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Chapter Six

Ellen stared at the spiral shapes. Although Jane had described them to her, the impact of seeing them herself was quite different. There were indeed nine individual spiral forms. Eight of these were simple spiral shapes, but the ninth was a double spiral; and where the two spirals almost met, the line of each spiral was straight instead of curved. Although there was only enough room on each page for two spirals, there was a small diagram which seemed to indicate how they should be arranged. The double spiral was the central form; the other eight spirals were arranged round it. There was an inner arrangement of four and an outer arrangement of four, each of which was opposite a gap between two of the inner spirals. Each of the two sets of four spirals contained one of each of the four types: one formed anticlockwise from the middle outwards, one anticlockwise from the outside to the middle, one clockwise from the middle outwards and one clockwise from the outside to the middle.

Having studied the spirals this much, she handed the diary to Eva, who herself stared silently at the shapes for some time.

It was Jane who broke the silence.

“Not only is there the puzzle of the spiral shapes themselves, but also there is the way the lines of the spirals are formed. I really am astonished at how precise and intricate these workings are. I had my usual ball-point pen, which produces quite a fine line, but I find it amazing that I apparently produced these intricacies while half lying down, and using a fairly ordinary pen.”

Eva started to describe a section of the first spiral that appeared after the handwritten description of Jane’s day had petered out. The line was sometimes a series of tiny dots or small dashes; sometimes it was a continuous line with tiny regular markings off either one side or the other, and sometimes both. She followed the line a little farther, and found that in places there were even some minute sub-spirals. The farther she followed the line, the more kinds of marking she noted.

“I think I should let you have a closer look at this now, Ellen,” she said.

The next hour was spent in silence. The diary was passed between them at intervals, so that each could have a chance to make further study of the construction of the spirals.

“Apart from being fascinated by the pattern,” said Ellen, “I feel that looking at the spirals is affecting me in some way.”

“Do you know,” said Eva, “I was just about to say exactly the same thing. I was sitting here trying to work out how I’m being affected, but I just can’t put words round it.”

“Of course,” said Jane, “I’ve seen them before; but I haven’t looked at them recently. Because I have seen them before, I’m really in a different position from both of you. Yet despite having seen them before, the fine structure of the spirals is still a surprise to me – but maybe this will be less so than for you. However, I feel affected too in a way I don’t seem to be able to pin down.”

“Ellen!” said Eva suddenly. “You remember the stick?”

“Yes,” replied Ellen. “Why?”

“Do you remember when I was telling you the story of how I came by it, I described how the old woman had brought me a drink?”

“Yes of course.”

“Well, I have a sense that the effect that looking at the spirals is having on me is a bit like the way I was affected by the drink the old woman gave me.”

Jane interrupted: “Please will you explain what you are both talking about?”

“Oh, I’m really sorry,” replied Eva and Ellen almost in unison.

Ellen continued, "I'll stay quiet while you tell your story to Jane. Better still, perhaps I could go and get the stick out of the car."

"I didn't leave it in the car!" laughed Eva. "Remember how I take very good care of it? I brought it into the house! I'm surprised you didn't notice. It's behind the door of the room where we slept."

Ellen fetched the stick, and handed it to Jane to look at, while Eva started to tell its history.

When the story was finished, Jane was eager to ask more about the drink. "Did you see the old woman prepare it?" she asked.

"No," replied Eva, "she made it inside and brought it out to me. Although it was still warm, it seemed to have a cool flavour. Its taste was different from anything I've drunk before or since. There was a definite and particular energy, or vibrance, associated with it. I couldn't tell the colour because of the dark earthenware mug it was in. When I was drinking it, and for a while afterwards, although I knew that everything was the same, my perception changed, so that my experience of everything felt much more profound. For example, as I said to Ellen, I was aware of perceiving beautiful colours, although I still saw the leaves and fields in their usual shades of autumn. When I look at the spirals I see them as they are. I can describe their structure to you and you would agree with me; but there's something else happening too. I'm not seeing beautiful colours on this occasion, but I do have a feeling of a deeper sense of perception without having any way of describing it further."

Jane was listening intently to everything Eva said. She thought for a few minutes. "I do think my own experience is like that too. I wish I could say something more, but there seem to be no words."

Ellen was sitting very still and looking slightly detached but relaxed. Jane spoke to her, but she did not seem to hear. Jane and Eva looked at each other mutely, wondering what to do. Eva put her finger to her lips, and Jane nodded slightly. They both looked at Ellen once more. By this time her eyelids had begun to droop. After a while, her lips started to move, almost imperceptibly. Jane and Eva stared at her. The movement of Ellen's lips became progressively more pronounced, until it seemed she was mouthing something. The movements of her mouth did not seem to relate to any words, and she made no sounds.

