

THE GREY PEOPLE

by Ben Jeapes

Originally published in Substance, Winter 1996

There was a breeze at the top of the tower, of course. Even when the day below was still and warm, up here the air would always move, gentle and cool.

Malcolm Lloyd squinted up at the deep blue sky that vaulted the top of the tower where he and the rest of the tour party stood. The cathedral spire, the tallest in Britain, sprouted from the top of the tower and soared up towards heaven. The recent restoration work had left it gleaming new.

Malcolm looked down, very carefully, over the parapet at the roof of the west transept of Salisbury Cathedral below. It was a long way down. He was suspended between heaven and Earth on a platform of medieval stone. He put out a hand and felt its comforting solidity. The platform was well-anchored in reality.

‘Just look at these carvings,’ said a voice in his ear. He slid an arm round Caroline’s waist; she snuggled up to him in a reflex that had become automatic over the last thirty years.

‘Aren’t there a lot of them?’ she said. There were the usual gargoyles at the corners of the tower: elsewhere the stonework was covered with vague forms that could have been saints or sinners, blurred by the centuries of weathering.

‘Frightens off the evil dark,’ Malcolm said. ‘The church didn’t have a lot of faith in its own ability to ward off wickedness so it called in outside help.’

‘It must have taken ages to do.’

‘The guide will know how long,’ said Malcolm.

‘Why did they go to all this trouble? No one ever came up here to see them.’

‘Ah, but God could see them.’ Malcolm knew he was slipping into his lecture theatre tone again, but it was an old habit. ‘God would know there weren’t any carvings up here and the stonemasons would know that God would know.’ He looked at the carvings thoughtfully. Kindred souls, those long-dead masons. Kindred souls. They knew that the cathedral wouldn’t be complete without these carvings. They understood.

‘Whatever you say.’ Caroline could tell that her husband was sinking into a philosophical mood. She turned her attention back to the guide, who was talking about Christopher Wren’s modifications to the building.

Malcolm shut his ears to the guide’s professional rambling and studied the stone again. He had been too intent on the vaunted view to notice the carvings at first; they were so much part of the cathedral, they were what you expected. He reached out a

hand and caressed one, savouring the love and attention that the man who had carved it had put in to it.

He was all alone. The quiet suddenly pressed in on him and he looked around quickly. The party had vanished and he was completely on his own up here. Then he saw the guide lurking just inside the door to the staircase, and he sighed. Silly to get so worked up . . .

He hurried to join the rest of the party shuffling down the narrow spiral staircase that led into the heart of the tower.

‘Come on,’ Caroline said. ‘Let’s see how the Menial’s doing.’

* * *

The Menial was a student from the technical college named Ted, who shared the bibliophilia of his employers. He sat in front of a computer in one corner of The Agora, a converted shoe shop in Salisbury’s Canal Street. Its purchase had been lubricated by the golden handshake that had been Malcolm Lloyd’s reward for three decades of academic service and now it was halfway through its transformation into the literary and academic emporium that Malcolm and Caroline dreamed of. ‘Blackwells of Oxford, Heffers of Cambridge, stand back. Here comes The Agora of Salisbury,’ Malcolm had joked. The grand opening was a month away.

‘Hi y’all,’ Ted said affably as they let themselves in. His eyes didn’t stray from the computer screen as he finished adding the details of the book on the table next to him. The database files would not only help keep track of stock but would eventually be loaded into the desktop publisher so Ted could set the shop’s first catalogue. ‘So, did you like it?’

‘Very much, yes,’ said Caroline.

‘Quite excellent,’ Malcolm conceded. One of Ted’s other titles was the Native Guide, born and bred in deepest Wiltshire. He had recommended that they go and see the cathedral in the first place, to take a break from setting the shop up. He himself had cheerfully spent a hot Saturday afternoon putting book titles onto the computer.

‘Should think so too,’ Ted said with a grin. He put the now-classified book on top of the pile on his right and picked up another from the pile on his left. He began to tap away at the keyboard again.

