



**Crystal Says**  
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**Crystal Says**

**A Short Story  
by  
Michael Graeme**

**S**o, I'm standing in this crop circle, down in Wiltshire, England, and there's a girl dangling a crystal from the end of a chain. She's very pretty, so I'm thinking I'll have to find a way of overlooking the fact she's probably also some kind of crank if I want to take advantage of the situation here. I mean, it's not every day someone as good looking stops what she's doing, looks up, and smiles at me this way:

"First time?" she asks.

She's talking about the circle, I suppose, so I tell her yes, though this isn't actually true. There was another circle, long ago, but it's complicated and pointless explaining all of this now, so instead I go: "Wow, that's a lovely crystal!" which isn't as obviously flirty as complimenting her on her eyes or her hair or her dress or something, is it?

Anyway:

"Thanks," she tells me. "But it's just a lump of quartz - you wanna try it?"

And I say: "Erm,... no,... it's okay."

"Don't believe in that sort of thing then?"

Her eyes are green, and her hair is long and blonde and all frizzed up, and she's so sweet and charming I can already feel myself blushing at the effect she's having on me. "I didn't want to disturb you, that's all," I tell her. "I mean, you looked so absorbed."

"Well, I'm done now."

I look around at the circle - though strictly speaking it's not *just* a circle. Sure, there's a main central circle of flattened crop, and we're standing in that, but there are also four smaller out-riding circles and, altogether, they're placed like the five dots on a dice. Then there looks to be a square, making tangents to all five circles, which ought to be quite something, I suppose - I mean *really* difficult to draw - except the lines don't quite meet, and the corners of the square have all been botched. It all looked so much better from up on the road and that's what tempted me down. I can't say what I was expecting to feel here, I mean standing in a circle again after all these years, only that what I'm feeling *now* isn't it.

"So, is it real, do you think?" I ask.

She laughs. "Nope."

"Does your crystal tell you that?"

"My eyes tell me that, silly. They tell me pretty much who dunnit too."

"Oh?"

"Be that crew from Abbotsford way. Total menace if you ask me. They're givin' all the other corn crushers a bad name this season."

"What are you dowsing for then, if you know it's a fake?"

She gives me a twinkle. "Answer to a question maybe - like should I be worried about this guy who's been follerin' me round this past half hour?"

"Ah,... " I take a step back and raise my hands. Unarmed, see? Harmless,... that's me. Okay, I've been a little careless but a guy can sometimes reach the point when he begins to feel invisible to pretty girls, so he takes it for granted he can look at them all day long and they won't see him. Okay, that's a lame excuse, I know, and I've got some apologising to do, so I say:

"Sorry,... I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Its okay," she replies. "Crystal says there's no harm in you."

"Really, I *am* sorry. It was just that it seemed a creepy place and I felt better, being in sight of someone else. Sounds soft I know,..."

She looks at me with one suspicious eyebrow raised. "Crystal says the truth's a little shaky on that one."

"But you didn't consult the crystal. I thought you kind of waved it about to get an answer."

"Sometimes I don't need to."

I'm thinking I've blown it, but then she smiles and it seems I might have got away with it, but now I'm looking at her and realising how young she is. Twenty one? Twenty two? Far too young for someone like me, fast sliding into his middle age. It's time to be making an exit then, but it seems I've aroused her curiosity now and she's not ready to let me go just yet.

"Never been in a circle that feels creepy," she tells me. "Some people jump at shadows, but that's a fear inside of them. If this place spooks you, it's in your head."

There's more to this girl than her looks! There's also, dare I say, a sympathy about her? And it's this sympathy that finally tempts out my confession:

"Actually," I tell her. "I *have* been in a circle - once before."

"Oh?"

"Twenty years ago. Something happened. It shook me up a bit. That's why I'm nervous about being in this one."

She reaches out and takes my arm - sort of cups the elbow in her palm and just holds it quietly. A moment ago, all I wanted to do was make out with her but now she's comforting me against a fear she can only guess at, and I'm letting her do it because I sense something in her touch. Call it an intuition, or a delusion, but I feel this girl *knows* something, and that she can help me.

"Haven't been in one since?" she asks.

"Nope."

"Weren't that many circles around back then," she muses. "Easier to fall into a live one I suppose. Is that what you're looking for maybe? A live one?"

"Is there such a thing? I thought they were all, well,..."

"Fake?" She smiles knowingly. "I can feel you trembling. You're telling me a circle scared you so much - and then ask me if they're all fakes?"

"But it might just have been something in my head, like you said."

"Well, you won't ever know until you step into a live one again. But nowadays it's complicated. Sure, you're right: there are so many people faking them now it's hard to know what you're lookin' at." She smiles. "Unless its that Abbotsford crew who's done it of course."

