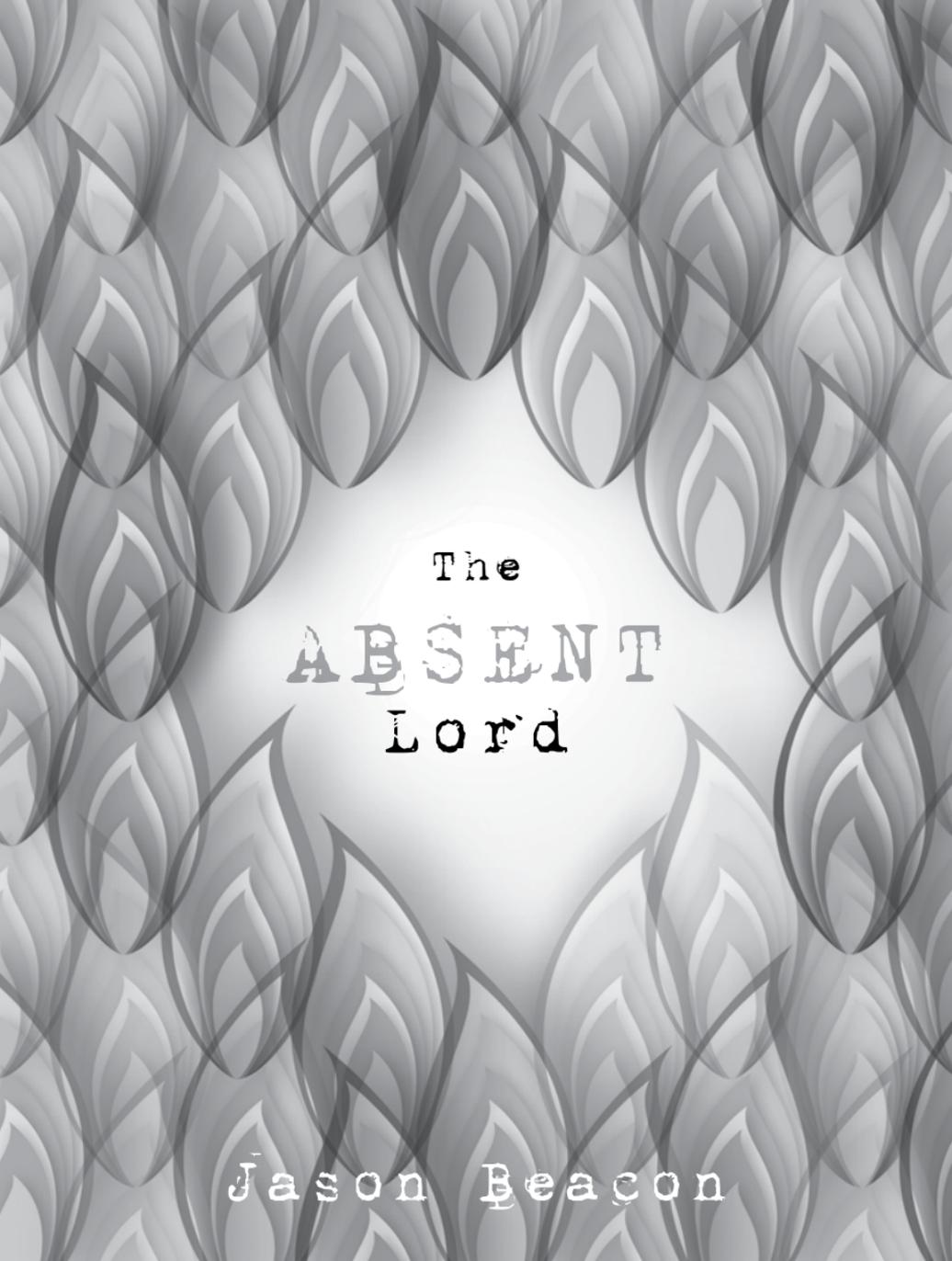


The  
A B S E N T  
L o r d

Not *exactly*  
a Novel

Jason Beacon



The  
**ABSENT**  
Lord

Jason Beacon



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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Guerilla

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A CIP Catalogue of this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-907248-12-2

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[www.chandlerbookdesign.co.uk](http://www.chandlerbookdesign.co.uk)

Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by Ashford Colour Press Ltd.