Malcolm sidled his way across to look over Ted’s shoulder. He had been less than happy about purchasing the machine, but had reluctantly agreed that nowadays any small business needed one. He had also been less than happy about hiring a student to help out – his opinion of the breed had never been high even when he had been paid to lecture them – but Ted was intelligent and friendly and hard working. Even better, he was ready to work for peanuts, willing to work Saturdays and knew more about making the machine work than Malcolm and Caroline put together. He had helped with its purchase and had bullied the various salesmen without mercy on the Lloyds’ behalf.

Malcolm just about had the hang of data entry. It was almost self-explanatory. He watched Ted work to convince himself that he had it right. Type the title, press RETURN. Type the author, press RETURN. Type-

He blinked. 'Hey!'

Ted looked innocently up at him. 'Hey?'

'Hey. What happened? It . . . well . . .'

Ted had touched one key and words had appeared in half the fields on the screen. The hard disk had whirred and the computer was waiting for the next book to be entered.

'Oh, that's easy, Mr Lloyd. All the books in this pile have the same category details, see; I enter title, author, price and ISBN but the rest of the fields all have exactly the same stuff in them. So, I set this key here to type it all out in the right places, automatically. It's very easy. It's called a macro.'

Malcolm swallowed hard and hoped that Ted would not see him sweating. 'No effort at all, really,' he said.

Ted was impervious to the forced levity. 'No, not really.'

'Frightening,' Malcolm muttered.

They made a pot of tea and, when Ted joined them, Malcolm took the opportunity to study him covertly. The speed with which they had acquired the Menial discomfited Malcolm. They had been at a drinks party to introduce them to Salisbury society; one of the guests had mentioned to Caroline that another guest had a son very keen on getting in to the book trade, what did she think, come and be introduced . . . Ted had turned up on their doorstep the next day. So far it had been Caroline who had dealt with him the most and Malcolm trusted in her judgement, but, well . . .

Malcolm finally decided he liked what he saw. Ted reminded him of their own two children. He was young, inexperienced, naive, but a good lad with his heart in the right place. Give him another forty years, Malcolm mused, and there's hope for the boy.

Ted, though he would never know it and Malcolm could never hope to be understood if he voiced the idea out loud, was like Salisbury Cathedral. He had that look which Malcolm had come to recognise. Everything about him spoke of singularity. His spiky hair, trainers, T-shirt bearing the logo of a Tolkeinesque pop group – Ted was a whole entity, a being with a place in the universe. Everything he did had the unique stamp of Tedness about it.

Everyone is special to themselves, of course, but Ted knew it. A million other teenagers might dress that way, but not necessarily because that was who they were. They were the followers; Ted was a leader. Ted knew where he stood in relation to himself and where he stood in relation to the world. He had his life worked out.

Good for you, boy, Malcolm thought. We're going to get on.

‘Sorry?’ He jerked his head round, guilty because he hadn’t been listening. Caroline had said something and he knew she knew he had been elsewhere.

‘Keys, dear, keys’ she said. ‘You were going to get some duplicates cut. For Ted.’

‘Oh . . .’ Yes, he had been. He had said so, several times. He finished his tea in one gulp and rose to his feet. ‘I’ll do it now. Where can I go, Ted?’

‘Ah-’ The boy thought. ‘There’s a while-you-wait place in the mall, you know? Down on the left.’

‘See you soon, then.’

* * *

His heart swelled as he walked out into Canal Street. The Saturday crowds, at this time of year mostly awe-struck Americans gaping at buildings older than their country, were thinning and his way was unimpeded. This was it! His eye took in the architecture: a range of styles from Stuart to Victorian, even with some black-and-white Tudor fronts thrown in as well. A town with history, with individuality, dominated by the bulk of the cathedral that nestled at the centre and which cast its aura over the community around it. Safety.

He turned into the mall. It was a modern thing and he assumed it was an old Salisbury street or alley way, entirely refurbished for pedestrians only. It had recently been post-modernised from its original sixties concrete. Different coloured stone, a cobbled effect, refacing of the shops along it – a medley of Italianate styles, architectural frills, bells and whistles serving no useful purpose whatsoever. He squared his shoulders and walked down it, trying not to wince at the computerised techno-music blaring out from a shop on his right, looking for the key shop. In the corner of his eye a flash of grey-

He stopped, so suddenly that a woman close behind him bumped into him. He apologised, watched her walk away, and looked again at-

-a slab of concrete. Grey concrete that had escaped the facelift. What else? He half-smiled and carried on walking. Then he saw the grey flash again.

