

# **The One Who Is Two**

## **Book 1 of White Rabbit**

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### *The four books of the White Rabbit series*

*1. The One Who Is Two*

*2. Friends and Enemies*

*3. Red Tape*

*4. The Woman Who Looks Both Ways*

## **Chapter 1**

Cadwallader stood with his back to the window, leaning against the sink units, conscious of the curve of the moulded laminate against his buttocks. He crossed his arms and then uncrossed them quickly. Glancing expectantly at his wife, he tried, unsuccessfully, to think of something to say.

'It's time you left,' she said, 'It's ten past already.'

A heaviness pulled at his guts as his spirits sank even lower.

'I thought maybe a quick cuppa before I go. As it's my birthday.' He wanted to sound casual, but his voice came out pleading, like a sad child.

'Please, Simon, you know what we agreed. He'll be here soon.'

'Oh, I see. He's coming here today, is he? On my – on a Sunday.' As he spoke, whining and hurt, he could see her face harden, her eyes glittering with sudden anger.

'Where and when I see Geoffrey is none of your business,' she said, her voice quiet and tight, 'And it wasn't me that started all this, was it?'

Cowed by the force of her anger, he looked down at his shoes with his mouth set in a sullen frown, like a schoolboy resenting his punishment.

'Was it?' she hissed.

Again he didn't reply, aware that his silence was confirming his guilt. Her reproach bore down on him, crushing him like a weight. After a long silence he looked up, feeling silly and shamed.

'Right then,' he said, 'I'll just say goodbye to the kids.' He could see his daughter through the door to the living room, sitting on a cushion three feet from the television, staring zombie-like at a gyrating pop singer. 'Laura, darling,' he called, 'Daddy's going now.'

'Bye,' the girl said, not turning from the flickering screen.

'No goodbye kiss?'

He waited, but she showed no sign of having heard him – and another small stab of pain jabbed into his chest. He crossed the room and bent to press his lips to her long yellow hair. She

seemed to ignore him, but then lifted her face briefly to plant a perfunctory kiss on his proffered cheek before turning quickly back to the television.

'Bye-bye, sweetie,' he murmured to the back of her head, 'See you next week.'

'You won't find Alex,' said his wife, as he came back into the kitchen, 'He'll be over the road. Ian's got a new computer game.'

Sensing her growing anxiety for him to be gone, he picked up his jacket from the back of the kitchen chair and, keeping his eyes fixed on the white melamine of the table, pulled it on.

Sundays were always bad, but this one, his birthday, had been worse than most. Naturally, he hadn't expected anything from his wife, but he had been shocked by the children's indifference. A cheap card from Alex, probably bought that morning by Stephanie from the newsagents at the bottom of the road, and a scrawled picture from Laura, five minutes of half-hearted effort, bad even by her standards. And then a few hours wandering around Lego-Land, acutely aware that his sole contribution to their pleasure was as the provider of funds. He remembered the same day in previous years – the attention, the affection, the presents bought with carefully saved pocket money, the meticulously drawn birthday cards – and the contrast was brutally stark.

'Right then,' he said, fighting to keep the misery out of his voice, 'I'll be off. I'll see you next Sunday, usual time.'

As he spoke, Stephanie seemed to remember something. She turned to the living room door, calling above the pop singer's warbling. 'Laura, you haven't given Daddy his present.'

'It's on the sideboard,' said the girl, without enthusiasm.

'She's made you a present,' explained Stephanie, 'I'll just fetch it.'

Cadwallader waited by the back door, slightly cheered that his daughter's indifference was less complete than he had thought. Something at the corner of his vision caught his attention: a flash of white in the doorway to the living room. It was a large white rabbit, looking up at him with blank, pink eyes, its ears erect, its fur glossy and unnaturally brilliant as if it had just been washed and tumble-dried.

'Here you are.' His wife came in from the hall and handed him a small package crudely wrapped in what looked like recycled Christmas paper. Inside was a small medicine bottle, brown glass with a black plastic screw-top. Holding it up to the window, he could see it was filled with a turbid liquid.

'What is it?' he asked, genuinely puzzled.

'Perfume. Actually after-shave, as it's for you.'

He unscrewed the top and sniffed at the bottle. It had an aromatic smell, strangely familiar.

'Squashed geranium leaves,' explained Stephanie, 'It's a new fad at school. She made about two pints of the stuff last week – I had to put the poor plant in my bedroom, before she reduced it to a bare twig.'

Cadwallader smiled and, up-turning the bottle onto his forefinger, dabbed the liquid behind each ear in a mock-female gesture. Stephanie watched him, unsmiling, her expression anxious and irritated. She glanced up at the clock.

'Please go now, I don't want a scene.'

He felt his tiny bubble of pleasure burst.

'Thank you for the present, darling, it's lovely,' he called, slipping the bottle into his jacket pocket.

'OK.' The girl replied without turning round.

As he opened the back door, Cadwallader remembered the rabbit.

'Oh, I nearly forgot to ask. Her new rabbit, what's its name?'

'Loofah.'

'Loofah? You mean, like a bath sponge?'

'Exactly. Like a bath sponge.'

'I don't get it.'

'She had a bath sponge in the shape of a rabbit. A pink one. You bought it for her, two Christmases ago.' More reproach, implicit in her tone, for not remembering the pink sponge. 'She called that "Loofah" too, if you remember – and now she's got a live version.'

'It's a silly name,' he said, defensively, 'Why couldn't she call it something normal – like Flopsy or Thumper?'

'It's Laura's rabbit and she can call it what she wants. Anyway, I happen to think that Loofah is a very imaginative name.'

'Well, whatever. But I don't think you should have it running round the house. It's not hygienic.'

'What are you talking about? The rabbit's in the garden. It never comes into the house.'

'Stephanie, it was right there, in the living room. I saw it myself.'

'Then what's that?' she said, looking out of the back window.

He moved back into the room and followed her gaze. The rabbit, dazzling in the grey light of the autumn afternoon, was sitting in the middle of the lawn, looking straight at him with solid inscrutability.

'Laura,' his wife called through to the living room, 'It's time to put Loofah back in his hutch. He's been out long enough.'

'I'm telling you the rabbit was in the house, sitting right there – I saw it when you went to get the present.'

'Then he must have a key for the patio doors,' she said, humourlessly, 'Now, Simon, will you please go. If you won't stick to our agreement, I'll have to get the solicitors involved – and neither of us want that, do we?'

