

Princess of the Source

*The Historical, Mythical & Spiritual Story
of the River Walbrook*



by Jayl De Lara

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MUDLARKING

On the night of the Hunter's Moon on October 3rd in the year of our lord 2009 – my dear friend Grace took me mudlarking on the banks of the River Thames beneath Cannon Street station and the steps at the bottom of Cousin Lane: these being adjacent to a welcoming and vibrant drinking establishment called 'The Banker' - sitting proudly upon the river wall, built into the arches of the old railway bridge.



An intriguing new experience for me - this mudlarking; which is essentially searching for artefacts on the foreshore of the Thames at low tide. The term "mudlark" was coined during the Industrial Revolution. It referred to young street urchins or sometimes elderly woman who scoured the banks of the river for anything they could find to sell: lumps of coal knocked off a barge, discarded rubbish, household items, toys and old coins. It was a nasty practice, since it often involved contact with raw sewage and the occasional brush with a washed-up corpse. Mudlarking was also a dangerous occupation and there have been many incidents of people cut off by the incoming tide, caught in the mud and drowned. The police actually considered mudlarking a criminal offence and practitioners were sometimes slapped with short prison terms or stints in reformatory schools. Ironically, in the 1980s, an organization called the 'Society of Thames Mudlarks' obtained a special licence to do exactly what was considered illegal before: scavenge the river. But this time, it was in the name of history and the preservation of historical artefacts. Mudlarking is now something practiced as a hobby by people of all ages and all 'walks of life' fascinated by London's history.



Upon descending the steps, I soon felt the crunch of shingle beneath my boots. I realised that not only were we in an area of great antiquity and historical significance, but also a location of immense magic and spiritual power. My friend explained that this was a very special place for her, where her late father had brought her mudlarking as a little girl and where his ashes had actually been scattered less than 4 years before. Consequently, I felt a reverence matched by a deep sadness for my friend.

Here on the ground beneath the wall, was laid out the whole history of this great city. A veritable treasure trove here with fragments of pottery dating back to medieval times, an assortment of crockery from various eras and places (including Holland) and the unmistakable green glazed pottery of the Tudors years. Ornate blue Victorian china and particularly prized by my ‘hard-drinking’ companion - pieces of 17th century Bellarmine jugs: Cardinal Robert Bellarmine was a 17th-century puritan who abhorred drinking (as well as King James I) so his face was put on to alcohol bottles as a joke.



We found numerous oyster shells, animal bones (including the molar of a cow), pieces of 18th century clay pipes, including a full bowl and to my great excitement – roof tiles from houses burned down in the great fire of 1666. I felt the surge of history through time and tide and upon closing my eyes for a few short moments, could hear the crackle of the flames, the crashing of the tiles upon the shore and the screams and shouts of panic from that fateful September night.



My imagination then catapulted me 2½ centuries forward as I imagined the ferocity, chaos and rage in this place on another September night, as terror rained from the skies in the form of German bombs. As I began to hear the drone of the aircraft and the explosions all around, my friend suddenly brought me back to the now, as she excitedly showed me a piece of pottery dating back nearly 2,000 years to the time of the Londinium and the Roman occupation. A knowledgeable young woman – my friend; with a vision and intelligence way beyond her tender years; attributes matched only by her youthful beauty and piercing eyes. She seemed to know facts, sometimes obscure, about every era of this river’s history like she had actually been there herself.

