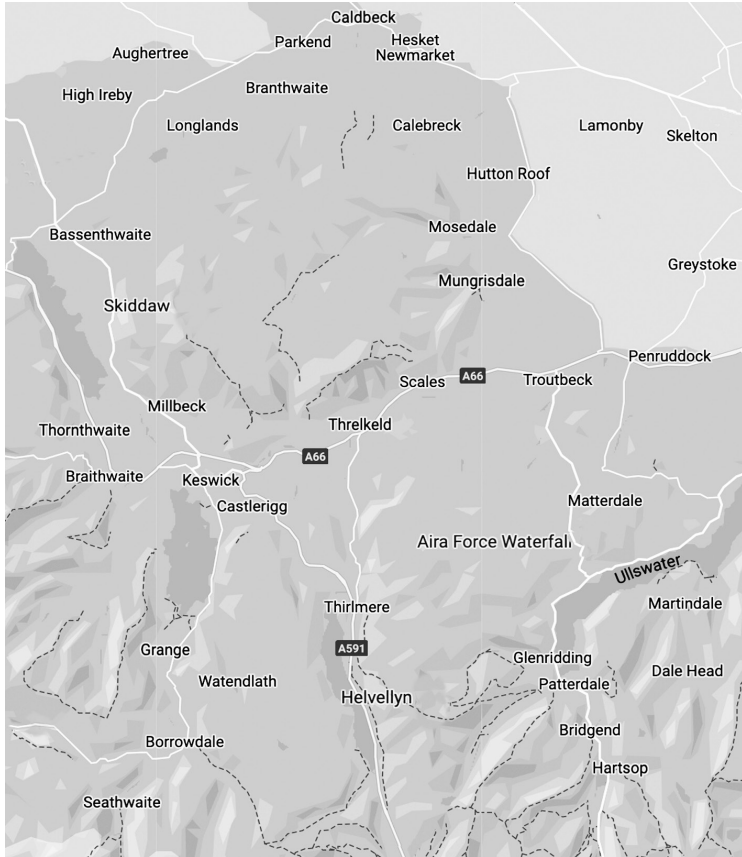




*The Threlkeld Theory*

REBECCA TOPE



## *Chapter One*

It happened barely ten minutes before they were due to leave and Angie Straw blamed Russell for it entirely.

‘Better have something to eat,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a while before we get anything, otherwise.’ So she bit down on a crunchy Hobnob and broke a tooth.

It was the small molar next to the eye tooth on the upper left-hand side. It had been mostly composed of filling and when she spat the debris into her hand, it was more black metal than white tooth. Half-chewed biscuit added more colour. She squealed and ran upstairs to the bathroom mirror. Unlike previous occasions, this time it looked worse than it felt. There was a jagged stump, dark brown in colour, the front wall of the tooth having disappeared completely. Even the smallest smile revealed it in all its horror.

‘Does it hurt?’ asked Russell when she went downstairs again.

She shook her head, unable to speak. If she made the attempt she feared she might cry. The day was already destined for high emotion – and now everything was condensed into this sudden calamity, which felt not far off the end of the world.

‘Just keep your mouth shut and carry on,’ her husband quipped, aware of an urgent need to defuse the situation. ‘Nobody’s going to look at us, are they?’

‘Photos,’ she mumbled, trying to speak through closed lips.

‘It’ll be fine. We’ll phone the dentist in a quiet moment and get you seen to, probably tomorrow. Come on now, we mustn’t be late. I’ll drive,’ he added heroically.

She found herself partially consoled, despite his culpability in giving her the fatal biscuit. Russell was solidly on her side at all times. After forty-four years, this was more true than it had ever been. Through sheer good fortune and with no special effort, they continued to like each other.

‘All right,’ she said thickly.

They were going to Keswick, twenty miles north of their home in Windermere, to witness the marriage of their daughter, Persimmon, to Christopher Henderson. It was late July, and the ceremony had been postponed from its original scheduled date in June. Robin, their baby, was now nearly four months old and the light of all their lives. The event had expanded, as such things did, and moved from one town to another as registry offices made difficulties and available bookings turned out to be in short supply.

