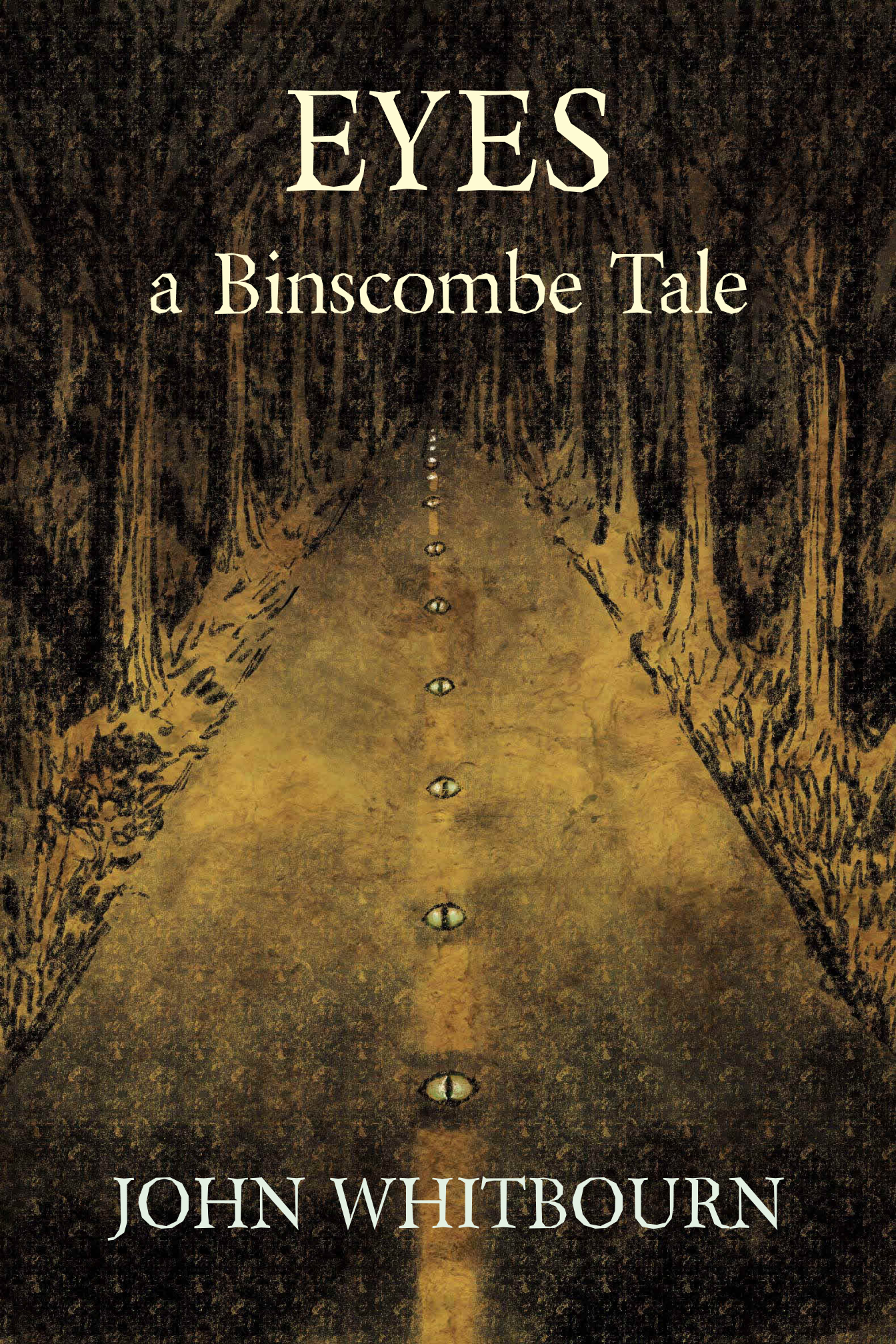


EYES

a Binscombe Tale



JOHN WHITBOURN

“It has been said that the Angel of Death is all eyes...”