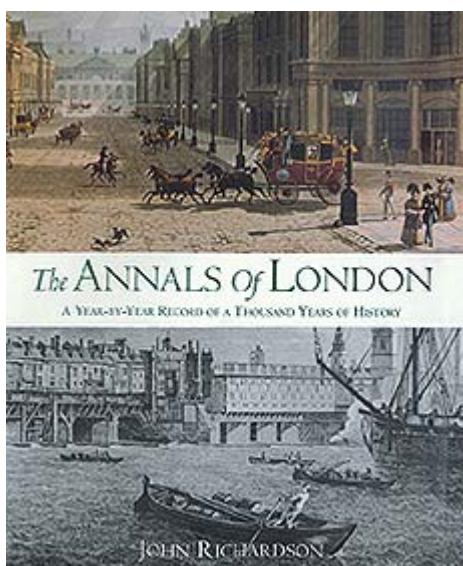
Having a video camera with me, I filmed her in the shadow of the railway bridge near the site where her father's ashes had been scattered, with the river and London Bridge a short distance away as my backdrop. And as the cool fresh autumn breeze blew through her striking blonde hair, I knew with an uncanny certainty that a part of her belonged in this special place and that somehow she was inextricably linked with its vibrant and frightening history. At this point, with a strange intrusion, the lyrics of an old Genesis song entered my mind – “Olde Father Thames, it seems he’s drowned – selling England by the pound.”

Now as darkness enveloped us and the bow wave of a passing river boat crashed upon the shore, we agreed that we had both worked up a hearty appetite. So with “The Banker” beckoning us – warm and inviting with the promise of great food and fine ales, we ascended the old steps, leaving the ancient shore to the crabs and the incoming tide.



We shared a delicious meal in this magical establishment and also for the first time recounted in open and honest conversation the tragedies of our lives. I felt such a close empathy and bond with my friend and despite her youth in this lifetime, felt somehow that she was a very much older soul than myself. As we ventured back out into the streets of the olde city on this full moon autumn night, I could not shake the feeling, nor the uncanny thought, that somehow I had known this girl before. Moreover, there was something mystical about the place we had just visited – something highly significant about the steps climbing down to the river. Something to do with the water. Something to do with the flow. Something to do with Grace.

I resolved to look deeply into the history of this place in the certain knowledge that amazing and exciting discoveries awaited me. So after bidding my fairest friend farewell and returning to my lodgings, I began scouring John Richardson’s marvellous ‘Annals of London’ in search of the secrets.



THE WALBROOK

We had actually been hunting for treasure at the mouth of the River Walbrook – one of the ‘lost’ rivers of London. Originally, the Walbrook rose in a boggy area north of the old city wall, known as Moorfields – a large marshy plain situated between modern day Bishopsgate and Finsbury. Now 32 feet below road level, the river once flowed through the city wall at Moorgate and its source was near where the Highbury & Islington station stands today. There is mention of bridges that were built over the river once it had entered the city, close to All Hallows Church. From here it flowed down Copthall Avenue, which can be seen today as a street off London Wall. There was a bridge at this point, and from there it flowed down into Tolkenhouse Yard. St. Margaret’s Church, which stands next to the yard, was built over the river. It then flowed down to where the Bank of England now stands, down what is now known as Walbrook Street, into Dowgate Hill and then flowed into the Thames at the bottom of what is now Cousin Lane.



The river - which was about 10 feet wide, shallow and fast-flowing, was believed to have had sacred powers and magical healing properties and would have been a source of fresh water in the Roman era, which is perhaps why the Romans built the Temple of Mithras on its east bank. It was possible for quite large vessels and barges to navigate the river. After the Romans left, the river was used to dump just about anything in, including animal dung and human waste, so it essentially became an open sewer.

When Londinium was captured by the invading Anglo-Saxons during the late 6th century, all the Celtic British inhabitants were forced to live on the east bank of the Walbrook while the Saxons would reside on the west, so the river actually divided the settlement.

In 1096, following the Norman invasion, the Church of St.Stephen’s Walbrook was built on the west bank of the river where a Saxon church had once stood. By then it had become a mere stream, due to the years of neglect and volumes of waste dumped into it.

“The Annals of London” describe the following: -

1288: The Walbrook was ordered to be cleaned, such was the filth and stench emanating from it.

1383: It had almost completely silted up, as for the cost of 2 shillings a year (10p), houses were allowed to build latrines over the river. The annals record that each household had to contribute to its cleaning.

1439: The church of St.Stephen’s Walbrook was actually rebuilt on the east side of the river where there was more space for a graveyard. (In 1666 the church was destroyed in the great fire and Sir Christopher Wren built a new church there in 1672 to replace it, which still stands.)



1457: The church of St.Mildred in Poultry was partly built over the course of the river.