Christopher had relatives in and around Penrith; he and Simmy lived in Hartsop, which was a lot closer to Keswick than Kendal, which was where they had originally proposed to get married. The Straws lived in Windermere, running a popular B&B business. Logistics and timings had mutated from basic and simple to convoluted and frustrating. All the original arrangements had been changed since April, when the decision to make themselves official had been cemented.

Now the post-wedding party was to be held in Threlkeld, a village close to Keswick, where Christopher's sister, Hannah, had ordained they assemble at the pub for a meal confusingly known (but with perfectly rational historical origins) as 'the wedding breakfast'. Nobody seriously challenged the choice of venue. Parking and navigating would both be easier than in the jumbled, tourist-thronged streets of Keswick and the place had a good garden. They could stay all afternoon. It was a Wednesday and none of the usual evening drunkenness was to be expected. Some people would fit the whole thing into a long lunch hour.

'It's only a tooth,' Angie insisted to herself repeatedly during the drive. It did not exactly hurt, although she was aware that every time she opened her mouth the stump reacted to the incoming air. Russell strove to distract her by pointing out various features along the road. Once they had passed Ambleside, the A591 ran unimpeded northwards all the way to Keswick. The unassuming little Thirlmere on Angie's side of the car was only sparsely dotted with visitors in the scanty parking areas that mostly had to be paid for. The day was dry with hazy cloud.

'Bicuspid,' she said suddenly.

'Excuse me?' This was a recent affectation on Russell's part, copied from an American B&B guest. He relished ridiculous idioms wherever he found them, and adopted them as his own in some cases.

'The tooth. It's a bicuspid. I've been trying to remember the word for the past seven miles.'

'I thought that was something to do with one's heart.'

'Oh. Is it? Now I'm confused.'

‘We can ask Ben to google it,’ said Russell, automatically.

‘Don’t let me smile,’ she begged him. ‘Can we arrange a signal for you to stop me?’

‘I’ll scratch my nose,’ he said. ‘Although I think you can risk a bit of a smirk, if not a fully-fledged grin.’

‘As if a wedding on its own wasn’t bad enough,’ she grumbled. ‘I’ll be remembered forever as the crone at the feast. The wicked godmother at the christening party. There’s one in every fairy tale.’

‘Charlotte Rampling in *Melancholia*,’ agreed Russell with a happy sigh. ‘How I do love that film. It’s so outrageously *true*.’

‘Nobody remembers the groom,’ said Angie randomly. ‘I wonder if Christopher is feeling a bit left out.’

‘It comes with the package – the groom being in the shadows, so to speak. But I’ve been wondering the same thing, now you mention it. Where did those boyish smiles go? I haven’t seen him look really unworried for a while now.’

‘It’ll be the job. And the baby.’

‘And getting married. He never was very good with responsibility. Not that I mean to criticise.’

The Straws had known Christopher Henderson from the day he was born. They remembered the little boy and the teenager he had been, before he took off on a prolonged spate of travelling, acquiring and discarding a wife along the way. Now he was back at the centre of their lives, they were enjoying getting to know him again. ‘He might be worrying that he’ll mess up this marriage like the first one,’ mused Angie. ‘Do you think?’

‘I hope not. This time he’s got our girl’s happiness in his hands. He’d better get it right.’

Angie was watching the picture-book scenery and wishing the day was over already and her tooth fixed. ‘I’d actually rather it would hurt more. Then I could demand a bit of sympathy. As it is, nobody’s going to be remotely interested.’

‘Nor should they be. This is not our day, old girl. Just remember that.’

Their daughter was wearing a garment that Angie thought of as a ‘midi-dress’. It went a few inches below her knees and appeared a trifle heavy for high summer, but it made her look tall and slim and carefree. It was a shade of light brown that Angie could find no name for, with flashes of white here and there. Very short sleeves and a low neck gave Simmy a subtly virginal look, which Angie found disconcertingly moving. At forty, it was no longer correct to think of Simmy as a girl, but Angie and Russell were not even trying to shake the habit.

Christopher Henderson, the groom, was an inch taller than his bride, almost as slender and exactly the same age. The two had met on the day they were born. Nobody would dream of using the word ‘incestuous’ about their relationship, but it was undeniable that they had a great deal of background in common. He wore a pale grey suit and a pink tie, which made him stand out amongst the small crowd of guests who, on the whole, had not taken a lot of trouble over their clothes. His hair had been cut shorter than quite suited him, but the subtle flashes of auburn were still there.