As usual, it was in the corner of his eye but never there when he turned his head. The Grey People had always been there, just an infinitesimal unit of measurement away from reality, eager to renew their acquaintance. He hadn’t seen them since coming to Salisbury, until now. It had been too good to last.

He shut his eyes and thought hard of the cathedral, the carvings there, the wealth of particularity that made it-

The grey blur vanished but he could sense the protest of its denizens. They would be back: he knew the pattern of behaviour too well. Whenever they found an opening they took full advantage and, if beaten once, they mustered all their strength to return.

They left him alone while he was in the shop. They rarely confronted him when he was with someone, preferring the times when he was on his own – though he could often see them even when he was with others, lurking, waiting. Caroline was the safest guard against them. She embodied a full, happy marriage; a life together – countless memories, facts, events that the two had shared. Caroline had never seen the Grey People but she could banish them by her presence alone.

The keys were cut, the money parted with. There is only so long you can linger in a key-cutting shop. Malcolm reluctantly stepped out into the mall.

So far, so good. He was fiddling with his wallet, trying to fit his credit card into its place and keep the receipt from fluttering away, and not looking ahead. Then some instinct made him look up.

A fuzzy cloud of nothing was swooping down on him, eating up everything before it. The mall was gone already and the passers-by walked blindly into its oblivion. And there, at the front, were the Grey People, eagerly reaching out, delighted to welcome their old friend back.

He turned and broke into a run, round the corner of the mall towards the far end, and just beat them into the High Street. This was still old Salisbury, *Olde Worlde*, everything the Grey People hated, and they balked at the invisible barrier between them. They gestured angrily. Breathing heavily, Malcolm started at a quick walk the long way round back to *The Agora* and stopped in his tracks as grey began to spill out in front of him. It was moving along a line of sloppily-laid tarmac. The workman who had put that down hadn't thought about it, hadn't cared, and the Grey People were using his lack of spiritual commitment for their own gain. Now they lay between him and *The Agora*. They radiated glee at having him trapped.

Don't panic, think straight, don't panic, think straight. The grey haze lay across the street, but it wasn't moving. The Grey People were uncomfortable in the High Street. Then, slowly, the greyness began to move towards him again.

Malcolm turned about and his heart leapt. Ahead lay the gates into the cathedral close. That would show them. He began to walk, occasionally glancing behind him. The Grey People were approaching and stepping up speed; they could sense his plan and they were angry. Malcolm began to bump into people again, at first muttering 'sorry' and then not bothering.

The greyness was spreading down the sides of the street and he had to walk in the gutter as a compromise between avoiding his enemy and avoiding the oncoming traffic. The side streets, too, were tinged with nothingness.

Then he was approaching the gates. By now he was walking straight down the middle of the street, ignoring the cars, noticing with satisfaction how the Grey People were suffering from the closeness of the cathedral. Now the greyness was too insubstantial for a Grey Person to come close to him: its tendrils reached out for him from either side of the street but turned transparent, then disappeared entirely as the gates came closer. Then he was through the gates and into the cathedral close, and

the vast building's stone bulk was ahead of him. He shut his eyes and luxuriated in its glow of detail, of workmanship, then turned round and looked behind him. The Grey People had vanished.

Feeling weak at the knees, Malcolm found a telephone box and dialled The Agora's number.

'Agora Bookshop?'

'Hello, love, it's me. I'm holed up in the Close. Can you come and get me?'

There was silence. Then, 'Oh, dear, it's not-' Malcolm smiled as Caroline stopped, knowing that Ted was in earshot.

'Yes, it's them,' he said. 'They were in the mall. Ted wasn't to know.'

'All right,' said Caroline, 'I'm on my way. Give me five minutes.'

* * *

They had to wait for Ted to leave to discuss it, but the lad only had another hour to go that day. He seemed to sense their tension and when he bade them goodnight he appeared quite glad to go.

Malcolm insisted on making another cup of tea. Caroline couldn't wait that long.

'I thought we'd left them,' she said as Malcolm filled the kettle. Malcolm deliberately turned the tap off and plugged the kettle in before answering.