Cadwallader unlocked the driver's door and then turned back to look at the house.

In the great scheme of things it wasn't much – a three bedroom detached house in a modern estate on the edge of Rickmansworth – but it had been the centre of his life for five years. He had decorated it himself, he had fitted out the bathroom and installed the new kitchen units. The flower beds he had laid out were flourishing and the Norwegian maple he had planted in the front lawn, and had watered lovingly through two summers of drought, was beginning to look like a real tree, standing clear of its now redundant stake, its trunk thickening and its branches spreading.

And now what was it, this house that had once been his? Home to a woman who held him in contempt and to two children who were quickly forgetting who he was.

He scanned the little close of neat suburban homes, each surrounded by a pocket-handkerchief of carefully tended garden, each struggling in vain to proclaim individuality: the grand front doors with brass fittings, the carriage-style porch lights, the mock-Jacobean leaded windows. He remembered how he had come to despise these facile pretensions, how he had felt suffocated by the primness and by the essential vacuity of the place, and how he had wanted to escape from it all, to get away. Anyhow, anywhere, just away.

And so he had gone. Leaving *haus frau* Stephanie for the arms an exciting new partner, escaping the suffocating prison of suburban pettiness for the thrilling promise of limitless freedom, he had turned his back on this cosy little world, and at the time that had felt so completely right, his path having the sharp clarity of a spiritual epiphany. Now, however,

everything had changed, now this world was turning its back on him as firmly as he had turned his back on it – and that didn't feel quite so good. Because for all its prim cosiness and its smug security, it didn't seem so bad now, not so bad at all; not now that his life was bereft of all vestiges of cosiness and security. Even the dull roar of the M25, the eternal background to life on the estate that had once so irritated him, now sounded more like the purr of a friendly cat.

Shivering in the brisk wind, he felt the first splatterings of a cold drizzle on his face. He opened the car door, fumbling with his keys. Then, as he slid into the driver's seat, a new misery struck home like a knife wound in the guts. He should have told her today, if only because of the mortgage payments. Soon all that would remain of seven years work would be a few items of obsolete hardware and three boxes of promotional tee-shirts in the company's rather lurid livery. Because somehow, in the midst of a boom in the software linkage systems market, he had managed to drive his once thriving business into the ground.

The A412 was depressingly quiet for a Sunday afternoon, and he would be back in no time, back to his cold and poky Uxbridge flat, empty now of the new woman, his palace of freedom turned prison of loneliness. But he couldn't face it, not just yet, not feeling like he did. Seeing the children had unsettled him – more so than usual – and he needed time to collect himself, to ready himself for the grim wretchedness of the flat.

There was the possibility of stopping for a drink. The analgesia of the alcohol had appeal, but the pubs he passed did not. The first had been crassly modernised and was now the haunt of local wide boys, drinking bottled lager and radiating aggression like gamma rays. The 'Whip and Collar' was usually OK, but at this time it would be full of happy families finishing off their Sunday lunches: not the place for a domestic pariah such as himself. There was nowhere else before the motorway.

He thought briefly about going back into the town centre, but he hadn't the energy to turn the car. And so he drove on, gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead, clenching his jaws against the rising tide of misery. Soon he had left the outskirts of the town and was approaching the motorway access roundabout, sucked forward by his own lassitude.

Suddenly something snatched his eye, a dazzle of white in the grass verge on the right. For a moment it fixed him, the shaft of brilliance piercing his brain like a silver blade. Then without warning his hands spun the wheel, swerving the car across the road in front of an oncoming BMW. He stamped the brake in a desperate reflex and the front left wheel bounced onto the verge. The car shuddered to a halt as the BMW screamed past, bellowing outrage. The whiteness vanished into the tall grass; it could have been a rabbit, but he wasn't sure.

Cadwallader was breathing hard. The car was slewed across the entrance to a small lane and the engine had stalled. He lifted his hands off the wheel: they were trembling. He felt a warm flush of self-pity. Was there nothing, not even his driving, that was safe from his own lunacy?

As he stared up the lane, letting the misery wash over him, recognition clicked into place: he'd been here before, with the children. There was a path at the end that led up to some woods beside the motorway. He started the engine and pulled forward. Although battered by the ceaseless roar of traffic, it would do for a time-killing stroll.

Cadwallader pulled up onto the verge and turned off the engine. For a long while he didn't move, but sat slumped over the wheel watching the fine drizzle settle on the windscreen.

When he eventually did get out of the car, he felt instantly cold in the chill easterly wind. He leaned across to the passenger seat and picked up the ski hat and scarf that he hadn't needed in the morning. His shoes, fawn slip-ons with absurd little zippers down the front, were unsuitable for

November rambling but then he wasn't going far. Despite himself, he grinned. The shoes were comical, caricature old man's shoes, hand-me-downs from his ageing father. His wearing them was somehow symbolic, although of what he wasn't quite sure. He locked the car and headed up the lane, hat pulled down and scarf wrapped up to his chin.

His vision quickly blurred as the drizzle settled on his glasses. And although it wasn't late, the dim light was already fading. Enclosed by the hedges, the lane was in near nocturnal darkness and he began to walk faster.

As he emerged into the open, a track led off to the left to pass through a tunnel under the motorway spur road: this was the route leading up to the woods. The road itself ran straight ahead, plunging into a scrappy copse some fifty yards further on. He had intended to follow the track, but he now saw something in the trees, a flash of red. Pausing briefly, he was held by the sudden colour, and then set off towards it, making a diversion despite the inexorably advancing darkness.

What he had thought was a copse was in fact a clearing where the road ended, pitted hard-core surrounded by twisted damaged trees. There was a wire fence at the back, behind which the motorway thundered, blind, oblivious and eternal. Straight ahead of him, up against the fence, stood a derelict fire engine. Huge and imposing, it was bizarrely out of place, its massive engine lying half-disassembled on the ground beside it like the guts of a disembowelled beast. The ladders were missing, but the white hose reels were still intact, as were the water units, a mass of brass pipe-work and spigots. To the left of the fire engine was a decrepit caravan, chocked up on bricks with its wheels missing. It lay in a sea of detritus: Calor gas canisters, a doll's pram with a torn hood, two rusting bicycles and an electric cooker.

