Christ Jesus came to earth to teach us about the Real God and we are saved by the knowledge, the Gnosis, we gain by following him, and not, as the Church would have us believe, because God accepted his blood sacrifice on our behalf.

‘Many of their gospels give a different slant to the Biblical stories. For instance, in their version of the Garden of Eden, Eve does not bring about the downfall of man but, realising the god who had forbidden them to eat of the Tree of Knowledge was a false demiurge, she led Adam to rebel against him and thus gave him the chance of salvation through Gnosis.’

‘Wow!’ said Jack, and laughed.

‘Sometimes I wonder if modern psychiatrists and therapists have learned anything since the ancient days,’ Meredith mused. ‘There is a passage I remember from the Secret Gospel of Thomas which is supposed to be a direct quote from the living Jesus. Jesus said: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you”.’

Jack sipped the very good wine Meredith had chosen. Would what was coming forth from him save him? And if he did not follow what was coming forth, would he be destroyed?

** *** **

As soon as Emma knew that he had the translations she pestered him until he agreed to take them to show Mary Brown.

‘You haven’t heard half of the story about her own links with Akhenaten,’ she said. ‘She might even have heard of the Shemsu Benu.’

‘The connection with Akhenaten is very tenuous,’ Jack protested. ‘Just because his name appears once...’

‘And his seal ring was found, remember, with the papyrus that mentions his name.’

‘We don’t know if my great-grandfather found it with the papyrus that mentions his name. Most of the fragments in the case were totally unconnected. Some were from as late as Roman times. Old Wilson must have picked them up all over the place. When the family packed up his things after he died, the ring may have got in there purely by accident.’

‘Did he not keep a diary or a journal about his discoveries?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘I bet he did! It would tell you if the ring was found with that particular papyrus or not. I believe it was.’

‘You would believe anything!’

‘Mary would believe it too!’

‘Believing something doesn’t necessarily make it true.’

‘No, but neither does doubting it make it untrue.’

He grinned. ‘Okay. It is an open question. We’ll leave it at that.’

‘No we won’t!’ she said. ‘He must have kept a jour-

nal. All those old archaeologists did. You must try to find it. You seem to be on some kind of trail, following clues and signs laid down for you.'

'That is what I'm afraid of!'

'The journal might help.'

'If there was one – it was probably destroyed.'

'Don't be so negative! The whole thing is tremendously exciting. You must admit it beats spending your life at the pub talking about cricket all the time!'

'Are you saying that is all I did with my life before these things started happening?'

'No, of course not. But you must admit you did not do much.'

Jack surveyed his past life and had to admit there was not much there that he was proud of. Even when he went abroad to write a travel article he tended to travel well and comfortably and write about the wine and food and water-skiing.

He agreed reluctantly that he would make enquiries about a possible journal.

** *** **

Mary, as Emma anticipated, was very interested in the translations, particularly in the list of names.

'It is so frustrating that it is so damaged,' she said. 'A lot of the links are lost.'

'Do you think they all have something to do with Akhenaten?' Emma asked. 'Maybe its a genealogy.'

‘I don’t think so,’ Mary said thoughtfully. ‘They seem rather to be members of a society: the Companions of the Benu.’

‘What’s the Benu?’ Jack asked.

‘The Benu was a mythical bird, resembling the blue heron, supposed to have landed on the first mound of earth that emerged from the primeval waters, and laid the egg out of which all that we know emerged. Later it was believed it was a kind of phoenix, burning itself up on the altar of the Sun God Ra, encased in an egg of myrrh, and emerging, reborn, from the flames. It became a symbol of resurrection.’

Mary’s thoughtfulness was giving way to a growing excitement.

‘I am beginning to see where this is leading us,’ she said.

‘Where?’ Jack’s face was blank.

‘I think the time has come for me to tell you the story of my encounter with Akhenaten. Perhaps when you hear it you too will see the significance of the Shemsu Benu.’

Jack was prepared to listen now to anything that made sense of the story that was unfolding in his own life. He listened with growing interest as Mary spoke.

