

The *Gawain*
Legacy

Jon Mackley

For Lara, the fact she was leaving her husband wasn't so bad as the bus being late.

The deep blue hues in the sky were fading in the east. A single wispy cloud floated above, tinted black in the January night. The morning star glittered, watching her. She dragged her coat tight around her slim frame against the chilling wind.

Distant shimmering lights led to the nearby train station. The glow seeped through the morning mist around the platform. A few figures stood waiting to catch early trains like freezing caricatures from a Lowry painting.

The painting ... the painting had been the final nail in the coffin of her relationship with Michael. It seemed petty now. Even now, despite her desperation, despite her fear, her resolve had almost broken. She could still return before he woke and he would be unaware of her intentions.

But nothing would have changed except her diminishing self-esteem. He'd continue tormenting her and she might never again find the strength to leave.

She could, of course, catch a train from here. An early commuter train would take her to Birmingham, or to London. From there she could travel to anywhere in the country; hell, she could get to Europe if she wanted.

A man walked past with a dog, which sniffed at her

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holdall. The owner grunted a 'good morning'. He dragged the dog away, not looking at her.

The light bleeding across the sky had eclipsed the morning star; the clouds were tinged with salmon. The concealing darkness was exposing her to the terrors of the day.

She stared at the Lowry caricatures again, wondering if they could see her, as she saw them. She should have taken off her glasses before she started, then she wouldn't have known about them: blissfully ignorant in blindness.

She removed the glasses, carefully folding the arms down. She could see clearly enough without them, but in this half-light, distant things became blurred.

If eyes are the windows to the soul, I don't want anyone looking into mine.

Without her glasses, the world blended into an anonymous blur of colours. She only needed the glasses for driving and reading, but tiredness had enveloped her and the world faded away to a hazy nothingness.

If I ever leave my husband again, I'll go when I'm less tired.

But there wouldn't be a next time, she thought, unconsciously crossing her fingers. Standing here, waiting for the bus, marked the end of that relationship. And all the time, her father's quotation from *Twelfth Night* on the day she had announced her engagement, rang in her mind: *Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage.* Had he seen something wrong in their relationship when she had been blinded by love?

And it wasn't even a nice painting, she reminded herself.

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But Michael had decided it suited the bedroom wall and, because Michael was always right, it had gone up. Six months later, it had fallen down again. Gravity had chosen five o'clock in the morning to remove the painting from its seat of glory. The ensuing argument had forced her to the end of her tether: Michael had found a way of making it her fault. Already, she had been unconsciously planning her escape. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, she had walked out. Her heart had hardened, even though she was still brushing tears away.

And even though she was devastated by grief because everything had ended, and she was crushed by the uncertainty of the future, there was another, stronger, overwhelming emotion.

Relief.

She glanced over her shoulder. The rising sun paled in the mist. Even without her glasses she recognised the familiar landmarks of “home”: the river Welland and the bridge, the wooden archway of the George, the yellow limestone and timber-framed buildings. She needed to leave them all behind her now.

Shivering, she realised her teeth were gritted. She tapped her foot in irritation, praying the bus would arrive soon.

She looked back at the train station. Her first awareness that something was wrong was pure instinct. It was the same pervading fear that ate into her gut when she heard the key scraping in the lock as Michael came home from work. The sensation was so familiar that, at

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first, she thought he had found her, that he had woken early, found her note and had come to drag her back.

A movement, almost imperceptible.

She put her glasses on again and looked down the bank, past the discarded shopping trolleys, to the train lines.

Swathed by the morning mist, she saw a figure standing, Christ-like, arms outstretched, his overcoat hanging loose around him. Standing on one of the sleepers between the silver of the railway lines.

As she watched, he knelt down, his arms suspended in a parody of the Crucifixion: resigned to his fate.

The mist had almost swallowed him. In the distance – a mere pinprick in the curtain of the night – she saw the light of the oncoming train. The Jesus character had worked out this train wouldn't stop, wouldn't even slow down for the platform. And there was no way the driver would see him in time, even if she could.

Another movement. Further down the lines, in the path the train would take, she saw lights in the distance, torch beams spearing the mist. Dogs barked. Her mind tried to connect the images: man running away from men with dogs. Did he hope the train would get him before the dogs did?

