



CARTOGRAPH

A short story by

CHRISTOPHER MARCATILI

Review:

...one extraordinary feat of imagination and narration by Christopher Marcatili who creates in *Cartograph* a frightening world that is at once alien and familiar...

— *Sydney Morning Herald*

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It were a sleeting evening when I arrived at Alabastor town. A little man calling hisself Moby ferried me in on his skiff from the city. It weren't a long trip, an hour southbound along the rugged coast. Alabastor were still mostly a fishing village and the seashore there were known to be mostly tailing silt and rocks; sometimes broad and shallow, others steep and narrow. The only thing the town were known for were having remained remarkably stable for at least one half century. I landed my polished boot in mud alighting from the boat, called by Moby the Henrietta. I were a far cry from my city.

Where it can be avoided I'd not normally venture further out of home than my beloved haunt, Bella Berty's. But a 'matter of emergency,' it were. The local landowner, one Baron Evercliffe, had called it in. Evercliffe, his barony all of six and one half miles squared, were a well known rum-runner and muscle man. In my line, you deal with all sorts. Asking Mister Moby if he might show me the way, he only shrugged and explained he weren't welcome ashore no more.

So I trudged my way through the sleet and found meself on a cobbled street. In those parts, the motorcar is still a work of wizardry. But darker arts are common, where the neon glitz of the city don't reach. Mostly my offices— Hawkum , Kale & Dunn—do urban jobs and as Junior Study Cartographer I had not then been called out of the city on work. But as the Baron were a personal friend of Mister Kale, I were sent out to be made sodden with just a coat and a leather satchel to protect meself.

Alabastor were set upon a small but steep hill beside its woeful trough they called a harbour. All the way atop the hill were the Marchin' Toad, where Mister Kale's secretary had put me in for the night. She had wrote ahead; Alabastor had yet to lay cables. I wondered why the locals paid tidings to the Baron at all.

The town were a mire of streets and bends and after only a few minutes I found meself figuring my path as only a cartographer may. Given the weather, I thought it best not to expose the most recent cartographs, given me by Mister Kale who had drawn them hisself some five years earlier. But we cartographers know to care for the product of our labour. First job is to get bearings, typically from up high. So up went I, which as it turned out took me direct to the Toad.

My lodgings were an unusual place. Men clustered sombre in one corner, talking of shifts to the land like changing weather patterns. Where went one path, where goes the new? Which mountain were there ten years ago and which weren't? Folk knowledge, not like the rigours of my trade. On the other side were the ladies, laughing loudly at bawdy tales they told each other. In the centre, under a glowing lamp were a fiddler lady. Her body were still, yet her arms moved faster than I could see. And aside her, a boy of eight or nine, chanting wordless ditties. Whether he had forgot the lyrics or if they came with none, I'd not hazard a guess. But the scene were a world away from the jazz bands of dear Bertys.

I took to my lodgings gladly, making space before the fire for my boots, coat, and battered satchel. Barely had I enough time to settle in when a girl rapped at my door.

'Mister Trunk, is it?' Asked the girl. I said it were. 'There's a room out back, and a man to see you.'

It's not my preferred method, working without a meal, but higher powers than meself were at work. Namely, Mister Kale's dear friend the Baron.

Quickly then, I made my way along. On entering the back room I showed a bow, 'Your Baronship,' I said. Cartography always were a venerable posting in the city but even I have my humbleness. And out there it seemed necessary; of humbleness the Baron had none.

'It's about bloody time,' he snapped, without even offering me the seat before him. The room were simple, probably set aside for all sorts of clandestinely deeds. A darkened window, a single table. A rather stout looking brute in one corner.

'My most humble and sincere apologies,' no word would go back to Mister Kale that I'd shown lip. 'I arrived as fast as the Henrietta might carry me. She's a small vessel, and I rather heavy cargo.'

In truth, I were a scrawny lad and I saw the Baron appraise me, finding my visage perhaps unfit to the task. But there I were, trusted by Mister Kale. To be fair, I thought not much of his person, neither. A very large

man, with folding jowls and in a permanent sweat. Judging by the flush of his cheeks, I dare say he did less running with his rum than drinking.

'We must go to the foothills tonight,' implored Evercliffe. 6

Frowning, I informed the Baron that I knew of no foothills within his Barony.

'That's because they did not exist until yesterday,' the man had a way of growling as others would speak.

'My Lord Baronship,' I explained patiently, for not all know my craft, 'night time is the worst to venture out. I've not met your trickster personally, but I dare say he or she prefers the darker hours for their workings. While you would be quite safe from direct harm, I'm afraid no such rule applies to meself. As well, with the sleet, darkness and the unfamiliar land, there's no law against you slipping and doing yesself a bother.'

'My son,' shouted the Baron while marking his point by slamming a hammy fist to the poor table before him. 'It is entirely in contravention of the Wilcott Accord. I own the land, for godsakes.'

Perplexed, I took it upon meself to claim the chair Evercliffe had not offered. Satchel on my lap, I unclasped and drew out the map. With deliberate caution I laid it out for the both of us to witness, for Mister Kale had entrusted it to me. My satchel held a number of tools no cartographer can do without. A pencil is one, and this I also laid on the table.