‘I don’t know how or when my fascination with ancient Egypt started,’ she said, ‘but from an early age, certainly. I remember my project on Egypt at Junior School was read out to the class. My mother took me to the British Museum in London and I could not be

drawn away from the Egyptian exhibits. But the first time I noticed Akhenaten was when I was a young woman visiting the Louvre Museum in Paris. I was heading for the Egyptian galleries, climbing a staircase. At the head of it, looking over me and, I swear, meeting my eyes, was this huge stone bust of the pharaoh Akhenaten. He had such a strange face, elongated, with slightly slanting eyes and very full lips. I have since read in books that he was ugly and deformed, but to me that day, and ever since, he was beautiful! I stopped and stared for a long time, and came back many times to gaze at him. In the galleries I sought out any artefacts that might have been from his time, and after I left the Louvre I began to read books about him. I was totally intrigued by the mystery that surrounded him. It seems that when he succeeded his father he took the name Amenhotep IV, but soon changed his name to Akhenaten as he became more and more convinced that there was only one true God, and that God was Aten, represented by the burning disk of the sun.

‘For thousands of years the complex pantheon of Egyptian gods had been stable. Each of the forty-two nomes (or districts) in the country had developed their own particular religious myth, with its group of divine protagonists, in an attempt to understand and explain the mysteries of existence. Some became so popular and were so appropriate to the human condition that they became accepted more widely than the district in which they originated.

‘One of the most important and widespread myths was that of Isis and Osiris. This was part of the Ennead of Heliopolis. Here it was believed the creator sun god was Atum, or Ra-Atum, the Totality, ‘an ultimate and unalterable state of perfection’. From him descended two divinities, Shu and Tefnut (air and water), and from them two more, Geb and Nut (earth and sky). From these, four offspring followed: Osiris, Isis, Set and Nephtys. Rich mythic material was woven around these four. Osiris and Isis, brother and sister, were also lovers. Set killed his brother Osiris and scattered his chopped up body far and wide. Isis, grief stricken, searched and found the pieces, bound them together, and, fanning them with her wings, restored enough vitality to him that he fathered their son Horus on her. From this event grew his role as Lord of the Other-world, representing resurrection, rebirth, life after death. Horus, their son, tried to avenge his father’s murder, and represented the fight of Good against Evil in many of the sacred stories.

‘The Aten, as represented by the shining disk of the sun, was another of the many gods of Egypt, scarcely a major protagonist in the Great Drama before Amenhotep IV chose him as his favourite, changing his own name to Akhenaten, ‘Beneficial to Aten’. He looked on the Aten as King of the gods, thereby displacing Amun of Thebes who had borne that title before. To the Aten he attributed the creation and ordering of the world, and the ultimate power to preserve or destroy. Afraid

that the purity of his vision would be corrupted by others, he declared that he and his great Royal Wife, Nefertiti, would be the sole channels through which the Aten communicated with earth and bestowed its blessings.

‘The most powerful priesthood at that time was attached to the worship of Amun with his great temple complex at Karnak. No doubt because the female pharaoh Hatshepsut, a century before, had brought her favourite god Amun to prominence, and given his priesthood unprecedented riches and power, they were not at all pleased to find their temple and themselves starved of power and funds, and later even physically attacked and destroyed. It was a very important tenet of belief that the gods performing their traditional roles kept the universe, not only in order and balance, but in existence. It was thus dangerous to alter anything, for in doing so one might bring about the end of all things. Statues of gods in Egypt were sacred objects which, it was believed, the gods themselves might inhabit from time to time. When statues of Amun were smashed and his temples desecrated, Akhenaten was putting the whole universe in jeopardy.

‘Akhenaten reigned for about twenty years and in that time he left behind the great cities which had for millennia been the seats of power, and built his own totally new city, Akhetaten, now called Tell el-Amarna in Middle Egypt. No one knows how he died, but there has been much speculation that he was assassinated by

the disaffected Priests of Amun, possibly with the support of General Horemheb, who, although a commoner, became pharaoh himself a few years after Akhenaten's mysterious disappearance.'

'After his death,' Emma interrupted enthusiastically, 'Akhenaten was reviled as a criminal and a heretic and they tried to remove every trace of him from history. The king lists at Abydos do not mention him. It is as though he never was.'