'We can't leave them, my love,' he said gently. 'They go where I go.'

'But-'

'I was over confident,' he said. 'That's all.' The Grey People had at least had to try to break in to the mall. Even though hundreds like it were popping up all over the country, it was impossible for the process to be done carelessly. The architects would have spent considerable time on the job; people would have spent time and attention on the aesthetics of the place; the whole thing was an effort by the city of Salisbury to smarten itself, to take pride in its appearance. What had let the Grey People in had been what was in the mall itself. No doubt the shops there also spent time and attention on their image, on their goods, on how to present themselves to the public, but the trap lay in the tools they used. He remembered the thumping bass that had pulsated out into the mall. The shops chose to make themselves special by turning to mediocrity.

'How can you ever be confident when you never know where they'll turn up?' she raged, whether at him, or at the Grey People who she had never seen, or at life in general, he didn't know. 'Why can't they be consistent?'

She had never seen them, but she had seen their effect on him. It had been on a field trip from Cambridge.

He had met and fallen in love with her as a postgraduate student, and she had interpreted his defences against the Grey People – his love for old things, good

workmanship, attention to detail – as endearing eccentricities. He hadn't mentioned his enemies and the two had had a comparatively normal relationship. After a year or so they began to drift apart and then, on a field trip, he had been careless and the Grey People had struck him down.

His skin still crawled at the memory. First, the cold, slick nothingness that enveloped him. Then, advancing out of the fog with joy on their faces, came the Grey People and they ate him – took away his thoughts, his memories, his identity.

Caroline had found and rescued him and nursed him back to normality. It wasn't immediately obvious how the Grey People had damaged him; it was only every now and then that gaps in his memory became apparent. Like when she had had to drive them back to Cambridge – he could remember the way but he had forgotten how to drive.

It was better than the first time they had got him, when he was just six. His distraught parents had picked him up from the hospital where the policeman who had found the wandering, dazed child had taken him. It was months before he was as back to normal as he ever came. But he had been hurt. He knew his name, he could walk and talk – other than that, his first six years of life had vanished forever.

But he remembered the Grey People. From then on, they had been his enemies. He hated them as only a six-year-old can.

They had stayed with him, all through his adolescence and teens and even in university, though they had had to fight hard to break into Cambridge. That being so, he had stayed there, knowing when he was on to a good thing. The academic life had suited him and he was offered a fellowship. He celebrated by marrying Caroline.

There were other attacks but they had only been close shaves – the Grey People had never again been able to get at him personally. He had a family – Caroline and the children, Diana and Gordon. His friends and colleagues (and Malcolm took care to associate with the kind of people who could keep the Grey People away). And a life full of a million little carefully wrought idiosyncrasies and habits.

But time passed, nothing stood still. Gordon and Diana had left home to start their own adult lives, friends had moved on and it had been time for a change. After thirty years, even Cambridge was becoming cosy and untenable, so the decision was made to up sticks and move themselves. Somewhere they would enjoy, yet somewhere sufficiently new to present a challenge, to keep them on their toes – to prevent them from letting down their guard.

'Look,' Malcolm said, 'you know what the Grey People are like-'

'I just know what you've found out and you admit you've made mistakes,' said Caroline. 'Supposing you're wrong this time? How do you know they won't find another loophole to get at you-'

'They won't, I promise, love,' Malcolm said. 'Now, I've thought about it, and I know how to make safeguards. For a start there's the shop layout . . .'

* * *

A magician used to warding off demons with occult signs and symbols might have recognised the layout of The Agora. Every area was guarded by carefully-positioned clusters of books that Malcolm Lloyd was certain would be anathema to the Grey People. They covered all subjects; Malcolm felt they added to the slightly ad hoc atmosphere that any good bookshop should have. What they had in common was their manufacture. They were the leather-bound volumes, hand-manufactured, printed on thick vellum. New or second-hand, relevant or completely out-of-date, Malcolm didn't care. They worked.

They were more than enough to balance the effect of the mass-produced paperbacks that actually brought in the money. Malcolm winced inwardly when he saw the rows of gleaming uncreased book spines in the paperback section. To counter them he had decided to open up a section for second-hand paperbacks as well, sensing that these would offer more resistance to the Grey People than copies fresh off the presses – books barely touched by human hand, never having had the love or commitment given to them by a reader that would invest them with that quality of bookness.