Angie remembered her envy at the newborn baby's impressive quiff that glinted red in certain lights. Now here he was, waiting with the registrar for the business to begin. His gaze returned repeatedly to the window at the back of the room and the fells beyond, as if he needed to steady himself for a coming ordeal. Angie watched him closely, trying to assess his emotional state. Nervous, she concluded, and uncomfortable. As an auctioneer he was well used to being the centre of attention, so it couldn't be that. No – this was an anxiety about becoming a husband and a parent all at the same time. She sighed impatiently, remembering Christopher's father and how he had fallen short in so many ways. Was his eldest son doomed to follow the same road? Not if Angie Straw could help it, she decided, squaring her shoulders.

Everyone sat down, looking for Russell to bring his daughter into the room. *It's a parody*, Angie thought, to her own surprise. The ceremony struck her as a mangled mashup of the age-old church service with its careful symbolism that fitted so uncomfortably with modern life. The father giving his girl away; the pre-adolescent female children clustering uncomprehendingly around the skirts of the bride; the ribald remarks of the groomsman; the food and drink; the flowers and the music and the dancing. Simmy and Christopher had avoided the worst of it, but with nothing of equal gravitas to take its place, they were forced to comply with the basic pattern. They had selected much of the wording, consistent with the minimal requirements of the law, and let Bonnie go overboard on the flowers. Simmy carried a spectacular bouquet, and every man in sight wore a buttonhole.



The registrar gave a few introductory remarks, which included the word ‘contract’ more than once. He was a man of about thirty in a nondescript suit who smiled relentlessly. His nose was peeling as if he’d recently been outside a lot without suncream.

Angie explored her tooth with her tongue every few seconds.

‘Stop it,’ hissed Russell, when he came to sit beside her, having delivered Simmy as required by tradition. ‘Leave it alone.’

Angie tried to distract herself by watching her grandson on the lap of his Auntie Hannah in a row full of Henderson relations. Robin was dressed in an outfit that looked vaguely Edwardian – a sailor suit, perhaps. Nobody had consulted Angie about what the infant ought to wear. He was placid by nature and more than happy to be passed from person to person, grabbing at hair or earrings as he went.

The next stage, which appeared to have no time limit to it, involved a lot of standing about in a courtyard while everybody took photos and chatted. Russell dutifully shook hands with everyone, posed for his picture and beamed indiscriminately at Christopher’s four siblings whom he had known their whole lives. George Henderson looked unwell and mumbled about having to get home for something important. Eddie, the middle son, stood square and respectable, uttering vague phrases about the day being a long time coming. Hannah and Lynn, the two sisters, bustled and bossed and took almost all the photos.

It was Angie who said, ‘Shouldn’t we be getting on? The pub’s going to wonder where we are.’ Which worked

rather well, and started a drift to the car park, followed by a procession through the eastern side of Keswick and on to Threlkeld where the Horse and Farrier pub awaited them.

Several people were already there, sitting around tables outside. A hasty welcoming committee was assembled, the couple cheered and more photos were taken. There was an almost indecent haste to get on with the planned proceedings. It was half past one and they had asked for food to be available from one o'clock.

'Sorry,' Angie heard Simmy saying to the man in charge. 'Everything took longer than we thought.'

Sandwiches, cold meat, salads and crisps were laid out on a long table under a gazebo and everybody got a free drink. Guests lined up and filled their plates. Angie had vetoed the making of speeches as one of her very few contributions to the event. But Christopher's brother, Eddie, would take no advice or admonition and stood up on a chair at the end of the buffet table, as people were milling about collecting the food, and spoke a few words. Red-faced and unoriginal, he uttered the usual platitudes and Angie groaned. Louder than intended, as it turned out, and also badly timed, coming at a pause in the speech, so that everyone heard her.

'Hush, woman!' hissed her husband.

Eddie glared and raised a beer glass in a toast.

Simmy went over to her parents. 'We should have had champagne,' she said with a sigh. 'Look at them!'