A happy face peered round the door of the Argyll, seeking the landlord’s attention.

‘Is it all right if I bring the kids in?’ asked the man.

The landlord looked to left and right, as if the forces of licensing oppression were poised outside ready to strike.

‘Course you can—but if the polis arrive, then out of the back door quickly, if you please. There’s my license to think about.’

The man entered, cheerfulness (or was it relief?) still shining from every pore. In the decently subdued atmosphere of the Argyll, such expressions seemed almost improper and it soon worked upon him to tone down the joy level.

The other very noticeable thing about the visitor was that he was not alone. In his arms he carried a baby, asleep and bundled up in a space suit arrangement of clashing primary colours. Close behind came a young lady of sixteen or so, whose features suggested a blood relationship with the happy man rather than anything more interesting. Speaking of her features, I also managed to note both her painful beauty and the wolfish, protective devotion to the man that shone in her sloe-eyes.

Mr Disvan registered my sudden awakening of interest and waved an admonitory finger.

‘Not for you, Mr Oakley,’ he said, as gently as he could. ‘She deserves better than that—and you couldn’t handle the trouble.’

As usual, any protest on my part at this implied slur on my morals and/or courage, was cut short by more pressing developments.

The happy man and his family (?) came up to our table. He grabbed Disvan’s right hand and pumped it furiously.

‘I can’t ever thank you enough,’ he said, with deep feeling. ‘I’m forever in your debt.’

Everyone was staring at us and Mr Disvan was clearly discomfited by the scene. He extricated his hand from the happy man’s death-grip with some difficulty.

Despite Disvan’s warning, I was still appraising the girl but, on reaching the level of her eyes, I desisted. Whilst clearly just as grateful to Mr Disvan, she was now looking about for fresh threats to her father. The backwash of dangerous energy I caught from her glance made me reconsider the plans I’d laid. She was obviously a girl to watch—but not in the sense that I’d been doing.

‘There’s nothing to thank me for,’ said Mr Disvan briskly, eager to be out of this. ‘Nothing at all.’

The happy man shook his head and the girl fixed Disvan with a look I was glad not to be receiving.

‘Nothing? You saved our lives, more or less. I hardly call that nothing!’

Mr Disvan still refused to accept responsibility for the happy man’s continued survival.

‘All I did was listen to you,’ he said, ‘and then suggest the obvious. A commonsense suggestion, that’s all I provided. However, if you’re so keen to be obliged, why don’t you go and buy me a drink and we’ll call it quits. How about that?’

A certain natural English desire to remain in the background played a large part in forming Mr Disvan’s reaction, but

I detected something else. There was a feature of what was going on that greatly disturbed him—something more profound than embarrassment. I had intended to probe this suspicion when the happy man was at the bar. However, instead of leaving us alone for the moment, as Disvan had doubtless intended, the man stayed put whilst his daughter (?) rushed off to perform the task for him.

I had the distinct impression that the little family unit before us was a well-oiled machine, communicating by telepathy and dedicated to a single objective—like a Bedouin sub-tribe, only without the knives (as far as I could tell).

Mr Disvan appeared to give in to the inevitable. ‘Mr Oakley,’ he said, ‘allow me to introduce you to Mr Edmund Maccabi. That’s Joseph, his son, he’s holding and Bridget, his daughter, up at the bar.’

I stood up and we shook hands. ‘I believe I’ve seen you around the village, Mr Maccabi,’ I said, by way of getting a normal conversation going, ‘but I don’t recall you visiting the Argyll before.’

Maccabi was suddenly rather grave.

‘No, you wouldn’t have, Mr Oakley,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid my wife passed away about a year ago. Before that, I was always busy working. Now looking after the family takes all my time. I used to come in here when I was younger, but it’s not possible now.’

He seemed a personable enough sort of man and I conceded that perhaps his earlier excitability was the product of some momentous event, and therefore excusable.

