

Ilya of Seversk

It was an ordinary day when Matthew had hit a wall with what he had been working on, and decided that a change of direction was needed.

He stood at his desk, stretched and yawned. As he walked to the window to let fresh air into the room that had become stuffy whilst he worked, Thomas jumped down from the desk scattering papers. As the drift settled, a brightly coloured advert for “Past Life Regression” was to the top of the pile.

Matthew was a middle aged man, tall but not still slim. He lived alone with Thomas - a black cat who came to visit one day, and then the next, and the next. His visits become longer, until neither of them realised that they had been living together for quite some while. Both took this arrangement for granted. Forasmuch as Matthew looked forward to waking and finding Thomas on his bed when he woke, or on the doorstep when he returned home from some outing, he regarded himself as independent of the cat, as Thomas acted independently of him. He'd been this way all his life, with everyone: with family and friends. Not aloof. Not even distant. Just slightly on the outside edge of being on the inside. If you see what I mean. Whether he was on the outside because he was an observer of those around him he had never known. The answer didn't trouble him all that much - thus it had ever been. But it had carried a stigma. Not from friends. No; his friends found him charming and hospitable most of the time. It was Matthew's family who looked at him askance; for they, loud, outgoing and boisterous couldn't work out why he was so different. Many of them felt silently judged by his presence, whilst Matthew not knowing this about them, in his turn, felt that they viewed his solitary life, and unusual interests as a sign of his inherent failure.

“Hmm” thought Matthew, as he picked up the flyer, “why, did I keep this?”. But he knew why. Matthew was a genealogist. He spent his days delving into the history of his clients, working his way backwards, adding details to the family history of the person that had come to him unable to go as far as they wished. He had noticed on more than one occasion that there were unconscious threads

woven through a family history. Repeated tragedies, illnesses, and occupations. How many times had he sat listening to his clients telling him that they were the "first" in their family in some area of social, academic, or professional achievement when in fact, the family tree revealed the truth? The truth being that they were really following in the footsteps of their ancestors. Sometimes even choosing to live far away from their living family, but now eerily close to that place where a great grandparent lived, worked, and had his being. Time after time, what had long passed gave the impression of not being all that far from what was happening now, or just recently in the lives of his clients. Often he wondered if there was some silent command calling out orders for the reenactment of the same dreary dramas, generation after generation. And if he was feeling whimsical he wondered what might finally cut those strings being pulled from the past, or appease the haunting ancestors.

Matthew picked up the leaflet, and carried it along the passage to the kitchen. He knew Thomas was following, he could hear the 'tick tick' of claws along the floor.

Thomas sat at the kitchen door watching the birds in the garden, occasionally chattering to them as if to charm them. Now halfway through a cup of tea, and wondering what to do to clear his mind about the 'family' he was working on, Matthew once again took up the leaflet and read about how Andrew Hampden, Hypnotherapist, could help 'discover past life and resolve barriers to success in your current life'.

"Current life!" Matthew said aloud "I'm not sure I like the sound of that, do you Thomas?" Thomas, still watching the birds, cocked an ear. "It sounds like there could be more of *this* to come". Matthew was not a pessimist, but he was sensible enough to know that for many people one life was all that was required another as yet 'undiscovered country' didn't so much strike him as an adventure, but as an unnecessary labour best avoided. He was not given to meeting trouble half way. Nevertheless, and almost in spite of himself, Matthew picked up his phone, and started to send an email to Andrew Hampden. As far as he was concerned a telephone call ran the risk of being answered there and then, and he'd find himself committing to something he wanted to do but simultaneously found preposterous. He was after all a rational and intelligent man, but he also liked to give himself time and space. Everyone said that, and that was important

to him. People - his clients - came to him, because of that doggedly rigorous approach to history that he brought to his genealogy business. He didn't promise ancestors who were royalty, or rich celebrities of their time. He gave to his clients the facts. Hard facts sometimes; and where the facts permitted it, he would flesh out the timeline with a probable approximation of events, that to some of his clients, sounded exactly like the kind of story they had been waiting for.

Andrew Hampden, had replied before the end of 'office hours' and had offered Matthew an appointment that neatly coincided with his day off, and was located not far from usual supermarket where he could go shopping afterwards so that it wouldn't be an entirely wasted day.