'It *is* rather informal,' said Russell carefully. 'But none the worse for that. It's lucky we chose this pub, with all this parking space.' He smiled vaguely at all the cars that had fitted themselves into the two areas on either side of the

road. His attempt at cheering his daughter was unsuccessful. 'And the weather's just what we ordered,' he tried again.

'Mum thinks it's a shambles,' Simmy accused. 'Don't you?'

'I think no such thing,' Angie replied. 'But if the man had to make a speech, why couldn't he choose a better moment?'

'He meant well. He's got a good heart, as Granny used to say.'

'That's another thing. I'm the oldest woman here – and I don't like it. Everyone else is under fifty.'

'Nonsense. Corinne's nearly sixty, for a start. And Helen.'

'Helen's barely over fifty,' snapped Angie. 'She must have been well under forty when she had those twins.'

Simmy gave the special little frown she used when she wanted to imply that her mother was badly awry in her logic. 'What does that have to do with it?' she wondered.

'Take no notice, pet,' said Russell. 'Your mother broke a tooth. Show her,' he ordered Angie, who bared the stump.

Simmy peered into the mouth a few inches from her face. 'When? How? Have you phoned the dentist?'

'About two hours ago on a Hobnob. And no, there wasn't time to phone anybody. We were practically in the car when it happened. It would have made us late.'

'Does it hurt? Phone them now.'

'How can I? I don't go around with the dentist's phone number in my head.'

Simmy gave her a long look.

'She wants us to google it,' Russell explained. 'Like normal people.'

Angie heaved a sigh. 'Let's go and ask Ben to do it,' she said, having observed young Ben Harkness and his beloved Bonnie sitting together at a table under a tree. A sunbeam had found them, sneaking between two branches and picking them out as the golden couple, rather than the newlyweds. 'Look at them!' she breathed with a sudden fond smile. 'Like something out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.'

'Hardly,' said Russell. 'That play is pure cynicism from first to last. Especially the wedding scene.'

'Stop it,' said Simmy, turning back to look for her new husband. 'I'll see you later.' And she strode down a little brick pathway to where Christopher was talking to both his brothers.

Angie gave herself a shake and set about the task of circulating, taking Russell with her. All the Hendersons were there, and they knew the Straws well, thanks to many shared holidays when they were small. There were also several grandchildren, whose names Angie made no attempt to remember. Eddie had a son they always referred to as 'Jonty', she reminded herself, and George had a daughter of about ten whose hair was alarmingly ginger. Lynn and Hannah had three little ones between them, with expectations of one or two more yet to come.

'Auntie Angie!' beamed Lynn, the youngest and the only one who applied the technically inaccurate *Auntie* to Angie's name. 'Isn't this amazing. They've really done it. Don't you think it feels like *destiny*, somehow? Just such a shame Mum's not here to see it. You've got to be mother to both of them. And father,' she added, looking at Russell.

The faint suggestion of incest was not lost on Angie, chiming as it did with her own thoughts. Everybody was aware of it – the fact that Simmy and Christopher had been virtually siblings in their earliest years. When they developed romantic feelings for each other in their teens, both sets of parents had been concerned; in Angie’s case because she felt strongly that her daughter should cast her net much wider. As it turned out, both youngsters cast unwisely as well as widely, with collapsed marriages behind them.

‘We should have let them do it twenty years ago,’ sighed Russell.

‘Wrong,’ Angie disagreed. ‘They’d have been constantly wondering whether they’d missed something. And now it’s the best of all worlds, with the baby and everything.’ *Everything* included Simmy’s florist shop, Christopher’s responsible and lucrative work and a highly desirable house in the northern reaches of the Lake District. ‘I don’t want anyone to think I disapprove. I just hate weddings.’ She sighed yet again, hearing its echo and resolving to stop doing it.

‘Maybe two,’ said Russell with incorrigible optimism.

‘Two what?’

‘Babies, of course.’

Angie allowed herself to relax into cosy reminiscences with Lynn about the vagaries of weather on the North Wales coast where the two families had spent their innumerable family holidays, recounting Christopher’s valiant efforts to barbecue sausages for ten people when he was barely into his teens. But she was also eyeing the wedding guests, with persistent echoes of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

running foolishly through her head. It occurred to Angie decades ago that her whole attitude towards weddings had been coloured by that poem. She found herself uneasily waiting to be collared by a stranger with a long tale to tell.

