The Sympathy Society

by Graham Masterton

The phone rang just as Martin was cracking the second egg into the frying-pan. He wedged the receiver under his chin and said, 'Sarah! Hi, sweetheart! You're calling early!'.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then, Sorry, Martin. This is John - John Newcome, from Lazarus.

John? What can I do for you? Don't tell me Sarah's left some more documents at home.'

No, no, nothing like that. Listen, Martin, there's no easy way of saying this. We've just had a call from the British Embassy in Athens. I'm afraid there's been an accident.

Martin suddenly found himself short of breath. Accident? What kind of accident? Sarah's all right, isn't she?

I'm sorry, Martin. We're all devastated. She's dead.

Martin turned off the gas. It was all he could think of to do. Whatever John Newcome said next, he wasn't going to be eating the full English breakfast that he had planned for himself. The flat was silent now. The television had switched itself off. The birds had suddenly stopped chirruping.

You're going to hear this sooner or later, said John Newcome. He was obviously trying to be stable but his words came out like a bagful of Scrabble tiles. The press will be onto you. You know. Sarah had an accident on a jet-ski, late yesterday afternoon. It seems as if she went between two boats. There was a line between them. The chap from the Embassy said that she probably didn't see it. Only a thin line. Braided steel.

No, said Martin.

I'm sorry, Martin. But it's probably better that you hear it from me. She went straight into it and it cut her-

Martin could never tell afterward if he had actually heard the words, or if he had imagined hearing them, or seen what had happened to Sarah in his mind's eye, as if she had sent him a Polaroid snap of it. Full colour, blue sky, blue sea, yachts as white as starched collars.

Head-

No this can't be true. This is Thursday morning and as soon as I've finished my job in Fulham I'm flying out to Rhodes to spend the next ten days with her, swimming and snorkeling and going to discos. Not Sarah. Not Sarah with her long blonde hair and her bright gray oystershell eyes and her Finnish-looking face. And the way she laughed - wild exaggerated laughter, falling backward on the futon. And those toes of hers, kicking in the sunlight. And she hated fat, she used to take her ham sandwiches apart and put on her reading-glasses and search for fat like a gold prospector. And her kisses, clicking on his shoulder, in the darkest moments of the night. And suggestive little whispers.

Off.

His mother said that he was very brave. His father stood with his hands deep in the pockets of his brown corduroy trousers and looked as if he had just heard that interest rates had gone down again. He spent most of the weekend in his old room, lying on his candlewick bedspread, facing the wall. He saw so many faces in the floral wallpaper. Devils, imps, demons and fairies. But he couldn't clearly remember what Sarah had looked like. He didn't want to remind himself by looking at photographs. If he looked at photographs, he would remember only the photographs, and not the real Sarah. The real Sarah who had touched him and kissed him and waved him goodbye at Stansted Airport. Turning the corner. The sun, catching her hair. Then, gone.

After the funeral, he went for a long walk on the Downs, on the bony prehistoric back of Sussex, where the wind constantly blew and the sea always glittered in the distance. But no matter how often you walked up there, you always had to return. And, as evening turned the sky into veils of blue, he came down the narrow chalk path, clinging on to the hawthorn bushes to keep his balance, and he knew that he was going to go mad without her. He was going to kill himself, take an overdose, cut his wrists, fill his car with carbon monoxide. She was gone, and she had left him all alone in this world, and he didn't want to be here any longer. Not alone. What was the point? What was the purpose? Everything that he had ever done, he had done expressly for her. His whole life from the moment he was born had been leading him toward her, by all kinds of devious paths and diversions. They had given him her jewelry. Her necklace, her watch. What was the point of them, if she wasn't alive to wear them?

And more than anything, he kept imagining what it must have been like for her, rounding the prow of that yacht, laughing, revving up her jet-ski, only to see that steel cable stretched in front of her, far too late. Maybe she hadn't seen it at all. But what had she *felt*, when she hit it, and her head came flying off? Don't tell me she felt nothing. Don't tell me she wouldn't have suffered. Don't tell me that for one split-second she wouldn't have realized what had happened to her?

Nobody had any proof, of course, but didn't they always say that when they guillotined the nobles in the French Revolution, and their heads had tumbled into the basket, some of them had cried out in shock?

In their flat, two weeks later, he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and tried to cut his throat with the steak knife that he had stolen from a Berni Inn the previous summer. Because Sarah had dared him to. Now he believed that he knew why she had dared him. She wanted him to have a way of joining him, when she died. It was drizzling outside. One of the gutters was blocked with leaves and water was clattering intermittently into the basement area outside.

He drew the serrated blade across his neck. It tugged at his skin and blood suddenly poured on to his shirt. It didn't hurt, but the tugging was deeply unpleasant, and the knife obviously wasn't sharp enough. He had expected to cut through his carotid artery and send spurts of blood all over the bathroom, up the walls, over the mirror.

Sarah's neck must have pumped blood, when her head was cut off. He remembered reading about the beheading of a British soldier in a Japanese PoW camp. His commanding officer said that blood jumped out of his neck like a red walking-stick.

He lifted the knife again. His hand was already slippery and his fingers were sticking together. He tried to cut again, but his neck was so messy that he couldn't see what he was doing, and he was beginning to tremble.

He slowly dropped to his knees on to the floor. The knife fell in the washbasin. He stayed where he was, his head bowed, his eyes streaming with tears, his mouth dragged down in a silent howl of loneliness and agony.