We laugh, then she tells me her name is Jocynda, and she asks me if I'd like her to show me a real one, a live one, as she calls them. But I'm thinking it'll be going dark soon, and I'd rather not be wandering around a crop circle in the dark, because it was dark the last time, and I'm not ready to get that close to things just yet.

"Is it far?"

"Won't be."

"I don't understand."

"It'll be near here, yes, but it hasn't happened yet. I'm expecting a fresh one any day. I know exactly where it's gonna be: Crystal tells me that - already dowsed it off a map, see?"

"Ah,... and you can't tell me where, I suppose?"

"Nope. Secret. If I let it slip, the corn crushers might find out and go and make a circle in its place. And that's no use to anyone, is it?"

This is beginning to sound like the fantasy of a child. Have I misjudged her? Is she just a crank after all? "I'll just have to trust to luck then," I tell her.

She senses my patronising tone but forgives it with a sigh. "Even the freshest circle hereabouts is a few weeks old," she explains. "The few live ones have all settled down to background ripples by now. They'll be no use to you. I'll gladly tell you where they are but, trust me, you need a fresh one, no more than a day old."

"You've no idea when it's going happen?"

"Soon."

"Crystal tells you that too?"

She giggles. "You don't believe any of this, so whatever I say's no better 'n a guess to you is it?"

She's got me there.

"What's the hurry anyway?" she asks.

"Never said there was. I just don't want to visit one at night, that's all."

"Scaredy cat." She smiles. "Why not come to the pub and meet my friends then? Crystal says you're sad and it'll cheer you up. They have rooms there. Stay the night, see what the morning brings?"

**O**f course, I do not want to go to the pub, and meet Jocynda's friends. What I want is to sit at a quiet table, just her and me. I want a monopoly on her warmth and her smiles. I want to pretend I'm

twenty years younger, then I can savour the glorious ambiguity of this invitation. I know she's just being friendly, but a man can dream. Anyway, instead here I am, in a cramped bar-room that's hot and loud with the sound of beery faced people. Everyone seems to be laughing like loons, except for my companions, a pair of po faced young men who sense I do not want to be there, and reciprocate with an impressive sullenness.

We're hunched around a small, wobbly table, shoulder to shoulder, clutching glasses of a dark and pungently yeasty ale. I have not seen Jocynda for a while and am beginning to feel I've been abandoned to the mercies of these, my indifferent companions. One of them is called Callum. He's a dark haired, lanky youth, who was quick to ascertain my position on the flying saucer and green men hypothesis, with its attendant conspiracies of a sinister government cover-up. Significantly, he's offered no attempts at more varied conversation since then, upon discovering I do not share his beliefs.

The second young man calls himself Wombat. He's a blonde, baggy jumpered, dread-locked dreamer of sorts, for whom the photographs of many seasons' worth of crop formations, framed above the bar, seem a constant source of inspiration for him, at least judging by the way his eyes divide their time between these holy icons, and the rim of his glass.

One of the pictures is indeed of a pseudo-religious mandala, pressed into a golden crop of wheat. I remember it from a few years back, when it was outed in the national press as a fake, made for a documentary on the abiding credulity of human beings. When I mention this, Wombat tells me the fakers are responding to unconscious energies that guide their creations - so there is no such thing as a fake formation anyway. Indeed he goes further and tells me I am a victim of decades worth of government disinformation, and that my ignorance of these matters is proof alone of that fact. There is no answer - all his bases are covered, his position is unassailable.

With the exception of their conspiracy theories, which bear certain similarities, the views of these young men seem quite different, and I am wondering how they can be so politely reconciled for them to keep such company together, but then their eyes are caught by Jocynda as she returns, and their expressions say it all. It's really quite simple, of course: they are young, and horny, and hopeful!

There is another young man in tow - Dervish, she calls him. He's smartly jacketed, bespectacled, and intelligent looking, and there's something more urbane about him than these two country lads. He nods to me, then buys a round. I offer Jocynda my seat and squeeze through the crowds to join him at the bar.

Dervish, I discover, is a self-confessed circle faker, the leader of a group of corn crushers currently locked in a battle of one-upmanship with a fiendishly proficient crew from Warminster. He points out the picture of a fractal star from last year's season, pressed into a barely-field and claims it as his own work - then grudgingly concedes the picture of another, an intricately worked Celtic motif, as being the handiwork of the Warminster lot.

"So, what do these guys think of you, then?" I ask, nodding to where Callum and Wombat are currently falling over themselves to entertain Jocynda. "I mean, them being such believers?"