*“Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house”*

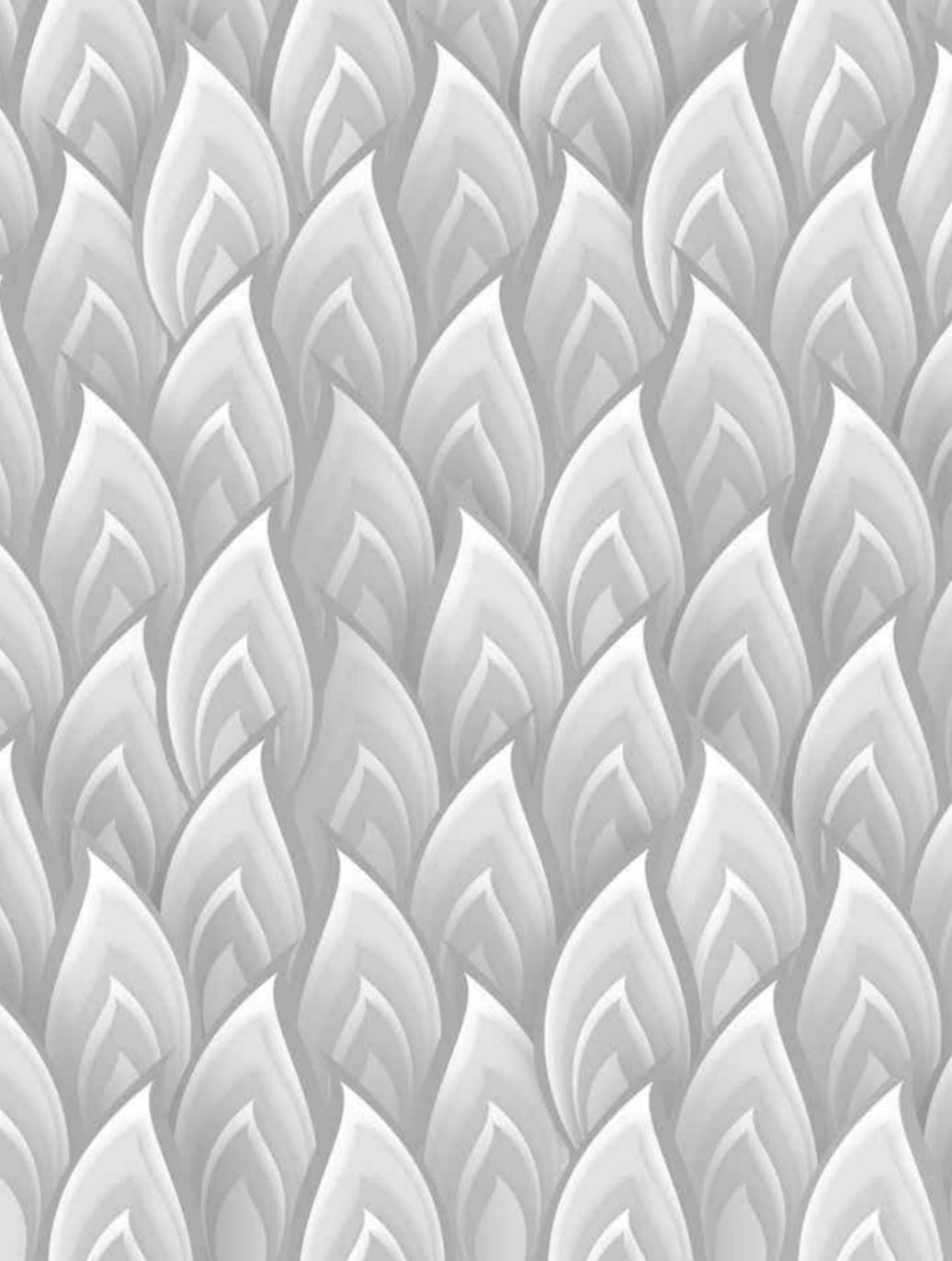
**Matthew Ch5 V.15**

*“It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness”*

**Confucius**

*“When someone asks what there is to do, light the candle in his hand”*

**Rumi**



# 1

IT WAS THE fifth of January. Marcus Grool stood, vacant and dull as a tarnished candlestick, on the curb of the street corner and stared. From his left hand dangled a briefcase; in his right, a tightly furled umbrella. From high above, fat, twinkling raindrops tumbled merrily down around the city and some, falling with almost guided precision, splashed noisily onto Marcus Grool's unmoving nose before spattering across his expensive leather shoes.

Marcus Grool's left eye twitched. To the smartly dressed observers who now hurried past in search of shelter or a taxi home, the man standing on the street corner appeared to neither care nor notice as the steady downpour stained his crisp, lined suit a darker shade of grey. The traffic lights jarred from green to red and back; spray from the wheels of

cars hissed angrily across his already sodden shins. Still, he remained immobile. Of course, what no one else whizzing by that statuesque anomaly at that moment could know – indeed, what Marcus Grool himself did not know – was that after this day, nothing in his life would ever look the same again.

Marcus Grool arrived home to the small but neatly ordered apartment where he lived with his girlfriend, Elizabeth. Slamming the door behind him, he flung briefcase, umbrella and sopping suit jacket to the sitting room floor before marching across to the fridge. He plucked out a dewy can of beer, cursing as he did the weather for its personal vendetta against him, and then noticed, draining the icy liquid half-empty in one, long gulp, a note on the counter Elizabeth had left him. It said she would be working later than usual tonight but that she would be home in time for dinner. She hoped he had had a good day. It was signed, as ever, with three kisses.

Marcus Grool snorted and kicked off his shoes as he and what remained of his beer went over to the couch and made themselves comfortable. The TV controller fell automatically to hand and for a few minutes he idled disinterestedly through the channels. Irritated by the images before him, he finally flicked the machine off. He

finished the beer. The aluminium can made a satisfying scrunching sound in his fist. He leaned forward and placed it on the coffee table. As he did so, he noticed a book he had not seen before. It must have been one Elizabeth was reading, for it was a book about meditation. Aside from at his desk or in front of the television, sitting still was not a pursuit that appealed to Marcus Grool. He flipped over to the back cover and scanned through the blurb. Then he looked again at the photograph on the front.