Then, in front of the caravan, he noticed a child, a small girl: he hadn't seen her at first, in the fading grey light. He had assumed he was alone and the sight of another person gave him a strange, shivering shock. She was his daughter's age, thin and pale, with dark hair hanging about her face in damp straggles. Apparently oblivious to the rain, she sat on a stained mattress with her arm around the neck of a large black dog, a greyhound cross of some sort. Neither the child nor the dog moved nor made a sound. For a moment he was transfixed by the stillness of their gaze, filled with a growing unease. Then he turned and walked quickly back along the road as if fleeing from some nameless danger.

The track was heavily pot-holed and, especially in the deep gloom under the spur road bridge, he had to take care to avoid puddles. After this the way rose steeply; it was still rough walking on thin soles, but dry. At the crest of the ridge the track turned sharp left to run along the top of the motorway cutting. There was now no barrier from the road and the monotonous roar intensified.

Out of the lee of the ridge he was exposed to the full bitterness of the wind. Shivering, he thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. He felt something: the crumpled wrapping paper of Laura's present. But there was no sign of the bottle. He stopped, checking the inside pocket and then his jeans. Nothing. It was gone. There was another uprush of self-pity; he had lost it already, his only birthday present, the only sign, paltry though it was, that any creature on earth was aware of his existence. He touched the skin behind his left ear and then held the finger under his nose, smelling the residual perfume of the geranium leaves. For some moments he stood staring at the pitted concrete of the path, gutted by sorrow.

After a hundred yards or so, at the start of the woods, the track joined a narrow farm road that swung in from the left. He walked slowly now, like a mourner at a funeral. Why had he let all of

this happen? this was the big question. For he had let it happen, watching blankly, like a rabbit in the headlights of a car, as the whole thing fell apart. His marriage and his children and his home, and now his business, each slipping through numbed fingers and crashing, one by one, to the cold concrete floor.

It was strangely peaceful in the woods. The stately beeches soared skywards like gothic pillars, their branches meshing over the road like vaulting. The manic roar of the traffic, though undiminished in intensity, seemed to lose its relevance in the cathedral calm. The air here was still, though he could still hear the wind in the high branches of the trees, far, far above. As he walked the tree trunks loomed out of the half-light, vast impassive sentinels, aware of his presence though indifferent to it.

Whatever it was that had done for him, it had crept up on him like a murderer in the night, unnoticed and unrecognised. It had led him away from the path into the dark, dark forest, where he now stumbled blindly forward with a quiet panic screaming through his skull. He stopped and stared up at the swaying branches far above, clawed silhouettes against the grey sky. He felt suddenly severed from his life and a strange calm flooded over him. A scrap of floating seaweed swept along by the currents and tides, carried by the blind forces of the ocean, he had lost control of his life.

He reached a junction which he did not recognise: he had come further than he intended. The road itself swung right, heading out of the wood, back into the fading light of the afternoon. An unmetalled track branched off straight ahead, leading on through the trees. Cadwallader followed the road, feeling suddenly exposed as he left the sanctuary of the woods.

After fifty yards, the road crossed a single lane bridge over the motorway. Here the roar reached a manic crescendo, the scream of the engines and the thunder of tyres on concrete like a never-ending onrush of enraged beasts, bellowing their fury into the gloaming. He stared down at the two-way river of light – white flowing towards him, red away – which stretched to infinity, winding away over the distant hills like a luminous snake. The brief peace of the cathedral had dissolved in the corrosive acid of misery; he had lost everything, every single thing that had mattered to him, and in return he gained nothing but anguish. And now he was trapped: even if he saw a way out the mess, he knew that he wouldn't have the strength to take it.

So what now? He hadn't a clue, not a single scintilla of an inkling.

Leaning forward against the metal parapet, he allowed himself to sink into the endless flow of lights, relaxing into his misery as into the arms of an old friend. In a strange way he liked it here, flowing with the lights, his thoughts numbed by the incessant roar. Perhaps he could stay forever, gazing down onto the motorway, shielding himself from pain until death finally carried him away.

'Don't jump.'

Although the voice was smooth and soft, like velvet, he heard her clearly above the traffic noise. And oddly he was not surprised, as if he had been expecting her. He turned slowly.

A girl approaches from the far side of the bridge, further away than her voice had sounded. She comes towards him slowly, gliding across the tarmac, watching him with half a smile in her eyes. Small and slim with flowing dark hair, she is barefoot and wears nothing but a light gown of a shimmering white that flows around her body and thighs like molten silver. She is surrounded by warm brightness, like a pool of sunlight, that moves with her.

He has a vague feeling of knowing her, she seems so familiar, and yet also he is certain that he has never seen her before in his life; and for some reason he cannot fathom he is also certain that she was expecting him, waiting for him here at the bridge.

She stands close in front of him and he is enveloped in her capsule of light; he feels the sun-warmth on his skin, he sees the colours that are too bright, the light that shimmers, undulating and dream-like.

'I wasn't going to,' he says quietly.

She smiles up at him and puts her face to his neck, as if smelling something. She sighs, closing her eyes in ecstasy. Then, without warning, she reaches up to him, slides her arms around his neck and pulls him forward, locking her lips onto his. At first he hesitates, holding back, but a fuzzy warmth trickles through him: he closes his eyes and flows into her. Inside him icy concretions of angst and misery slowly begin to melt, softening and falling away. He holds her waist, pulling her slim body against his, and then time stops.

After an era, or possibly two, she pulls back.

'Come,' she says, and taking his hand, leads him across the bridge, back towards the woods. He walks beside her, swimming in her travelling pool of summer.

In the woods it is warm and dry. The trees they pass are in full leaf, clothed in the emerald green of spring, and dappled sunlight filters through the foliage. Is this how it's supposed to be? he thinks vaguely as she leads him to a patch of soft grass. They are surrounded by the tall, green trees, shimmering in the sunlight and the gentle breeze. She kisses him again and pulls at the tie of her gown which falls open and then off her shoulders. Her body fills his soul, he is aware of nothing else: the dappled light on her golden skin, her small breasts, her belly and her soft round thighs.

She lies down on the grass, pulling him down with her. He is dimly aware that he is no longer wearing his jacket or his sweater. Locking her mouth on his, she places his hand over her breast and begins to pull at his belt. She swirls around him like mist, the feeling and sight of her body blending with the velvet heat in his brain. Her hands slide over his skin and into his soul, her limbs encircle him and he is sucked down into her, sinking, floating and flowing away.

## Chapter 2

Swirling colours, light and sound as a single sensation. Floating, falling, with tiny fibrils of awareness beginning to coalesce. Then something solid emerging from the confusion: a woman, a boy, and a yellow-haired girl. They are watching him, unsmiling. A tendril of anxiety grows, undulating at the base of his consciousness.