'How do we know about him then?' Jack asked.

Mary smiled. 'The persistent curiosity of archaeologists,' she replied. 'Just as we found the far outer planets because we noticed certain anomalies in the orbits of other bodies in space, archaeologists began to notice gaps in records and artefacts that did not fit known facts. Then the ruins of Akhetaten were found at Amarna, and the archives with hundreds of clay tablets recording the daily business of the city were unearthed. Akhenaten is now almost the best-known pharaoh from ancient Egypt. Hundreds of books have been written about him.'

'Tell Jack about your dreams,' Emma prompted eagerly.

'Dreams?' Jack exclaimed with interest.

'I never entirely forgot the impact the face of Akhenaten in the Louvre had on me, but I was busy bringing up my children and living my life, and it faded into the background. And then, about twenty years ago, I began to dream about it. More often than not the statue of

Akhenaten would come alive, climb down from its plinth and walk towards me. In the museum it was only the top half of a statue, but in my dreams it was always complete. I always woke up before it reached me, but I could see its mouth moving as though it was trying to tell me something. It seemed to me it was pleading with me to do something, but I couldn't understand what. I was frightened and retreated down the stairs. When I woke I always regretted my cowardice in running away, and told myself that the next time I would stay to find out what he was trying to communicate.

'Then I read a book that seemed to explain what was happening: 'Tombs, Temples and Ancient Art' by Joseph Lindon Smith. Lindon Smith was an artist who accompanied archaeologists in Egypt to record their findings. In 1909 he and Arthur Weigall decided to put on a play about Akhenaten in the Valley of the Queens. The idea behind it was that the Priests of Amun had cursed Akhenaten so that in death he would not be able to travel to the Otherworld, but would be doomed to walk the earth forever as a powerless ghost. The play intended to lift the curse and free the soul to travel on.

'In January 1909 several archaeologists and their families and friends gathered in the Valley at Luxor to watch the dress rehearsal. Arthur Weigall and Joseph Lindon Smith had written the text between them and they and their wives were taking the major roles.

'The rehearsal was performed in a natural amphitheatre in the valley of tombs with the actors appearing

and disappearing from above and behind rock formations, the perfect setting for a drama about ghosts and ancient curses.

‘Lindon Smith had planned the whole performance well. The costumes were excellent. His wife Corinna was dressed in a swathe of red silk as Queen Tiye, Akhenaten’s mother, to be called upon to intercede in the Otherworld for the release of her son. Hortense Weigall as Akhenaten himself was costumed according to ancient wall paintings. Head dresses of papier mache for the gods were extraordinarily effective. Haunting music had been specially composed. Lindon Smith as Horus appeared from the Underworld with his magnificent mask glowing in red light that was shone up from below, and intoned words that were echoed back from the rock cliffs and seemed to reverberate deeply inside the tombs.

‘After the invocation Hortense as “Akhenaten” appeared on a crag above the stage. As the actress raised her arms in supplication to the god, a devastating peal of thunder and a blinding flash of lightning struck. A wind sprang up as if from nowhere and rushed screaming through the narrow valley. Lindon Smith described how they clutched their possessions at once and bent double against the blast. The donkeys, which had brought them to the valley, set up a terrified braying.

But almost as suddenly as it had started the storm was over, and they decided to continue the rehearsal,

laughing at the dramatic interruption, and joking about the Priests of Amun trying to intimidate them.

'The rehearsal continued, but again, later, when Queen Tiye was declaiming Akhenaten's Hymn to the Aten and making an impassioned plea for his release, another violent storm swept through the valley, this time with squalls of rain and hail stones as big as tennis balls. Most of them fled at this point to the shelter of a tomb, but Corinna in her persona as Queen Tiye stood dramatically and firmly on her rock and continued her recital of the long hymn to its very end. When her husband drew her away she was soaked to the skin, but wild with excitement that she had defied the elements and the ancient Priests of Amun.

'It was impossible to continue this time, and they retreated to the tombs for shelter. That night they slept uneasily.