He shrugs and smiles, as if he thinks the question is crass. He seems to be telling me I'm an outsider here and I just don't get the vibe. "We're all part of the same scene, man," he says.

We return with drinks, in time to hear the lads embarking on their discourses: Callum with news of a space-ship and attendant strange beings, spotted by the White Horse at Uffington. Then Wombat gives us an intricate post-hoc analysis of the errors in the Cantor Set formation discovered in a meadow by Stonehenge, and how they're not errors at all but a cleverly coded message that clearly predicts the date of the next apocalypse. He's a bit too young to remember, I suppose, but they were saying similar things about 2012.

Meanwhile, Dervish listens to it all with polite interest, hoovering up their thoughts and perhaps wondering how he can incorporate features into his creations that will reinforce these various beliefs. Then the others want to know from him what he's planning next. I swear he gives a twinkle from his suddenly rascally and theatrically revealed gold tooth, and then he says it will be big - more complex even than the Sumerian motifs of last season, that they should prepare themselves to be blown away!

They stare at him agape, as if they see him as a sort of messianic instrument, and I notice he is careful to say nothing that might discourage them in these beliefs. Me? Well, I'm older aren't I? I am of an age when I see beliefs as no different to all the other useless jabberings in this bar. In another twenty years, these guys will be looking back and believing in nothing much at all, and I'm guessing, like me, the only thing they'll really remember about tonight in any detail is Jocynda - the colour of her eyes, the texture of her hair, what she was wearing, and how much she filled our hearts with such sweet longing.

They're laughing now.

Jocynda has told them about the Abbotsford crew's latest efforts, and they are amused by how I could ever have been taken in by it. So I remind them that by their own arguments, the fakers respond to unconscious influences of a paranormal nature - therefore how can the Abbotsford crew be any different?

But the lads are united in their belief the Abbotsford crew aren't a real part of the phenomenon at all - just a bunch of cider-swigging yokels. It seems one must possess a certain level of social gravitas in order to become a true instrument of the gods.

They close their ranks and look at me as if wondering what Jocynda means by dragging this grumpy old guy into their presence. It's clearly not to make them jealous - so then what? I suppose Jocynda means nothing by it all except showing kindness to a stranger. Seeing her with them though makes me wonder again what I thought I was doing, letting myself be seduced into hanging around like this. I realise of course I don't really see Jocynda when I look at her - only her beauty, and such beauty is ageless. It pays no heed to the stages of a man's life. Sure: when he's younger, he can make love to it - but when he's older? What's he supposed to do about it then?

By now the beer has taken my legs, made me sweaty and dizzy, and I'm incapable of working any of this out. The noise of the bar is like a wall of madness ringing in my ears and I want to go, except now she's lowered her mouth to my ear and is saying: "Tell us about your circle."

"My what?" The jabbering in the bar is so loud I do not hear my own words, so I am shouting above it, and the others look surprised because it seems they hear me very well.

"Sorry," I tell her. "Getting a bit tired."

She's disappointed, but her sparkle is quickly restored by the continuing attentions of her companions who seem far more eager for her company than they do for mine. I make my excuses, then slip away to my room, quietly grizzling as I climb the stairs: I might have been lying in my own bed by now, far away from the past, from my youth, but instead, I've descended into a kind of cesspit, seething with human madness - a madness that is totally incapable of answering the question first posed to me in a simple swirled circle of wheat all those years ago: How does one judge the truth of anything?

**I**n the morning, I am on the carpark of the inn, rested, breakfasted and lifting my bags into the boot. I've decided it's best to head for home but, right on cue, an old Volkswagen bug appears, and Jocynda trails a lazy arm from its window, as she rolls up beside me. She slides her shades down a touch and says: "You going?"

"Yep."

"Crystal says you're angry - that we got on your nerves last night."

"Crystal's wrong, then. I mean,... I *was* angry - but not with you,... or your friends. Like you said it's something in my head. That's why I was angry, and that's why I should be going."

"You *are* angry, though."

She's looking so pretty this morning, all hugged up in a sweater against the cool air. But the sky is clear and it'll make a fine day when the sun gets up - a day for lingering, for admiring the beauty of this lovely creature. But what's the use? That's not why I came here at all!

"I can't solve any of this now," I tell her. "It's just too damned late for me."

"Are you going to explain that, or shall I see what Crystal says?"

She's smiling, giving me the impression she sees more in me than I'm comfortable with. Is it so obvious I'm jealous of her boyfriends, jealous of their youth, and angry too that youth can be so blind to beauty, all it wants to do is hump its bones?

"It's just that nothing I heard last night explains anything," I tell her.

"Oh?"

"I came looking for a solution."