The tendril is a plant, a sea plant, swaying gently in the deep blue water. Then the plant grows a bud and the bud bursts into an orange flower, a bright orange flower that gets bigger and bigger, filling the sea.

Orange-red brightness, completely amorphous. He can't see anything else – why can't he see anything else? Then suddenly the orangeness condenses, becoming a reticular pattern of black against dazzling brilliance. He has opened his eyes.

He looks up at the branches and the leaves swaying above him, scattering the brightness of the sun. Slowly, the gentle rocking lulls him and the flickering brightness seeps into him, filling the hollow cavities of his mind with rolling light and warmth. The tendril dissolves into nothingness and his breath flows quietly like the evening tide. Then, though at first imperceptibly, it changes.

The swaying becomes slow and deliberate and the dazzling pattern of silhouettes presses down on him, threatening to suffocate, to crush. He sits up quickly, blinking.

He is surrounded by trees, their huge trunks crowding in on him like menacing strangers. He shrinks back, cowering and afraid. Something is missing. The woman and the two children, where are they? He looks around quickly, but he cannot see them. Panic flares, though it is fast dulled by confusion. Were they ever really here, or was they just part of a dream? He tries to picture them in his mind, to bring them back – but sees only shadows. And now the memory of the dream is fading and he can feel them slipping away, sliding out of his mind like sand through a sieve. He sinks back into himself; he is aware that he has lost something, but he doesn't know what.

He hears a voice, a laugh, light and happy like music, spilling and tumbling through the viscous air. Sitting up again and he looks around. He is on a patch of grass, brilliant green, each blade blazing with luminosity. Directly ahead of him, on a road leading out of the trees, there is a girl, small and pretty, barefoot and dressed in white. She turns to him, waves farewell, and then is away into the brilliant sunlight.

Her smile fills him with a sudden warmth, melting his fear. The trees are friendly now and pull back, giving him space. He feels the spongy grass under his body and the cool dampness on his hands. The green light shines up through him as if he were transparent, made of soft glass. The girl is his friend, and he knows she likes him. But who is she? The question plops into his mind, hovers expectantly for a few moments in the translucent jelly of his awareness, then fades to nothing, leaving no trace of an answer.

After this he closes his eyes and an image of the girl is all around him, bathing him in golden light. It is a delightful memory, fuzzy and warm, though also insubstantial, shimmering in his mind like a mirage. He tries to focus, but everything is fluid and slippery, each thought sliding away as he reaches for it, like fish in a turbid pool. The girl is there, blurred and confused, and also what could be a woman and a child, or possibly two children. But he can't see them at all now, they are too indistinct. Perhaps they were nothing after all, phantasms and no more than that. There are other images, but far away out of reach and already sliding into the blur: a neat red house and something dying, something he knows is his.

Suddenly he is aware of a sensation, a cold wetness on his skin, and he opens his eyes. A slug, a black slug as big as a man's foot, is crawling over the back of his hand. He can feel the muscular waves that ripple along its belly as it propels itself over his skin on a bed of slime. He watches, fascinated, as the sunlight glistens on the slime-covered body, encasing it with rainbow coloured jewels. Its eye stalks move slowly to and fro and its breathing hole is a vast dark cavern in the side of its shining carapace. Eventually it slides onto the grass, leaving a sheet of shining wet diamond across his skin. The spell breaks and he sees that there are more of the giant molluscs, scattered around him on the grass. Indeed he is surrounded by them, a broken circle, all moving slowly away from him back into the woods, their shining trails radiating out from where he is sitting like shimmering silver spokes of a rimless wheel.

Standing, he teeters slightly, unsure of his feet. There is a looseness around his waist: his belt is undone and his jeans are open. He feels suddenly guilty, like a criminal, and another tendril of anxiety begins to undulate quietly at the base of his awareness. With fumbling sausage fingers, he pulls up the zip and buckles the belt.

He looks around at the swaying trees, their grey trunks flowing and swirling like molten plastic, at the dark green undergrowth with its tendrils of briar twisting and coiling into a filigree of gothic intricacy, and at the grass at his feet, the blades curling and flowing in waves like the

cilia on a protozoan membrane. All is moving – and at the same time perfectly still, as if embedded in clear resin.

He notices some discarded clothing scattered about his feet: a ludicrous blue hat with a little red man embroidered into it, a purple scarf, and a dark blue jersey with patches of smooth cloth on the shoulders and elbows. There is also a black coat with a dark red lining. Of leather, the back and sleeves are shiny, like the slugs, though the front is smooth suede; he can feel the texture of this in his mind, like a girl's skin, soft and subtle. Smiling at the thought, he looks up the road. His own girl is now far away, a shimmering patch of white in the bright daylight. He feels suddenly alone – the trees close in menacingly – and he doesn't want to lose her.

The clothes might be his, they might not. But either way, he doesn't want them, clinging and stifling on this bright warm day. Except for the coat, that is: for he likes the coat, with its slug-shiny sleeves and its girl-skin front. It is amazingly heavy and clings desperately to the ground as he picks it up. When he puts it on the lining material grips the bare skin of his arms, squeezing him affectionately. Then, uncertainly, he steps out of the widening circle of great molluscs and follows the girl up the road.

The smooth plastic blackness of the road arched in front of him like the back of a whale breaking through the waves, and the trees parted as he advanced, stepping aside like courtiers. The girl was ahead of him, his white-clad target, his goal. He knew he could reach her – just a few yards of tarmac separated them – but as he hurried towards her, he felt something begin to change. It was imperceptible at first, just a strange sense of threatened instability as of an ornament teetering on the edge of a mantelpiece, but then he noticed the colours that swirled around him becoming brighter still, absurdly bright, and then gradually melting away from the objects that gave them existence. Once liberated from the bonds of form, they flowed freely, first blending into one another then separating in a mad whirling dance, like the paints on a deranged artist's palette. Again he was alone, this time in a realm beyond existence, a realm of formless, flowing colour; he shivered, giddy with panic. But then, in the midst of the swirling mess, there was something solid, a firm blob of white that refused to blend, a whiteness that belonged to something, the whiteness of an object. He focussed on the girl's gown, anchoring his mind in the swirling maelstrom. And then, slowly coalescing around the rock of whiteness, the rest unmixed itself and swam back into place: the green returned to the grass, the black to the tarmac, and the blue to the brilliant sky that gave it birth. The road was back where he had left it and the girl was still there, far ahead of him, walking away.