She wasn't usually blessed with a vivid imagination, but her mind was saturated by the image of a body after impact.

The train continued: a weapon of suicide.

She wasn't aware of moving, didn't know where the reserves of strength came from. It was like watching

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someone else when she hauled her bag over the iron railings. A myriad of thoughts struck her; the most forceful was a chiding voice inside her head: *It's better to try and fail than to not try at all and live with the consequences.*

Then she was lifting herself on to the railings. Her holdall rolled away down the embankment. She shuddered. If she fell, she could tumble uncontrolled down the side of the bank, perhaps skewering herself on the debris waiting at the bottom like a crocodile's teeth.

She heard the hum of the train on the lines; the sound of the engine was carried by the light breeze. She let go of the railings and slipped down the bank, scrabbling for grasses and roots. She landed down alongside her bag.

The rattling train drew closer. The light pierced the darkness and behind her, torch lights swung closer.

She ran across the train tracks, tripping, stumbling, but caught herself before she fell.

The Jesus character was standing in front of her, a shade among a multitude of shadows.

Her body no longer responded to rational thought. She was either going to help him or join him.

She tripped again, then ran, finding a rhythm to avoid obstructions in her path. The train bore down on her like a predator alighting on its prey. It was on top of her.

She wasn't going to reach the man in time.

The screams of the train were deafening, like standing in the heart of a volcano. Lights blazed. Ozone burned. Suddenly, adrenalin surged through her, filling her with inhuman strength.

She leapt, already knowing she was going to miss the man and be hit by the train herself.

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I'm too late, she told herself. He's dead.

Her hands connected with solid muscle. She hadn't tensed her arms. They buckled against him. The man hadn't been prepared for a 'rescue'. His body crumbled. Her jaw connected with his shoulder. Her teeth snapped together. Blood filled her mouth. Her head swam with the shock. She curled her feet underneath her, pulling them from the path of the train.

The world erupted. Wind was dragged out of her. Her spirit felt like it was being sucked out of her eyes. The vortex dragged her towards the train, as unforgiving as a demon.

In eternal moments it was over. The train had gone. She clawed at the earth, fighting for breath. Behind her, the torches had scattered but dogs barked, picking up the scent. They were close. Beside her, the man was crying.

'You should have left me.' His voice was child-like. 'It's got to end now.' He looked around, as if trying to find the next train. 'They'll find me,' he whispered.

Ungrateful bastard, Lara thought. She stared behind her. The torchlight moved closer. The men had regrouped. The barking was muffled; the man's scent was masked by the stench of the train.

'Get away,' the man said, looking down on her. Even in this half-light, she could see his eyes were slits, his top lip curled, baring his teeth and his contempt. 'Get away now, before they see you.'

'What?' Lara started.

The man turned, hauling himself from where he had

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fallen. He grabbed her by the wrist. 'Too late.' His voice was forlorn. 'They'll find you too, come on.'

Lara was stunned. That morning she had planned to get away, laying a false trail. Did it matter if she went by train or by bus? Wherever the man was going was just as anonymous as anywhere she had planned. 'My bag,' she gestured feebly.

'No time.' He pulled her with him, dragged her. She stumbled. He glanced at his watch. Now they were running along the sleepers, towards the station.

'Platform two; train to Birmingham,' he said. 'Which is it? Left or right?'

'Right,' Lara said. She peered over her shoulder. She felt that if the torches swung in the right direction the beams would burn her, like a vampire in sunlight.

She blinked in the bright station lights. The man lifted her on to the platform. She started to run as he pulled himself up behind her. A momentary strand of reason threaded in her brain. The men following him were probably police. This man could be a criminal. If she was caught, she'd either be considered an accomplice, or fined for trespassing on the train tracks. No good turn goes unpunished.

She wanted to get away, but the man had caught up with her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. His grip was firm and strong. Uncomfortable. She wouldn't be able to pull away, even if she wanted to.

The tannoy crackled: *The train now approaching platform two is for Birmingham New Street.*

The train came to a halt. The few people on the platform

stepped forward. Lara and the man became part of the crowd, swept towards open doors.