Jenny came to see him in hospital. Jenny was plump and pale with scraped-back hair. She worked in the accounts department at Hiya Intelligence, but ever since he had started working there, she had made excuses to come up and see him in software. She had brought him a box of Milk Tray chocolates and a John Grisham novel.

You've lost an awful lot of weight, Martin, she said, laying her little nail-bitten hand on top of his.

He tried to smile. Throat's still sore. Besides, I haven't got much of an appetite.

How long have you got to stay in here?

I don't know. The psychotherapist said he wasn't very happy with me. I said, "What's happiness got to do with anything?"'

'So what did he say?

He said, "If you don't know, you ought to stay in hospital."'

Jenny reached down and fumbled in her big woven bag. She produced a folded copy of the *Evening Standard* and handed it to him. There, she said. Read that ad I've circled. I don't know if it'll help, but you never know.

It was a small display advertisement in the classified section, under Personal Services. It read: Grieving? Suicidal? When you've lost a loved one, The Sympathy Society understands how you feel. Unlike all other counselors, we can offer you what you're really looking for. Underneath, there was a telephone number in Buckinghamshire.

Martin dropped the paper on to the floor. I don't think so, Jenny. The last thing I need is even more sympathy. I've had so much sympathy I've been feeling sympathy-sick. Like eating a whole box of chocolates at one sitting.'

By the way- he said, handing her back the box of Milk Tray, I don't like milk chocolate. You eat them.

It's all right. Give them to the nurses.

She looked so disappointed that he took hold of her hand and squeezed it. I'm just pleased that you came, that's all. I can't expect you to understand how I feel. Nobody can. Sarah was

everything to me. Everything. I'm not making a song and dance about it. I simply don't see the point of living without her.

What about your family? Your mum and dad? What about all of your friends?

They'll get over me.

You really think so? she challenged him, with tears in her eyes, and her lower lip quivering. You're hurt, of course you are. You're absolutely devastated. But why should even more people have to suffer?

I'm sorry, Jenny. It's my life and I have the right to do what I want with it. And that includes ending it.

Jenny stood up, and sniffed, and picked up her bag. If that's the way you feel, I hope you make better job of it next time.

Martin gave a painful cough and held out his hand to her. Don't be angry with me, Jenny. Please.

I'm not. I just can't stand to see you giving in. I'd give my life for you, you know that.

He looked into her eyes and he could see how much she loved him. He had the dreadful, unforgivable thought that if only she had died, instead of Sarah. Hadn't she offered her life? And if it could make any difference, would he have taken it?

Thanks for the book, and the chocolates, he said.

She didn't answer, but she leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. Then she left the ward, dancing awkwardly in the doorway with a man on crutches.

Martin lay back on the bed. The sun crossed the ceiling like the spokes of a broken wheel. He dozed for a while, and when he opened his eyes it was almost four o'clock.

You've been sleeping, said a soft voice, very close to his ear. Mmm, he said. Then he suddenly opened his eyes wider. That was Sarah's voice. He was sure that it was Sarah's voice. He turned sideways and she was lying right next to him, her eyes bright, her blonde hair spread across the pillow. She was smiling at him in that gently mocking way she had, when she caught him doing something embarrassing.

Sarah, he whispered, reaching up and touching her hair. I had this nightmare that you were dead. It seemed completely real. You don't have any idea.

She didn't reply, but very, very slowly closed her eyes.

Sarah, talk to me. Don't go to sleep. I have to tell you all about this dream.

Her eyes remained closed. The colour gradually began to seep out of her cheeks. Her lips were almost turquoise.

Sarah - listen to me - Sarah!

He tried to take hold of her shoulder to shake her, but his hand seized nothing but blanket. He sat up, shocked, and it was then that he realized that only her head was lying next to him. Her

severed neck was encrusted with dried blood and part of her windpipe was protruding on to the sheet.

He made an awful moaning noise and half-jumped, half-fell out of the bed, tangling his feet in the sheets. His head struck the edge of his bedside table and his plastic water-jug dropped on to the floor, along with his book and his chocolates and his wristwatch.

A nurse came hurrying over. Martin! Martin, what's the matter?

She helped him up. He tilted on to his feet, and twisted around to stare at the bed. Sarah's head had vanished, and he knew that it hadn't really been there at all. It had been nothing more than a nightmare. He sat down on the side of the bed, feeling shocked and bruised. The trouble was, it was worse being awake. Sarah was dead and he was alone, and he could never wake up from that, ever.

Back at the flat, with the blinds and the curtains drawn, he sat at the kitchen table and smoothed out the page from the *Evening Standard* that Jenny had given him. He had read the advertisement for The Sympathy Society again and again, and every time he read it he had been left with an odd feeling of unease. Unlike all other counselors, we can offer you what you're really looking for. How did they know what he was looking for? How did they know what *anybody* was looking for?

He ate another spoonful of cold spaghetti out of the can. That was all he had eaten since he came out of hospital. He didn't have to cook it, he barely had to chew it, and it kept him alive. It seemed absurd, to keep yourself alive when you wanted so much to die, but he didn't want to die a lingering death, through starvation and dehydration; and there was always a chance that somebody would find you, and resuscitate you, and feed you with drips and tubes. He wanted to die instantly, the way that Sarah had died.

After almost an hour, he picked up the phone and dialed the number in Buckinghamshire. It rang for a long time, with an echoing, old-fashioned ringing tone. Eventually, it was picked up. There was a moment's breathy pause, and then a clear voice said, Miller.

I'm sorry. I think I must have the wrong number. I wanted The Sympathy Society.