Afterwards she accused herself of making that very thing happen.

A man holding a full pint glass of beer approached her with a determined smile. ‘Mrs Straw!’ he proclaimed. ‘Mother of the bride.’

‘Guilty,’ she admitted. ‘A role I was never going to be suited for.’

He laughed excessively and sat down beside her, ignoring Lynn. ‘No, no – I congratulate you on the informal tone. It’s considerably better than any wedding I’ve been to. Not a photographer in sight. And the flowers are spectacular.’

‘I can take no credit for it,’ said Angie, waiting for him to introduce himself.

He got there eventually. ‘Derek Smythe,’ he said, patting himself on the chest. ‘Newbie at the auction house. Learning the ropes. New start and so forth. A real stroke of luck, the way it’s turned out.’

‘Ah,’ said Angie, who was dimly aware that a potential second auctioneer had been taken on to be trained up at the saleroom. ‘Pleased to meet you.’ She scrutinised him closely. Younger than she had first thought – probably only mid-thirties. Brash, loud, but essentially insecure, she decided. At least two stone heavier than was good for him, and going in very much the wrong direction as far as that was concerned. ‘Are you married?’ she asked, thinking the occasion of the wedding made the question relevant.

‘Oh yes,’ he said cheerfully. ‘With a fine stepson for good measure.’

‘Any other children?’

‘Two little ones. The stepson is Bruno. He’s best mates with Jonty and I believe he knows your husband.’

Angie frowned. ‘Really? Is he here?’

‘Seems not. He might feel he doesn’t know you well enough; he only met Chris once, I think. He wouldn’t regard that enough of an acquaintance to intrude. He’s very shy. I’ve been trying to talk him into doing a bit of casual work for the saleroom, as it happens, but he says he wants space and freedom for a few weeks – whatever that means. I’m not in a position to force him, although we always need another pair of hands at weekends. Fetching and carrying. Gets on well with the clever lad, Ben. They’ve taken on a little house right here in Threlkeld for the rest of the summer, the three of them. It’s all one big happy family around here, let me tell you. It’s been a big relief to me, finding everyone at the auction house so friendly.’ He smiled contentedly and waved towards Ben and Bonnie. ‘You know Ben, of course. You probably know about the house, as well.’

‘Of course I know Ben,’ said Angie, who had mixed feelings about auctions, antiques and Ben Harkness’s new job. ‘But I hadn’t heard he was moving house. He’s supposed to be at university, not messing about with old pictures.’

‘Ah,’ said Derek Smythe cautiously. ‘But he wouldn’t be at uni now, would he? And he’s getting great experience. I understood he was having a year out, or something of the sort.’

Angie had never properly mastered the art of discretion, and saw no reason to withhold her views about Ben and his career. ‘His parents are very anxious for him to resume his studies,’ she said pompously. ‘This time last year he was destined for great things at Newcastle. Now he’s thrown all that away – or will do if he’s not careful.’

‘He’s young yet,’ said the man, with a worried look. ‘And with his feel for history, he’s always going to have plenty of options. My stepson thinks he’s a genius.’

‘He is,’ sighed Angie. ‘That’s most of the trouble.’

By four o’clock, the whole thing was almost over. Angie had a dental appointment for the coming Friday, thanks to Ben and his phone, and the newlyweds had departed with their baby for a token honeymoon night in a hotel in Carlisle.

‘Why Carlisle?’ Angie had demanded in bewilderment.

‘No reason. We just fancied it. It seemed to tick all the right boxes,’ said Simmy. ‘We’ll be back by supper time tomorrow, so Robin can go to bed as normal.’

Ben’s mother and sister, Helen and Tanya Harkness, had taken themselves home some time before, leaving the young couple to make their own arrangements. Ben had been working in Keswick at Christopher’s auction house for a month or so, and had found himself a temporary room in town. ‘It’s what used to be called “digs”,’ he told everyone. Bonnie still lived in Windermere with her foster mother, Corinne, and the logistics of meeting up with her beloved consumed much of her attention. Buses were generally involved, and lifts from willing people, whether friends or strangers.