As his nascent panic ebbed quickly away, he stepped out of the shade and was immersed in light, dazzling and white. It blazed over him and through him, illuminating every atom in his body. With a sudden rush of excitement, he became light; he was light itself, a splinter of the sun shining across the surface of the earth. But then, as he sped forward at sunbeam velocity, he felt his feet thudding onto the warm tarmac, his body lurching forward with each step. He wasn't light at all, he was earth. His limbs became sacks of sand and his body filled with concrete. He took a step, hauling his leg forward, dragging the huge weight of his foot over the ground. Finally he stopped walking, for he must remain still to let the earth flow into him, to become one with the soil and the bedrock. As his petrification neared completeness, however, something flickered across the granite mass that was his brain: a dazzle of whiteness. The girl was standing at a gate at the top of the road, a beacon of brightness. The earth melted and flowed out of him like lava, releasing its grip.

He was now between two fences which appeared to converge ahead of him, funnelling him towards the girl, the focussed angularity hard grey metal tearing into his fragile vision. A vague shadow scudded across his mind, possibly a memory. Of a bridge? No, he was on a bridge now; it wasn't a memory at all. He peered gingerly over one of the parapets; a river shimmered twenty miles below, a river of colours and shapes which flowed both ways at once, a river of sound that echoed through him in falling crescendos of noise, each throb and pulse perfectly in place as if played by a vast orchestra.

He could have been lost forever in the endless flow of colour and sound, but again the girl pulled him back, an image of her coalescing in his mind to call him away. Starting forward again, he quickened his pace. Even as he walked, though, he could feel the river as it coursed by far beneath him. It wouldn't let him go, it was tugging at him, pulling him towards itself with a strange force. And there was nothing between him and it except for several miles of empty, free-fall space – and a flimsy little bridge. Suddenly he saw falling, a horrible plunging into the gaping chasm. Then the tarmac veered away from him and he was on a knife-edge with sheer drops on either side. For a moment he teetered, swaying wildly and fighting for balance with windmilling arms.

But he did not fall. Forcing his eyes straight ahead, he nailed his vision to the whiteness of the girl's clothes, resisting the magnetic force of the abyss that pulled him to gaze into its terrible vertiginous eyes. His heart hammered in his throat and he ceased breathing – and gradually he regained his balance. Then, putting each foot in front of the other with a tightrope walker's care, he edged slowly forward, staying directly between the parapets.

At last he reached firm ground. The solidity of the earth under his feet caressed him, enclosing him in a warm blanket of gravity. Relief washed through him and he breathed deeply, feeling suddenly light, like gossamer in the breeze. He laughed out loud, spinning around like a dancer.

At the gate the road turned sharply to the right. When he reached it, the girl had moved on; she was not more than thirty yards away from him, now moving with molluscan slowness, gazing around at the trees and the sky. He made to follow her but stopped dead. For on the other side of the gate were two people – a woman and a man – sinking slowly behind the crest of a low grassy hill.

The woman had flowing hair as black as the night itself and wore a tiny dress of the brightest of bright reds, like a splash of freshly spilled blood against the brilliant blue of the sky. He caught her profile as she turned to speak to her companion: magazine model loveliness, with tanned skin and sculptured features.

But for all the woman's allure, it was the man who caught his attention. For some reason, the disappearing torso filled his consciousness, hammering its presence into the back of his brain. The short hair was thinning from the forehead, and he wore glasses and a lime green tee-shirt with a flash of orange on the front. Slung casually over his left shoulder the man carried a jacket, a black jacket with a red lining. He felt something he couldn't identify, a tightness inside, cold and dark, which blossomed quickly into a unplumbed, all-encompassing loathing. Standing rock still, he was turned to stone, unable not to watch, boiling black blood pumping furiously through his skull. Then a moment later the man was gone, vanished behind the hill, and the terrible spell was broken. The empty grass rolled towards him like the ocean swell; he was breathing hard and he was afraid.

The girl in white! He turned quickly and relaxed; she was still there, standing at the side of the road and pulling a flower from the hedge. She felt so close that he could reach out and touch her, pluck her out of his field of vision like taking a picture off a wall. As he watched the scene coalesced into a moving tableau of unbearable beauty: the girl in her dazzling white gown floating on the plastic river of tarmac as it flowed slowly between the undulating green banks, her dark hair flowing over her face to meet the startling blueness of the flower, a splinter of sky in her hand.

Then another figure appeared behind her, a discordant pulse of ugliness, and the tableau shattered. It was a small fat man in a dark suit and a bowler hat. His chubby face was creased with worry and his stubby pin-striped legs sliced together like scissors as he walked briskly up the road, carrying a battered leather briefcase in one hand and an umbrella in the other.

He shook his head and blinked vigorously, trying to get rid of this new, unwelcome blot, trying to restore the harmony. But the man caught his eye and raised the umbrella in greeting, then hurried forward to meet him. The ugly stain spread quickly across the loveliness, growing larger, closer, but he couldn't escape, he was trapped like a light-blinded rabbit. Then, when all seemed lost, the girl intervened; as the little man trotted past her, she stepped forward and took his arm, stopping him.

The cool wash of relief quickly ebbed away, however, as the girl leaned up to whisper to her chubby new friend, her body touching his with a revolting familiarity. The fat man tried to pull away, indicating at him with the briefcase. But she held her prey, talking softly to him and turning him away. He struggled again and this time she kissed him, pressing her lips onto the quivering pink jowls. The little man's struggles now became feeble, like an exhausted salmon, and as he collapsed into her control she took his umbrella and led him away down the road like an obedient puppy.

His short-lived relief was now replaced by a sharp sense of betrayal. How could she desert him like this? It couldn't be true; there must be some mistake. Any minute now she would send the little man on his way and come back to him, he knew she would, she was bound to. But even as these thoughts jabbed through his mind, the girl was stepping off the road, leading her man into the woods on the left. The incongruous pair was now encased in a horrible and exclusive intimacy and, choking on jealousy and betrayal, he watched helplessly as they disappeared into the enveloping greenery.