You've reached The Sympathy Society. How can I help you?

I've, er - I saw your ad in the *Standard.*

I see. And may I ask if you have recently been bereaved?

About six weeks ago. I lost my partner. She- He found that he couldn't get the words out.

Mr Miller waited for a while, and then he asked, with extreme delicacy, Was it *sudden*, may I ask? Or an illness?

Sudden. It was very sudden. An accident, while she was on holiday.

I see. Well, that means that you're very suitable for Sympathy Society counseling. We don't counsel for illness.

I've had some psychiatric counseling on the NHS. It hasn't made me feel any better, to tell you the truth.

That doesn't surprise me. Psychiatrists, on the whole, have a very conventional view of what it is to be "better".

I don't quite understand what you mean.

Well, if you're interested in us, why don't you come to see us? It never did anybody any harm to talk.

How much do you charge?

Financially, nothing.

You mean there are no fees at all?

Let me put it this way. I do expect some output from all of the people we help. I'll explain it you when you come to see us.

You sound pretty confident that I will.

We word our advertisement very carefully. It appeals only to those who we can genuinely help.

It started to rain again. Martin couldn't see it through the blind, but he could hear the castanet-clatter of water on the concrete outside.

Tell me how to reach you, he said.

The taxi dropped him off by a sagging green-painted gate, at the end of a driveway that was made almost impassable to motor vehicles by its overgrown laurel-bushes. His feet crunched up the wet pea-shingle until eventually a redbrick Victorian house came into view. Its windows were black and empty, and one of its side-walls was streaked green with lichen. Three enormous ravens were strutting on the lawn, but they flapped away when they saw him coming, and settled on the roof instead, like three bad omens.

Martin went to the front door and rang the bell. He waited for two or three minutes but nobody answered, so he rang it again. He couldn't hear it ringing anywhere in the house. A corroded brass knocker hung in the center of the door, with the face of a hooded monk. He banged it twice, and waited some more.

At last the door opened. Martin was confronted by a white-faced young woman with her hair twisted on top of her head in a messy but elaborate bun. She wore a simple gray smock and grubby white socks.

You must be Martin, she said. She held out her hand. I'm Sylvia.

Hello, Sylvia. I wasn't sure I'd come to the right house.

Oh, you have, Martin. Believe me, you have. Come inside.

Martin followed her into a huge gloomy hallway that smelled of frying onions and lavender floor-polish. On the right-hand side of the hallway, a wide staircase ran up to a galleried landing, where there was a high stained-glass window in ambers and browns and muted blues. It depicted two hooded monks in prayer and a third figure in a thick coat that looked as

if it were made of dead stoats and weasels and water-rats, all sewn together, their mouths open, their legs lolling. This figure had its back turned, so that it was impossible to see who it was meant to be.

Sylvia led Martin along the hallway until they reached a large sitting-room at the back of the house. It was wallpapered and furnished in brown, with two dull landscapes on the walls. Here sat three others - two men and a woman. They turned around as Martin came in, and one of them, a silver-haired man in a baggy brown cardigan, stood up and held out his hand. The other man remained where he was, black-haired, with deep black rings under his eyes, hunched in his big worn-out armchair. The woman was standing by the window with a cup of milky coffee in her hand. She was so thin that she was almost transparent.

Geoffrey, said the silver-haired man, shaking Martin's hand. But you can call me Sticky, my dear. Mary always did. Ardent stamp-collector, that's why.

Sticky - the stamp-collector who came unhinged, put in the black-haired man, in a West Country accent.

Sticky gave Martin a tight little smile. This is Terence. Sometimes Terence is extremely cordial but most of the time Terence is extremely offensive. Still, we've learned to take him as he comes.

What he means is, they've learned to keep their gobs shut, said Terence.

Sticky ignored him. Over here - this is Theresa. She used to be a very fine singer, you know. Cheltenham Ladies' Chorus. Theresa gave Martin an almost imperceptible nod of her head. It's a pity, said Sticky. She hasn't sung a single note since she lost her family.

Terence said, Where's the pity in that? I haven't plowed a single furrow and you haven't stuck in a single stamp, and Sylvia hasn't strung together a single necklace. There has to be a reason for doing things, doesn't there? A reason. And none of us here has a single reason for breathing, let alone singing.

Come on, Terence, Sticky chided him. You know we do. You know what we're here for, all of us.

At that moment another door opened on the opposite side of the sitting-room, and a tall man entered, leaning on a walking-stick. He was very thin, almost emaciated, with steel-gray hair scraped back from his forehead, and a nose as sharp as an ax. His eyes were so pale that they looked as if all of the colour had been leached out of them by experience and pain. A triangular scar ran across his left cheek and disappeared into his hairline.

He wore a black double-breasted suit with unfashionably flappy lapels. As he walked into the room, Martin had the impression that beneath his clothes, his body was all broken and dislocated. It was the way he balanced and swiveled as he made his way across the carpet.

Martin, he said, in a voice like glasspaper. You'll forgive me for not shaking hands.

Mr Miller, said Martin.

Tybalt, please. Ridiculously affected name, I know; but my father was an English teacher at a very pretentious boys' primary.

He eased himself into one of the armchairs and propped his stick between his knees. You must tell us who you have lost, Martin; and how. But before you do, your fellow-sufferers here will tell you why *they* sought the help of The Sympathy Society. Sticky - why don't you start?