'In the morning it emerged that both Corinna and Hortense had had an identical dream in which one of the statues in the Ramesseum had come alive and whipped her with his flail, Corinna in the eyes, and Hortense in the stomach. Both women were in great pain in the part of the body where they had been hit in the dream. Later Corinna had to be rushed to a Cairo hospital with a dangerous case of trachoma. Most of those who had been at the rehearsal were ill. The play was abandoned.'

When Mary finished speaking there was silence for a while in the room.

Emma shuddered. 'The dark forces are very real and we challenge them at our peril!' she said.

'Do you believe there really is a ghost and a curse?' Jack asked Mary.

She shrugged. 'My persistent dreams make sense if there is,' she replied. 'And then, just at the time I was really pondering the truth about all this, I met a man who claimed to have seen Akhenaten's ghost in the desert in Egypt. He claimed that Akhenaten himself told him he had been cursed, and pleaded with him to try and release him. I felt I could no longer ignore the possibility that it might be true, and began to wonder what I could do about it. Archaeologists and Egyptologists don't know what happened to Akhenaten in the end. His successors did everything in their power to eliminate all record of him from history. Something sinister must have gone on!'

'Tell Jack about your experience at Abydos!' Emma prompted.

Mary smiled indulgently at Emma and then continued her story.

'Some time later I was in Egypt with a group. We were all seeking some kind of explanation for our fascination with ancient Egypt. I was particularly interested in Akhenaten after my dreams about the statue in the Louvre, but we didn't go to Amarna where the ruins of his city lie. It was at Abydos that I unexpectedly had an experience connected with him. The temple itself is still in a remarkable state of preservation. It was built some

years after his death by Sety I who might well have been alive at the end of Akhenaten's reign. Sety was the son of the aged Rameses I who succeeded Horemheb – and Horemheb was the man who is believed to be responsible for the overthrow of Akhenaten and the restoration of the ancient religious cults.

'The temple itself is impressive enough, built in a region that was extraordinarily sacred. In the myth of Isis, Osiris and Set, the head of Osiris, severed by his brother Set, was believed to be buried there. In the desert nearby archaeologists have found thousands of pieces of broken pottery. Those who could not be buried in this special ground had pots broken in their name as a way of connecting them with the place.

'The group took a long time exploring the temple itself, but I felt drawn to the desert beyond and wandered off by myself. I will never forget that day. As I left behind the temple and the village I left behind all noise... all comfortable sound of voices, of chickens clucking, cocks crowing, dogs barking ... One moment I was on fertile soil, the next on barren desert. Soon I was stepping over pebbles and then wading through sand, aiming towards the range of mountains that bordered the sacred land. From a high mound I looked back and saw the broken mud brick walls that had once cut off the temple complex from the rest of the community. What had seemed so mighty when I was there gazing up at the gigantic columns, seemed small and insignificant now against the vastness of the desert

surrounding it and the towering rock of the mountains that lay beyond.

‘A million earthenware or stoneware pots must have been lying broken in the sand, some weathering on the surface, others lying deeply buried, the restless sands of the desert continually covering and uncovering them, each one a story in itself. What lives were represented there! What joys and sorrows! I began to feel really strange. I think it was at that moment I became aware for the first time of the invisible worlds that inhabit the same space as our own. I looked around and I was alone in a vast and empty desert, but I felt as though I was standing in the middle of a crowd. When I shut my eyes I could almost see them.’

Jack remembered how he had felt in the forecourt of the Abbey when Mary had first pointed out to him the existence of the invisible worlds. He still did not want to believe in them.

‘I walked a long time among the shards of others people’s lives,’ Mary continued, ‘wondering about those who had put them there; wondering about all the stories of an afterlife I had ever heard...’

Mary stopped speaking and they sat quietly for a time, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

‘It was hot,’ Mary resumed,’ and I could see rocks and mountains ahead. I made for them, hoping to come upon a particular wadi I had been told about which was supposed to be a kind of gateway between the worlds. I don’t know what I expected of it, but I was

curious. My mind was very much on the mystery of death at that time because my mother had recently died and I was missing her desperately. Its funny, all your life you know about death, it is the one certainty in life, but until someone close to you dies, you don't really believe in it!