The author's portrait smiled back, serene and full of calm.

Marcus Grool reached back and, with all his force, hurled the book at the sitting room window. With a boom and a rattle from the pane, the book bounced off the glass, flipped over the lamp and landed, face up and still smiling, in the armchair by the coffee table. Marcus Grool stared for maybe four or even five whole seconds. Then, he threw back his head, closed his eyes, and emptied his lungs at the swirly, white ceiling.

'Argh!' he yelled. He beat his hands on the cushions beside him and jumped up and down. 'Arrgghh!' He smacked at his forehead with the heel of his palm as though trying to burst a bongo drum. Finally, when all the energy from the moment had been spent, Marcus Grool flopped wetly back across his nice, cream sofa and gently began to cry.

\* \* \*

‘Hello?’ The front door banged shut. Across the partly obscured doorway to the bedroom, a petite, frizzy-haired figure blinked past. There was the “click” of the kettle.

‘Sorry I’m so late, my love,’ the voice continued. It strained as high heels were squeezed from aching feet. ‘Some of these parents don’t stop talking. I don’t know why they send their kids to school in the first place. They all seem to know about teaching. And there’s homework to mark already.’ There was a pause. ‘Marcus?’ No reply. Slowly, the bedroom door brushed open against the carpet. The pretty, inquisitive face of Elizabeth appeared in the room. Inquisitiveness became concern. ‘Marcus?’ she said again.

Marcus Grool sat cross-legged and blank-faced on the bed with an enormous pair of scissors in his hand. Strewn around him, and hanging unevenly from the wardrobe door, were the neatly cut strips of cotton and cloth that had until recently been his suits for work. He wore blue underpants and charcoal socks, and wrapped about his head was a yellow, paisley necktie, which appeared alone in surviving the massacre. A crumple of empty beer cans lay piled beside the bed. He stared at his girlfriend flatly.

‘So: we’re studying to be a tailor?’ said Elizabeth gamely.

‘They fired me,’ Marcus responded. His voice was devoid of spirit, save for perhaps a trace of beer.

‘Oh, baby.’ Elizabeth sidled her light form up close to him on the bed and took him in her arms. He sat there limply – like the schoolboy who thinks he has mislaid his sweets, only to discover the dog has swallowed the lot. ‘How did that happen?’ Elizabeth continued, stroking his hair. ‘You said there weren’t going to be any more layoffs.’

‘It shouldn’t have been me,’ Marcus said sullenly. ‘It should’ve been Tom Leckle. I work twice as hard as Tom Leckle.’

‘What? You mean they kept Tom instead of you? Oh, that’s just crazy. Crazy,’ repeated Elizabeth. She rocked him gently.

‘Yeah, well Tom plays golf at weekends, doesn’t he? Down at the clubhouse, chatting up Sir Michael while I put in the overtime. I practically run that department. And there’s him, with that facetious smile and the “What a good birdie you got on Saturday, Sir Michael”. Makes me sick. I’m going to sue for unfair dismissal, I tell you, that’s what I’m going to do.’

‘I could always give you golf lessons as a late Christmas present?’ suggested Elizabeth, smiling. But Marcus just grunted and pushed her away.

‘Why won’t you take me seriously?’ He pulled the necktie irritably from his head and hoisted himself off the

bed to stand in the doorway. ‘This isn’t a game, you know, Elizabeth? This is my life – our lives. On the line.’ He stared at her for a second longer. Then he turned and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Elizabeth sighed heavily. She looked down at her tired feet and rubbed them, thinking of all the homework she still had left to mark.

So: finally it had happened. She supposed she should feel sorry, or worried at least. Yet, as she sat there cross-legged on the bed, Elizabeth was slightly surprised to find that more than anything she felt a great sense of relief. Next door in the living area, the kettle rumbled to the boil and clicked itself off. She caught her reflection in the mirror. Was she surprised, she asked it? The reflection frowned. Then Elizabeth took a deep breath and got up to go and make herself some coffee in readiness for her work. Either way, it was going to be a hard, cold winter.

‘I’m sorry. Beth? Bethy.’ Marcus stood there in his bath towel. Feebly, he raised an imploring hand.

At the long, high counter that divided the living room from the kitchen, Elizabeth carried on writing. Her other hand propped her head up beneath straying, curly tresses. She sniffed.

Marcus dropped his hand to his side. ‘Bethy: come on.’

'I've got work to do, Marcus,' said Elizabeth, not raising her eyes.

'I said I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap again. I've had a really bad day.' He shuffled and poked at a bit of fluff he had noticed on the carpet by his foot. Frowning, he bent and picked it up. 'I know, I know, the beer doesn't help.' He walked behind her to dispose of the offending loose fibres. 'It's just a bad start to the year, that's all. It'll be all right. I know some people. Tomorrow I'll ask around. I'll...'

Marcus stopped, unsure.

Elizabeth put down her pen. 'I know you will,' she said. She smiled weakly. She heaved another big sigh. 'But it's not just the job, is it, Marcus? I thought we'd been through this – haven't we?'