"To what? The circles?"

"Maybe, but it's more than that. The circles just bring it all into sharper focus, that's all. I came looking for the truth: I mean about everything!"

"Is that all?" She gives a dry laugh. "I take it you've had no luck yet?"

"Can it really be so difficult? The circles I mean. On the one hand I'm offered Callum and his scary little green men, while on the other I get Wombat and his mother earth going on about yet another damned

apocalypse - as if we didn't have enough paranoia the last time. Then there's Dervish and his cynicism about the other two lads believing in all this paranormal stuff, while so far as I can tell his only motive's a rather shallow and egotistical desire to have the Warminster corn crushers fall down and worship at his feet."

She thinks back fondly, then chuckles. "Yep. That just about covers it. You'd think one of them would be right, wouldn't you?"

"But what about you? What do you think?"

"Me? Oh,... " she shakes her head and looks clueless. "Wotcher asking me for, silly?"

"You talked about ripples, about circles quietening down after a while. You dowse for energies with your crystal. I mean what's *that* all about?"

"I don't dowse the circles. Crystal tells me things, that's all. Circles tingle, lots of people feel that - don't need to measure it. Energy? Whatever does *that* mean? All I know is a tingly circle's where it happens for me. Think its where it happened for you too. And where it might happen for you again."

"Where *what* might happen?"

"Listen, maybe you're not going to get this, but if it's the truth you're after, then you need to find a tingly circle and step into it. Then you'll know."

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because it wouldn't make any sense to you, silly."

"Try me."

"Okay imagine this: a place where anything you believe in can *be*. Anything at all! Green men come to stick things up your bum? Great Mother nagging us about yet another bloody apocalypse? Dervish's rational world where nothing ever happens that he can't calculate? All of it. All true, at the same time. See? No problem."

"You're right. It doesn't make any sense at all."

She bites her lip - impatient with herself that she cannot explain things any better. Then she leans across and clicks open the passenger door. "Get in. I want to show you something."

She takes me out across the downs, the old bug thrumming away and smelling of damp carpets. She does not speak, but rides quietly with the window down, her hair blowing in the draft, the crystal nestling snug in her bosom and shooting out little rainbows as the sun hits it.

We pull over down a quiet lane, the trees in a nearby copse swishing in the breeze, a meadow of pale green barley moving in liquid silver waves, and there's a whole set of concentric circles, like a bullseye in its middle. The formation looks freshly minted and I'm wondering if it's the one that Crystal predicted, but she hastens to reassure me it's not - says it's a few weeks old now and fairly quiet but a live one all the same. She picks up on my hesitation and tells me not to worry, that nothing dramatic will happen here, that I can relax - merely dip my toes a little.

So I follow her through the wire, pick up a tram-line, and she leads me out to the formation. As she enters, she raises her arms, with her palms flat, and gives a little twirl.

"Tingle's nearly gone now," she says. "But you might feel it, if you're quiet."

There *is* a tingle in my palms, but that could be anything. Less easy to explain is the buzzy, crackly sound in my ears, but that could just be too many rock concerts. There's a different look to this one though: a puzzling complexity to the way the barley's swirling, first one way, and then the next. It's strange,... beautiful.

"Not the work of the Abbotsford crew then?"

She laughs, tells me I'm a fast learner, coaxes me into the centre of the circle, then asks me to hold still. Then she plants her index finger in the middle of my forehead:

"Know what's inside of there, under my finger?"

"Brain?"

"Which bit of brain, silly?"

"Erm,... front bit?"

"Okay, now go deeper. Imagine my finger poking deep inside, as far as it can go."

"Middle bit, then?"

"Pineal gland. Okay? Called that 'cos it's like a pinecone? Geddit?"

"Okay, I've heard of it."

"Feel my finger tickle it now? Likes to be tickled. Tickle it by twiddling some magnets around your head and strange things will happen."

"Oh?"

"Hallucination maybe - or maybe something else. Some call it a port-way to whatever ocean floats your boat."

"You're saying a tingly circle will induce an hallucination?"

"I said *maybe*." She lowers her finger and looks around. "Why not? If it's magnetic - and it vibrates. Sounds right, *feels* right to me."

"A magnetic anomaly? Okay! That gives the energy a name. But why would it fade? And why would it vibrate? And how does it get here. None of these are answers, Jocynda - just more questions."

She offers no explanation but looks closely at me again: "Tell me now," she says. "What happened to you?"

I'm feeling more than just a tingle in my palms at the moment and I'm not sure I want to explore this. I'm still nervous about it, I guess, because the hairs are standing on my arms, and I can feel ants crawling over the top of my head. "I don't know what happened, but it didn't feel like an hallucination."