1511: The Moorfields area of the city at the river's source was considerably developed in this year with the construction of dykes and canals to channel the water. The area was popular for skating in the winter and archery in the summer, but the development around its source no doubt contributed considerably to the river's demise.

However, as late as 1739, when St.Mildred's church was rebuilt (having also been destroyed in the great fire) the river, although below the surface, was described as "a great and rapid stream running under St.Mildred's steeple at a depth of 16 feet." By the mid 1800's, no traces at all of the stream above ground remained. It did briefly reappear around the foundations of the Bank of England at this time, but essentially from this time on, the river was an underground sewer (as seen in the picture below taken beneath the bank.)



In the 1860s excavations by General Augustus Pitt Rivers uncovered a large number of human skulls, and almost no other bones, in the bed of the Walbrook. Many historians consider these skulls to be a result of the rebellion of Boudica in the year AD 60.



BOUDICA

Boudica was a queen of the Brittonic Iceni tribe of what is now known as East Anglia. Together with her daughters, she led an uprising against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. Boudica's husband, Prasutagus, an Icenian king who had ruled as a nominally independent ally of Rome, left his kingdom jointly to his daughters and the Roman Emperor in his will. However, when he died his will was ignored. The kingdom was annexed as if conquered, Boudica was brutally flogged, her daughters raped and Roman financiers called in their loans. Consequently, in AD 60, while the Roman governor, Suetonius was leading a campaign on the island of Anglesey, Boudica led the Iceni, along with the Trinovantes and others tribes, in an assault on Camulodunum (now Colchester) which they completely destroyed. On hearing the news of the revolt and fearing it would be the rebels next target, Suetonius hurried to Londinium, which was then only 22 years old as a Roman settlement.

Concluding he did not have the numbers to defend it, Suetonius evacuated and abandoned it, whereupon Boudica attacked the settlement, had all the remaining inhabitants slaughtered and the fledgling city burned to the ground. The crisis led the Emperor Nero to consider withdrawing all Roman forces from the British island, but Suetonius' eventual victory over Boudica (reputedly at the village of Battle Bridge on the site of what is now King's Cross station), secured Roman control of the province. Boudica then poisoned herself so she would not get captured and there exists to this day an urban myth that she is buried under Platform 10 at King's Cross. In relation to Boudica's destruction of old Londinium, archaeology shows a thick red layer of burnt debris covering coins and pottery dated before AD 60 within the bounds of the Roman city, especially around the area of the Walbrook.

Boudica – the warrior queen, has become a British legend synonymous with true bravery and the triumph of the underdog against a repressive regime. A great bronze statue of Boudica with her daughters in her war chariot was commissioned by Queen Victoria's late husband - Prince Albert. It was completed in 1905 and stands next to Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament with the following inscription from Cowper's poem, referring to the British Empire: "Regions Caesar never knew. Thy posterity shall sway."



Returning to the Walbrook and the discovery of the skulls in the 1860's excavations, it is known that it was customary of the Celts to take the heads of their victims and offer them to Nike – the winged goddess of victory.

MITHRAS – LORD OF LIGHT

In 1954, during new excavations on a bomb site near the bed of the Walbrook, archeologists discovered a carved marble head depicting Mithras – Lord of Light. This was actually the first find in the uncovering of the Roman temple which had stood on the east bank of the river. Other incredible marble carvings of deities soon followed, including the head of Minerva – goddess of learning, Serapis – Egyptian god of the harvest, Mercury – the guide of the souls of the dead, Bacchus – god of wine and Pan - god of shepherds and flocks, of mountain wilds, hunting and rustic music. The whole site became known as the Temple of Mithras.



Clearly, the Walbrook was a river of great significance and power before the disrespectful abuse by man clogged up its flow and hid it from the sun. But IT IS still there, even though it now flows completely underground, entering the Thames through a culvert beneath Cannon Street railway bridge.