Another pause. Jack was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He did not want to think about death.

'I was nearly collapsing with heat exhaustion when I finally found shade. Ahead of me was what had been described to me as the gateway between the worlds – two dark cliffs between which a river of golden sand seemed to flow. The air was very still. Very heavy. Very hot. I felt as though I was waiting for something to happen.

'I waited. The desert waited. The sky waited.

'And then suddenly a light breeze sprang up and the loose sand around me began to stir.

'Then it was still again. The silence seemed even more oppressive than it had been before.

'After a long while I heard a strange and distant sound. A kind of howling and roaring, faint at first, but growing stronger and more fearsome every second. I stood up, alert, startled, staring at the gap in the mountains from behind which the sound seemed to be emanating.

'And then a cloud of sand began to pour out from between the gap, propelled by a mighty wind, and in that wind I swear I heard voices crying! The Dead were rushing into the sacred space around me!

‘I suddenly panicked and turned to run, but the sand was already whipping up around me and cutting into my skin. I was terrified – and not only of the Dead. I thought I would be buried alive and would never be found.

‘I remember thinking that I was falling into a dark void.

‘But gradually the darkness lifted and it seemed to me I was surrounded by a golden mist. And then I saw the figure of the Pharaoh Akhenaten walking towards me through the mist, his flesh shining like gold. He reached out his hands to me, and rays of light shone from every finger, enclosing me in a web of light. He spoke, but I could not understand what he was saying. I remember wondering why he did not speak in my language as channellers and mediums do when purporting to be transmitting messages from the Dead.

‘But then he suddenly vanished. The golden light vanished, and I found myself lying in the hot sand of the desert.’

There was a long silence in the room when Mary finished speaking. Jack was stunned. He was thinking about the dreams in which he had felt so lost and alone in the desert. He was remembering how he had heard his name called desperately as though someone was pleading for help. He had a vision of the tomb guardian walking like an automaton to the horizon. Could he have been trying to lead him to the ghost of Akhenaten? At one moment he felt that he himself was the

ghost of Akhenaten in his dreams... Why else would he feel so alone? At the next he believed Akhenaten was calling him... What *was* going on?

‘It seems to me...’ Mary was saying thoughtfully, hesitatingly, ‘that what has been happening to you recently, Jack, is a continuation of what was happening to me. We were not brought together by chance.’

He knew she was right, but he wished she was not.

‘When you started speaking Mary, you said you might have some idea how the Shemsu Benu fitted in?’ Emma asked suddenly.

Mary nodded, but was slow to reply.

‘It could be,’ she said at last, ‘that if it is true about the curse on Akhenaten and if his loyal friends knew about it at the time, the Shemsu Benu might have been a secret society founded by them to bring about his rebirth by removing the curse. You can imagine the chaos and confusion that must have followed the king’s murder. Many of his followers would have been killed too. Some might have got away, and met again later.

‘His enemies had left him no power in this life or the next. His loyal companions were determined to restore it to him.’

‘One of his daughters, Setepenra, was one of them!’ cried Emma excitedly. ‘She was a child when he died, and probably also went into hiding. She may have emerged as a powerful lady when she joined the Shemsu Benu and gave it her blessing.’

Emma’s eyes were shining. She had always been

particularly interested in Akhenaten's youngest daughters, about which so little is known.

'It would seem they did not succeed in their aim if three thousand years later he is still a ghost wandering the earth,' Jack said.

'Perhaps the society went the way of most secret societies,' Mary said sadly. 'It started with enthusiasm and courageous dedication, but as the difficulties they encountered appeared more and more insurmountable it may have gradually lost impetus until the secrets passed down by father or mother to son or daughter became so diluted they became meaningless. Perhaps centuries after Akhenaten there was still a Shemsu Benu, but they had long since lost the knowledge of their founders, and the rituals they performed had become more and more elaborate, and more and more obscure.'

'Like the Masons today,' Jack mused.

'Perhaps there is still a Shemsu Benu today!' cried Emma. 'And we are members of it!'

Both Jack and Mary looked at her, Jack in shock, Mary with interest.