Silly thing, really, said Sticky, as if he were talking about nothing more traumatic than allowing himself to be bowled lbw in a local cricket match. I was looking after my grandson for the day. Beautiful little chap. Blond hair. Sturdy little legs. We were going to go down to the beach and look for crabs. I went to get the car out of the garage, and I didn't realize that I'd left the front door open. Little chap followed me, you see. I reversed out of the garage and he was so small that I didn't see him standing behind me. I ran over him. Slowly. And stopped, with the wheel resting on his stomach.

He paused for a moment and took out a clean, neatly pressed handkerchief. He was lying on the concrete looking up at me. There was blood coming out of his ears but he was still alive. I'll never forget the expression on his face as long as I live. He was so *bewildered*, as if he couldn't understand why this had happened to him. I moved the car off him, but that might have been the wrong thing to do. He died almost at once.

He smiled, but tears were filling his eyes. Of course, that was the end of everything. My marriage; my family. Do you think my daughter could ever look me in the eye again? I thought of killing myself by putting a plastic bag over my head. I nearly succeeded, but a friend of mine stopped me just in time. And I was glad. Suffocating like that - that was the coward's way out.

Sylvia? said Tybalt.

Sylvia stared at the floor and spoke in a hurried monotone. My husband Ron was all I ever wanted in the whole world. He was loving and kind and generous and he was always bringing me flowers. He was a firefighter. About nine weeks ago he went out on a shout in Bromley. Paint factory on fire. He was the first in, as usual. His nickname was Bonkers because he was always rushing into things without thinking.

He kicked open a door just as a tank of paint-stripping gel blew up. He was covered in it, from head to foot. The coroner said it had the same effect as napalm. It stuck to him, and it cremated him alive. He was screaming and screaming and trying to get it off him, but there was nothing that any of his mates could do. Two of them had to take early retirement with post-traumatic stress disorder. And me? I missed Ron so much that it was like a physical pain. I wandered around like a zombie for the first few weeks. I walked in front of buses, hoping that they wouldn't stop. I thought of pills. I bought two hundred paracetamol from different chemists. But then I thought, no. That's not the way. That's when I saw the ad for The Sympathy Society. And rang. And here I am.

Your turn, Terence, said Tybalt.

Terence didn't say anything at first, but cracked his knuckles one by one. Theresa, at the window, winced with exaggerated sensitivity at every crack.

Come on Terence, Tybalt coaxed him. Martin needs to know what happened to you.

Farming accident, said Terence, at last. There's a kind of plow called a disk plow. It's got steel disks instead of shares. Ours got jammed last year, and my sister tried to fix it. It decided to unjam itself when she was right underneath. Dragged her halfway through it. She called for help for two hours before she died. I was plowing in the next field and I couldn't hear her. The doctor said he'd never seen anybody suffer such terrible injuries and stay alive for so long. Half her face was torn off and one of her legs was twisted around backward, so that the foot was pointing the other way.

After the funeral I went home and I took out my shotgun. I sat in the parlor for nearly an hour with the barrel in my mouth. But I think I knew all the time that I wasn't going to do it.

There was another long pause and it became obvious that Terence wasn't going to say any more than that. Theresa? said Tybalt. Theresa gave a wan smile. Without turning away from the window, she said, It's extraordinary how your life can be heaven one second and hell the next. Just like that, without any warning at all. We were on holiday in Cornwall, my husband Tom and I and our daughter Emma. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. The sun was shining. The breeze was blowing off the sea. We went for a walk on the cliffs. Tom and I were holding hands and Emma was running all around us. Then suddenly she was gone. Vanished. We were frantic. We thought she'd fallen over the cliff, and we searched and searched but there was no sign of her anywhere. Not on the rocks. Not on the beach. It was just as if she'd vaporized; as if she'd never existed.

I can't describe the panic I felt. Tom called the police and the coastguard, and they searched, too.

'They had tracker dogs out, helicopters, everything. I overheard them saying things like, "She'll probably be back on the five o'clock tide, three miles down the coast." Tom was wonderful. He kept telling me that she was probably playing some silly game, and that she'd soon turn up, teasing us for being so worried.

But she wasn't playing some silly game, and she didn't turn up. We did an appeal on television. You might even remember it. Somebody said they had seen her in Fowey, with a strange man in a raincoat. But that was all a mistake.

A little Jack Russell terrier found Emma, in the end. She had fallen down a natural chimney in the ground, nearly sixty feet down, and so narrow that she was completely wedged, and scarcely able to breathe. The post-mortem showed that it had taken her five days to die.

Tom went out the next day and it was only when I was putting away the ironing that I found the letter he had left me. It was too late by then. He had hanged himself in a lock-up garage in Ealing.

Everybody was so kind. Once or twice my sister nearly persuaded me that it was worth going on, that life could still be worth living. I took too many pills, but I washed them down with vodka, and I was sick. I thought of cutting my wrists, they say you have to do it from wrist to elbow, don't they, so that nobody can stop the bleeding before you die. But what happens when you take pills? You fall asleep, and that's it. And what happens when you cut your wrists? You gradually lose consciousness. You don't stay wedged in a hole in the ground for five days, slowly dying of thirst and starvation, looking at the little circle of daylight sixty feet above you and wondering why your parents haven't come to rescue you. You don't suffer, as

Emma must have suffered. You don't lose your faith in the people who are supposed to be taking care of you.

She stopped in mid-flow, and lifted one hand, as if she were trying to attract the attention of somebody in the garden. But there was nobody there. Only the overgrown bushes, and the apple trees heavy with half-rotten Worcesters.