With the arrival of the new millenium, there has been a major resurgence of understanding regarding ancient springs, wells and river courses and the spirits and forces that dwell within them. During the 'Carnival Against Capitalism' on June 18th, 1999, a fire hydrant was let off on Dowgate Hill by 'Reclaim the Streets' to symbolically represent the freeing of the Walbrook. In the late 00's, a new conceptual group called 'Walbrook Restoration' produced a website conceived as an artwork as opposed to a real organisation, with the objective of "restoring the River Walbrook to its former glory as a new nature reserve in the centre of the City of London." 'Raising the Walbrook 2008' proposed the following: - 1) An attempt to raise the River Walbrook, by distributing a votive offering of coins down all the storm-drains along its route, on the day of the Autumn Equinox. 2) An attempt to raise the River Walbrook, by distributing a libational offering of gin down selected storm-drains along its route, on All Hallow's Eve. 3) An attempt to raise the River Walbrook, by distributing an epular offering of Jelly Babies down all the storm-drains along its route, on the day of the Winter Solstice.



Now in 2009, the river still flows beneath the streets, but there are many spiritual folk who now feel it is rising again and that it is nearer to the surface than it has been for centuries. In June of this year, artist Amy Sharrocks, an artist fascinated with London's relationship with water organised a special walk. With the help of a dowser, she charted the river's course from its source near Highbury and Islington Tube station, down through old Moorgate, where the city wall once stood, then down to its mouth at the Thames. Linked by ribbon bonds, like molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, a group of 50 participants surged and meandered along some of the capital's busiest pavements. A truly unique and inspiring event.

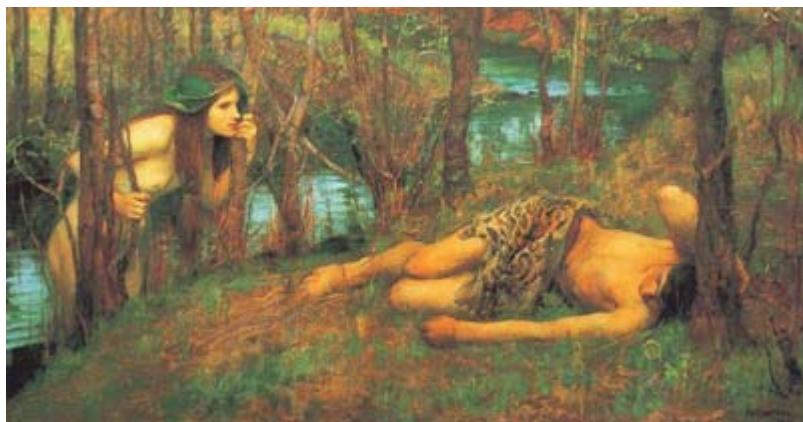


In the end, nature will have its way and restore the true order of things, for when the flow is blocked, the pressure builds and when the pressure builds, dams break open. THIS is the natural law - and here the words of a Jayl song spring to the mind – “there ain’t no malice in the flow.” No malice maybe; but guardians, nevertheless - always in attendance.



NAIADES

In Greek mythology the Naiads or Naiades (Ναϊάδες from the Greek νάειν, "to flow," and νάειν, "running water") were a type of nymph who presided over fountains, wells, springs, streams, and brooks. Naiads were associated with fresh water. The essence of a naiad was bound to her spring or stream, so if a naiad's body of water dried, she died. They were often the object of local cults, worshipped as essential to humans. Boys and girls at coming-of-age ceremonies dedicated their childish locks to the local naiad of the spring or stream. In many places, their waters' ritual cleansings were credited with magical healing properties.



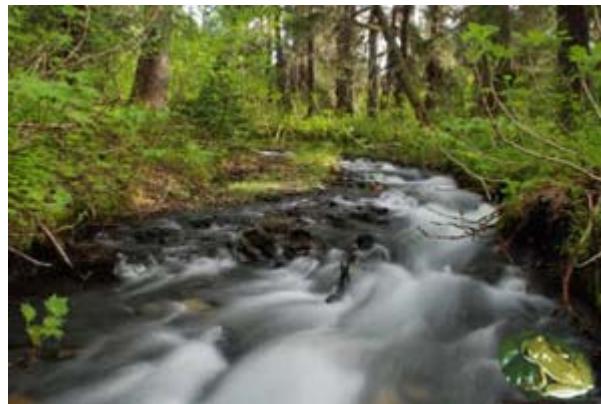
I awoke with a start. I thought I'd heard a crashing sound but I must have been mistaken. Apart from the clock ticking, the room was silent and my mouth was dusty dry; so I reached for my bottle of 'The Source of Life' and sipped gratefully. My copy of the 'Annals' still lay open beside me. The entry was from 1975, when the horrific Moorgate tube disaster of the 28th February had dominated the news. "London Underground's worst ever disaster!" screamed the headline.