Opening day was approaching and Ted was working even harder on the computer, this time at a crateload of second-hands that had just come in. Malcolm had expected the computer to be a channel for the Grey People and had kept the area around it well protected with books, trusting in them and in Ted's precision and care to keep the Grey People well away from the machine; then Ted, quite of his own accord, had described software compilation to him. Thousands of lines of code, each one exactly right and in the proper place. The Grey People, Malcolm had decided, would come nowhere near something so carefully wrought as a computer program.

'You haven't half got some rubbish here, Mr Lloyd,' Ted said cheerfully.

'It pays the bills, Ted.' Malcolm came over to see what there was and had to agree. Lurid covers with implausible spaceships, dragons fighting it out with sultry and scantily-clad maidens. He peered further into the box and his heart pounded at a flash of grey.

'Maybe we should get rid of it all,' he said quickly. Ted frowned up at him.

'You've got some good stuff too, Mr Lloyd,' he said. Malcolm blinked again at the greyness and smiled to himself. Like a mouse in a cage, it was running around in the box but could not break out into the shop. There was nowhere near enough for a Grey Person to appear. The protection worked.

'Read a lot of it, do you?' he asked.

'Yeah, a bit.'

'Show me. Make a couple of piles, the good stuff and the bad.'

Malcolm came back some minutes later to inspect the results. One pile was significantly larger than the other and feelers of grey danced up and down it.

'That's the bad pile,' Ted said. Malcolm leaned casually against a shelf of rare first editions to earth himself.

'Pass me the one on top, will you?' Ted was too polite to register surprise at the request and passed up a title. Malcolm took it, ready to drop it immediately if the grey in it got out of control.

"Book Seven in the Epic Saga of the Cycle of . . ." he murmured, studying the cover, then glanced at the back. "The Evil God is slain and the King is restored to his throne, but now the Dark is rising once more and a young farm boy from the furthest corner of the Empire must face . . ." No wonder the last owner got rid of it.' He tossed it back on to the pile. 'Right, Ted, this lot can go straight out the back.'

Ted stared. 'You won't even try to sell it?'

'I wouldn't inflict it on anyone.' Malcolm could see the doubt in the boy's face and resorted to bribery. 'And, Ted, I appoint you Agora monitor for this kind of stuff. You get to approve every order we make and I only want to stock the good stuff. Agreed?'

'Hey, right!'

* * *

It was finished on a Friday. Caroline was out on some task and Malcolm was in the back room going through publishers' catalogues when he heard a cry of triumph from the front.

'The last one! That's the last one!'

Ted was dancing a jig around the piles of books; he stumbled and stopped with a foolish grin when his employer came through.

'Finished?' Malcolm said.

'Every last one, Mr Lloyd! Every last one! Aristotle to Zola. Arts to . . . Zoology. Um . . . Annuals to . . .'

'All right, all right. Let's see.'

Ted, still flushed with pride, looked on while Malcolm sat down at the computer and called up a few titles at random, just to show that he could. 'You've put a lot of work into this, Ted. Well done.'

'Thanks, Mr Lloyd.'

'In fact, I think a celebration is in order.' Malcolm pulled out his wallet and handed Ted a five pound note. 'You're over eighteen, aren't you? And there's an off-licence just round the corner, I think. I'll trust your judgement, and remember to get a receipt.'

'I'll be right back, Mr Lloyd.' Ted hurried out with the money and left Malcolm alone with the computer . . . the shop . . . the sanctuary.

He looked lovingly about him. Yes, it really was going to be all right. All the care and attention he and Caroline and Ted had put in . . . this was it.

He turned back to the computer and his fingers played over the keyboard at random. He glanced up at the screen and screamed as the Grey People welled out and took him.

* * *

Grey covered him and he floated in its vileness while they came at him, ecstatic at having him in their grasp once more. They touched his clothes and his clothes rotted away. Their hands played over him and his skin began to dissolve. They reached through him, through his blood vessels, through the layers of muscle and fat, deep, deep down into the heart of Malcolm Lloyd.