The other blinked. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Everything!' Elizabeth cried suddenly, throwing up her hands. 'Marcus, it's everything, isn't it? You against the world – these are your plans, this is where you're going, this is how we get there. It's all about you. And if it works it's because you're a genius and if it doesn't it's because life's unfair. What's not fair, Marcus? The world revolving around Marcus Grool? There's a child of eight in one of my classes, his work's been bad lately. Do you know what I found out this evening? What Father Christmas brought this year?'

‘Bethy...’

‘A father with three months to live, Marcus. They can’t afford medical insurance and because of the fraud that is this country’s health service, he can’t be treated. That’s where the “not fair” line gets off. Why is it always about you?’

‘Bethy.’ Holding his ground, Marcus raised a forefinger. ‘Just listen to me for a second. I’m very sorry to hear about this child, but the only future we have any control over is our own.’

‘Cah...’ Elizabeth dropped down off her stool and strode past him. She fell back onto the sofa, knees tucked beneath her slim body. Her boyfriend rotated impotently where he stood, half-naked, in his towel. There may not have been much to the young schoolteacher physically but when she burned, she blazed.

‘Who do you think I’ve been doing this for? Who?’ he demanded. There was no answer. ‘For us, Bethy. For both of us – for our future. Don’t you understand? That job was going places, it was...it was going to make us.’ He coughed. ‘But there’s no use getting all emotional about it. Some tired, kitchen drama re-enactment doesn’t do anyone any good, we know that. I got a severance pay. That’ll keep me going until something comes along.’

‘How much?’ asked Elizabeth quietly.

Marcus shifted and looked down at his bare chest. ‘Ten thousand.’ The other pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows but said nothing. ‘If I invest it properly,’ continued Marcus, ‘then maybe I’ll be able. . . . Bethy? What are you doing?’

Elizabeth was moving again, this time towards her handbag. Marcus watched, puzzled and silent as she went through her purse. Eventually, she pulled out a card. She held it out briskly and without a word. He took it with a degree of wariness. The card was lined and faded. Marcus flipped it over in his fingers.

Across the centre, in old-fashioned, calligraphic letters were the words:

*Dr. Edmond Ummond – Q.U.A.C.K.*

Underneath were an address and telephone number.

Marcus looked up. He regarded his girlfriend’s eyes coldly – and with a flicker of fear. ‘I don’t need to see anyone,’ he breathed roughly.

‘You need to talk to someone,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Or just listen, maybe. I don’t know.’ She watched him, almost shaking before her. Suddenly, she softened and took his hands in her own.

‘You’re lost, Marcus,’ Elizabeth said. Her fingers played

lightly on his. ‘You’ve been away so long, and I don’t know how to find you.’ She looked at him, and then to the card between their hands. ‘A parent at the school recommended him. He’s not your usual kind of therapist. Apparently he’s...’ She paused and bit her lip. ‘He has a different approach to most – but very effective. It’s not far from here. You’ll have plenty of time, now. That is, if you really don’t want to take up golf,’ she added, glancing up at him.

Marcus hesitated. He flapped the little card in front of him as though it were a distress signal. ‘I don’t need any of this New Age psychobabble,’ he said intently. ‘It’s my job that’s gone missing – not my mind. All I need is to get back on track. You’ll see,’ he insisted, though he failed to convince either of them. ‘If I invest some of the ten thousand -’

‘Shh.’ Elizabeth placed a finger on his lips. ‘Why don’t you invest in yourself for a change, hm? Nothing else matters. There’s so much more to you than this, Marcus Grool. At least, I used to think there was. Isn’t there? Isn’t there, Marcus? Because, if there isn’t...’

Marcus, however, remained silent. Elizabeth looked at him for a few seconds more, tight-lipped and with a shadow of resignation. There was no need to interpret that look. Marcus swallowed as his girlfriend traced her small fingers over his chest. Then, she turned aside and moved past him.

Picking up her books, Elizabeth switched out the kitchen light and went tiredly towards the bedroom.