I closed the book and tried to recall my dream, but it was already fleeing from my memory like a spring hare. Perhaps this was for the best, as deep inside I had a sense of claustrophobic unease. I breathed a large sigh and gradually my eyes became heavy again in the silence of the morning. As I drifted away the dreaming returned, this time with a clarity as clear as winter ice.

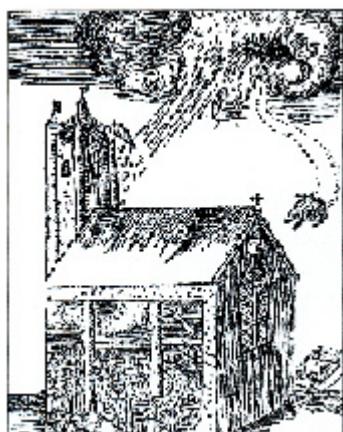
THE DREAM

In my dream a young girl with golden flowing hair stands by a beautiful and picturesque babbling brook in a field of lush green grass and wild flowers. Animals peacefully graze upon this field whilst dragonflies and butterflies flutter and dance above the stream. The girl is singing in a sweet and dulcet tone, accompanied by birdsong, which fills the air. She is happy and at one with this chorus of nature that surrounds her. Her feet are bare and she walks in her stream, letting the cool spring water rush between her toes. The water twinkles and glistens in the early morning sunshine. HER stream, HER Source – fresh and clear, unspoiled and clean.



She stops to address a small green frog, camouflaging himself on a lilly. “I can see you, little frog” she cries gleefully. “Hrrrmph ... sharp-eyed little nymph” croaks the frog, “You’ve blown my cover!” “What are you hiding from?” inquires the girl. “There’s a storm coming” says the frog. “But there’s been many a storm” replies the girl, “and all that happens is our brook flows faster!” “But something’s coming on the storm – something mean” says the frog, “the rooks told me.” “Awwwh – you don’t want to believe what the rooks told you, rooks love spreading rumours and being dramatic – it’s in their nature!” In the distance there is a faint rumble as if on cue and with this, the frog leaps from his lilly and swims away downstream in a most frantic hurry.

In my dream the sky turns black as coal, there is thunder and lightning and pelting rain. Time has rushed forward and I am standing on the muddy banks of a great river. All around there is the scent of panic in the air with people rushing back and forth and loading possessions into boats. Children are crying, dogs are howling and the river is rapidly rising, swollen by the immense amount of water crashing down from the sky and a volumous tide surging up the river, powered by a baying moon. Most are leaving in a tremendous hurry, but some are electing to stay, like so often in the books of history, refusing to heed warnings brought to them by soothsayers and crows.

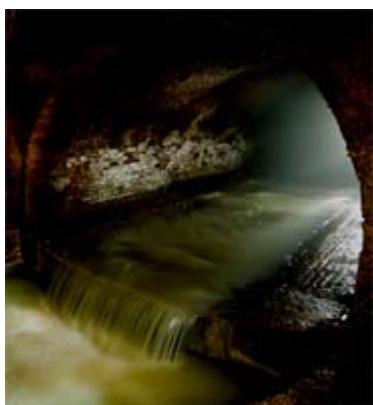


Terrifying and relentless, the great Queen rides into the city, the wheels of her chariot roaring across the stream onto the stoney streets, her horses baying and snorting steam through the pounding rain. With her army behind her and her daughters by her side, she is driven by rage, revenge and blood lust.