They reached into his brain and started work on who he was, peeling away his identity like layers of an onion. Biting down the panic that made him want to give up and give in, he recited what he knew, anything at all, keeping it active in his mind where they couldn't get at it.

'I'm . . . Malcolm Lloyd. M-Malcolm . . . *Arthur* Lloyd. B- born . . . born . . . September . . .'

It vanquished Descartes. *Cogito ergo sum* had no meaning here because, though he might indeed think, his thoughts were as a baby's. Meaningless, uncomprehending. Unimportant. Insignificant.

He felt the cold start at his extremities and work inwards and, like Socrates with his hemlock, he knew that when the cold reached his heart he would be nothing. Malcolm Lloyd would be gone.

It cleared in patches, like mist. Vision returned through rapidly shrinking patches of grey.

('Malcolm!')

He saw whiteness. Dirty whiteness. He stared up at the ceiling, aware of something nearer his eyes.

A face. A person. Love. Warmth. Familiar.

('Malcolm!')

His lips moved.

'C . . . Ca-'

She helped him up. He was lying flat on the floor, his feet still up on the chair. He had fallen over backwards as the Grey People rushed out at him. There were tears in her eyes.

'It was them again, wasn't it?' she said. He nodded. 'They got in, didn't they? But how . . .?'

‘S’okay,’ he mumbled. He felt strength returning as he drew on Caroline’s own energy.

‘It is not okay! We . . . we sell everything, we buy this place, we come for sanctuary, somewhere we can be at peace and yet they’re still here . . .’

She trailed off and looked up. Malcolm gingerly moved his head and saw a young man standing in the doorway, staring at them with round eyes. A bottle wrapped in green tissue paper dangled from one hand.

The boy was in his late teens or early twenties, of average height. His hair was gelled and he wore a T-shirt and jeans and trainers. All this Malcolm took in at once. He had no idea who the newcomer actually was.

‘What’s happening?’ the boy asked.

‘Malcolm’s had a kind of turn,’ Caroline said, ‘but he’s better now.’

He knows my first name, Malcolm thought. I should know him.

‘Oh no! Can I help? I’ll call an ambulance or-’

‘No, no,’ Malcolm croaked. He held up a hand. ‘Help me up, that’s all.’

Together they got him into a chair. ‘Are you sure you’re all right, Mr Lloyd?’ the boy asked.

‘Take the rest of the day off, um . . .’ Malcolm gave up trying to remember the name. ‘Yes, take the rest of the day off and I’ll be fine in the morning. I promise.’

* * *

‘Ted,’ Malcolm said. The name rang no bells at all.

‘He’s done so much for us, dear,’ said Caroline. ‘We met his parents at that drinks party.’

‘Drinks party?’

‘Oh, Malcolm . . .’

Malcolm shrugged. ‘I’m sorry.’ He stood up and paced around the room. Then he went out into the front room of the shop and looked about him. Caroline followed. ‘You’ll be glad to know I remember all this,’ Malcolm said. ‘It’s The Agora, and I remember thinking how safe it was from the Grey People. So, why isn’t it?’ He walked back to the computer. ‘It’s this bloody machine, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘It-’

‘No, not that,’ Caroline said. ‘You told me you’d decided it was safe. Something to do with software.’

‘Really?’ Malcolm looked surprised. ‘Okay, it’s not the computer. It’s not you or me. It’s not the books. Ergo, it must be-’

‘Malcolm, no!’

‘Ted.’

'No!' Caroline said. 'Malcolm, he can't be! You've always said how pleased you are with him. You said he was careful, and . . . and meticulous, and . . . and everything the Grey People aren't.'

'I liked him?'

'You liked him a lot. He's . . . he's a *good boy*, Malcolm. Malcolm, I'm sorry, but it was you.'

'It was not!'

'Shut up and listen, Malcolm Lloyd. Malcolm, for the last thirty years you've been surrounded by . . . by a kind of unofficial bodyguard, you know who I mean, and now it's just me. You know that-' She tapped her head '-up here but you don't feel it. You're still living as if all the others were around you, and they aren't. You got careless. You were so convinced you were safe, you let your mental guard down, and look what happened.'