Jane and Eva glanced at each other, nodded, and then continued watching Ellen. Ellen began to make some slight sounds. Eva and Jane leaned forward, listening intently, and then looked at each other once more. They shook their heads; neither could make out what the sounds were. Gradually the sounds faded; gradually the movements of Ellen's mouth ceased. She sat completely still with her eyelids half shut for several minutes.

She then started to rub her eyes. "Oh, I feel a bit odd," she said. "What time is it?"

Jane looked at her watch. "It's nearly half past twelve."

"Just about lunchtime then," said Ellen.

Jane and Eva stared at her.

"What's the matter with you two? Why are you looking at me like that?" Ellen burst out.

Jane and Eva patiently explained to her exactly what they had seen happening to her. Ellen gaped, first in disbelief, and then with dawning acceptance of what had been described to her.

"I'm feeling quite chilled," she said. "I'll just go and get an extra jumper and a mug of hot water." She soon returned, looking rather pale.

"I still feel a bit odd. I wonder why I went into that peculiar state you described. All I remember is that I was studying the minute pen strokes that make up the double spiral shape, then the next thing was finding you two staring at me. You've explained how I was behaving, but I have no memory of it myself at all."

The three were rather shaken by this turn of events. Together they decided that since time was pressing, Eva would make them all something to eat, and that when they had eaten, she would drive Ellen's car for at least the first half-hour. They all agreed that it was better for Ellen not to drive until she had recovered a little more. They wished they had more time to discuss the configuration of the spirals, their reaction to them, and in particular what had happened to Ellen. It was difficult to guess when they would all be able to meet again, but they agreed to keep in touch. Ellen and Eva made sure that Jane had everything she needed to hand. She assured them that another friend would be calling in the mid-afternoon. After that, they said goodbye.

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In the end, Eva drove Ellen's car all the way to her house. They had intended to share the driving, but Ellen still felt a little odd, so Eva continued. Ellen spent an hour relaxing in Eva's house before driving home. She phoned Eva when she got in to let her know that she had arrived safely. Eva had asked her to do this because

she was concerned. She had tried to persuade Ellen to stay the night, but Ellen had been adamant that she was feeling fine by then, and anyway she had to start work again the next day. Although she had an independent income from her late father's estate, she now had considerable responsibility in the running of a charity which supported homeless people, and those who found it difficult to make the transition between places in long-stay hospitals and community living. She knew that she would not be able to take any more time away from her work for some weeks. She spent the evening unpacking and organising things in such a way as to keep housework to a minimum, as she knew she had a heavy schedule facing her.

Chapter Seven

"The first day of September," mused Adam. "I find it hard to believe I've been here for more than four weeks already. I'm glad I have nearly four more weeks left. Quite a number of new tapes have been arriving, and we now have sixty-five in total. It has been good to find that students have been so enthusiastic about gathering these songs, and that the people who sing them have not been too reluctant to be recorded."

"It is so good to have you here," said Boris. "I am glad we have more time, and that I will not have to wait until next summer before you return. Our idea of your returning next spring is ideal for me and for our project. How long do you think you will be able to stay then?"

"I'll have to look into it in more detail once I'm back home, but I hope that I'll be able to be here for about five weeks."

Boris relaxed. "That's excellent!" he said.

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The days continued to pass in the pattern that the two had laid out for themselves. They studied side by side; they walked together every day discussing new material they found on the tapes, and they cooked and ate in the late evenings. The rhythm of their lives carried a feeling of timelessness, but nevertheless Adam was vaguely aware that the days he had left to work here were becoming fewer. He consulted the calendar – September 21st – only seven days left, and then he must board his plane to return home.

He turned to Boris. "Old friend," he said, "I'll miss you and our work here together a lot. I feel that this time we've had has brought us closer together than ever before."

"I agree," said Boris. "Although I know that you are going to try to find a publisher for our earlier work and that has to do with our shared life, it is not the same as working together here. While you are away I would prefer not to work on any of the tapes. Do you mind? I will collect up any new ones that come in, and store them carefully, together with those we have which we have not yet processed. We have done well. We have already finished thirty-eight tapes, which is more than the thirty we thought we would cover. I hope we shall do another two each by the end of this last week."

"I'm glad you won't be working on them while I am away," said Adam. "I realise I would prefer it that way too."

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In the afternoon of the next day, just after their daily walk and snack, Adam picked up his next tape. He loaded it into the tape deck, put his headphones on, and switched it on. At first there was a solo voice, a rich tenor, which was soon joined by what was obviously a large gathering of people. He was aware from the beginning that this was a different type of music altogether from any that the other tapes had revealed. While they worked, Adam and Boris rarely spoke to each other, but on this occasion Adam stopped the tape and touched Boris' arm urgently. His friend realised that there was something important happening, and immediately switched off the tape he had been working on and turned to Adam.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I want you to listen to this," said Adam. He started to play the tape through the speakers.