There is brutal slaughter all around – screams of terror, blood and sinew, splintering bone crushed by hooves and steel, decapitations, arms and legs and rolling heads – hopeless eyes staring up from the churning ground. No quarter is given; all who remain are murdered and the city is set alight to cheers of triumph. I want to avert my eyes but cannot, as I am unseen amongst this horror and carnage and I'm at the centre of my own dream. The once clear stream heading down to the great river runs red with the blood of the victims - and in places bubbles and boils with the heat of the flames. As the avenging army finally leave, they head north - upstream towards the village of Battle Bridge. By now I am squeezing my eyes even tighter shut in an attempt to shut out this nightmare but of course, they are already closed for my sleep, so I am only partially able to do this. Finally I find the courage to open them wide whereupon I witness a scene of total devastation. I look around and nobody is left, except for one – one who must have been hiding in mortal terror throughout the attack – I see it is the young girl. She is standing in the stream leading down to the great river, bloody boiling water swirling around her knees as tears pour down her face. Beside her on the bank are two broken skulls, already mostly robbed of their flesh and floating by her at that very moment is the torn and flattened body of a little green frog.

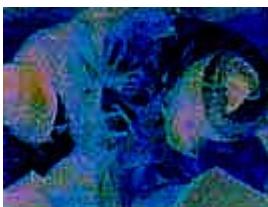
I nearly awake, such is the trauma of this dream, but there is no logic in the patterns of sleep and suddenly I am in another time. I am in a large cavern underground, which seems to lie at the base of a deep drain, as high above me I can see a metal grill with subdued light coming down from it. To my left and to my right is rushing water; flowing yes, but this water is pungent and stinking with a stench so foul, I am choking. There is no way to climb out of this hell hole so I realise I must make my way down this sewer to try to find a way out. I am able to claw my way along a narrow ridge above the flow which I am grateful for as I am most reluctant to enter the water, for fear of what disgusting diseases may lurk within. The passage is dark, narrow and cloying and in the faint light I can see stalagmites, slime and strange fungi on the brick ceiling.



I push on, but suddenly I am nearly knocked into the foul water as a group of huge rats come rushing by me writhing and squealing and disappear into the void ahead. I feel lucky that at least that I am not in some James Herbert novel and that I've not been attacked, but my urgency to escape has become greater. Finally the passage widens and I can see what appears to be another cavern up ahead. As I get nearer I can make out what appears to be a small figure standing in the clearing next to the water. As I approach I feel certain it is the tragic girl from earlier in my dream but this cannot be, for the creature I see cowering in the shadows only resembles the girl in size and stature. Apart from this, what I see before me hardly resembles human form at all. Its hair is a mass of straggly grease and tar - wild and unkempt and practically covering its face. Its body is brown and dirty, barely covered by what appears to be a kind of tunic made of sack. One eye peers menacingly at me through a gap in its hair. "Please don't be afraid," I say "I promise I won't hurt you – who are you?" At first the creature recoils back into the shadows, a couple of stray rats by its bare and filthy feet. But I am persistent and once again, in the softest most reassuring voice I can muster I ask "It's Ok - Who are you?" In a voice so faint it barely registers an echo, it answers me, "Aglaia." To my shock I realise that this poor creature is a young girl after all, but I am not sure if it is the same girl from earlier. "Aglaia – that's a pretty name, what are you doing here in this dark and smelly place?" "This is my home" she answers. "Your home?" I reply, feeling almost nauseous "How can this be? Where are your parents? How did you get here?" Clearly feeling a little more sure that I mean her no harm she replies "I've always been here and I don't have parents – I am on my own." "But why are you living underground in this sewer?" "This isn't a sewer" she replies, "This is my stream." "How long have you been here?" I ask, feeling a sense of pity and shame. "As long as I can remember" she replies. "And do you ever go up to the surface?" I ask. "No, It's not safe – there is a terrible war happening up there, with balls of fire coming from the sky; it's safer down here." As if on cue, there is suddenly a huge thunderous bang above us that makes the whole cavern shake to its very foundations. The girl lets out a shriek and runs off with a splashing into the darkness of the tunnel. I call to her but she is gone before I can even begin to go after her.