She looked behind her again. The lights of the station muted the torches. ‘Come on,’ he said, shoving her into the carriage. There was a kind of forlorn anger in his voice. He almost pushed her into a seat a few places up from the door. ‘Turn away from the window,’ he snapped, sitting down opposite her. ‘Don’t let them see you.’

The train was hot. Sitting down, she realised perspiration was dribbling down her cheek. Her lungs were burning and her heart pounding. While the adrenaline had been pumping, she had not noticed how tired she was.

She watched him resentfully. He had pulled his collar up. If the other men were the police, then they’d have the authority to search the train, carriage by carriage until they found their quarry.

She was suddenly anxious. ‘Let me go,’ she whispered. ‘This is nothing to do with me. I won’t tell anyone about you.’

He shook his head despondently. There was a hydraulic hiss of closing doors. Lara wondered if any of the men had come on board: how many of them were looking for her, even now? ‘You’re not a prisoner,’ he said. His voice was soft, distant. ‘But the dogs’ll have your scent. They’ll find you.’

‘How? They don’t know me.’

‘They always seem to,’ he said, almost wistfully.

Lara unconsciously touched her face, making sure she

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still had her glasses. The realisation fell upon her. When dawn spread her fingers across the line they would find her holdall, which would have something to identify her. They could trace her to Michael, find out her details.

The train pulled away. Lara peered into the darkness. The man turned her head away from the window with a strong finger under her jaw. In that brief moment, she had seen men ... and perhaps a woman ... some of them were in grey trench coats, looking like First World War officers. Perhaps she had made eye contact with one of them, a stern-looking man with round glasses ...

She sat back, watching the other passengers. Then she stared at the man, perhaps seeing him for the first time. His eyes were closed. His face had changed. The furrowed concern had melted, replaced by a mask of serenity. He was unshaven, but he had an angular face, noble and refined, with the ruggedness of an actor. His hair was swept back. It reached down to his shoulders.

She drew in a breath, but the man opened his eyes and silenced her with a raised finger. His eyes flicked to the other passengers. 'Not here.' He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Lara slumped back, frustrated. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

An uncomfortable few seconds passed before the man opened his eyes – piercing blue – and regarded her. She wondered what else was in there: what pain was searing through his heart?

For a while he remained silent. When he finally spoke, the lines of concern scored his face again and his voice

was filled with sorrow. 'It was almost over. They would have left it ...'

'What?'

The man looked away.

'Don't I deserve an explanation of where we're going?'

'Where *we're* going?' the man said. A wry smile touched his eyes. 'Why do you think *we're* going anywhere?'

Anger flared inside her. 'Damn you! Why are you so enigmatic? Don't I deserve a word of thanks for risking my neck?' Tension locked her shoulder muscles, but curiosity overrode her indignation. 'Don't I at least deserve a name?'

He studied her for a moment and then whispered: 'Will.'

She shot him a caustic smile. 'That's a start. I'm Lara ...' Her teeth clamped when she realised she didn't want to give her married name. That part of her life was over. 'Halpin,' she added.

Will nodded. He offered no more information and asked nothing.

'Where are we going?' Lara pressed.

Again, the painful silence as Will thought through his answer. 'Away from here. Does it matter?' He saw the agitation in her eyes. 'To Birmingham for now. After that ...?' He mouthed something, almost inaudible. 'Where would you go?'

The train slowed and pulled into the next station. A man sitting across the aisle got up and left. Will watched him apprehensively. He waited until the man had gone and then fixed his gaze back on Lara. She shifted

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uncomfortably, trying to read his expression. She tried to speak, but no words came out. Instead she just shook her head. When the train pulled away, he spoke again.

‘What about you?’ he wondered. ‘You’re running, just like me. But you’re not focused. Regrets already? Or did you just want to get out of Stamford and make it up from there?’

Lara tried not to recoil under his sarcasm, she couldn’t meet his gaze. Was she so easy to read? Although she’d thought about Michael, she still couldn’t grasp that she was away from him. Not free, but away. And then there was the whirlpool of emotions. She had expected to grieve for the passing of a relationship, but there were no tears left inside.

‘You do have regrets,’ Will said. Something danced behind his eyes.

Lara shook her head. ‘Memories, some good, some bad. A few realisations, nothing else.’ She stood up. ‘Excuse me.’

