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## White Corridor

### Christopher Fowler

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#### SECOND HEART

‘Concentrate on the moth.’

The creature fluttered against the inside of the upended water glass as the women leaned in to watch. It was trying to reach the light from the amber street lamp that shone through the gap in the curtains. Each time its wings batted against its prison, the Shaded Broad-bar Scotopteryx chenopodiata shed more of the powder that kept it in flight, leaving arrow imprints on the glass.

‘Concentrate hard on the moth, Madeline.’

In the early-evening drizzle, the Edwardian terraced house at 24 Cranmere Road was like a thousand others in the surrounding South London streets, its quiddity to be a part of the city’s chaotic whole. There were shiny grey slates, dead chimney pots and shabby bay windows. The rain sketched silver signatures across the rooftops, leaving inky pools on empty pavements. At this time of the year it was an indoor world.

Behind dense green curtains, five women sat in what had once been the front parlour, narrowing their thoughts in the overheated air. The house was owned by Kate Summerton, a prematurely grey housewife who had reached the age at which so many suburban women fade from the view of men. As if to aid this new invisibility, she tied back her hair and wore TV-screen glasses with catalogue slacks and a shapeless fawn cardigan.

Her guests were all neighbours except Madeline Gilby, who worked in the Costcutter supermarket on the Old Kent Road and was disturbingly beautiful, even when she arrived still wearing her blue cashier’s smock. Kate had known her for almost three years, and it had taken that long to convince Madeline that she possessed a rare gift beyond that of her grace.

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The small brown moth batted feebly once more, then sank to the tablecloth. It was losing strength. Madeline furrowed her brow and pressed pale hands to her temples, shutting her eyes tight.

‘He’s tiring. Keep concentrating.’

The Broad-bar made one final attempt to escape through the top of the glass, and fell back. One wing ticked rapidly and then became still.

‘That,’ said Kate, adjusting her great glasses, ‘shows the true intensity of the directed mind. The energy you generated is not measurable by any electronic means, and yet it’s enough to interfere with the nervous system of this poor little creature. Of course, the test is hardly very scientific, but it suffices to demonstrate the power you hold within you.’

Madeline was astonished. She gasped and smiled at the others.

‘You have the gift, dear, as all women do in different degrees,’ said Kate. ‘In time, and with our help, you’ll be able to identify the auras of others, seeing deep inside their hearts. You’ll instinctively know if they mean you good or harm, and will never need to fear a man again. From now on, you and your son will be safe.’

Kate was clear and confident, conscious of her middleclass enunciation. As a professional, she was used to being heard and obeyed. She turned to the others. ‘You see how easy it is to harness your inner self? It is important to understand that, in a manner of speaking, all women have two hearts. The first is the muscle that pumps our blood, and the second is a psychic heart that, if properly developed, opens us to secret knowledge. You can all harness that heart-power, just as Madeline is doing. Males don’t possess this second spiritual heart; they have only flesh and bone. They feel pain and pleasure, but there is no extra dimension to their feelings, whereas we are able to find deeper shading in our emotional spirituality. This is the defence we develop against those who hurt us and our children, because most men do eventually, even if they never intend to. They are fundamentally different creatures, and fail to understand the damage they cause. With training, we can open a pathway illuminated by the pure light of truth, and see into the hearts of men. This is the breakthrough that Madeline has achieved today, in this room.’

Madeline was unable to stop herself from crying. As a child she had been lonely and imaginative, used to spending long afternoons with books and make-believe friends until boys discovered her nascent beauty. Then the nightmare had begun. Now, there was a chance that it might really be over. For the first time since she had met Kate, she truly believed that her power existed.

‘That’s it, let it all out,’ said her mentor, placing a plump arm around her as the others murmured their approval. ‘It always comes as a shock the first time. You’ll get used to it.’

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Madeline needed air. She left the suffocating parlour and passed quickly through the herb-filled kitchen into the garden, where she found her son kicking sulkily at the flower beds that held etiolated rosebushes, each with a single despondent pink bloom.