Martin turned to Tybalt, and Tybalt raised one eyebrow, as if he were asking him if he was beginning to understand what was happening here, at The Sympathy Society. Martin looked from Theresa to Sylvia, and then at Sticky, who was making a show of folding up his handkerchief again.

Martin? said Tybalt. Why don't you tell us your story?

Later in the evening, they sat in the kitchen and ate a supper of chicken casserole with green peppers, and home-made bread - prepared, said Tybalt, by Mrs Pearce ... such a dear person ... she comes up from the village. The atmosphere at dinner was strained. Terence was twitchy and obnoxious. Sylvia couldn't stop dabbing her eyes and her nose with her paper napkin. Theresa wouldn't eat anything, except for a tiny nibble of bread, and Sticky was deeply distracted, as if he were thinking about something else altogether.

During the cheese course (when the table was messy with crumbs and stripped-off sticks of celery) Tybalt scraped back his chair and said, Martin - you've realized by now what we're doing here, haven't you?

I'm not sure, said Martin. I think perhaps I'm missing something.

Understatement of the year, put in Terence.

Tybalt ignored him. We're not here to cry for you, Martin; or mollycoddle you; or make you believe that life has to go on. What a fallacy that is! Life doesn't have to go on, if you don't want it to. Where were you, before you were born? You weren't anywhere. You didn't exist. In the same way, you won't exist after you're dead. There's no heaven, Martin. There isn't any hell. But there is one thing: in the instant when you die, there's *revelation*.

Revelation? Martin was used to being the center of attention, and he didn't like the way that Tybalt dominated the whole room, and everybody in it.

Revelation like the Book of Revelations, said Terence. Revelation like the scales falling from your eyes.

Tybalt smiled. When you're dead, you're dead. That's all there is to it. Blackness, nothingness, that's it. We all know it, even if we're scared to admit it. But I believe there's a split-second, when you die, that you see the world as it really is. We probably see it when we're born, too. Why do you think babies cry, when they first come out of the womb? But babies forget; and babies can't tell us what they've seen.

Neither can dead people, said Martin.

Well, you're right there. Nobody comes back. But these days, there is a way to record what people are seeing, in their mind's eye. When people think, electrical impulses jump from one synapse to the other, inside of the brain. And we can catch those electrical impulses and record them, just like a DVD disk.

What are you trying to tell me? That you can record what's happening inside of other people's brains?

Tybalt nodded; and nodded. You've got it, Martin. That's exactly what we can do. The technology is still in its infancy, but we've managed to recover five or six minutes of footage of living brain activity; and at least six seconds of post-mortem activity. We can see what people are thinking about, when they die.

He stopped for a moment, to light up a cigarette. Then he waved away the smoke, and said, We can record those last split-seconds of human life. We can record it in pictures and sound, DVD no problem. The entire technology has been in place since 1996. What it needed was the will to make it work.

And you think that you have that will? asked Martin.

Not me, you. You're the only one who can show us what happens when you go to meet your Maker. You and Terence, and Sylvia, and Sticky, and Theresa. You're the only people who can make this work.

Martin said nothing. He was beginning to grasp the enormity of what Tybalt was saying, but he needed to hear it spelled out. Tybalt said, I have my suits tailored, but I'm a physical mess. When I was twenty-four, I borrowed my friend's motorcycle and took my girlfriend for a ride along the Kingston bypass. We went through the New Malden underpass at 125mph, and then I lost it. She came off the pillion and flew right over the central reservation, straight into the front of a Securicor van. I tumbled nearly half-a-mile down the road in front of me, and smashed up everything that was smashable. Ribs, pelvis, arms, legs, ankles. I was like a jelly filled with bits of bone. And I died. I lay there on the road, dead. And when I was dead, I saw something. Only for a few seconds. But I saw the world as it really was. Not the way we imagine it, when we're alive. I *saw the world as it really was*.

But you survived, said Martin.

Tybalt shrugged, and tapped his stick. Yes, I survived. By good or bad fortune, an ambulance was passing, and they took me straight to Kingston Hospital. They thought I was past saving. They gave me so many electric shocks that they burned my nipples off. But after the seventh shock, I started to breathe; and I have never stopped breathing since.

All the same, I know what I saw, after that accident, and I don't believe that it was shock that caused me to see it, or concussion, or psychological trauma. As I lay in the road, Martin, I saw things that would make your hair stand on end.

So what are you saying to me? asked Martin.

I'm saying nothing. But you listened to all of your fellow society members this afternoon, didn't you? They're all bereaved, just as you are. None of them want to carry on without their family or their partners. They all want to die. But none of them want to kill themselves with tablets, or exhaust fumes, or by cutting their wrists. When they die, they want to feel what their loved ones felt. They want to suffer in the same way. Sylvia wants to burn; Sticky wants to be crushed; Theresa wants to be trapped below ground. This will be their redemption.

You know what I'm talking about, Martin. How many mornings have you lain awake and thought about Sarah, and what she felt like, when that steel wire cut off her head? You want

to experience that too, don't you, Martin? - or else you wouldn't have answered my advertisement. The Sympathy Society isn't the Samaritans. The Sympathy Society *really* sympathizes. We'll give you what you're craving for. The same death that your loved one suffered.

Martin's mouth was totally dry. You'll do that - you'll burn Sylvia? You'll trap Theresa under the ground?