"Grrrr. Can't you just tell me?"

"Okay, a bunch of us dared each other to sleep out in a circle, near Avebury, one summer. I was a pretty

rational kind of guy in those days, and I didn't think anything about it, but I woke up in the small hours to find the others had gone, and there was this big cardboard box in the middle of the circle with my name on it - not scribbled mind - it was printed *into* the cardboard, all official-like. So, I figured the others were having me on, except I couldn't work out why they'd left me, or why they'd gone to the expense of making up a personalised box.

"It seemed too elaborate, nonsensical, like things are in dreams, but at the same time it felt so real. I shouted for them, thinking they were hiding out in the field, but after a while I knew I was alone. Then a voice came from inside my head, a woman's voice - clear, gentle - not frightening or anything - and she told me that if I looked inside that box I'd find the answer to everything I'd ever wanted to know - that I would find the truth, you see?"

"Cool. So, what did you do?"

"Do? What do you think I did? I ran. I went back to the van, but the others weren't there. They turned up in the morning, said they'd slept the whole night through, in the circle, like we'd agreed, and woke up to find me gone."

She flops down in the barley, and I flop down with her. The crop's beginning to lift itself back up to the sun and the little brush-like stalks tickle us as we lay there.

"You wish you'd looked inside that box, don't you?"

"Knowing for sure I'd really seen that box would be a start."

She gives me a sympathetic look, and then floors me with the most peculiar question: "Do you believe in unicorns?"

"Erm,... you want the honest answer?"

"Okay,... fair do's. But I've believed in them since I was a little girl - or maybe *wanted* to believe, is a better way of putting it."

"Go on."

"Saw one in a crop circle," she tells me.

"That makes my cardboard box seem dull. Do you see them often?"

"Don't look at me like that! Just tell yourself it's an hallucination and you'll be okay with it. Anyway, there I am, in the middle of the day - other people all around me and I'm wondering why they can't see him too."

"What's he like, your unicorn?"

"Oh, he's such a beauty. Soft to touch, coat like silk. He's very shy, but he lets me pet him. Been seeing him for years now - in places like this. I haven't ridden him yet, but I'm working up to that. Now, I know what you're thinking, and I've thought the same thing, but what if he really *is* a unicorn?"

"The way you describe him, I wish he *was* real. But there's got to be a difference between what the mind

invents, and what's true. Where would we be otherwise? There'd be no consistency to the world."

"Have you never thought that maybe we don't need consistency? Maybe we only *think* we do. Maybe in a pure state of being, consistency is something we only play with now and then, and what's really true is something so far beyond our understanding we can never hope to touch it while we're livin' in these skins. The truth we crave is just the petty stuff, the stuff we let ourselves believe in. We narrow our beliefs to something small, and that's the measure of our world, *our truth*. Ask me, I think your box was empty. That's what your voice was trying to tell you."

"Lucky I didn't open it then, or I'd've been really cross."

"Ha ha."

"Listen, you're starting to sound like Callum and Wombat now. Take some advice? If you really want Dervish to like you, you must play down this side of yourself. I mean, this unicorn thing is really cute, but,... well,... I don't see him going for it."

She's amused. "What makes you think I want Dervish to like me that way?"

"Just guessing. I don't have Crystal to help me out all the time."

"Well, I'm not that fussed about Dervish really. But out of interest, if you were me, who would you choose?"

"Among those three reprobates? Well, Dervish is the better looking, but he's a bit of a rake, and he only wants one thing from you."

"Crystal agrees." she says. "And Callum?"

"Callum doesn't trust anyone - he thinks the whole world's in conspiracy against his version of the truth, so one day he's going to wind up wondering what it is *you're* hiding as well, and it won't matter how you play it, he'll always have an answer for why his creepy version of reality's more valid than your sunny one, where unicorns gallop across the Wiltshire downs. As for Wombat - well, he's a sweet guy but he doesn't look the kind to hold down a regular nine-to-five for the rest of his life, which is what you need a damned sight more than woolly words when you've got kids to bring up."

"Sounds like none of them will do then. Perhaps you're thinking I should pick you instead?"

She pouts wonderfully, but she's only playing with me.

"Well, I've been smitten since I first saw you, Jocynda, but I don't think that's what this is about, do you?"

She sighs. "Crystal agrees."

"It does?" For a moment I'm gutted, until I remember it's only what the crystal says, and I don't believe in it - except it must be what Jocynda thinks or she wouldn't believe in it either. "Crystal's not so dumb then," I tell her.

She takes my hand. Okay - she knows I'm not going to get the wrong idea now, but she needn't test me so.

"What is it about, then?" she asks.