He placed a hand on her arm. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To the loo,’ she said bitterly. ‘That’s all right, isn’t it?’

His shoulders slumped. He closed his eyes again, not willing to be drawn.

She made a shaky path along the train, away from him.

There was solace in her brief isolation. The small cubical reeked of bleach. She quickly checked her pockets: money that was the important thing, and her passport – she had both of them.

She wiped the seat and flushed the lavatory before sitting down. Sitting there, she focused her mind away

from the problems taunting her. In the relative stillness she realised for the first time that she was on a train, away from Stamford.

She was free.

It was impossible to truly believe it. She'd lived so long with the chains of marriage strangling her. She wondered if she had ever been in love with him, or whether it was the *idea* of being in love that had seduced her.

She tried to tell herself everything would have been all right if Julia had lived. Julia, the daughter that never was, the child strangled by her own umbilical cord as she struggled her way into life. When Lara had fallen pregnant, she'd hoped a new focus would unite the pair of them.

Tears brimmed, then spilled. She always cried when she thought of Julia. She cried for her own loss and the love she would have been able to give. But also because it would have been unfair to bring a child into a relationship like theirs. Although she'd hoped Michael would have mellowed with fatherhood, the more she thought about it, the less likely it seemed.

He'd not been present at the birth; not been with her when she'd discovered Julia had died. When he eventually saw her, he had sat glaring at her, his silent brooding making her feel that Julia's death had been her fault.

That had been eighteen months ago. While she recuperated, she'd endured his snipes about how lazy she was, her body became numb to the emotional pain he inflicted. Then, largely to get away from him, but also

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to subsidise his evening drinking, she took a part-time secretarial job. It was boring, repetitive work and she was nowhere close to achieving her potential, but Michael was insistent that she was at home when he returned; he barely gave her any freedom.

No more, she told herself. I'm free.

But would Michael ever let her be totally free? Would he find her and drag her back by the hair? Would he tell the authorities she'd stolen something? She smiled inwardly. All she had taken were the clothes in which she sat and a small amount of money, a nest egg she had protected from Michael's drinking; the secretarial job had provided her with only a small amount to get away.

She washed her face, hoping her rheumy eyes and tear streaks would fade. She couldn't stay around this 'Will' character, whoever he was: whatever his misdemeanours, he was clearly suicidal.

At the same time, she wanted to help him. Perhaps that would be the first step on the road to redeeming herself?

That's Michael talking again, she realised. Making me feel guilty. Making me feel it's my fault.

Isn't it? a cold voice chided her.

If Will was suicidal, then he was dangerous. He might try again, and maybe not care who he took with him.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, then exhaled slowly. She'd try to get him to talk. That was all. If it didn't work, well, walk away ... fast. But at least Will had a direction, which was more than she had. He was right: she hadn't thought this through. She could follow for a while, at least.

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Steeling herself, she wove her way back along the carriage to where Will was waiting. He nodded an acknowledgement, but did not smile.

‘The conductor came round, so I paid for both of us.’

She sat down. She was tired and hungry. She said nothing. Just like with Michael, all her resolution drained away.

Will’s eyes narrowed. ‘D’you do a lot of this? Wandering around in the early hours? Pulling people away from oncoming trains?’

‘Only as a hobby,’ Lara said acidly. “Thanks” would do.’

Will sat back in his seat, saying nothing.

‘Where are we going?’ Lara asked.

‘We?’ Will cocked his head. ‘I’m going to Chester, eventually. You could leave at Birmingham. Go somewhere else? Or go back to wherever you came from.’

Her heart dropped. ‘Chester,’ she repeated uneasily. ‘Why?’

‘Because it’s there.’ His eyes had started to crinkle. It was the first sign of happiness she had seen in him. ‘History, architecture. And shops. You’ll need new clothes. Is there a problem with Chester?’

‘Only the ghosts.’

‘No such thing as ghosts,’ Will said sharply. He stared out of the window. ‘Birmingham International,’ he said. ‘New Street soon.’

Passengers collected bags and coats. Lara sat still, waiting for Will to speak. He chose not to. His eyes

flicked from buildings to roads. When the train slid to a halt, he waited for the other passengers to disembark before nodding to the door.