Now he was really alone. Completely alone. Utterly alone. He stared blankly up the empty road as the hot tarmac arched and rolled towards him, and the hedges and trees twisted and swayed with slow deliberation. A cold snake of fear slithered up his spine. It was all now so oppressively close, the trees and the sky crowding against him, the tarmac smothering his awareness with a crawling intimacy. He pushed at the air, fighting for space, but still it pressed in on him, the whole of creation forming an existential rugby scrum with him at its centre. Then suddenly, just as he was about to collapse under the great weight, it lurched back, the trees and the sky hurling themselves away from him, stretching into the dizzy distance, further than he could ever hope to reach. He staggered forward into the gaping void – and it was all back again, crushing in on him, tight and suffocating. The fear-snake coiled into his skull and a hurricane of panic whirled through his brain.

He spun round to escape the hideous oscillations, first turning back to the gate then over towards the bridge. But it wouldn't stop, the oppressive closeness and dizzying distance still alternated wildly – and then blended, combining into one hideous blur of suffocation and vertigo. He jammed his eyes closed to shut it out – but they were all still there, the gate, the road, the

field, writhing on the undersides of his eyelids. A scream ripped through his skull, but the noise coagulated silently in the plastic air. He ran forward, but his feet refused to obey.

And then gravity was no more. As a panorama of tarmac slid by under him he could see the tiny stones, each embedded in its coat of black tar, each so different from, and yet at the same time so alike, those that surrounded it. They moved past in slow motion, coming gently towards him with an unhurried languor like hundreds of black, luminous friends.

Then, with an explosion of light and colour and jolted twisting limbs, gravity made a come-back.

An ocean of black-coated boulders stretched out into infinity and then came rolling back in slow, gentle waves. Warm hardness caressed his cheek, comforting and calming like a mother's hand. He liked it down here, cuddled to the plastic tarmac; down here it was safe, away from the panic and the fear. As he focused on the coagulated boulders in front of his face and stared into the weird twisted gaps between them, he thought of melting into liquid and seeping down into the vast network of caverns beneath the surface of the road, of spending eternity as a thousand subterranean rivulets tricking deeper and deeper into the hard flesh of the earth.

There was a blurred movement at the edge of his vision and he refocused. A creature was approaching, clambering over the sea of boulders. Clearly intent on matters of vital importance it moved quickly, following some invisible path across the featureless if uneven plain of the road. It got closer and closer until – as big as a rhinoceros – it paused under the jutting overhang of his nose, sensing his presence with bobbing antennae. Then, with quiet deliberation, it turned and hurried away, going up past his eyebrows and out of sight beyond the top of his head.

After the ant had gone, he lay watching the waves lumbering towards him across the tarmac. The slow rolling gradually seeped into him and his thoughts rocked gently in time with the waves. The boulders melted into each other and a heavy curtain of darkness began its inexorable descent.

But he didn't want to sleep, he had only just woken up.

Suddenly galvanised, he scrambled to his feet, shaking his head to dissipate the heaviness. But as soon as he was up, it started again; the trees and the sky hurled themselves in at him, before veering away with dizzy insanity. The snake of fear was quickly awake, slithering up his throat. Now, however, he sensed something inside, a tiny pebble of hardness that the fear couldn't touch. And so this time he caught the snake, seizing its scaly neck. It twisted, trying to bite him – a slab of sky crashed down – but he held it. Then, with teeth-gritting effort, he forced it back down into its slimy cave; the oscillations slowed, and stopped.

He relaxed and for a moment all was stable. Then – suddenly – the trees crushed in, swerving giddily up to his face. Again the fear rose, but again – and with less difficulty – he forced it down, restoring equilibrium. A butterfly of lightness fluttered across his chest and he breathed deeply, savouring the viscous air; he had won, and having won once he knew he could win again.

The empty road flowed slowly away between its flower-decked grassy banks. But without her the scene looked as barren and derelict as industrial waste land. A heaviness pulled at his throat and he turned away.

Where to now? Without the girl to guide him, he was at something of a loss. He looked around aimlessly, wondering what to do. The wooden fence next to the gate was breached by a stile, and beside the stile was a tall signpost. Perhaps this might help.

Unfortunately the sign was blank. It was a piece of wood, one end carved into a hand with the forefinger pointing across the field behind the fence, but with no words to give direction. Despite its unhelpfulness, however, he found himself entranced by the quality of the workmanship: for in addition to the forefinger, the other three fingers had also been carved, curled into the palm and gripped by the thumb, each with its nail and joint creases. Then, as he gazed up admiringly, it moved; the hand twisted upwards and the forefinger wagged, beckoning him forward.

His tiny tremor of surprise faded leaving a residue of confusion; he'd seen good wood carving before, but nothing quite this lifelike. The sign seemed to sense his lapse in attention and beckoned more vigorously, this time with an edge of impatience. His puzzlement gelled quickly around a hard pulse of indignation. Who on earth did it think it was? he thought. Then, as if to add insult to injury, as he went to turn away the wooden fingers snapped imperiously and the whole hand waved him forward and pointed across the stile.

He stormed back towards the bridge, seething. Nicely carved or not, he was damned if he was going to be ordered about by a wooden signpost – he would go this way instead. But as reached the beginning of the metal parapets, his tempest of outrage faltered. He gazed into the dizzying abyss and felt it sucking him forward, spinning him with vertigo. Perhaps not the bridge, after all.

He turned again and headed up the road towards where the girl in white had disappeared, deliberately not looking at the sign as he strode past it. A few yards beyond the stile, however, he lost confidence. The road stretched out into the dark unknown, its trees and hedges pressing in menacingly, like assassins awaiting their victim.

There was, of course, the field.

The field, with its open blue skies and its little grassy knoll where the woman in the blood-spill dress had wandered, carefree as a sky lark. Sunlit pastures opened out before him, enticing and safe.

'I'm going this way because that's what I want to do,' he said, trying to sound assured, 'I hope you understand that this is my decision, and my decision alone.'

The sign did not respond, but he sensed an arrogant smugness in the curl of the fingers. He gritted his teeth but refused the challenge; he wasn't going to let himself get rattled by some pompous, puffed up piece of wood. And so, taking an angry grip on the waist-high cross-bar of the stile, he swung himself up onto the first step.

And nearly fell off again – for the wood was like rubber, swaying and buckling under his weight. For a few precarious moments he teetered to and fro, fighting for balance, and then lunged forwards, gripping the cross-bar with both hands. He managed to swing his left leg over onto the swaying foot-piece on the far side and then stood astride the stile as it bucked like a rodeo bronco, trying to throw him off. After a short while it seemed to tire and he saw his chance. But his optimism was misplaced – just as he'd got his right leg over, the foot-piece plunged suddenly and tumbled him onto the grass.