"The origins of this music are clearly quite different from any of the rest I have been working on," said Boris.

"That's exactly my experience," said Adam, "so I wanted you to hear it straight away. Shall I play some more of it?"

Adam ran the tape back to the beginning, switched it on, and then played it for about ten minutes. After

this, they sat in silence for a while, staring at each other.

“I don’t really know what to say,” said Adam, “but I think I’d like to hear it again.”

Boris was keen to hear it again too, and suggested that this time Adam did not stop the tape.

The two men sat almost motionless as they shared the experience. The only movement was when they reached out to each other to join hands. Boris ran the tape back to the beginning. Without referring to Adam, he started it once more. Again they sat almost motionless, holding hands. About halfway through, Boris noticed that Adam’s hand seemed colder than before. He turned to look at his friend, and was surprised to see that his eyelids were drooping. He felt a little concerned, but said nothing. A few minutes later, he noticed that Adam’s lips seemed to be moving very slightly. His hand was still cold. Boris let the tape keep playing, and he sat and observed his friend. By now Adam’s mouth was moving quite obviously, and his throat too was moving, as if he were singing, but there was no sound.

The tape finished. Boris continued to hold Adam’s hand, reluctant to break that contact while he was in this state. His mouth was no longer moving, but his hand remained cold and his eyelids drooping. Boris sat and watched him carefully. He appeared motionless except for his breathing, which was very slow and measured. Boris decided that the best thing was to sit and wait. Although he did not understand what was happening, he did not feel there was any reason to worry about Adam’s health.

Instinctively he sensed that it was important not to interfere in any way with what he was experiencing.

From time to time he looked at his watch. Ten minutes had passed since the tape ended, then twenty, then thirty. Then Boris became aware that Adam’s hand was slightly warmer. He waited another ten minutes, during which Adam’s eyes opened fully, and his hand and his breathing became normal for someone who was fully conscious.

Adam turned to Boris. “Now that we’ve had a chance to absorb the music on that tape, tell me what you think of it.”

“I have something else I have to talk to you about first,” answered Boris.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” said Boris carefully, “first I want to talk to you about what I saw happening to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

Adam was clearly puzzled, and Boris was then sure that he had no awareness of the change that he had undergone. He suggested that they made a drink for themselves, and went to sit on the bench outside to talk about what had happened.

Sitting side by side in the late afternoon sun, the two men relaxed as they gazed across the fields to the ancient birch woods beyond.

“Now tell me,” said Adam.

Boris described everything from when he had noticed how Adam’s hand had become colder. Adam listened without interrupting. He trusted his friend completely, so that although he felt incredulous, he also knew he was hearing the truth.

“You say that you first noticed my hand was colder about halfway through the tape?” asked Adam.

“Yes, I did,” confirmed Boris.

“I do remember that after the first time we listened to the whole side of that tape I had a feeling of wanting to talk to you about something; but I so much wanted to hear it right through, I decided to wait. I can’t remember what I would have said to you, but I do remember the feeling. Perhaps we should listen to the tape again.”

“I think we should,” said Boris, “but not now. I think it would be wise to leave it until at least tomorrow.”

“I think I agree,” replied Adam. “Perhaps we should leave the tapes for today. Shall we cook early and then spend the evening playing chess?”

“But first shall we make some more of that vegetable stew we enjoyed so much last week? I have just remembered I froze some fresh young nettles in the spring this year; we could add these,” said Boris.

“Excellent!” replied Adam enthusiastically.

Later in the evening the two men were sitting and setting out the chess pieces.

“I’ve always admired this set,” said Adam, “where did it come from?”

“Have I never told you before? My grandfather carved these pieces himself. He died before I was born so I never saw him do it. My grandmother told me that it was one of his hobbies after he became too old

to do heavy work. He used to sit on the bench outside in the afternoons and work on these pieces. Time did not matter at all to him, and he did it solely for his own enjoyment. Fortunately his eyesight remained very good; and this, along with his carving skills, meant that he was able to produce these beautiful and intricate designs.”

They played the game slowly, with much discussion between moves. The game was not central to their conversation, it was a pleasant addition. They reminisced about their student days, laughing out loud at some of the events they each recalled. They drew up a list of possible leads for Adam to follow when trying to get a publisher for their early collection of songs. After finally completing the game of chess, they played duets on Boris’ piano, delighting in having the freedom to stop and repeat passages that they particularly enjoyed. They finished with Schubert’s ‘Fantasie’, and then leaped up and hugged each other.

It was late. Tomorrow they would listen to that tape again.

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Although Adam was tired, he could not settle. He tried reading a gardening magazine from the collection that Boris had thoughtfully left on a small table beside his bed. Blueberry bushes floated around in front of his eyes as he tried to doze. Eventually he fell asleep, but he kept waking, aware that he had been hearing once more the sounds of that train ... the train where he had first met Ellen.