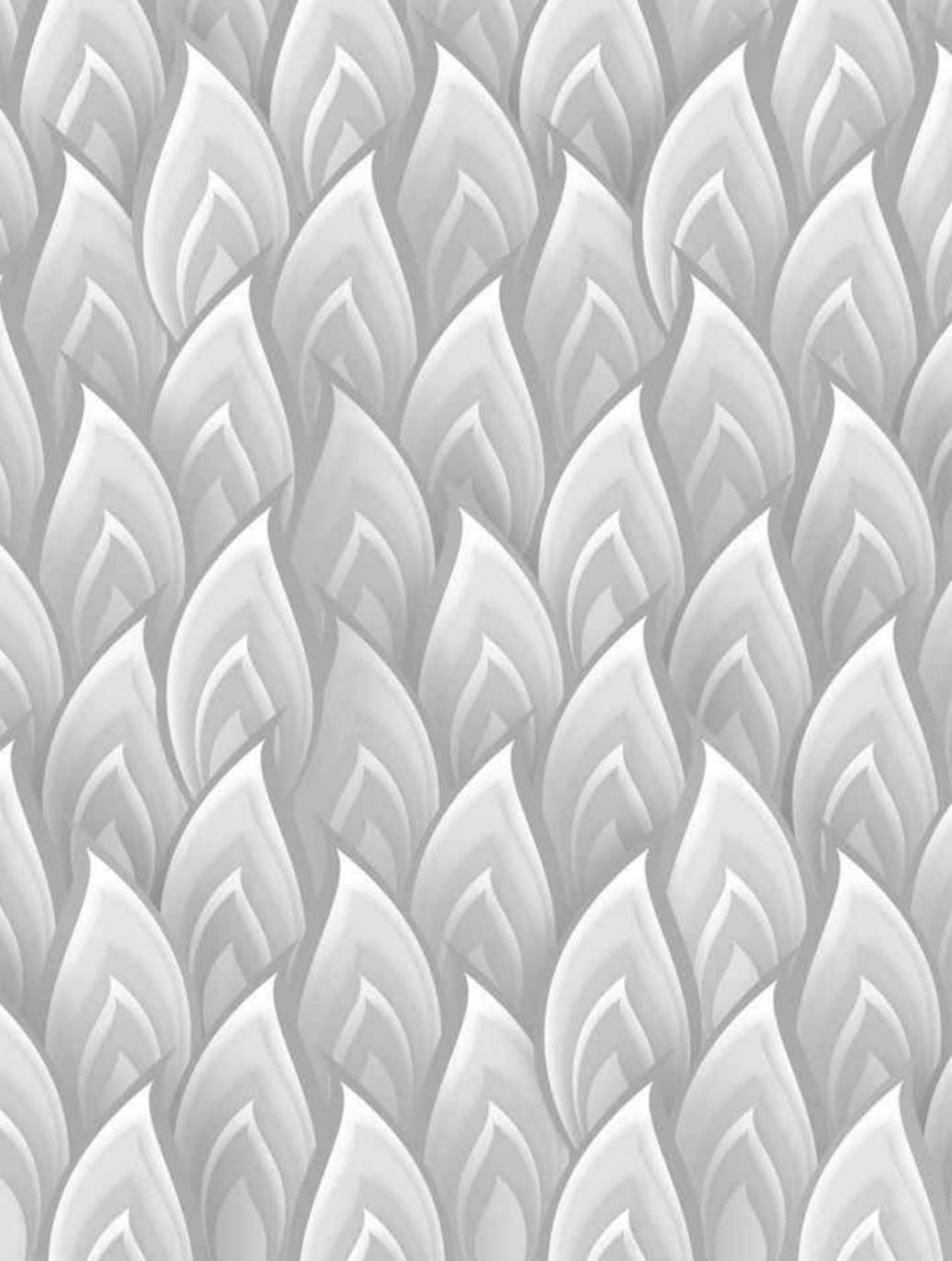
Marcus regarded once more the crumpled piece of destiny in his hand.

*Dr. Edmond Ummond – Q.U.A.C.K.*

What an absurd business card, he thought. His features darkened as he cleared his throat. ‘How did you know I’d lost my job, anyway?’ he asked.

In the doorway to the bedroom, Elizabeth paused. ‘I didn’t get the card tonight,’ she said. She gave him a thin smile. Then, hesitating for just a second, she disappeared.

Marcus Grool blinked and wondered just what he had done to deserve such a very, difficult life.



## 2

UDSWICK ROAD WAS located in an obscure, quiet part of town, the journey to which took longer than he had anticipated. When Marcus finally did arrive, he frowned and once more fished the card from his coat pocket to be sure. What immediately struck the visitor on first viewing this cosy little street had less to do with *where* it was than the impression given of *when* it was. It was as though the entire high street of some quaint, old market town of a hundred years before had been warped, sounds, smells and all, into the present day. There was a cobbler's, a confectionary, a bookbinder's, a tailor's; the butcher, the baker, the watchmaker. Marcus half-expected any minute to see a horse and carriage come trotting by with frock-coated footmen aboard. The toot of a car horn behind him broke his daydreaming and made him step back onto the curb.

Towards the far end of the street he could just make out an Elizabethan tavern. The heavy, wooden signboard wavered in the blustery January breeze. On the board was painted a magnificent sailing ship and, beneath this, the words: “The Brave Seadreamer”. There were no hamburger restaurants, no supermarkets, no homestyle shops and not a single mobile telephone centre in sight. Marcus felt in his other pocket for his own phone just to reassure himself he was still in the right century.

No. 73 was opposite the watchmaker and was perhaps the most singular oddity of them all. It was built from stern and imposing dark stone blocks, as one might encounter in the houses that line the streets of Edinburgh. It consisted of a basement with two high storeys above and gave the authoritative air of a building that could easily have been half the town hall. “Half” is indeed right, for next door – No. 75 – was its exact mirror image, saving the fact that from pavement to roof it had been decorated in soft, pink stucco. A bronze plaque by the door announced it to be some kind of dance school. Gazing up to the roof of the peculiar edifice, Marcus noted a large, glass conservatory, which was bedecked with bursting, colourful hanging baskets in spite of the season, straddling the two addresses.