Possibly he read my mind for, as his daughter returned, thoughtfully carrying a tray of drinks, he turned to me and said, ‘I hope you’ll excuse the fuss just now, Mr Oakley. I’m not always like that, you understand. It’s just that the last few weeks have been a real trial to us and today was a great deliverance.’

Mr Disvan raised his eyebrows as if to suggest surprise at this disclosure. A moment followed when no one knew what to say. I was uncomfortably aware that the girl had rejoined us and had, sipping at a glass of shandy, again fixed those eyes of infinite possibility upon me.

The final straw was that even Joseph, the baby, woke up and stared at me. I was obliged to take the plunge.

‘If you’ll excuse me asking,’ I said, inwardly questioning the wisdom of curiosity, ‘what was it you had to thank Mr Disvan for?’

Mr Maccabi thought his response through before replying. He was clearly not ordinarily a glib spinner of tales.

‘Just advice, really,’ he said finally, setting down his pint of Guinness, ‘like Mr Disvan said. Very important advice, mind you. It saved six lives this morning, including our own.’

I knew that Disvan was a man of many accomplishments, but this was more than usually worthy of note.

‘Well, congratulations!’ I said to Mr Disvan. ‘Why didn’t you mention it earlier? We could have done with the conversation.’

It was true. That particular Saturday dinnertime at the Argyll had not been a festival of stimulation. Things were so quiet that the landlord had been allowed to start on his monologue about the shortcomings of brewery managers—and then silence was found to be preferable to that.

‘I didn’t mention it,’ said Disvan, ‘because I didn’t know. Simple as that.’

‘I’d been having these dreams, you see,’ said Mr Maccabi helpfully, just as the thread of conversation was about to slip from our fingers again. ‘They were pretty distressing and, whilst the meaning was clear as day, I didn’t know whether to believe them—or what to do in any case.’

‘Then I remembered my father asking Mr Disvan for assistance years back,

when we had those mysterious tappings in the attic. Not only that, but he was a tower of strength when my Amy passed away. He sorted out all the admin and paperwork at a time when I just wasn't up to it.'

Mr Disvan in the role of good Samaritan and social worker was a new concept to me, and not altogether credible. We could all see, however, that he was far from pleased to be unmasked, and the subject was left undeveloped.

'Anyway,' Mr Maccabi continued, 'I asked Mr Disvan to pop round to see if he had any suggestions to make...'

Disvan butted in, apparently keen to bring matters to a brisk conclusion. 'Mr Maccabi kept dreaming that he and his family were in a bus queue, waiting to go to Goldenford, with three other people...'

'A mother and child and a chap going to work,' said Maccabi.

'Whatever. But when the bus turned up, it went out of control and ploughed into the queue, presumably killing everyone. Mr Maccabi said it was so vivid, it had to be more than merely a dream. Not only that, but he was intending to make just such a journey in the near future. And all I advised was that he and his family, being forewarned, shouldn't be there to be run over.'

'Ah yes, but that's not all,' added Mr Maccabi, addressing his comments to me. That, I agree, was just commonsense. Why I'm really obliged to Mr Disvan is that he went on to explain we still had to catch the bus to Goldenford that morning because that was also ordained. If we'd just not turned up, things would have got all twisted. It might have meant the accident was merely postponed and the bus would catch us some other time when we weren't expecting it.'

Mr Disvan didn't seem happy with this. 'I put it a little more subtly than that, Mr Oakley. I seem to recall speaking about the concept of *wyrd*, the threads of fate and so on.'

'Yes,' agreed Mr Maccabi, 'there was a lot of superstition mixed in there but the majority of it was sound.'

Mr Disvan rested his head on his hand and looked away.

'Anyway,' Maccabi continued blithely, 'I gave it a lot of thought and decided to confront the prediction on the ground it'd chosen. We turned up at the right time but, beforehand, I'd rung the bus depot. I'd said there was a serious fault on the Binscombe bus. Unfortunately, they wouldn't believe me at first. I heard someone say "we've got a right loony here" and then they hung up.'