"For me? What it's always been: seeking that box with the truth in it, but always getting waylaid by beauty."

I'm looking right at her as I tell her this and manage to leave her in no doubt about the kind of beauty I'm meaning. She blushes and shakes her head. "You're very kind, but one day I'll be old and all of this will have gone. Beauty is so fleeting. And the truth? Well, like I said, that's whatever you choose to make it. Both are human values, and chasing either's gonna,... well,... " she chuckles. "Have you runnin' round in circles."

I've stretched out on my back and cupped my hands behind my head. The barley's soft and springy underneath and I'm feeling pretty good, just being with her. Meanwhile she's moved around a little and she's laying down on her back too, resting her head upon my belly like it's a pillow, the two of us making a big T in the middle of the circle. Then something pops into my head and I'm saying: "This isn't an old circle at all is it?"

"Nope. Came down last night, right where crystal said it would. Feels like a *real* live one to me. Relax. No saying what might happen."

I stiffen at once. "You could have warned me!"

"Shush now, relaaaax! Just to fall into it – real gentle like."

"Okay,... but I hope it's not little green men. Ughh. Nasty things."

She laughs. "How could it be? You don't believe in them."

"I know, but listening to Callum can be scary - and fear is infectious, isn't it? What if he's contaminated me with his own beliefs. I mean, what if he's right?"

"He *is* right. Remember? Leastwise in his own head he is. Just like the rest of us." She chuckles. "Now, don't you go worrying about any little green bogey men. I'll just shoo them away with my unicorn, while you go lookin' for your box."

I can hear that buzzing sound again, and while I'm feeling kind of dizzy, I'm also feeling sleepy and comfortable. Meanwhile, Jocynda's found my hand once more and she's holding onto it, because I think she feels it too.

So,...

**I**'m now about three hours Northbound, and the M5 is about to join the M6, so the traffic's starting to get a bit sticky, like it always does around here. It's late evening, the sun going down and there are little rainbows shooting out of the crystal that's dangling from my rear view mirror. Jocynda told me it was just a lump of quartz and not to make such a fuss

when she gave it to me. I needn't believe in it, she said, that it was really just something to remember her by. Then she kissed me, sort of shy, and then she waved me off.

I found my cardboard box, right where I'd left it twenty years ago, and it was empty, just like Jocynda guessed it would be. Now, maybe it was only empty because she put the thought into my head, but it's not the first time I've wondered about it. After all, what can you put inside a box that's vague enough to be read as a metaphor describing the truth of all things, in any language, yet still make any kind of any sense to you? Let's just say it came as no surprise, even though I've spent the best years of my life hoping there might have been something more, I don't know,.. tangible, I suppose.

What am I supposed to make of it then? Well, maybe Dervish and his hoaxers had somehow worked their way inside my head, given my pineal thingy a playful kick, and were having a darned good laugh at my expense, but I looked up from my empty box to find Jocynda, dressed in white, like a picture book fairy, sitting proudly on the back of her unicorn and I was left wondering if she might actually be right about a lot of other stuff as well.

Suddenly the quest for truth, in human terms at least, seems overrated to me now. Ask anyone what those circles down in Wiltshire are about or how they got there, and you'll get a different answer every

time. It's really no more than whatever you choose to believe it is. And if that's so, I'd rather have Jocynda's sunny wishful thinking than some of the other creepy stuff I've heard. Anyway, going back to Jocynda sitting on that unicorn, she gave me a twinkle, then she and that magnificent beast just took off over the downs in a scene as lovely as anything I'm ever going to bear witness to again. And, unlikely as it might have appeared to common sense, I could not deny the heart-wrenching beauty of it.

Okay: red tail lights are stabbing up ahead now as the motorway slows down, so I close in behind the car in front and give the crystal a tap, then watch it swing. Sure, Jocynda will grow old like me and some of what she has will fade. But real beauty's not like she said: it's only when we try to pin it down it becomes ephemeral. Think of it more as a feeling though, like how the sight of Jocynda on that fantastic beast lifted my heart to the heavens, then beauty becomes something altogether different. Such a thing can transport you to the edge of infinity, to a place no amount of petty truth is ever going to describe.

Oh, I know: I told her I was searching for the truth, like a shining knight of old, but always getting waylaid by beauty. Well, if you ask me now, I've always had it the wrong way round. So, go seek the eternal beauty of the soul, my friend, and don't go getting yourself waylaid by promises of truth, no matter how alluring, because it's always going to be an

illusion, or just somebody else's nightmare, or at the very best a closed down vision of a world that could be whole lot bigger, if we could only open our eyes a little wider. The traffic's really bad now! I could do with some directions on how to get around it. Sat Nav? What kind of truth will that give me? A narrowly plotted path from one place to the next? Sounds dull! I reckon from now on, I'll just go,...