Tybalt nodded. Nobody else understands, Martin, but I do. You want to die. But trying to cut your throat with a steak knife ... that doesn't even compare, does it? What did Sarah feel? After her head was cut off, did she still *think* for a second or two? Did she see her body, still speeding along on that jet-ski, with blood pumping out of her neck? You want to know that, don't you, Martin?

Martin cleared his throat, and nodded.

Tybalt leaned forward and touched his knee with chalky fingernails. The Sympathy Society can arrange for you to be killed in any way you choose. There's only one thing we ask in return. We need to record your impressions with synaptic monitors ... we need to see what you see, think what you think, the instant you die. I saw something terrible when I lay on the road after my motorcycle accident, and I need to know whether I was hallucinating or not.

What did you see? asked Martin.

Tybalt shook his head. I don't want to put any ideas in your head. Besides, if I tell you, you won't want to be killed at all.

I want to die, said Martin. I want you to cut off my head, and kill me. I need to know what Sarah went through. I need to know exactly what she felt like.

There you are,, said Tybalt, with unexpected gentleness. That's why we call ourselves The Sympathy Society.

The following morning was chilly and overcast, and inside the house it was so gloomy that they had to switch the lights on. They gathered for breakfast in the kitchen, although Martin couldn't manage anything more than a cup of coffee. Sylvia sat at the head of the table, her hair all pinned up. She looked even paler than usual, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Around her neck hung a small silver crucifix.

At half past eight, Tybalt came in through the garden door. He was wearing a long black overcoat with the collar turned up. Well, he said, chafing his hands together. Everything's ready, Sylvia, if you are.

Sylvia set down her teacup. She looked around the table, at each of them, although she didn't smile. I don't like goodbyes, she said. Anyway, we're all going to meet again, aren't we?

Theresa reached across the table and took hold of her hand. There were tears in her eyes. I envy you, she said. You don't know how much I envy you.

Tybalt said, None of you have to come out and watch. This is Sylvia's moment, after all. But if you want to be with her, I'm sure she'll appreciate it.

Sylvia stood up. She was wearing a plain green linen dress, and she was barefoot. Tybalt went back out into the garden and she followed him, leaving the door ajar.

Theresa said, I'm not going. I can't. Terence didn't say anything, but made no move to get up from the table. Sticky went through to the hallway and came back with his brown tweed overcoat and his checkered scarf. I'm going. Poor girl deserves somebody there. Terrible thing, to die on your own.

Don't, said Theresa. Sticky laid an apologetic hand on her shoulder. Sorry ... didn't mean it like that.

Martin didn't know whether he wanted to witness Sylvia's death or not; but Sticky said, Come on, old boy. You never know. When you see this, you might change your mind.

They went out into the garden. The grass was wet underfoot and dew was clinging to the branches of the apple-trees. Martin was shivering, and it wasn't because of the cold. In the far corner of the garden stood a dilapidated shed with broken windows, and just in front of it, Sylvia was already kneeling on the ground. Tybalt was standing over her, taping electrodes to her temples with silver fireproof tape. A little distance away stood an old metal table with a PC standing on it, and a collection of equipment for recording Sylvia's heart-rate and brain activity.

Martin and Sticky stopped and stood at a respectful distance, close to one of the trees. A robin perched on the fence close by, beadily watching them. Sylvia looked so plain and pale she reminded Martin of St Joan, about to be burned at the stake. But her expression was completely calm, and her eyes were lifted toward the sky, as if she were quite prepared for what was going to happen to her. As if she were quietly looking forward to it.

It took nearly ten minutes for Tybalt to fix the last electrode, and Martin was beginning to lose his nerve. I think I'll go back inside, he told Sticky. But Sticky took hold of his hand, and gripped it tight, and wouldn't let it go. You're best staying, he said.

Tybalt went across to the metal table and switched on his PC and his recording equipment. Then he went to the shed and came back with a large blue petrol-can. He told Sylvia to cover her face with her hands, and then he unscrewed the lid and poured the contents all over the top of her head. Sylvia shuddered, and let out a muffled, high-pitched *ah*! It wasn't petrol. It was a thick, greenish gel, which dripped slowly down her neck and over her shoulders. Martin could smell it, even from twenty feet away. It was paint-stripper, and it must have been searing the exposed skin on Sylvia's hands and neck already.

Tybalt's expression was grim, and he worked as quickly as he could. He picked up a large paintbrush and smeared the gel all down Sylvia's dress, back and front, and over her legs. She was trembling in agony already, but she kept her hands pressed over her face, and the only sound she made was a thin, repetitive *eeeshh - eeeshh - eeeshh-* But the pain that she was suffering was nothing to the pain she would be suffering next.

Without any hesitation, Tybalt took a cigarette lighter out of his pocket, and snapped it into flame.

Are you absolutely sure you want to do this? he asked her, in a voice so quiet that Martin could scarcely hear him.

With her hands still clamped over her face, Sylvia nodded. Tybalt lit the top of her piled-up hair, and instantly her head burst into flame. Martin jolted with shock, but Sticky kept gripping his hand. He had never seen anybody burn before, and it was so horrific that he couldn't believe what he was looking at. Sylvia's hair caught fire in a whirl of tiny sparks, and then her ears shriveled and curled over like blackened bacon-rinds. She kept her hands over her face even though the tips of her fingers were alight. But then the fumes from the paint-stripper exploded with the softest *whoomph* and she was completely buried in flames.

Martin couldn't understand how she could bear the pain without moving. The flames were so fierce that he could hardly see her, only her blackening elbows and her scarlet-charred feet. But then she threw open her hands and screamed the most terrible scream that he had ever heard in his life. It wasn't just a scream of agony, it was a scream of total despair.