Marcus frowned. He considered turning around then and there, until the sight of a man passing by in a suit reminded

him he had little else to be doing. He looked down at his own attire, which seemed so alien to him on a weekday morning. Then, surprised but not overly curious at his surroundings, he potted up the short flight of steps to No. 73. Reading up the list of six names by the door, he saw “Dr. Edmond Ummond” at the top and pressed the bell. Nothing happened. Looking once more at the card in his hand, he pushed again and then, automatically, tried the brass handle of the flaking, wooden door. The pointed metal was cold in his grasp. It yielded and the door swung silently inward.

Marcus found himself in a reception hall akin to an old, grand hotel lobby. The walls were papered in patterned silk, the furniture decorated in velvet; the floorboards were varnished almost black and there was a distinct touch of woodworm to the main desk. A creaky looking staircase dog-legged back upon itself towards the high ceiling above. No one was about. Marcus called tentatively into the spacious hallway but no answer came. Just as he was deciding to give up on the whole, stupid idea, a colossal voice – held in place by an equally proportioned lady – whirled through a nearby doorway and, with a heave of breath, plumped itself down behind the desk.

‘Oh my,’ exclaimed the old dame, flummoxed and smiling all at once. She had bright, round cheeks and sparkly light-blue buttons for eyes. Her hair was tied up

in a tight, white bun and her accent came straight from a cider press. She flicked through a leather appointments book before her. Then, giving up, she beamed up at the visitor before her. 'I'll bet you're Marcus Grool,' she said, squinting slyly. 'We talked on the telephone.'

'Er, yes. Yes, we did,' replied Marcus, uncontrollably smiling back.

'Ah, ain't you a handsome devil – just like I said you'd be? I can tell these things, you know?'

'Mm,' replied Marcus, nodding uncertainly. He looked down. Seeing the card still between his fingers, he said: 'I've come to see the quack.'

The quirky old receptionist chuckled coyly at herself and covered her mouth with a pudgy hand. 'There I go again,' she laughed. Then, sobering, she said: 'Half a tock, now. I'll just let Dr. Ummond know you're here.' She whispered rapidly into the receiver of the old-fashioned telephone. Having finished, she smiled up once more. 'The Doctor'll be ready just as soon as,' she told him affably. 'Well now. Can I be taking your coat for you?'

'Oh, no. That's fine. Thank you,' said Marcus.

The receptionist hefted her cracking bulk to its feet. 'Hot cup of tea?' she panted, smiling her way over to the door through which she had first bowled. 'Kettle's boiled just this instant.'

‘No, really,’ insisted Marcus. ‘I’ll just...’ He cleared his throat. ‘I’ll just wait.’

The other shrugged. ‘All right, then. Have it your way. You can go up now, if you like. First floor.’

‘Really? I thought you said -’ Marcus frowned. Then he coughed and said: ‘Well. Thank you.’ He started up the stairs.

‘Good luck, now,’ added the receptionist, watching him as he went. A strange, sudden tone of *somethingness* in her voice made Marcus hesitate and turn around. The old woman gave him a quick, little wink. Then, she was gone.

“Dr. Edmond Ummond – *Quintessentially Unique And Certainly Klever*” as proclaimed by the sign on the door of the study, lay spread-eagled in his chair with his head back, snoring loudly. Marcus approached the desk with a certain degree of caution. Leaning from the waist, he peered gingerly over at the occasionally twitching form of the so-called “cutting edge” doctor of psychiatry.

For a start, he was old. At least in his seventies, Marcus surmised, if not older. He studied with disdain the sallow skin, the dry lips and the electric shock of long white hair that immediately characterised the sleeping man. He was also as lean as a one-legged stork and was unfashionably dressed in a baggy and threadbare chocolate, corduroy suit. A red

silk handkerchief fluttered from his breast pocket and, as the visitor looked closer, he noticed with a sense of revulsion the hairs of the other man's nostrils fidgeting excitedly on the strength of his breathing. To cap it all, there was more gold showing in the gaping, ancient mouth than there was ivory.

Marcus straightened. What had been bemusement was now irritation, possibly annoyance, even. He glanced perfunctorily about the room. Everything was antique, belonging to a bygone age: from the heavy wooden chest and mahogany closet that stood respectively against the walls nearest the door, to the thick, sashed curtains at the window and the five-pronged candelabra on the desk. Past their best before date, like the old shrink himself, snorted Marcus privately. A broken cuckoo clock on the mantelpiece behind the desk held eternity at seventeen minutes to six. The little wooden bird gaped blindly into space from the end of a rusty spring.

'Hello? Dr. Ummond? Doctor?' Marcus received no response but the faintest, unconscious passing of wind. He pulled his overcoat from where he had draped it neatly over one arm. 'Right, that does it,' he muttered crossly. He'd tell Elizabeth a thing or two about this, that was for sure. He made ready to leave.

'Zeek zooks!' In a flash, the old man was awake and rigid in his chair. His hair stood out from his skull at right-

angles and he stared wildly about. He threw a glance at the cuckoo clock behind him. 'Holy crumpet,' he exclaimed to himself. 'That's where the time goes, Ummond, you great fool. Up, awake! To business!' The Doctor blinked and looked about the apparently empty room. One long, white eyebrow arched acutely. 'Now that's a funny thing,' he muttered, smacking his thin lips together.

From behind the far edge of the great, wooden desk, the figure of Marcus Grool inexorably emerged into the good Doctor's view. 'I'm here,' he said, rising slowly from his knees. The force of the other man's eruption had sent him cowering to the floor. He regarded Dr. Ummond now with wary suspicion, and little warmth. 'I'm Marcus Grool,' he stated flatly.