'I had to ring back and say I'd got into the depot the night before and tampered with the brakes, the steering, you name it. The next stage was to say the Binscombe Liberation Front, or someone, had planted a bomb on it but luckily it didn't come to that.'

'They must have taken a look at the bus and found out whatever the fault was. Either way, when the bus turned up, it wasn't the one I saw in my dreams but an older, replacement vehicle. It rolled up, stopped safely and took us to Goldenford.'

'A tragedy averted and six people saved,' said Bridget Maccabi. Her voice was like the crack of a playful whip.

'Precisely. So that's the end of that,' her father agreed, and toasted the supposed agent of their salvation. 'Here's to you, Mr Disvan!'

I looked at Disvan and saw at once that he was harbouring doubts so far unexpressed. I was wondering what these might be, when a noise from across the table distracted me.

Mr Maccabi had stood up with a strangled cry. He was staring in horror at his pint of Guinness on the table.

'What's the mat—' I started to ask.

Maccabi didn't seem to hear me. He lunged at the drink and began a furious search of the glass's contents with his fingers. Great gouts of Guinness flew

everywhere, covering our party and the surrounding area.

The landlord, who hated seeing good beer go to waste and who liked seeing it on his floor even less, shouted a non-sense assessment of events at Mr Maccabi, but he took no notice.

Bridget Maccabi was on her feet and I thought her gaze would shatter the unoffending glass.

When less than a third of a pint remained to distribute, Mr Maccabi seemed to come to. He looked at the damp and sticky havoc he'd caused and silently appealed to us for sympathy. We all remained silent, not knowing yet whether we ought to give it.

'There was an eye in there,' he said, to no one in particular. 'Honestly—an eye—floating in the beer. It blinked at me!'

He returned to staring into the glass and shook his head sadly. His voice became softer and more reflective.

'Really, there was an eye,' he said. 'It was looking at me.'

'Alas no,' said Mr Disvan, finding an age-old lampshade suddenly fascinating in his attempt to avoid Mr Maccabi's face. 'It was looking *for* you.'

* * *

'Dad needs to see you,' said Bridget Maccabi. 'Now, please.'

The request seemed to dispense with actually consulting our brains and cut in at some reflex level. We found ourselves rising to answer the call before really considering it.

A mere minute or two after entering the Argyll, Bridget Maccabi had prised Mr Disvan and myself out and was ushering us down the street. I was going to compensate for this brutal herding by some jocular comment about Bo-peep and sheep but a cautious look at those black, flashing eyes caused me to reconsider.

In fact Mr Maccabi did need to see

us—or someone at least. He looked in terrible shape. In the three days since we'd last seen him, rings under his eyes had grown and joined together to simulate mascara. He was chain-smoking with suicidal ferocity and glanced about like an American tourist in Beirut.

Despite the evident state of emergency, civilisation in the Maccabi household had not yet fallen. He welcomed us in and arranged for tea or coffee to be brought. It was clear, however, that Mr Maccabi was anxious to get to business. Mr Disvan seemed happy to go along with that.

'What is it that we can do for you?' he asked.

'I just want you to look at something,' Maccabi replied, looking fixedly at the glowing tip of his cigarette. 'First of all, anyway.'

He got up and, moving to one corner of the living room, lifted up the edge of the carpet.

'I thought,' he said, 'or hoped, that the scratching might be mice. But when I investigated... well, this...'

He pointed to what appeared to be a knot in one of the floorboards.

Mr Disvan went to the spot. I was going to remain safely where I was but, at that moment, Bridget Maccabi re-entered the room with a tray of cups and, for some silly reason, I felt obliged to go and join the two men.

I found that Disvan had removed a mirror from the wall and was holding it over the area indicated by Maccabi. Maccabi himself was puzzled.

'Why don't you just look?' he asked.

Mr Disvan didn't reply immediately. He continued to experiment with the angle of the mirror until we were given a clear, bird's eye view of that section of floor.