Sylvia tried to stagger on to her feet. Martin instinctively tried to move forward to help her, but Sticky held him back. It's what she wants, man! It's what she came here for!

Sylvia toppled sideways on to the grass, with flames literally pouring out of her face. She opened and closed her mouth two or three times, but her lungs were too burned for her to scream again. The flames ate through her dress and turned the flesh on her thighs into charcoal. She quivered, as her nerve-endings were burned, but eventually she stopped quivering and it was clear that she was dead. Thick smoke rose into the gray morning sky, and the smell of roasted meat brought a surge of bile into Martin's throat.

Tybalt switched off his equipment and approached them gravely. I think she understood what her husband went through. I hope so. Did you record anything? asked Martin.

I won't know till later, when I analyze all of the images. I wouldn't like to think that she died like that for nothing.

She didn't die for nothing. She died because she's a human being, and human beings should have the choice to die in any way they want to. You haven't changed your mind, have you?

Martin thought about Sarah speeding toward the cable. No, he said. I haven't changed my mind. But I wouldn't want to burn, like Sylvia did.

They went back into the house. Theresa was sitting in the corner, in tears. Terence was hunched in his chair, saying nothing.

She's gone, said Sticky, unnecessarily. A good girl, a very brave ending.

Later that evening, Martin knocked on the door of Tybalt's study. Tybalt was sitting in front of his PC, frowning at the blurry, silvery-gray images that danced on the screen. As soon as Martin came in, he switched it off.

Anything? asked Martin.

Tybalt shook his head. Not so far. It's too soon to tell. There's a lot of filtering to do, a lot of enhancing. But I think I caught *something* today.

Martin hesitated. Tybalt appeared tense, and anxious for him to go, as if he had recorded some images from Sylvia's last agonized seconds of life that he didn't want to discuss.

Of course - as soon as I come up with anything... Tybalt began. Martin nodded. Then he said, Who's next?

Theresa. Hers will take the longest, of course. There's an old dry well, right at the end of the garden, beyond the orchard. I had it bored deeper, fifty feet or so. She's going to go down tomorrow morning.

Isn't anybody going to miss us? What about our bodies? Aren't you worried about the police?

Tybalt gave a small, secretive smile. By the time the police come looking, The Sympathy Society will have moved to pastures new. And everyone here has written a letter, explaining that they have taken their own lives. As will you, when your turn comes.

Yes, said Martin, at last.

Theresa dropped herself down the dry well at the end of the garden just after dawn the following day. It was drizzling slightly, and her hair was stuck wetly to her forehead. They kissed her, each of them, before she went. She was obviously frightened, but she was smiling.

Tybalt attached the last electrodes to her forehead, with reels of cable so that he could monitor her alpha-rhythms right down at the bottom of the well. She knelt down in the brambly grass, and then, quite abruptly, she slithered out of sight.

They heard her cry out. My leg! I think I've broken my leg! But they didn't answer, and she didn't cry out again. She had chosen to suffer the same death as her daughter, and her daughter had broken her left wrist and her collarbone, when she fell.

There was nothing more to do. They walked through the orchard and back to the house.

Three days later, it was Terence's turn. Tybalt had arranged to hire a tractor fitted with a disk plow. It was delivered to the top of the lane that ran down the side of the house, and Terence himself drove it down to the paddock past the orchard. He whistled as he steered it on to the grass. For the first time since Martin had met him, he seemed cheerful and contented.

This was one death that Martin really didn't want to witness. But, again, Sticky insisted. They walked to the paddock by way of the orchard, and Martin stood for a while by the well, listening. Theresa had insisted that nobody should peer down the well to see how she was, because that would mean that she wasn't completely forgotten, the way her daughter had been forgotten.

He listened, but he heard nothing. Tybalt had checked this morning and said that she was still alive, but 'very, very weak.'

The tractor was parked beside the paddock gate, with its engine chugging over. Terence was already lying underneath the plow, between its shining circular disks. He was stripped to the waist, with Tybalt's electrodes fastened to his forehead. He caught sight of Martin and Sticky making their way across the grass, and he gave them an elated thumb's up.

Martin went up and hunkered down next to him. Are you all right? he asked him.

Couldn't be better. I've been looking forward to this. You don't know how much.

Aren't you frightened at all?

Frightened? What of? Pain? Dying? If we were all frightened of pain and dying, we'd all sit at home with a blanket over our heads, wouldn't we?

Tybalt came over. Are you ready, Terence? This is what you really want? Terence's eyes were bright. Come on, Mr Miller. Let's get this over with. The sooner the better.

Tybalt reached out and touched Terence's lips with the tips of his fingers, as if he were a cardinal giving benediction. Then he stood up and said, Better stand clear, Martin.

He went to the tractor and climbed into the cab. He revved the engine two or three times, and each time Terence grinned in anticipation. Then, with no further warning, he engaged the plow. *Oh, Christ!* shrieked Terence. The shining steel disks dragged him in like gristle into an old-fashioned meat mincer. His right arm was crushed into a bloody rope of bones and thin white tendons, and twisted around the spindle. Another disk cut diagonally into his shoulder and opened up his chest, so that one of his lungs blew out like a balloon. His groin was minced into bloody rags, and his legs were twisted in opposite directions.

The plow-blades stopped. Martin could see Terence's head wedged against one of the disks. His eyes were wide with exhilaration.