Malcolm said nothing.

'Malcolm, we need to start recruiting a new bodyguard, now, and Ted should be the first.'

'Ted?' Malcolm said. 'Darling, he's . . . he's young. He may be a good boy, maybe I liked him, but . . .'

'But?' Caroline said.

'He's . . . he's . . . young.' Malcolm still couldn't think of a word that better conveyed his objections.

'You were young once.' The argument didn't seem to impress Caroline. 'I've seen your birth certificate.'

'Okay, put it this way.' Malcolm was collecting his thoughts. 'Our friends back home – sorry, back in Cambridge – they were . . . they were our sort of people, Caroline. And our sort of age. They'd been through life, they knew its ups and downs and slings and arrows, they'd been knocked about a bit. They knew life and they savoured it and they enjoyed it.'

'And Ted doesn't?'

'They had experience, darling. They were on their guard, they didn't let things past them, they-' Malcolm waved a hand in frustration. It was so clear to him. 'They'd grown up. Ted has plenty of potential but he still has some growing to do.'

'I see.' It looked as if he was finally getting through to her. Caroline stood with her arms folded, gazing at the floor. 'Well, dear, Ted's the only one we have, and if he needs to do some growing, if he needs to be knocked about a bit, we've got to start now.'

Malcolm held her gaze for a moment, then looked away. 'Oh, no,' he murmured.

* * *

There were tears in Ted's eyes too, the next morning. 'But . . . have I done anything, Mr Lloyd? Is it something wrong-'

'Ted, Ted, you've done nothing wrong, nothing at all,' Malcolm said. It helped that he didn't remember the boy, but he could see it was hurting and he knew the pain that Caroline was feeling, and both those things stung him. 'You'd have to go soon, anyway, when term starts,' he said. 'We're just letting you go a month early. You're young and you should have a life, not be stuck here all the time. You should be out with your friends and your girlfriend. Look, you won't lose out.' He held up a cheque. 'A month's extra pay, and a bonus on top of that, for all the great help you've given us. And, next holidays, there's bound to be a job for you here.'

'If you're sure . . . ?'

'I'm sure, Ted, really.'

'I mean, I could at least finish the day . . . ?' Ted was beginning to sound desperate. 'There's the catalogue to set, and . . . ?'

'It's okay, Ted.' Malcolm tried to spare him the humility of pleading and used the tone which he had used on students to indicate that no further argument was needed or wanted. He saw Ted bite his lip as the realisation finally sank in: he really wasn't wanted any more. Just like that.

'Right,' Ted said. A pause. 'I'll . . . I'll be off, then.' He tried to be cheerful, disastrously. 'I'll see you.'

'Remember your cheque, Ted.'

'Oh. Yes. Thanks.' They looked at each other for a long moment. 'Well, 'bye,' Ted said, and left. Malcolm turned and went slowly into the back room. Caroline stood and put her arms round him and they held each other, tight.

'God, that hurt,' Malcolm said.

He could see it from Ted's point of view, but he could see further ahead as well. Two people that the young man had come to regard as friends, who he trusted and who were clearly fond of him in return, had abruptly turned round and slapped him in the face; but he had always regarded them as slightly cracked and perhaps, in the boy's mind, that explained it all. It would add to his character, as pain and hurt always did; it would help him develop and mature and grow as a bulwark against the Grey People. If he came through this then he would be fit for Malcolm's bodyguard.

'It won't last,' Caroline said.

'Doesn't make it any easier.'

That evening, Caroline would go round to Ted's house. She would explain that Malcolm was still affected by his 'turn'. He wasn't thinking straight or behaving normally. But they did want him, they did value his services, and Caroline had talked Malcolm back to reason. So, would he come back? And then it would be up to Ted. If

he could swallow his pride, if he could forgive the hurt, wonderful. And after what had happened today, he would always be on his guard. He would always be careful.

If not-

Que sera. Either way, Malcolm would win. If he came back, that was one more for the bodyguard. If he didn't, then the pain of the sacrifice Malcolm had made would hurt the Grey People. They certainly wouldn't be expecting that.

He looked out of the window at Canal Street. This was the new battleground. 'I'm going to get you, you bastards,' he murmured. 'Watch me come.'