When morning came he was glad to get up. There was no sign of Boris yet, so he walked in the garden and watched a bird having a dust bath in a particularly dry patch that had yielded a crop of potatoes earlier that summer. He was reluctant to eat breakfast until his friend joined him, so he eventually sat on the bench and sipped a glass of water. His mind went back to what Boris had told him of the state he had entered when they listened to that tape yesterday. As he reflected on it, he began to doubt whether it would be the right thing to listen to it again today. They had only a few days left now before he had to leave, and it was important that they continued to process the remaining tapes. Perhaps they should lay that one aside for now, and work on the others. He did want to know more about what had happened to him and why. He wanted to remember what he had been going to say to Boris after they first listened to the whole side of the tape. But he had a feeling that if they started to concentrate on that, it might well take up most of the time they had left. Being completely honest with himself, he also felt reluctant to investigate this further at a time when he would soon be parted from his friend.

When Boris appeared his face showed concern.

“Adam, you look really tired this morning,” he said, as they went indoors.

Adam explained about his disturbed night, and then went on to share his thoughts of this morning about the tape.

“You may be right,” said Boris. “Although I am keen to learn more about what happened to you, let us just leave it for now, work on two of the remaining tapes, and I will put yesterday’s tape in this cupboard.” He opened a long narrow glass-fronted cupboard which was near the fireplace. It had five shelves in it. He put the tape on the top shelf, along with some delicate glassware.

They began work once more. Adam found that he could not focus on the task as he had been able to do before. He kept finding himself staring out of the window. He could hear the music on the tape he was supposed to be studying, but it seemed to be much in the background. Again he could hear the sounds of the train. Again he heard some passages he remembered from that tape of yesterday. His thoughts ran past the chess set of last night which was carved in that strange and unusually intricate way. Even the delicate glassware he had glimpsed in the cupboard this morning was having a greater impact than the sound of the music he was supposed to be studying.

At length he turned to his friend and said, “I think I need to go outside this morning. I don’t feel I can do any more work at the moment.”

“Shall I come too?” asked Boris, concerned; his friend looked so tired, and almost unwell.

“I think I need to be on my own for a while this morning,” said Adam. “There are so many things on my mind. I think I need to walk about slowly for a while. Actually, I feel in a state of shock, but I don’t really know why. Your telling me what happened to me when we listened to yesterday’s tape has affected me a lot; but that’s not all.”

He stood up slowly and heavily. Although the air was quite warm, he put on a coat, and walked out into the garden. Boris watched him go. He understood that Adam needed to be alone for a while, but he made a mental note of the time, and decided that if Adam had not returned in about an hour and a half, he would go out and

look to see where he was. He assumed that he would take one of the usual routes they followed on the walks they had shared each day. Boris noted the direction Adam took, and then resumed his work. He was becoming more and more aware of just how much he would miss Adam when he returned to the UK at the end of the week.

Adam took the route that led him towards the ancient birch woods. It did not seem to be a conscious decision, his feet merely seemed to take him there. As he proceeded down the path between the fields, all the different parts of the jumble of thoughts in his mind continued to appear and disappear, unchanged. He felt very tired and dispirited. He was barely aware of the vegetation along the sides of the path. This was unusual; his eyes were normally alert to the array of grasses, wild flowers and even certain of the mosses. He felt so weary. No, it was beyond that; he felt at the end of his energies. Despite this, he continued to make his way very slowly towards the edge of the woods. Gradually the slow rhythm of his walking movements began to still the jumble of thoughts in his mind. He was able to think about each thing separately, and to ponder on the meaning of each without feeling he had to come to any conclusion. He reached the birch trees and was enveloped in their cool shade. The shapes of the branches calmed him, the gentle movements of the leaves made precisely the sound he needed. Without having to think about which direction to take, he followed one of the paths that was so familiar from his shared walks with Boris.

As time passed, he began to feel that not only was it all right to have these things to think about, but also he was feeling a sense of fascination about them instead of being totally overwhelmed. He began to look forward to a long process of savouring their existence in his life. He felt he could pull them out and think about them again whenever he wanted to.

He noticed that his pace had quickened a little, and he began to think of Boris and the rest of the tapes. Perhaps he would be able to complete one more before he had to leave. He walked briskly back to the house. Boris looked up and smiled in welcome; he was pleased and relieved to see some colour in his friend's cheeks. Adam sat down in a businesslike fashion, and the two worked on until lunchtime.

The end of the week came. Boris drove Adam to the airport and waited with him as long as he could; a long hug, and then they parted.

Adam's flight home was uneventful. Next week he hoped to be making a number of phone calls which would start off the process of finding a way to get that early collection of songs published.