He tried to say something, but all that came out from between his lips was a large bubble of blood, which wetly burst. His eyes slowly lost their focus, and he died.

Although Terence's death was so grisly, Martin was strangely elated by it. It was the expression on his face, as if he had found at last what he had always been looking for - as if he would have laughed, if he had been able to.

The following Saturday, inside the garage, Tybalt slowly reversed a Mercedes saloon over Sticky's stomach. Martin stayed outside, but he heard Sticky sobbing in pain for almost twenty minutes, and a single runnel of blood crept out from underneath the closed garage doors, and soaked into the pea-shingle.

Have you seen anything yet? he asked Tybalt, as the two of them sat over supper the following evening.

Tybalt poured himself another glass of Fleurie. Not yet, he said evasively. But you will, won't you? It's your turn tomorrow. Martin didn't sleep that night. He sat on the end of the bed staring at his reflection in the dressing-room mirror and wondering if he were mad. Yet somehow, it seemed the most perfect and logical way to go. Even if he didn't meet Sarah in the afterlife, at least he would have shared the same death.

At seven o'clock, Tybalt knocked discreetly on his bedroom door and asked him if he were ready.

It had been impossible to find a lake or a reservoir where they could moor two boats close

together and stretch a steel line between them. So Tybalt had devised a substitute: a motorcycle, and a wire tied at neck-level between two substantial horsechestnut trees.

It was a sharp, sunny morning. They walked together down to the paddock, with Martin pushing the motorcycle.

I haven't been on a bike for years, he told Tybalt. What he was trying to say was: I hope I don't make a mess of this, and blind myself, or cut half my face off, instead of dying instantly.

Tybalt said, You'll be fine. Just make sure you're going full-throttle. He sat patiently in the saddle while Tybalt attached the electrodes. It's funny, he said. I feel really at peace.

Yes, said Tybalt. Death is a good place to go to, when you understand what life really is.

So what is life, really?

Life is mostly imaginary. That's what I saw when I nearly died, coming off that motorbike. Our imagination always protects us from ugliness, and unhappiness, and fear. We have a gift for rationalizing our existence, to make it seem bearable. We're always looking on the bright side.

It's human nature, said Martin.

No, no. You don't realize what I'm talking about when I say "imaginary." I mean that our lives as we know them and recognize them are mostly in our minds. You'll see, believe me. Beauty is imaginary. Happiness is imaginary.

I was happy with Sarah.

You imagined you were happy with Sarah.

I just don't follow.

Tybalt stuck on the last electrode. I can't explain it any more clearly than that. You'll just have to experience it for yourself.

No - tell me!

Tybalt shook his head. If I told you, Martin, you wouldn't believe me. This is something you have to witness for yourself. Now, start up your engine, and think of Sarah. Think how *she* felt.

Martin took a deep breath. It was plain that Tybalt wasn't going to explain himself any further. All the same, what he had said had given Martin a strange feeling of dread, as if there were something far worse beyond those horse-chestnut trees than instant oblivion.

He pressed the self-starter, and the motorcycle whined into life. Tybalt leaned close to him and said, You're still sure about this? You can change your mind ... go home, build a new life. I won't think any the less of you.

Go home to what? A silent flat, with Sarah's clothes still hanging in the closet? Years of grief, and loneliness?

The recording wires will play out behind you, said Tybalt. Don't worry about them. Go as fast as you can. And keep your chin up. Martin revved the motorcycle again and again. The sun began to come out behind the trees, and the morning looked almost heavenly. At last he thought: this is the moment. This is it. The dew was glittering and a flight of starlings came bursting past. You couldn't leave the world at a better time.

The motorcycle sped across the paddock. Martin thought of Sarah, on her jet-ski. He could see the two horse-chestnuts but he couldn't even see the wire yet. It must have been the same for Sarah. Perhaps she didn't see it at all. He opened the throttle wider and the motorcycle bucked and jostled over the grass at more than fifty miles an hour. The breeze fluffed in his ears; the sun shone in his eyes. Chin up, remember.

He felt the blow. It was like a tremendous karate-chop to the adam's apple. He heard the motorcycle roaring off-key, and then suddenly everything was spinning out of control. His head hit the grass, and bounced, and he *saw*, he could actually *see*.

And he understood then what Tybalt had been trying to tell him, and why Tybalt had been trying so hard to see what only the dying can see.

He couldn't scream, because he was decapitated, and his brain was a split-second instant away from total death. But he could scream inside his mind. And that was how he died, screaming.

Tybalt sat alone in the house in front of his computer, running the recordings again and again. Martin's was one of the clearest. He could see him approaching the horse-chestnut trees. At the last second, he could see the wire.

Then - as Martin's head flew from his body - he saw what he himself had seen when he nearly died on the Kingston bypass.

He saw the polluted yellow sky, with tattered rooks circling everywhere. He saw gnarled and shriveled trees, and grass as slimy as seaweed. He saw a distant house with a sagging roof, and fires burning in the distance. He saw hideous, hunched creatures running along the lane. He even glimpsed a brief blurred image of himself, the way he really was.

A tall, white-faced figure, distant and sinister, with frightening deformities.

He switched off the computer and went downstairs. He opened the back door and stepped out into the garden. The sun was still shining - or, at least, it was still shining in his imagination. He lit a cigarette.

A cat came stalking through the grass. It stopped for a moment, and stared at him, almost as if it instinctively knew what he had discovered with technology: that it was not a tortoiseshell with gray eyes and gleaming fur, but something grotesque, like he was, and that both of them were living in a hell on earth.