During that telephone call Thomas had leapt upon Matthew's lap as he listened to Andrew explain the process. After the telephone call, and not wishing to disturb Thomas who now looked fast asleep Matthew decided to open a webpage on his phone and do his own research. As he breathed in and out so a tiny blue bubble between Thomas's lips gently expanded and contracted, looking dangerously as if it might turn into drool.

The following Tuesday morning, just before 10:30 Matthew parked his car. He double checked the address, and finding it to his satisfaction turned his phone to silent before one last hopeless check of his messages and email for anything that might constitute a good excuse for not going through with what he had come here for. No excuse presented itself, so he got out of the car and walked along the street. On either side Victorian terraced houses lined a strip of tarmac edged with cars in as many states of repair as the houses they stood before. He arrived at 118. An arch of brick painted red was around the door, reached by a path that had once been very smartly laid in black and white diamond shaped tiles which were now more noticeable by their absence. Nottingham lace hung at the windows - incongruously Matthew wondered if that was 'normal' for a hypnotherapist's place of work. He rang the bell. After a very short delay the door was opened into a dark hallway, the walls of which were hung with with bottle green flock wallpaper.

"Are you Matt, or Matthew? Hello! Come in. Welcome. Welcome. Mind the step that's it. I'm Andrew of course, pleased you make it. Go through second on the

right. Would you like tea? The kettle has just boiled.”

Matthew stood uncertainly on the threshold of the second room on the right. “Let me take your coat”, said Andrew “Make yourself comfortable - that chair over there. Was that ‘No’ to tea?”

Divested, tea declined, and seated, Matthew surreptitiously looked around the room. It was an intriguing room. It was mostly given over to books. One wall was virtually covered in crime paperbacks surmounted by a drawing of St Paul’s Cathedral, whilst the others contained aside from even more books, a wind-up clock, metronome, a photo of a black Labrador, and an amethyst geode. Matthew had been brought up to believe that it was impolite to look at another person’s possessions, and worse to pass comment upon them, even if complimentary. But he saw a book titled ‘Healing the Family Tree’ pointed and blurted out “what’s that about?”

“Ah” said Andrew “Dr Kenneth McAll - interesting man. Anglican. Medical man of some sort. He had this idea that illnesses can be caused by the interference of dead ancestors. He wasn’t exactly an exorcist; more of a courier in that he delivered his clients out of the hands of dead dominating ancestors”. He laughed at his own joke. Matthew felt the hair on his neck stand on end, but just replied with a non-committal “Oh”.

“Yes, it isn’t to everyone’s taste is it” said Andrew “not exactly the sort of subject easily discussed over Sunday dinner without Pepto-bismol to hand. But I can see why you would be interested in your line of work”.

“So he remembered that” thought Andrew, “or did he note it down?”

“I actually made a note of that”, said Andrew as if reading the other’s mind and smiling. “But before we get started, I wanted to get a few things straight. First of all I’m not guaranteeing you will ‘remember’” here Andrew bobbed his fingers in the air to make quotation marks “anything, and anything you do ‘remember’” - he repeated the mime “will not necessarily make sense now or ever. I want you to bear in mind that you are entirely responsible for your own thoughts and what you do with them, and should anything unpleasant come up there is time after to

go into that should you wish to. Everything said here is in the strictest confidence. Yes?”.

Matthew nodded.

“OK use the footstool, take the weight of your feet, settle into the chair, and you might as well begin your journey into trance by allowing your eyes to close normally and naturally”.

The thought that “he’s not wasting any time” crossed Matthew’s mind as he settled himself into the chair, and finding already that he was somehow trying to catch up with what was being said by Andrew as if the sound of his words was coming at him, not only from a growing distance in space, but also through a passage of time that somehow slowed the words, so that they came one....at....a...time...and clearly yet also indistinct, so that he found that he had to try to listen to hear what was said whilst also struggling to make sense of a variety of images that flashed across the inside of this forehead like random images from a film: dew on grass, a red cortina, candy-floss, a kitten, the itchiness of an old army blanket, the aroma of Golden Virginia, the cry of a sea-gull and then he was standing in from of a door. There was a number screwed to the door in cast iron numerals he knew that, but Matthew couldn’t make out what they were. And he went in.