There was indeed a knot-hole clean through the bare floorboard. Through it, from some dark space beneath the house,

an eye starred up at us, or so it appeared. Entranced, we watched it for some time. The eye was alive and active. It blinked and looked from side to side, as if searching into the room.

Mr Disvan was the first to break the silence. 'This is for you, I'm afraid,' he said, 'and it's for the best that others don't draw themselves to its attention. I should put the carpet down now.'

Mr Maccabi let the edge drop back into place. In a fit of fury, he ground his heel into the spot where the eye should be. We heard no response to this assault.

Mr Disvan had already re-seated himself and was spooning sugar into his tea. He motioned for us to join him.

Bridget served everyone with ginger-nuts that no one really wanted and then went to bring Joseph down to complete the gathering. The biscuits were surreptitiously passed on to the baby when Bridget's gaze was elsewhere.

'What else?' asked Disvan simply,

Mr Maccabi, a good way towards the end of his tether, leaned back in his chair, his hands linked behind his head, and looked into space.

'Eyes everywhere,' he said wearily, 'and note the plural. Prying eyes peering at us from every nook and cranny, through chinks in the curtain and keyholes—even floating in my cornflakes on one occasion! I don't doubt there's one in my cup of coffee if I could bring myself to check.'

By an effort of will, I avoided looking to see if this was true.

'To put it mildly, Mr Disvan, we're under observation.'

Disvan silently concurred.

'But they're not the only irritation,' Maccabi continued. 'I've started to hear whispering. I can't tell what they're saying, but I know it's about me.'

Disvan and I exchanged a covert glance which, swift as it was, was registered by Bridget Maccabi.

'It's true' she said. 'So listen!'

We did so. Mr Maccabi appeared unaware of the interruption. He was lighting a new cigarette from the expiring corpse of another.

'Only last night,' he said, 'I went into the kitchen and, even above the noise of the howling wind and rain, I could hear them whispering—two or three different voices, just outside the window. I went up to the blind and I wanted to lift it aside and see what they looked like. But I didn't. I just locked the back door and they went silent when they heard the noise. I know it was a bit cowardly of me but...'

We nodded our understanding. Mine, at least, was entirely genuine.

'When I left the kitchen and turned the light off, it was like a signal. The hissing and whispering started up again. Now, it hardly ever lets up. Eyes and whispering, whispering and eyes. I tell you, Mr Disvan, they're everywhere—in the empty spaces of the house—all of the quiet gaps in life.'

'We can also hear it on the baby intercom gadget,' said Bridget Maccabi, matter of factly. 'You know, the link-up with the baby's room that lets us know if Joe's awake or not. I've heard him answering their noises. But when I run up there, there's never anything to be seen. That concerns me, Mr Disvan. What sort of things are being said to him?'

Disvan shrugged. 'And then there's the shadows that aren't quite right—I mean that are too dark or fast or just the wrong shape. What are they?'

'But just about the worst thing of all,' said Mr Maccabi, rejoining the testimony session, 'is this.'

He pointed at his son.

Joseph was sitting on the floor, silent and engrossed in a way that year-old infants usually aren't for extended periods. Mouth open, he was tracking some invisible object around the room.

Bridget was nodding to confirm our

suspicions.

‘It’s going on all the time,’ she said. ‘All of a sudden, he’ll go out of phase with us. There’s something that holds his attention and won’t let go.’

Mr Disvan, who had an infinite store of kind feeling for children, leaned forward and flicked his fingers in front of the child’s face. Even he appeared concerned at the lack of reaction it produced.

Mr Maccabi steeled himself to sip his coffee. It was, apparently, eyeless.

‘Well?’ he said.

Mr Disvan’s interest was still on the baby. At that precise moment, it fell free of whatever glamour had been in operation and returned to noisy play with soggy biscuits and a doleful furry bear.

Disvan sighed and seemed to have to force himself to reply to Maccabi.

‘“It has been said”,’ he announced, ‘that the Angel of Death is all eyes’.

‘Pardon?’ I asked, on behalf of all.