The Straws were loitering.

‘We ought to wait until everyone’s gone,’ worried Russell. ‘Traditionally, we’re responsible, aren’t we?’

‘There’s nothing very traditional about all this,’ muttered Angie. ‘I don’t know what the world’s coming to.’

‘I have a feeling it’s come to something very much like what we wanted it to, back in the seventies. We wanted to throw out all those fusty Victorianisms – church, uniforms, hypocrisies of every sort. Remember?’

‘We succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.’

Ben and Bonnie were listening. ‘Didn’t you like it, then?’ asked Bonnie worriedly. ‘I thought it was lovely.’

Angie gazed at her. ‘Did you? Really? *Why*, for heaven’s sake?’

‘It was so *real*,’ the girl said. ‘They’re such a perfect match, with the baby and everything. And they love each other like proper grown-ups, nothing mushy or pretend about it.’

‘No hypocrisy,’ summarised Ben with a look at Russell. ‘It was what it was.’

‘Hm,’ said Angie, thinking again about Christopher. ‘Well at least they were lucky with the weather, after all that rain. It’s been perfect all day. Not too hot for comfort.’

‘And Threlkeld’s really sweet,’ Bonnie went on. ‘I’ve never been here before. It’s the absolute right place for the wedding party. No touristy stuff, everything nice and simple. Just a mountain and nice, ordinary people with proper jobs.’

‘Not so much as a lake,’ said Russell with a laugh. ‘It’s like Coniston with all the embellishments removed.’

‘How do you know about people’s jobs?’ wondered Angie.

Bonnie laughed. ‘It’s just a feeling, really. When we came here earlier on, we didn’t see any signs of tourist stuff.’

‘I have a theory,’ said Ben, pausing to make sure they were all listening. ‘I was thinking about it just now. It’s something Bruno and I came up with. We don’t think this place is nearly as simple and innocent as it looks. Nowhere could be. I just bet there’s a whole alternate reality just below the surface. Nowhere with a name like Threlkeld could fail to have layers – dimensions.’

‘He’s been reading Philip Pullman,’ Bonnie explained. ‘It’s made him go all whimsical.’

Everybody laughed.

‘So, where is Bruno?’ Russell wanted to know. ‘I’ve been expecting him all afternoon. I wanted to talk to him about our man.’

Even Ben was bemused. ‘Who’s “our man”?’

‘Come on. You’ve got to have heard him going on about the glorious EBL.’ Russell gazed at the blank faces. ‘Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Great man of the nineteenth century. Spent some months up here in his youth, married the impossible Rosina. Bruno’s read all his novels. Or nearly all. I’m still revelling in *Alice*, which is a real joy.’

‘Oh. Right,’ said Ben. ‘The “dark and stormy night” man.’

Russell grimaced. ‘If you must, but it’s galling to have him remembered for nothing else other than that. He was *great*, I tell you. He’ll have his revival any minute now.’

Ben also grimaced. ‘Bruno hasn’t mentioned an interest in him to me.’

Russell shrugged. ‘I get the impression that lad keeps his

interests in separate compartments, so to speak.'

Angie was still puzzling. 'When do you see Bruno?' she asked. 'Where does he live? Who *is* he?'

'You never pay proper attention,' Russell grumbled. 'Remember my little history group, and the course of talks we attended last winter? Well, Bruno did a paper, but he was too timid to read it. It was about Bulwer coming up here after his first girlfriend died. She's buried at Ullswater somewhere. He'd done very impressive research. I read the paper for him, and we got friendly.'

'He's that man's stepson,' Angie remembered. 'Smythe.'

'And he's Jonty's very good friend,' said Bonnie. 'The two of them are going to move into a house with Ben right here, next week. It's all happening,' she said with a slightly unhappy look.

'Without you, poor girl,' said Russell with excessive sympathy.

'She can come and see us any time,' said Ben, with a hint of irritation.

'How?' wondered Angie.

'Good question,' said Bonnie, making every effort to be stoical. 'Oh – and can you give me a lift home, please?' she added. 'Corinne isn't going to be able to take me. She's going to Penrith for some reason. She could drop me at the station, and I could get a train, but . . .'

'You don't wanna do that,' quipped Russell.