“Now close the door behind you” Andrew’s voice came suddenly into the blackness “and just notice what you feel here, if anything at all. There’s nothing right or wrong about any of this...you can always turn around and leave by this door at any time.....” he voice trailed away.

Matthew felt nothing. He was simply standing in total darkness. There was nothing there.

“allow the environment to take shape around you whilst you look at your feet - what do you see there?” Andrew wasn’t in this place, but his voice was there with Matthew, who looking down saw not the DMs he arrived in but clean boots. Uniform trousers, belt, holster, gun. GUN! That was a shock. Then as he focussed on it, Matthew discovered a sense of true connection with the gun, as with his

mobile phone. He knew its weight, it was familiar, almost friendly, and its weight was a comfort as certain as the knowledge that he was exceedingly skilled in handling it and would readily use it to terminal effect. Then his shirt came into view and a tie, tucked into the shirt. At this point he felt a slight wave of anxiety - he wasn't properly dressed, his jacket hung upon the back of the chair. The chair was at one end of a table against a white wall. All the walls were white. Upon the table was an ashtray full of cigarettes stubs. In his hand now, there was a cigarette with blue smoke curling up the nicotine stained fingers of a right hand. Another surprise. He was hairy. Much hairier than he was when he arrived. Dark curly hair on his head, all across his body, down his arms and legs.

Matthew heard himself describing all this, almost before he had really noticed it, in response to a question that seem to come to him, from a week ago in Andrew's voice. He was stronger and shorter. How strange.

"Where are you?" - asked Andrew. Matthew immediately described the guard room, and the sound. No. Was it a sounds, or was it a vibration? It was hard to tell the difference. "I am a guard at a nuclear station. The guard room is very warm, and brightly lighted. I am glad of this. I am alone here. I feel content. There is a window in the door here, and I can see that there is snow, very thick snow on the ground - all the way from the guard room, right the way across to the perimeter where the snow hangs upon the trees. The trees hide the fence. The fence is all the way around. It keeps up safe and secret. That is why I am here. It is a closed city"

"Where is the station, what is the year?" asked Andrew from inside someone's head - was it Matthew's?

"It is in Russia. In Tomsk, actually" he sounded incredulous at his own words "and it is 1958. I'm a Russian"

Andrews asked "What is your name?" It was as if Matthew's jaw refused to open, and his brain held on to the knowledge that he felt was there pushing its way to the surface like a buoy momentarily hidden beneath the surface of the dark sea.

"Ilya". His name sprang to the surface. He felt a stillness in his mind and in his

body as somehow this short, muscular, dark Russian inhabited that place where Matthew had been a long long time ago. It was as if he fell into a deeper sleep. His joints felt lax.

“Move forward now, forward to a period in this lifetime that has significance to you. Tell me what you see.” - said the voice.

For Ilya it was like waking from a strange dream in which he had been and Englishman living alone in a small house, too big for one person. He opened his eyes as he exhaled from the cigarette. He was standing in the middle of his living room. There was sofa and an arm chair. There was a wall unit upon which was placed a wooden bowl containing wooden pieces of fruit. Half a dozen glasses. A record player and five records in a rack. The records were placed at an angle to make it appear that the rack was full. A clock on the wall. The ceiling bulb was shaded with a plastic daisy now various shades of nicotine. The walls had an oatmeal coloured wallpaper with a vertical geometric pattern in a shade of brown. The door to the rest of the apartment was behind him along with a small table against the wall upon which rested a radio. Ilya's favourite possession. In front and to the left of the wall unit was a door to the kitchenette. To his left stood a table with two chairs and upon it an expensive glass ashtray that others had admired. Of course it was already full with the cigarettes of that day. Walking to the window Ilya looked out and across the pathway below. It had been like a dream, what he experienced as he squinted at the end of his cigarette before lighting it. He knew that. But as he stood here looking out from the window of his fourth floor apartment toward the identical block just across the way - it had seemed so real. He drew deeply on the cigarette, and blowing the smoke into the breeze looked down at the path beneath him and between the apartment blocks. The snow had long gone. It was a sunny warm day. The trees of the perimeter could be seen in the distance, but coming along the path here were two women. Too far down to hear what they were saying. He imagined they were talking about their husbands, exchanging confidences or talking about their children, for they both pushed prams before them. One of the women wore a dress with flowers printed on it. The other wore a dress of bold geometric design that conformed itself to the shape of her pregnant belly.