‘It’s a quote from Judaic scripture, Mr Oakley. Abodah Zarah, verse 20.’

I had still to make the connection. ‘What about it? I mean, Mr Disvan, is this the time or place to start discussing religion when...’

‘Shut up, Mr Oakley,’ said Bridget Maccabi. I did so.

‘Do you mean,’ she continued, ‘that those eyes belong to...’

Disvan nodded.

Mr Maccabi took the blow manfully. ‘And?’ he said.

‘Well,’ replied Disvan in measured tones, ‘that depends. Do you want the bad news, or the really bad news?’

The Maccabi response was speedy and surprisingly resolute given the circumstances.

‘Neither. We want help!’

Bridget Maccabi signified her solidarity with this stand.

‘Ah, well,’ said Disvan, somewhat more cheerfully, ‘it’s help you want, is it?’

Now, that requires a degree of thought and some time. If you’ll bear with me, I’ll see what I can do.’

He rose and, with almost indecent haste, made to leave. I naturally followed suite. The Maccabis, while hardly placated, seemed to have a touching faith in Disvan’s limitless powers of intercession. Bridget saw us out while her father cautiously investigated a long-stemmed vase that had aroused his suspicions. It too turned out to be, for the moment, an eye-free zone.

Needless to say, the questions had been relentlessly building up in me and, as the Maccabi door closed behind us, I turned to unleash them on Mr Disvan.

He stopped me in my verbal tracks by raising his hand, like some flustered, disillusioned traffic policeman.

‘Don’t even ask, Mr Oakley,’ he said, with all the very considerable firmness he could muster. ‘Things will just have to take their course, that’s all.’

* * *

A week passed. Then, one evening, a wretched looking Mr Maccabi sought us out in the Argyll.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘tell me the bad news first.’

For a moment, Mr Disvan looked doubtful about whether to do so. However, this rare internal debate was only a short process. His jaw set, and Mr Maccabi visibly braced himself for what he was about to receive.

‘The bad news is,’ said Disvan, ‘that I can’t help.’

‘Can anyone?’ asked Bridget Maccabi.

Again, there was just the flicker of uncertainty in the Disvan visage.

‘Er... possibly. In fact, yes, very probably—but we’ll come on to that later.’

Humanitarian motives moved me to go to the bar and buy Mr Maccabi a large brandy. When I returned, I found that he was recounting another episode from his

tribulations. The cigarettes were being consumed fast and furious.

‘They really mean business now, whoever they are,’ he was saying. ‘Last night I heard a noise in Joseph’s room. When I went in, there was a sort of “child shape”, dancing round his cot and looking in. You couldn’t see any detail, it was just a kind of gap in the darkness—but it was definitely a child. Standing alongside was a larger figure and I somehow knew that it was the child’s mother. She was just standing there and looking at me. There was real menace, Mr Disvan, real ill-intent. You couldn’t mistake it for anything else.’

‘What happened?’ I asked, alarmed for the baby’s sake.

‘The noise must have woken Bridget as well. She went charging past me, into the room, waving a carving knife, and the shapes simply vanished.’

Speaking for myself, I didn’t blame them.

Mr Maccabi knitted his brows and tried to see to the bottom of the brandy that he’d snatched from my hands.

‘Do you know what I think?’ he said. ‘I think that those shapes are the woman and child whose lives we saved from the bus crash. The two things are connected somehow...’

Mr Disvan made signs of agreement.

‘I’ve got it!’ shouted Maccabi. ‘The woman’s a witch and she’s put a spell on me... for some reason,’ he tailed off weakly.

‘Would it were so straightforward,’ said Mr Disvan. ‘That we could deal with. No, you were right to begin with. Those shapes and the people in the queue are connected, but not in the way you think.’

Mr Maccabi picked up his pack of cigarettes and, finding it was empty, threw it, Henry VIII style, over his shoulder. The landlord gave him a very black look indeed but desisted from commenting. In common with all the other people in the bar, he realised that

something very serious was being discussed. A force field of privacy was allowed to form around us.