As he picked himself up, he glanced up at the sign. Although it looked motionless, there could have been a slight vibration, a quiver of suppressed mirth. Muttering silent imprecations, he stomped away across the grass, hammering his anger into the innocent turf.

Once in the field, the path was easy to see, running over the crest of the little knoll. He walked quickly, still propelled by the rocket fuel of indignation though glad to be underway, to be finally away from the bloody thing. Then, as he looked towards the slope, he thought saw something, a diaphanous patch of colour vanishing over the horizon as if the woman's dress had left an after-image in the shimmering air. He stopped stone dead – for beside the red ghost was another, in lime green.

As he stared at the now empty sky, a weird coldness trickled inside him and his confidence ebbed like a falling tide. Perhaps the bridge was the best option after all. It wasn't that dangerous – he'd managed it once, he could do so again. Also there was something nice the other side, although he couldn't quite remember what; a mirage teardrop, black and shiny, crawled slowly across his mind and was gone.

Back to the stile, the sign held an imperious palm against him.

'I think I've come the wrong way,' he said, 'It might be better if I just went back over there.'

It pointed over his shoulder, quivering with impatience.

'I'm not sure that I should. I really think – .' His voice tailed feebly away as the sign stabbed the air with its finger. He looked up, pleading, but it remained impervious, pointing implacably across the field.

This time when he set off along the path there were no coloured ghosts, and his apprehension – together with the hazy miasma of the memory – gradually evaporated. He liked walking on the grass; its soft springiness seemed to propel him forward in long, fluid bounces. A gentle breeze cooled his face and the china-blue sky arched over him like a vast upturned cereal bowl. To his left the ground fell away steeply and in the distance he could see the two-way river snaking across the rolling hills. It was all so pretty and bright, like a Toy-Town film set. He could have reached out and cupped one of the far hills under the palm of his hand.

Something caught his eye to the right: a splash of colour. He turned quickly, in time to see two rabbits diving into the hedgerow, alarmed by his approach. They were lovely creatures, one a rich dark blue, the other emerald green – brighter even than the grass – and each showing its bob-tail, a flash of dazzling white against the coloured fur.

He was moving quickly now. Although he could feel the turf under his soles at each step, he seemed to be gliding over the surface of the field. He was a yacht sailing across the open sea; shimmering waves flowed across the grass, sweeping over the crest of the hill, crossing and recrossing each other, forming intricate whorled patterns as they swirled and eddied around his feet. Here and there exotic plants thrust up through the ripples: thistles with leaves like razor-wire and colour-burst flowers of brilliant pink; yellow ragwort crawling with black and vermilion caterpillars, too poisonous even to look at; and rose-bay willow-herb, spilling its feather-cloud seeds into the wind.

His velocity increased. The waves swept under him at giddy speed and the taller plants streaked by like telegraph poles from a train window. He ought not go so fast, he could easily trip, but he felt sucked forward by his own momentum and he couldn't slow his legs.

Faster and faster and faster. The world blurred into parallel lines of speeding colour, closing around him in a tunnel of slippery speed. Everything became speed – and the speed became fear, a high velocity terror that roared in his ears, his eyes, his brain. And still he got faster, a human rocket hurtling towards the crest of the hill.

Towards the crest of the hill?

He should have half way to Jupiter by now, not still heading up the hill. Steeling himself for a fatal fall, he glanced behind. The stile, with its obnoxious signpost, was right there, no more than fifteen yards away. He turned back to the path. The crest of the small hill lay ahead of him – and he was standing stock still, washed by the gentle ripples of the grass.

He breathed deeply and his panic melted away. When his galloping heartbeat had returned to normal, he tried again. Putting his left foot carefully forward, he made a single step. That felt fine, everything was normal and he had moved about a yard. Another single step: again all OK,

another yard forward. Then another, and another. He grinned, and with a surge of confidence, strode out for the top of the hill. But no sooner had he begun to walk normally, than – with a flare of naked panic – he was sucked into the tunnel of uncontrolled velocity.

He caught himself, stopped walking and was instantly still, though again no further forward than when he first started. How on earth was he meant to get anywhere? he wondered, gritting his teeth. Again he started walking – and again he was sucked into the tunnel of speed, and again when he stopped he had made no progress. This time his frustration snapped. As the grass swirled innocently around his feet, he clenched his fists and glared at the hill in front of him.

'This – is – ridiculous!' he shouted, 'Will you please stop this – at once!'

The waves seemed to pause, quivering slightly – with contrition perhaps? He started forward again, stomping crossly on the chastened ripples. And nothing happened. No acceleration, no sliding into the tunnel of speed: he was walking normally, moving like a person not a cyclotroned sub-atomic particle. This time he could feel the drag of his own weight pulling him back at each step, this time he was making effort, climbing the hill rather than sliding up it. At last he seemed to be getting somewhere.

He climbed onwards, pulling himself up the slope. Soon he was panting, heaving himself up with straining muscles, enjoying the exertion of exercise. The slope rose steeply in front of him and the summit beckoned ahead. He couldn't move quickly now, but took each step one at a time, steadily winning altitude with sweat and effort.

He paused for breath, panting hard, looking up the near vertical bank ahead of him. Not far to the top now, surely. He was certainly enjoying the climb, though he didn't remember the mountain being so – .

Mountain? What mountain?

He turned and, instead of a distant view of the road and the bridge far below, there was the stile, exactly where he had left it, fifteen yards behind. He spun round angrily to confront the mountainside and in front of him was a harmless little slope, leading to the crest of a small hill a few paces away.

'That's it,' he hissed, glaring at the grass, 'I've had it up to here with you and your silly games. I'm going back to the bridge, signpost or no signpost.'

But as he turned to march back to the stile, something felt different; the ground was flat, there was no slope. He looked around – and saw he was on top of the hill.

'Thank you so much,' he said to the grass, 'So good of you to oblige.'

On the other side of the knoll, the field banked away to the bottom of wide valley. The opposite slope was coated in thick woodland, a dense emerald green, the foliage plastic and fluid, close and yet so far away. Beyond the wood were more hills, rolling into the distance: some wooded, some a patchwork of fields, some with tiny Trumpton villages clustered on their slopes.

He was gazing out over the view – sensing the great distance, yet knowing he could pluck like a flower one of the tiny trees from the furthest hill – when he noticed someone in the field ahead of him. A middle-aged man, slightly overweight and wearing a light fawn anorak and dark blue slacks, was scampering around on the grass, coming up the hill towards him in a meandering series of zigzags and circles. The man paused apprehensively for a moment when he saw him, but then ran forward excitedly, clearly delighted with his discovery.