Suddenly I feel a foreboding sense of fear as I can feel that I am being watched from behind, from some deep recess in the cavern. Do I dare turn around? Do I run? Before I can make a decision, a harsh and whispering male voice addresses me, "Do not turn around – for to see me would mean certain death." The hackles on the back of my neck are up and I can feel every nerve in my body alive and pumping. "I will not hurt you" says the voice, "But you must not turn around." "Who are you?" I ask in trepidation despite his assurance. "My name is Erebus", he replies "Lord of Shadows."



"Why are you here?" I ask "And who is that poor child?" "This is my one of my abodes and where we are standing is the bottom of a deep well" whispers the shadow. I look up from the cavern and can see a circular light, clearly the entrance to the well high above. "I, with the help of my colleagues Hades and Styx built this bloody well with bricks ..."

This is one of many wells and drains that we constructed that spill down into this brook from above. The child you met is Aglaia and this is HER brook. She may appear like a child to you but she has been here for centuries. She is a water naiad and Princess of the Source, but now she has been forced to live underground. A ferocious war is raging on the streets of a city above us and this is actually the safest place to be." I'm about to turn around when Erebus hisses his warning to me again about the dire consequences of such an action. "One look at me and you will become a creature of the underworld yourself, you will become blind like the rats and surely die." Checking myself I speak again, "But this is no brook, this is just a foul sewer." "It might appear like this to you" he replies "But it hasn't always been this way. Once upon a time it was a beautiful uncontaminated stream, it is man's ignorance and stupidity that has made it this way. Man wants to control everything but doesn't realise that his days in this world are short. One day the stream will rise again and return to the sunlight, then I and my colleagues will be forced to move ourselves. Until that time, we live our days here maintaining the culvert and guarding the child." "Can she not leave this place at all?" I ask. "Whilst the war continues this would not be safe, but when it is over she will leave this place for a short time, as she has a special dispensation from the gods to go and live amongst men. There she will seek out the enlightened ones and help prepare the way for the end times, but she WILL return, for a true water nymph can never leave her stream unattended for long. She will always be drawn back to this place. Meanwhile, we will guard it for her and make sure it is fed from the drains above, for should it ever dry up completely she would die." "You sound like you really care for this girl?" I say. But there is no reply. "Erebus?" No reply. I wait for what seems like an age and finally I spin around. Nothing but wall and half light and the sound of the dirty slimy stream and dripping from the bricks above.



Once again, I can feel myself waking from my deep slumber but as I do my dream awards me one last vision. It is the time beyond man that the Lord of Shadows spoke of. The sun is beaming brightly – glittering upon a fast flowing river. All around broken concrete and debris, now covered with greenery and flowers. Swallows are swooping, animals of all kinds are roaming free and the banks of the river are festooned with weeping willow trees, swaying in a summer breeze. Gently coming back to consciousness now, I can hear an old Talking Heads tune playing in my head, "There was a parking lot, now it's a peaceful oasis, you've got it, you've got it!" My final vision of my journey is sublime in contrast to the horrors earlier in my dream. As I am waking I see the naiad bathing in her cool water, she is silky skinned, bare-breasted and no longer a child. She is the very epitome of lusciousness and as my eyes open I have a thrillimg sense of the journey I have been on and the destiny to come.



I rub my eyes and when I look at my earthly clock, only 15 minutes have passed! I think to myself something I often feel these days, that life is far more about the perception than the actual reality.

Ahhh – the Wonders of Life!

EPILOGUE

On the night of the Hunter's Moon on October 3rd in the year of our lord 2009 – my dear friend Grace took me mudlarking on the banks of the River Thames beneath Cannon Street station and the steps at the bottom of Cousin Lane: these being adjacent to a welcoming and vibrant drinking establishment called 'The Banker' - sitting proudly upon the river wall, built into the arches of the old railway bridge.

Jayl De Lara

October 2009



Dedicated to Grace Graznak ...

My friend, water naiad & guardian of my own brand of west country water – "The Source of Life."



With thanks to the following historical & artistic sources:-

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