'Perhaps,' Emma continued, her eyes shining with the excitement of genuine inspiration, 'all those people who believe they are reincarnations of Akhenaten today are actually reincarnations of members of the original Shemsu Benu. Perhaps,' and here she almost shrieked, 'perhaps we are reincarnations of the original members of the Shemsu Benu!'

‘For heaven’s sake!’ Jack said irritably.

But Mary was thinking seriously about what Emma had said.

‘It makes sense, Jack,’ she said quietly. ‘Both of us have had the overwhelming sense that something was expected of us in connection with Akhenaten. Why else have all these things been happening?’

‘There could be many explanations other than this one,’ he replied stubbornly.

‘Don’t you see Jack?’ Emma cried. ‘You and Mary have been chosen to go to Egypt and rescue Akhenaten!’

‘Hang on! Don’t get carried away!’

Mary laughed and raised a calming hand to her friend.

‘It is a tempting solution to many of the puzzling things that have occurred to us Emma, but we must not be too hasty. The matter needs more thought.’

‘I know you’ll find I’m right!’ Emma, though disappointed at their reaction, was determined not to give up her idea.

‘We may very well find you are,’ said Mary soothingly. ‘But if the Priests of Amun have kept such a curse going for more than three thousand years, it may not be so easy for us to lift it. Magic was very real and very powerful in ancient Egypt. What makes you think we would have any hope of success in challenging it?’

‘Why else would we be called to the task? Someone “up there” must think we have a chance of success. Perhaps we failed before because we were not ready.’

‘I don’t feel very ready now,’ Jack said firmly.

‘You don’t know. No one knows whether they are ready or not until they are tested. We’ll only know if we try. Its worth a try – surely?’ she pleaded.

‘I don’t think I am physically capable of going to Egypt again,’ Mary said regretfully. ‘It is not an easy country to visit even if you are fit, and I can’t walk more than a few yards these days.’

‘Perhaps that is why Jack is having the dreams. “They” know you can’t go, but you can guide and advise us.’

Jack glanced at Emma. Us? Were they a couple now? Mary was looking deeply thoughtful.

‘Do you propose we just waltz into Egypt, accost the ghosts of the Priests of Amun, demand that they release Akhenaten, and waltz out again?’ Jack jeered.

‘No, of course not!’ Emma flushed with annoyance. It seemed so clear to her that something had to be done and they were the ones to do it, that she could not believe he was being so negative.

‘How do you propose we do it then?’ he demanded

‘I don’t know,’ she said impatiently. ‘I feel we should just open ourselves to possibilities. I’m sure once we get there we will be guided. All those invisible presences Mary talks about will surely be there to help us.’

‘What of the ones who will be there to stop us?’ he asked.

‘I can’t understand why you are the one who is having all those dreams,’ she cried in exasperation. ‘They are wasted on you!’

Mary, sensing the mood turning ugly, intervened.

‘None of us can know the reason why things happen to us rather than to another,’ she said mildly. ‘But I’m sure there is a reason why Jack is having those dreams.’

Emma’s eyes were filling with tears.

‘Its so unfair,’ she said bitterly. ‘I would love to have them.’

‘You’re welcome to them! I don’t want them.’

‘Perhaps we have worried enough about the matter for now,’ said Mary hastily. ‘We should let some time pass and see what else occurs.’ She put her arms around Emma and gave her a hug. ‘Come, Emma, don’t be so upset. All will become clear.’

‘Jack is such a...’

‘Such a beginner,’ Mary cut in tactfully. ‘Remember Emma, you and I have been thinking about these matters for a long time. They are strange and new to Jack.’

Emma blew her nose noisily.

Mary met Jack’s eye.

He cancelled what he was about to say, and stood up.

‘Come Emma, Mary looks tired. We ought to go.’

Reluctantly Emma stood up.

‘Don’t worry,’ Mary said soothingly. ‘If what you believe is meant to be – it will be.’

‘Not if I can help it,’ Jack thought. He wanted nothing more to do with this craziness.

That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it. If you would like to find out what happens next, you can buy the complete Mushroom eBook edition from the usual online bookshops or through www.mushroom-ebooks.com