'Are you, indeed?' Edmond Ummond surveyed his visitor with a narrow, steady gaze. His eyes were a pellucid sea-green. They were the sort of eyes that age can never dim. Within them resided the memories of many a long-watched Moon.

The Doctor looked Marcus quickly up and down. Then, waving a long hand, he sat himself back in his chair. 'Well, I suppose it's not your fault,' he said dismissively. 'What do you want?'

Marcus motioned towards the chair. Receiving no further invitation, he seated himself opposite. He cleared

his throat. ‘Well, actually, my girlfriend made me come and see you, really,’ he said. ‘I, er...I lost my job, you see, and I suppose I’ve been a bit. Well: down.’

Dr. Ummond grunted into his chest and fixed his eyes pointedly on Marcus’ own from beneath his lined forehead. Without shifting his attention, he reached into a drawer by his right hand and picked out a tall, white candle. This he placed in a candlestick on the desk. With his other hand, eyes still unmoving, he patted about the desktop, and subsequently in his jacket pockets until finally, with a cluck of satisfaction, he procured a tatty box of matches. The Doctor struck a match, which fizzed loudly, and put it carefully to the candle. His eyes had not flickered. Dr. Ummond sat back in his chair.

‘Ahem, yes, well,’ began Marcus again, unsure. ‘Shall I? Yes, all right then. So anyway: I lost my job, as I said, which was a blow, um, especially seeing as really it was an unfair dismissal. And then Elizabeth – my girlfriend – well, she gets quite over-emotional sometimes, a bit worked up, you know?’

Marcus continued to speak as the Doctor regarded him in silence. He told him about Elizabeth and the argument they had had and then, without really noticing or intending to, about the suit incident and his anger at the injustice of the whole situation. After a few minutes

had gone by, the old man opposite said suddenly, quietly but with clear enunciation: 'This isn't going to be another one about sex, is it?'

Marcus blinked to a halt. 'Excuse me?'

'You know: sex. The old wrestle with the pestle.' He spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

Marcus shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'No, it – not at all.' He clutched his overcoat in his lap.

'Good,' pronounced Dr. Ummond severely. He banged the desk with his long, fine fingers. 'You don't know how very tired I get of listening to young men's problems about sex. There's only ever two problems men have with sex. Do you know what they are, laddie?'

Marcus stalled, then shook his head. 'No.'

'It won't go up' – the Doctor jabbed a finger at the ceiling – 'or, and which is usually by far the graver case' – he stamped on the floor – 'it won't go down. And in my experience there's nothing one man can say to another as will make the slightest bit of difference. Now carry on.'

Slightly dazed, Marcus stammered back onto the thread from which he had been diverted. Again, the Doctor appeared to listen, only this time he was anything but still. He drummed on the arms of his chair, opened and closed drawers noisily, fiddled with his handkerchief. Finally, making curious, unintelligible utterances under his breath,

he stood up with a frown and walked stiffly to the corner of the room, whereupon he opened a small door that Marcus had not noticed previously. There was the sound of a light switch being flicked on. Moments later, he distinctly heard the stream of water into a bowl.

Marcus paused. So too, it seemed, did the Doctor. 'Anyway,' Marcus began once more, 'If she could just see the situation from my perspec-'

'Ahhh,' went Dr. Ummond, and began to cackle as the sound of falling water once again reached Marcus' ears.

'Listen, Doctor, if this isn't-'

'Go on, go on, zeeks squeaks,' said the old man, waving a hand back into the room. Marcus caught a glimpse of the evidently deranged psycho-pensioner as, to the accompaniment of flushing, he wandered across the light source beyond. The next thing he knew, he heard the unmistakable burr and hum of an old, electric razor. A couple of minutes later, the light clicked off and Ummond re-entered the room.

'Look, I don't want to be rude,' said Marcus Grool as the other re-seated himself and probed at his chin, 'but I don't believe you're taking me very seriously.'

'Hah!' Ummond rocked back in his chair. He slapped a thin leg and chortled to himself, licking his tongue over his long, yellow and gold teeth as he did. A second later,

he snapped back, deadpan. 'I take everything seriously,' he said. Then, with a slight curl of the lip he added: 'Except for people.'

'Except?'

'That's right.'

'Then why..?'

'I have diagnosed your problem,' Ummond said casually. He inspected a well cared for fingernail.

'You have?'

'Assuredly,' replied the Doctor.

Marcus waited. 'So?' he blurted. 'What is it?'

Dr. Ummond did not regard him as he said: 'You are not at home.'

Marcus blinked furiously. He looked down at his overcoat and then, with a frown, said: 'But...'

'Listen!' cried the Doctor, suddenly pouncing forward so that he was almost halfway across the desk to the astonished Grool. He planted a bony elbow and aimed his finger like a pistol sight between the other man's eyes. His own pupils were wide and terrifying. 'You (he emphasised the word) are not at home.'

There was a charged pause as the two men stared at one another. Marcus gulped. 'What is that?' he asked, an edge to his voice. 'More New Age rubbish?' His eyes narrowed.