'Good afternoon. Lovely day, isn't it?'

The man did not respond, but ran around him, sniffing at his coat.

'Bit of a chill in the breeze, though,' he said, with growing embarrassment. The man grinned and got onto his hands and knees to sniff at his shoes.

There was a distant bark. The man paused briefly, but quickly went back to his excited sniffing and scrabbling. A large yellow dog – a retriever – was walking sedately beside the hedgerow at the top of the field. It stopped, looked across at them and barked again, this time with an edge of irritation. The man stopped sniffing and, a little crestfallen, looked up. Another bark. With obvious reluctance, he got to his feet and began to amble slowly away, stopping once or twice to sniff at a tussock. When he eventually reached the dog, the pair walked on side by side, the man occasionally running forward a few paces to investigate the hedgerow, although quickly falling back into line.

Where to now? he thought, turning away from the incongruous duo. The path he was on swept down into the valley where another stile led into the woods. Of course he didn't have to stick to this particular path, or to any path at all for that matter. It was a big field and he could go anywhere he wanted. But as he looked out over the open grass, across the uncharted expanse of swirling waves and whirlpool eddies, he shuddered. Despite everything, it might be better to stick with the devil he was, by now, getting to know rather well. And so, with one last look around the little hilltop he had won with such difficulty, he started down the path towards the woods.

He hadn't gone more than six paces before he noticed the slope getting steeper, falling away in front of him. After a few more steps he was on a steep bank, gazing down into the valley bottom miles below, giddy with vertigo. His feet began to slip on the near vertical grass, he was about to fall – .

'Just you stop that!' he snapped, 'Right this minute!'

### **Chapter 3**

The stile into the woods was considerably better behaved than its colleague at the top of the field: some swaying of the foot-piece and a slightly rubbery cross-bar, but nothing he couldn't handle. Once over he found himself in bright woodland. The trees were small, slender and tightly packed, jostling each other like rush-hour Tube passengers in the fight to reach the sun. Between the trunks grew clumps of writhing bramble and swaying ferns with neon-bright leaves cut into fractal patterns of sub-atomic perfection. To his right a sea of bluebells stretched into the distance, flooding the ground between the trees; the fleshy leaves undulated like fronds of seaweed and the blueness of the flowers coalesced into a rippling ocean.

Here and there trees had fallen, losers in the battle for space. Some still refused to die and lay propped at odd angles against reluctant neighbours, their spindly branches reaching up in vain desperation to the lost light. Others had given up the struggle, lapsing into the quiet dignity of death. These lay rotting into the leaf mould, sprouting fungi in a final efflorescence of life: yellow shells, each as neat and fresh as a baby's ear; tight clusters of orange parasols, like crowds of tiny geishas; and huge slabs of flesh, red and raw. The leaf canopy was low and broken, shattering the sunlight into dappled patches. Birdsong echoed languorously through the liquid air, seeming to emanate from the trees and plants themselves.

The intricate beauty was too powerful for him and it swamped all his other thoughts, pouring in through his eyes and his ears, filling his skull, his body, his soul. It possessed him. He became his senses, he was no more than what he saw and heard: the writhing branches and the coiling briars, the dazzling, flowing colours and the swimming sounds. He had ceased to exist – he was the wood, the wood was him.

After an era (or possibly two) there was a sensation. Was it vision? No – then it must be hearing. But it was neither; a butterfly had settled on what seemed to be his hand – so he did have a body after all. The great insect hung there, nonchalantly opening and closing its electric blue wings. Not blue, green. Wait, surely it was yellow, metallic yellow – or orange? As the creature flew off into the liquid air, a flash of red flickered in the broken sunlight.

With his independent existence rekindled, he looked all about and saw that he was now in the midst of the wood – there was no stile behind him, there was no path in front of him. He wasn't concerned though, for he liked the wood, it was his friend. Perhaps he could stay here forever. If he stood still long enough, he might even become a tree himself. But as he began to subside once more into the liquid stillness, he noticed a movement in the distance; flying shapes were flitting through the trunks. As they got closer, he saw that they were hovering, like bees, and a quiet buzzing murmured in the turgid air, only just audible.

They were not bees, however, they were tiny people, each about two feet in length. A family of five – a man, a woman and three children – dressed casually for a pleasant day out. They flew horizontally, like swimmers buoyed up by the liquid air. Above the shoulders of each was a diaphanous blur, only just visible, which could have been buzzing membrane wings or a half-existent helicopter blade. And in place of eyes were jewelled visors: curved discs of crystal, the surfaces broken into hundreds of glittering hexagons that shivered the sunlight into the flashing colours of the rainbow.

They came closer and closer, hovering to and fro through the shimmering air, unconcerned by his presence. He hoped they would come closer still, possibly even close enough to speak to, but after investigating a clump of foam-splashed elder they drifted away through the trees, carried by some mysterious purpose. He watched until the last flicker of movement vanished into the distant blur of trunks, and then it was time he moved on too. Lifting his left foot he stepped out into the uncharted sea of ferns and bracken.

And like the Red Sea the undergrowth parted, moving politely aside to reveal a path that wound away between the trees. He puzzled for a moment before starting forward, wondering why they had kept it hidden from him; soon, however, he was lost again in the colour and the sound, both too real and too strong, again overpowering his senses.

A sudden burst of brilliance snatched his attention. It was a plant with flowers that opened and closed rhythmically, flashing beacons of violet and yellow. He stopped to peer through the undergrowth, but it crouched shyly behind a briar, keeping out of full view.

It was no more than a few yards off the path and he decided to get a closer look. As he stepped into the greenery, the vegetation again parted, revealing another path. This he followed, though with the beginnings of a tiny tickle of worry. The plant seemed to have moved and was now behind a fallen birch trunk some feet away from the new path. He could see it better in its new position; the flowers seemed to be human hands with violet palms and sun-bright yellow fingers that closed quickly into tight green bud-fists. He wasn't certain, but he thought the hands were signalling to him, beckoning him closer. And so again he stepped towards it and yet another path opened up in front of him. And again the plant was still further away, crouching in a clump of ferns.

The tickle of worry became an itch; he could so easily get lost in this network of new paths. The plant was now beckoning with all its might, urging him forward into the undergrowth. This time, however, he ignored it and went to retrace his steps. It was then that he saw there was no

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