‘It’s cold out here, Ryan. You should stay indoors.’

‘Her husband smokes.’

‘Even so.’ Madeline rubbed her bare arms briskly, looking about. The Anderson shelters and chicken sheds of postwar London had been replaced with rows of flat-pack conservatories. New attics and kitchens thrust out along the terrace, the residents pushing their property boundaries as if halfheartedly trying to break free of the past. ‘I’m ready to go now. Come and get your jacket. We’ll go home.’

As the neighbours gathered in the hall with their coats, Mrs Summerton removed the tumbler from the parlour table, crushing the moth between her thumb and forefinger before it had a chance to revive, flicking it into the waste bin. She had started her refuge over twenty years ago, when alcohol abuse had been the main problem. Now it was drugs, not that men needed to take stimulants before battering their partners. Madeline had come to her with a black eye and a sprained wrist, but had still been anxious to get home on that first evening in order to cook her husband’s dinner. Seeing the gratitude in her protégée’s eyes convinced Kate she was doing the right thing, even if it meant performing a little parlour trick with a moth. Madeline was a good mother, kind and decent, but badly damaged by her relationships with men. If she could not be taught to seek independence and protect herself by traditional means, it was valid to introduce more unconventional methods.

Mrs Summerton said her good-byes and closed the front door, then checked the time and went to change, remembering that someone new was coming to the shelter tonight. She only had room for eight women, and the new girl would make nine, but how would she ever forgive herself if she sent her home without help? Besides, the new girl came from a wealthy family; her fee could finance the refuge for months.

Mr Summerton stayed in the kitchen reading his paper. He had coped with the house being turned into a women’s shelter, had even enjoyed it for a while, but now it was best to stay out of the way. His wife was honest down to her bones, he had always known that. She had made a few mistakes in her overeagerness to help, that was all, but now she was exploring strange new territory, enjoining the women to discover their innate psychic powers and leave their husbands – encouraging suspicion and hatred of all men, of which he disapproved.

Still, she was a force of nature when she made up her mind, and he knew better than to raise his voice in protest. There had always been too many women in the house: Kate’s friends, their daughters – even the cat was a female. His mother had once warned him that all women go mad eventually,

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and he was starting to believe it. Overlooked and outnumbered, he sipped his tea and turned to the sports pages.

Madeline walked home in the rain, clutching Ryan's hand too tightly. 'Why are we walking?' asked the boy. 'It's bloody freezing.'

'Don't swear,' his mother admonished. 'I haven't got enough for the bus fare. It's not very far, and the exercise is good for you.'

'That's because you gave all your money to her.'

It was true that Mrs Summerton charged for her services, but you couldn't expect her to do it for nothing. Kate had made sense of Madeline's life. During her lonely childhood years, she had been sure that some secret part of her was waiting to be discovered. But instead of gaining self-knowledge she became beautiful, and the curse began. Boys from her school hung around her house, laying their traps and baiting their lies with promises. She had even seen that terrible crafty gleam in her own father's eyes. She trusted easily, and was hurt each time. Beauty made her shy, and shyness made her controllable.

Now, at thirty years of age, she was finally discovering a way of standing up to the men who had always manipulated her. She owed Kate Summerton everything.

'Is she a lady doctor?' asked Ryan.

'Not exactly. What makes you think that?'

'You went to see her when you hurt yourself.'

Madeline had told her son that she'd fallen in the garden, and he seemed to believe her. 'She was very kind to me,' she said.

'You were ages in there,' Ryan probed, watching her face in puzzlement. 'I was stuck in the smoky kitchen with her horrible daughters and her boring husband. What were you doing?'

'Mrs Summerton was helping to teach me something.' She was unsure about broaching the subject with her son. He was at the age where he seemed simultaneously clever and childish.

'You mean like school lessons?' Ryan persisted. 'What was she teaching you?'

Madeline remained quiet until they had turned the high corner wall of Greenwich Park. Winter mist was settling across the plane trees in a veil of dewdrops. 'She was showing me how to deal with your father,' she said at last.