'Hah,' squawked Ummond, retreating once again.

He exhaled with a whistle through his teeth. ‘New Age,’ he repeated. ‘He calls it New Age. Oh dear.’

‘Look: if by any incredibly slim chance you do know something about this, I would appreciate it if you told me,’ asserted Marcus, trying to hold on to his temper.

Ummond looked puzzled. ‘But I just did tell you,’ he said.

‘I mean’ – Marcus searched for the word – ‘specifically.’

The Doctor shook his head and then, scratching it for good measure, pushed himself up from his chair and wandered over to the window. ‘Always the same,’ he muttered, placing his hands on his narrow hips and absently surveying the street below. ‘They come asking questions, and if you don’t give them the answer they were expecting, they ask for the one they were till your ears drop off.’

‘I thought you people were supposed to be scientific.’ Marcus stared with frustration at the Doctor’s eccentric silhouette.

‘Zooks!’ exclaimed Ummond. ‘Scientific, eh?’ He smacked his forehead before wheeling about. ‘In Sixteen hundred they had a science called “burning witches”’. He advanced on the befuddled Grool. ‘What d’ ya think they’ll say about modern psychiatry in four hundred years, huh? The less the better, I hope. Tell me, Grool’ – Ummond hung over him, wraith-like: ‘What is there new under the Sun?’

‘You can’t take that line.’ Marcus looked up into the other’s crazed expression and did his best to swallow subtly. ‘That’s just your trouble. You’re stuck in the past, you haven’t – you haven’t evolved. I mean, look at this place.’

‘New Age or anachronism, you can’t have it both ways,’ said Ummond. He ambled back around the desk and slumped into his chair with a sigh. His eyes flicked up sharply. ‘Schoolteacher, you say?’

‘What?’

‘Your missy.’

‘Yes, but-’

‘Teaches young kids, does she?’ Dr. Ummond arched an eyebrow.

‘Yes,’ said Marcus slowly.

‘Then perhaps you should join one of her classes. There’s obviously not much I can do.’ He dipped a finger in the molten wax of the candle and brought it to his nose for closer inspection.

‘I came here,’ grated Marcus, as near close to boiling as ever, ‘for some help.’

‘Then you’re in the wrong place,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘You can’t give help to anyone. Most especially not to helpless men like you who haven’t even got the gee-up to have an honest-to-God sex problem. My line is guidance, but if you’re determined to spend your life in the sewer

you might at least find the courage to be a proper rat. Good day.'

Marcus rose, trembling, to his feet. 'I'm leaving,' he announced through clenched teeth.

'Now that's funny – I could have sworn I heard someone squeak,' said Ummond, looking perplexedly about the carpet. In a single, swift movement, he snuffed out the candle on the desk with the palm of his hand.

At the door, Marcus halted momentarily. He frowned; hesitated. There was something very unsettling about that seemingly insignificant gesture. Marcus could not define it, but it made him go suddenly cold. 'Why did you do that?'

'Oh, you still here? If I told you you'd only want another answer anyway. You know your trouble, Grool?' said the Doctor, leaning back until he was almost horizontal: 'You're too thin.'

At that, the younger man turned on his heel and strode indignantly out of the study.

'What d' you reckon, Doc?' said Ummond to himself when the other had gone. 'Three days?' He nodded. 'All right, Edmond, my boy: you're on. Three it is.'

Outside in the cold, Marcus began to pace furiously towards the bus stop at the end of the street. He had never been so incensed in all his life – not even when his boss had fired

him. If there was one thing for certain, it was that he never wanted to see Ludswick Road, with its weird old shops and barmy receptionists, and above all that crazy old madman, ever again in his life. Who on Earth did he think he was, speaking to him in that way? What right did he have? Marcus heard a window slide open, somewhere behind and above him.

‘Marcus Grool, he’s such a fool,

Better catch up, he’s late for school;

Marcus Grool, he’s such a fool...’ went the taunting refrain.

Marcus neither turned nor hesitated, but continued to march stoically onward, scowling, until the doodle-ally Doctor was finally out of earshot.

Edmond Ummond watched him go with his sharp, sea-green eyes. A smattering of people had stopped in the street below and now stood squinting up at the white-haired gentleman where he perched on his windowsill. Ummond looked down at them and waved merrily. Across the way, Mr Meztchek, the watchmaker, was standing in his shop’s entrance, hands in apron, watching. The Doctor caught his regard. He winked at him.

The watchmaker nodded knowingly. Then, with a chuckle and a smile, he returned to his dealings with time.

\* \* \*

‘How did it go with Dr. Ummond?’ Elizabeth asked innocently as the door boomed shut and Marcus stormed into the apartment.

‘I’ve not been spoken to like that in my entire life,’ said Marcus, biting the words as he hurled his overcoat across the armchair. He paced and fumed. ‘He is the rudest, the craziest, the most insolent, ignorant human being I have ever had the misfortune to meet.’

Elizabeth did not look up from where she was cracking eggs into a bowl in the kitchen. ‘Well then,’ she said, switching on the whisk. ‘Sounds as though maybe you shouldn’t go back.’

‘Oh, don’t you worry,’ Marcus swore, ‘I won’t. If there’s one thing you can be quite sure of – I won’t.’