Maccabi found a fresh pack and scabbled the wrapper off.

‘They’re ghosts of the future,’ said Disvan suddenly, ‘ghosts that should be but aren’t yet. That’s why you couldn’t see any detail. They’re only potential ghosts.’

Mr Maccabi shook his head, uncomprehending.

‘All right,’ said Mr Disvan, sounding a little disappointed at our slowness, ‘I’ll spell it out. They’re gaps, in the truest sense of the word, in the universe. They’re spaces, or a diversion of energies if you like, prepared by Death, which were to be filled by the bus crash victims. However, because Mr Maccabi was forewarned, he caused a shortfall in Death’s daily quota. Those “gaps” Death had prepared weren’t filled up, and now they’re running around free.’

Mr Maccabi felt moved to protest. ‘But you...’

Disvan was remorseless and determined that not an iota of doubt about Maccabi’s tormentors should remain in our minds.

‘They are, in fact,’ he interrupted, ‘the very worst sort of ghost—unspecified, undirected and unresolved. They’ve no memories, no role and no story. They’re completely free agents who go where and do what they want. Unfortunately for you, what they seem to want is revenge for their non-existence.’

‘Revenge on me?’ asked Maccabi, with commendable firmness.

‘Seems that way,’ Disvan agreed lightly. ‘Not only that, but Death doesn’t appear to accept your change of its plans. It wants to have a word with you and make you stick to the script—as you will observe.’

Mr Disvan gestured towards the window and, for the split second before I averted my gaze, I saw that a reddish eye

was peering in through a chink in the curtains. It might just have been a rather nose-y (and strange) person outside but I was inclined to doubt that. Disvan leaned over and pulled the curtains fully to. Overcome by powerful emotions, Mr Maccabi lit another cigarette, unaware that he already had one in his mouth.

‘Well, I’ll tell you something else,’ he said, his voice shaking a bit at first but then painfully regaining its composure, ‘Death is also getting a touch impatient. It’s calling in accomplices.’

Mr Disvan somehow gave the impression that that was only to be expected.

‘I got up very early this morning,’ Maccabi went on, ‘because I couldn’t sleep. I thought I might as well have a bath. There I was, lolling back in the water, half dozing, when I happened to look up at the opaque panel in the door. A white shape suddenly sort of slid up and pressed itself to the glass. It was a face, trying to see in. The image was all broken up and angular, of course, because of the type of glass, but I recognised my Amy, all the same. My wife’s been gone nearly a year, Mr Disvan, but now she’s been made to come back!’

Mr Maccabi staggered on haphazardly, almost but not quite breaking down.

‘We didn’t say anything, but the way she looked at me was... different. She hadn’t returned to see me, that much was clear. I think she’s come to get the children to be with her—wherever that is. There was no love in the look she gave me, I can tell you. Something must happen to people’s feelings beyond the grave...’

We stayed decently silent. Poor Mr Maccabi had now lost his wife, not once but twice.

‘And then she floated away,’ he said softly. ‘I felt like putting my head under the water and going to her, whether she

wanted me or not. But would I then be like her and have no heart?’

Mr Disvan tried to sound comforting, but with so little experience of the technique, it was an uphill struggle for him.

‘Who can say, Mr Maccabi? Perhaps it was only a facsimile of her, or perhaps she was just obeying orders...’

I prayed that the landlord hadn’t heard this, or at least wouldn’t intervene with his favourite argument that orders were no defence, as proved at Nuremberg in 1945. Fortunately, my faithless prayers were answered.

‘No, it was her,’ said Maccabi with great finality. ‘So now I don’t even have her memory to live for.’

Quite abruptly, his tone became almost aggressive. ‘Tell me, Disvan, why didn’t you warn me about all this?’

‘To what cause?’ answered Mr Disvan, entirely unperturbed. ‘It might not have turned out this way. Death can sometimes be diverted or have its plans changed. In the event, and sad to say, Death has decided in your case to be stubborn. Similarly, not all “potential ghosts” make so little use of their freedom as your set, haunting their creator. You’ve just been a bit unlucky, that’s all.’