She followed him, away from the platform, up the stairs, through the ticket barrier and into the main foyer, packed with morning commuters. The smells from the multiple eateries crashed against her senses.

Will glanced over his shoulder as he passed underneath the displays announcing the arrivals and departures. While he scanned them, she watched a huge screen broadcasting Sky News, half expecting the lead story to be that she had left.

‘Ninety minutes until the train,’ he said, breaking her thoughts. ‘Change at Crewe.’ She was about to speak, but he was already hurrying away like a frightened mouse. He joined a short queue.

Chester, Lara thought. If I'd left home, would I go back to where I'd lived before? Wouldn't that be the first place Michael would look for me?

Was she focusing too much on Michael? The way he had treated her: not love, not even affection. He needed a servant, not a wife. Surely, he'd see there was nothing worth salvaging in the relationship and let her go. She closed her eyes. A part of her was scared – very scared – that he'd chase her to the ends of the earth, not satisfied until she was back in his possession.

When Will opened his wallet, Lara saw it was bulging with banknotes. Evidently he believed he'd take it with him when he crossed over to the other side, or maybe the ferryman of the river Styx didn't accept credit cards.

‘Hour and a half,’ Will said, looking at his watch. He peered around apprehensively. ‘Birmingham’s changed a lot since I was last here.’ He pointed to a pub on the concourse. ‘You ought to get some breakfast. You look like you’ll fall down any minute.’

He led her away from the growing crush of commuters and the harsh station lights to the subdued lighting of the pub. He strode confidently into the wide bar room: the bar was in the middle of the room. The young barman was well dressed. This was the kind of place where businessmen would have their lunches. ‘Full English breakfast and a couple of cups of coffee,’ he said.

The coffee was poured. Will carried it to a table at the side of the room. Lara sipped gratefully. The coffee provided a link with reality, a tangible moment which forced the morning’s events into the dawn’s fog. Perhaps she’d wake up and discover it was all a dream. When she woke would she find herself still in Stamford?

‘Do you have a mobile?’ Will asked.

Lara instinctively tapped a pocket, then shook her head. She’d deliberately left it at home.

‘Good,’ Will said. ‘They’d trace you with a mobile.’ He glanced up. The barman arrived with her breakfast. Lara’s head reeled. The smells were overwhelming. She had not realised how hungry she was. She devoured it quickly, looking up at Will occasionally. He sat back in his seat, eyes closed. Marks of consternation etched their way into his face.

‘All right,’ she said when there was nothing else to eat.

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Her voice was quiet and calm, ‘Will you tell me what’s going on?’ He said nothing. ‘Surely nothing’s so bad you have to end it all?’

He didn’t look at her. His eyes were vacant. He stared at his cup as if the grouts of his coffee would yield answers to unspoken questions. ‘You’d never believe it.’

‘Those men,’ she said. ‘Why were they looking for you?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘We have time,’ Lara said, but her eyes flicked nervously to the door. Part of her expected it to burst open. She shuddered, realising she was adopting his paranoia. Her gaze returned to Will and her eyes narrowed. ‘Look, I’m not prying. There’s a fine line between concern and intrusion, but nothing’s worth giving up absolutely. Surely?’ That was a lie and she knew it. If nothing was worth giving up then why was she here and not with Michael? *Only words*. She was telling him what she needed to hear; offering platitudes, hoping to make her own pain better. ‘Will,’ she whispered. ‘Please; you don’t have to tell me anything, but maybe we can rake through the ashes of your troubles and find something worth salvaging.’ She wanted to reach out, place her hand over his, but felt the intimacy of touch might bring reality to what might still be a dream.

For the first time, he looked up at her with a penetrating stare. There was a depth to those eyes suggesting an “old soul”. Lara wondered if he had truly noticed her since they had met. She smiled gently, a

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comforting, sympathetic smile, rather than trying to make him feel like a lost puppy.

‘Lara,’ he said, nodding. His acknowledgement implied everything was all right. His jaw clenched. ‘You look like her ... a bit.’

She did not ask whom he meant – his lost love, she guessed. She felt a sting of guilt. Was this what Michael was going through at the moment?

‘She left, is that what happened?’

‘Leaving wasn’t the problem.’ Will shook his head. ‘It was when she came back.’