... .by whatever Crystal says.

## From the same author on Feedbacks

*Love is a Perfect Place (1999)*

A short story by Michael Graeme - a twenty minute read: He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the queer fact that he wasn't thirsty even though he had walked for hours under a hot sun.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

*The Enigma that was Carla Sinclair (2004)*

I was not completely unhinged. She was just a computer program, a crude simulation - at best a never ending animated cartoon with only one character and no story line. But she was "something",... She was a hobby I suppose you might say. Other young men had hobbies, equally obscure, though perhaps more socially inclusive. They collected camera gear, they went fishing, raced cars or drank themselves stupid. Me? I coded in my bedroom. Same thing? Well, not quite. You see, while other people's hobbies took them out of themselves, mine enabled me to climb deeper inside.

*Lively Custard (2004)*

Short Story - a 25 minute read: Rogue trees are popping up all over the little town of Frinton-cum-Hardy and the residents have begun speaking in metaphors so mixed and mangled, poor Armitage, connoisseur of all things bookish, finds he no longer understands his mother tongue. And if all that isn't enough his young protege, Jenny, from the Books Galore Emporium is having "uncle trouble"!

*A Moth on the Moon (2004)*

Most people - except the conspiracy theorists - know the United States landed a man on the moon in 1969. What's less well known however, is that the British beat them to it, in 1947.

*The Choices (2006)*

A fifteen minute read:

I am sitting here in the lounge-bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel, by the shores of Loch Lomond, and I am staring out into the twilight at my choices. I have been this way before many times and I always seem to go wrong at this point, so you must forgive what must seem like fastidious caution, but I simply have to get it right this time!

*Escape From Paradise Island (2007)*

A 25 minute read by Michael Graeme: Crime doesn't pay. That's what they try to teach you in prison, and fair enough, I might even have left there one day determined to go straight except, suddenly, I was on an island in the China Sea, gazing at a beautiful girl in a yellow Bikini. So maybe it had been worth it after all. But careful now! You had to avoid thinking things like that because they'd a nasty habit of dissolving back into reality and you'd wake up right back in that stinking grey cell: five years of your life already erased, with another two to go, and all because you'd never been able to resist the puzzle of a pretty motor car!

*Push Hands (2008)*

Phil and Penny were made for each other - the only problem is they are married to other people. When they meet at a Tai Chi class they quickly realise the depth of one another's loneliness and need for a sympathetic ear. Fearful of the consequences, they go to elaborate lengths to avoid each other but their paths begin to cross with chance-defying regularity, pulling them ever more deeply into one another's confidence. Is this evidence of a mysterious power at work, or should they simply have an affair? Middle aged and married for a long time, their apparently unavoidable relationship causes them to ask serious questions of the meaning of their lives and their marriages, and finally to demand that their families respect them for who they really are. But will their families recognise them? Can they even recognise themselves?

Push Hands is a full length novel, complete and free to download.

*The Man Who Could Not Forget (2008)*

A Short Story by Michael Graeme (a fifteen minute read):

...I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was

little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book....

*The Magician of Monkton Pier (2009)*

Joshua is navigating his eco-boat, The Mattie Rat along a dark and stinking stretch of the old canal through Monkton - a city overwhelmed by gangs and gun toting militias. Joshua's seen it all before: urban decay, corruption and the death of hope.

Living on the water, and with no need for money, he's usually able to slip unnoticed through these dark town stretches and into the green beyond. But when he's tricked into picking up a pair of enigmatic hitchers, Joshua knows there's going to be trouble in Monkton.

In spite of his best efforts, the wily old Waterman is about to become an accomplice in the biggest magical stunt of all time. And if the world no longer believes in magic, well, it only has itself to blame.

*Katie's Rescue (2009)*

A thirty minute read: It felt odd, driving into Raworth, because where I come from Raworth does not exist. I know that stretch of road, you see? It dips down to the river Warfe, crosses over by the old bridge, then rises up the dale on the other side. Ordinarily there's just a steep wooded ravine and a picturesque waterfall on the river but, like I said, on this occasion, there was also Raworth,...

*The Summer of '83 (2009)*

Well, that's middle age for you: you either grow up, grow into it, accept its imperfections, its disappointments, and grow old grumbling at someone, or you ruin yourself on a mad fling with a girl half your age that you know won't last, and then you grow old alone and with only the walls to grumble at.

In the absence of any other alternatives, I know which of the two I prefer,... but what if there was a third alternative?