I thought that this might be moment when Mr Maccabi chose to tear someone’s head off but, contrary to expectation, he calmed down. Strangest of all, he seemed to have accepted Mr Disvan’s Binscombe logic.

‘After all,’ Disvan continued, as reasonably as before, ‘if I’d told you there were risks associated with the advice I gave, would you have dutifully turned up with your family to be run over? Wouldn’t you still have taken the chance?’

Maccabi pondered this point for some while and then drained his glass of brandy to the dregs.

‘Fair enough,’ he said. ‘So what’s the

solution?’

Mr Disvan smiled. ‘Well, that’s the very bad news I mentioned. There isn’t a solution.’

‘Ah...’ said Mr Maccabi slowly.

Disvan pressed on regardless.

‘As your commonsense should tell you, Death can be postponed—but not avoided. It’s the same as if you eat moderately, do a bit of exercise, practise “safe sex” and so on. You might live a bit longer, but not for ever. Like all the others who eat, drink and indulge their fleshly inclinations to excess, you’ll die eventually. You see the principle?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Maccabi in a very world-weary voice.

‘Well, it’s no different from the way you’ve tried to evade Death’s call. It was a brave try, but all the ducking and weaving hasn’t done any good. Death, so to speak, has its eye on you.’

Mr Maccabi and I looked, involuntarily, towards the window.

‘To put it in a nutshell, Mr Maccabi,’ said Disvan, leaning forward conspiratorially, ‘Death will have its way. I shouldn’t be too upset. You’re only going on a bit earlier than the rest of us, that’s all.’

‘Fine,’ commented Maccabi bitterly, ‘and to think that I was worrying about it!’

‘However,’ said Disvan, pausing for dramatic effect, ‘Death is also sometimes merciful—when repentance is sincere.’

Mr Maccabi clearly saw a tiny light of hope amidst the all encompassing gloom.

‘What do you mean exactly?’

‘Well, what if you were to say you were sorry to have tried to flaunt Death’s wishes? What if you were to agree to go along with them? Assuming the Grim Reaper intends that accident to happen, come what may, what if you were willing to be there to meet it?’

‘And be run over?’ I said incredulously.

‘And be run over,’ Disvan confirmed.

‘Are you saying,’ said Maccabi, a note of enthusiasm in his voice, ‘that if I face

the accident, Death might spare Bridget and Joseph?’

Apparently, Disvan was saying this. ‘Precisely. Assuming you join a queue and a few other people die with you, those “gaps” you’ve seen would be filled as planned, so there’d be no more hauntings. The shortfall in Death’s quota would be made up, save for a school-girl and a baby—which is to say, as near as makes no difference. Death would be happy, you’d be happy—albeit dead. In the circumstances, it sounds a reasonable compromise.’

Mr Maccabi nodded gravely.

‘It’s a good deal,’ he said. ‘I’ll take it.’

I was about to express my liberal humanist horror at the bargain that was being struck. My intentions were, however, changed by Maccabi crossing to the window and drawing the curtains. We then saw that the Angel of Death was indeed, all eyes.

‘I accept,’ said Mr Maccabi. ‘Are we in business?’

The eyes winked. Maccabi then mercifully shut out the view.

‘Mr Disvan, will you look after the children?’ he asked without turning back from the window to face us.

‘Of course,’ Disvan replied instantly.

‘As soon as she’s old enough, Bridget wants to join the Israeli Army.’

‘I’ll arrange it,’ said Disvan. ‘I have a good friend at the embassy.’

‘What about Joseph?’

‘Don’t worry. Mr Bretwalda has adopted several orphans; he’ll more than welcome another, believe me. Not only that, but I’ll watch over the boy all the days of his life.’

Once again, Mr Maccabi nodded his approval. He coughed nervously and checked his watch.

‘Good. Well, then, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I think I’ll be off. I have a bus to catch.’

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