Ilya was happy. He hadn't grown up here. But this was his home. He lived

happily alone here. In exchange for the work he did and the fence around the city he enjoyed more warmth, and better food than others. He hadn't seen the others in a long, long time, but he knew it nonetheless. He had heard the talking. Yet somehow he knew he wouldn't be here much longer, although he wouldn't ever leave Tomsk.

He came away from the window. And stubbed out his cigarette and reached for the packet to light another. He looked upwards to the apartment above, confused, and straining his ears, he thought he heard someone talking.

"And just allowing that image to fade from your mind, move forward in time once more to the next moment of significance in this lifetime."

It was Andrey's voice from from far, far away, he had almost forgotten him. "Who is Andrey?" Ilya shocked himself again "you fool, he told himself what are you thinking?" As his eyes opened again he was in a hospital bed. A cigarette in his right hand - as ever. A small metal ashtray nearby. No butts in it yet. The hospital is painted white. White walls, with lights that cast a white light. The doctors and nurses all wear white - even white caps covering their hair. Ilya's surgery went ok, but there was nothing that could be done. And he knew it. This hospital is where he would die. But he was going to have a fairly ordinary death. There would be no pain. There was no pain now. He couldn't complain. His life had been of use. He had been taught well, learned how to drink and tell jokes in the army. He'd been of use to his colleagues and neighbours, in his modest job keeping the city safe. He had been his own constant companion. Well - he and his cigarettes. And now it is time to sleep again.

Andrey's voice again - "just allow that image to fade, and when it has gone turn around and leave through the door. Good. Now make sure that door is firmly close behind you and lock it. You can return here in the future should you wish to. Now...as you walk a little way back up that path, the sun is still bright and warm in the sky, though the day is drawing on. There is your garden bench. Just sit there now, and allow everything you have experienced, and everything that you have learned to consolidate...and when you are ready to move on, whether you have been able to make sense of that or not, just say 'ok'".

For Matthew it seemed as though he'd been asleep for hours dreaming, whilst Thomas on his lap somehow contrived to make his legs ache. He heard himself saying "ok" and then:

"and the number is FIVE, everything returned to normal and you are wide awake". Andrew's voice - close to and loud.

As Matthew's eyes opened, he realised he wasn't at home dreaming with Thomas in his lap, and the first thing that caught his eye was that book "Healing the Family Tree".

"So", said Andrew looking very excited "that was quite a lifetime for a first time in hypnosis - you did extremely well. What's going through your mind?"

Gradually the images in Matthew's mind settled, and he replied "I feel very calm. Anchored almost. It's hard to describe. People have always referred to me as 'a bit of a loner' as if it was something *unhealthy* but I feel connected to that fact, but without the negative judgement. Solitary but not lonely. Does that make sense?"

Arriving back home Matthew wasn't quite certain what route he had taken, and he had completely forgotten to go to the supermarket. "Nevermind" he thought "I'll get an Indian". Thomas darted through the cat flap as Matthew filled the kettle - "Hello kiska" he said "you are not going to believe what I have to tell you". Thomas looked at his empty bowl and miaowed.

About a week later. Matthew was at his computer on another family tree when an email pinged through.

"Dear Matthew,

In reply.

thank you again for coming to see me and for the lovely review you later left. I haven't met many people as hypnotically talented as you appear to be, for many people seem to struggle with past life regression the very first time.

As you know, I leave it up to my clients to come to their own understanding of what past life regression is or does, and yet I read with increasing fascination how you felt compelled to look into the biography of Ilya. I have known this to happen once or twice in the past, but I myself was astonished to discover that Tomsk, or Seversk, was indeed a closed city. And how remarkable that you recall the the year of 1958 - the very same year that the Tomsk - 7 reactor came on line. I must admit a chill ran down my spine when I saw the photographs of the apartment blocks and the city which corroborate what you remembered exactly. But more than this, it is gratifying to note that the regression allowed you to re-connect to a part of yourself and find even greater contentment in life.

If you wish to revisit Ilya - or even search for another, you know where I am.

Kind regards

Andrew"