*The Man Who Talked to Machines (2010)*

You have to talk to them, counsel them, mesmerise them into stillness before you set foot anywhere near them. And, though I may

not be considered wholly sane, at least I have a reputation for the way I talk to machines.

*Pandora and Melanie (2010)*

My dear Richard, I apologise for the delay in writing to you but it's only now I am beginning to come to terms with the implications of your discovery, and also the news of your collaboration with the woman known to you as Pandora,...

The author joins in with the doom and gloom and predicts the end of the world, but as you might expect, there's an upside to every situation.

*Rosemary's Eyes (2010)*

A short story about life, and death: Rosemary was by the house, feeling her way among the delicate stems of a clematis, her light touch seeking the beauty of its tissue-thin blooms. She paused at our approach and looked towards me, her eyes passive, waiting. Then she reached out, inviting my embrace. And when she gathered me in her arms, she raised her lips to my ear and I felt her whispered words, hot and curling against my skin.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "Look into my eyes once more."

*The Road From Langholm Avenue (2010)*

A story of unrequited love, of unexpected love, of love lost, and found again. With divorce and redundancy looming, our hero, Tom, is left facing middle age with the feeling that he made a wrong turn somewhere in his past. Then, as if things aren't bad enough he's inexplicably haunted by memories of Rachel, a girl he had a crush on at school. With emotions bubbling up to the surface he realises the old business with Rachel has never really been forgotten and that before he can find a way through his crisis, he's going to have to journey back in search of his deepest past. Tom sets out to find Rachel and, regardless of her circumstances, do the one thing he couldn't bring himself to do a quarter of a century ago: ask her on a date. But things don't quite go according to plan. Tom discovers a lot can change in twenty five years, but that some things remain exactly the same. And when it comes to the business of unrequited love, even those closest to him are not immune. This is a full length novel - complete and free to read. It is not a teaser or a taster.

*In Durleston Wood (2010)*

A middle aged romantic, Richard Hunter has hit the buffers. Divorced and estranged from his children, he trains as a teacher and takes up a post in his home village at his old Primary School. Never more than arm's length away from a nervous breakdown and hopelessly in love with his headmistress, Richard seeks solace in his boyhood haunt: Durleston Wood. But the wood now hides a secret, a mysterious woman kept hidden there as the apparent "property" of a villain - or so she tells him. As he learns more of her fate, and her plan to transfer her "ownership" to him, he tells himself this is the last thing he wants, while wondering if it isn't actually something he needs more than anything, that far from destroying him, rescuing her could be the one thing that stops him from going under.

This is a full length novel - not a taster or a teaser.

*The Lavender and the Rose (2010)*

Matthew Rowan finds himself drawn to a secluded valley in the English Lake District where he meets Amanda, mistress of Crag-side, a cottage nestled deep in a fold between high fells. On the surface it seems like the ideal refuge from a world gone mad, but what he doesn't know is that the house sits at the epicentre of a magnetic anomaly and has a reputation for playing strange tricks on the mind of anyone who sleeps there. There's also something peculiar about Amanda, who calls herself Beatrice and leads a secretive life dressed entirely in Victorian costume. *The Lavender and the Rose* is an unusual love story, an erotic adventure, and a spiritual odyssey. It's also a psychological mystery whose resolution will require Matthew to question his understanding of the nature of human identity, and even reality itself.

*The Singing Loch (2011)*

Scott Matthews, a disillusioned city worker, finds himself drawn into a bizarre corporate conspiracy. From the ruthless greed of '80's London, to the austere beauty of Western Scotland, Scott begins to unravel the threads of an enigma dating back centuries, while gradually falling under the spell of the mysterious and forbidden Singing Loch. Here he discovers love, enlightenment, and ultimately a truth more startling than legend.

*The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac (2011)*

Writer Richard Graves arrives at La Maison du Lac, a remote hotel in the Swiss Alps, where he hopes to find the inspiration to begin the most important story of his career. It's here he meets the enigmatic Gabrielle, a beautiful Frenchwoman rebelling against her over-protective parents.

As he comes to know more about Gabrielle he realises he must rescue her, and that the story he must write is the one he finds himself living. The story will be a far cry from anything he's attempted before, with nothing appearing to be as it seems, including Gabrielle herself.

As their story unfolds, Richard's instincts tell him that only a tragic ending is going to make sense, and what follows is a desperate battle between his desire for a lasting happiness, and the seemingly darker intent of his muse.

At times mysterious, romantic and erotic, this is a journey that will take Richard and Gabrielle literally beyond the edge of reason, where the only guarantee is that neither of them will view life, or love, the same way again.

This is a full length novel, complete and free to read. It is not a taster or a teaser.



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