'Please,' I said with my most placating temperament, 'mark here where the error lies. I shall go to make my measurements at first light, rain or otherwise. I'm afraid Mister Kale would be most displeased with me if I made an unauthorised visitation to your trickster without his express permission.'

With much show of reluctance, he agreed and after marking the map I were dismissed for the evening.

When I saw the boy, I were most surprised. The Baron Evercliffe were there with a number of attendees. The grounds to the north-nor'west of his paltry Barony had indeed shifted quite remarkably and I saw something that day the likes I've not known since.

The boy were actually all of twenty years and thus older than I were at that time. By all accounts, he had grown up coddled. He'd been along the cliffs that marked the northern boundary of the Barony. According to my map, there were a path up to the cliff top, and there the boy may have sat when the local trickster espied him. How these creatures have divvied up their territories I - nor any man - shall ever be sure. I do know they range far and pay little heed to property divisions devised by civilisation. But the

Wilcott Accord were the closest any came to a peaceable arrangement with the beasts written some four hundred years before. This case were most certainly an issue of contravention.

The trickster, it seemed, had shifted the grounds beneath the boy's very posterior; cliffs had been levelled out. All that were left of the boy were his aforementioned posterior and two dangling legs sprouting out the dirt, surrounded by a scrub of dry grass and some rather pretty wild flowers.

My first thought were that it were unfortunate the wretched boy trusted too well the claim of his surname.

Given his position I asked: 'How can you be sure it's the heir-apparent?'

The question were not well-met by his Baronship, so I asked another. 'I take it none have thought to dig the poor boy out?'

The rain had cleared overnight and as they set about finding a shovel I began a march of length of the foothills. In honour of the boy's death, I thought they ought to officially be named the Foot Hills, but this also seemed in poor taste and Mister Kale were never keen on punning. So instead I pencilled down the name the Jorge View Range, in light of poor Jorge Evercliffe's last moments.

When they had the boy out, the most remarkable thing. It had only been two nights since his regrettable passing. Yet, already, his eye sockets were empty as a light globe – filament burnt out. Nothing there but horrid blackness. Worms, proffered one man. The fiendish appetites of the tricksters, another said. Evercliffe the elder wailed in horror, 'My boy,' and staggered toward the town.

I left the grievors and diggers to their lot and marked new routes made. There is an art to good cartographic work. We rarely use the stars, but an acute sense of distance, space and detail are all quite important. We do have a monthly produced table listing the current position of important landmarks against which we can get bearings. And we have other tools: my compass, my graphed paper, my string, my pencil. My quadrant were strung to my belt, and in those days my spring-fold measuring stick were still spritely.

But one must also measure that which is not geographic, and so few have a sense of it. What we call the shift lines, which allow the tricksters to 'scape the lands, are more of a metaphysics. I'm no mystic, but how does one describe the headiness of a fine spirit to a child that's never drunk? The shift of vision, of sounds and smells. Them tricksters work in a way none truly understand; shifting the earth, changing the coast, flattening the ranges.

Even man-built structures tremble before the shift of a trickster. And all for what?

Rumour states that the tricksters change the lands to disorient innocent travellers and render them susceptible to whatever wants the beasts have. Folk stories, of course, but some say they consume souls to live forever. Or that they take advantage of women and men to birth their race of horrid creatures.

My theory then were as follows: the tricksters are just creatures as are you and I. Beasts of earth, you may say. Only, they were here first and understand its patterns and graces in ways to which we are blinded. For all my training, the shine of the lights of the city I love makes it difficult to truly see the world behind. Our mistake – the error of the city and the people – is to work against the lands. The tricksters, they work with it. We swim against the tide, build bulwarks to ease its rush. Tricksters swim under currents, leading them where they wish. We cartographers are a little of both minds. Squinting past the light, we try to see what the tricksters see by night.

It were musings such as these ambling through my mind as I stumbled upon the beast himself. Not the first trickster I had laid eyes upon and assuredly not to be the final. Unlike the city tricksters, those in the country evidently did not bother civility – this one were as naked as the unholy day of his birth. He were perched high up in a tree, legs dangling like a child's.

'You've hit trouble,' I warned him, amicably I hoped. As beasts, tricksters are typically small-framed and quick, yet this one sat languorously. He were entirely at ease with my intrusion. His horns were smaller than most and his skin seemed more supple; perhaps he were younger.

'Come about the lad?' Though their voices were normally high and effeminate, his were deeper and more enunciated.

'In a manner,' I dallied, unsure, thinking not to confront but not to scamper, either. 'I just do the cartography. But, it's a matter of the Accord. I'll have to include that in my report.'

'Who are you here for?' The trickster shone me his teeth.

'I'm with Hawkum, Kale & Dunn. I'm Junior Study Cartographer with Mister Kale.'

Sagely, the trickster nodded. 'I remember Kale. Come about five years ago. I suppose he'd not had much use coming himself the last few years.' The trickster put hands to knees, 'Very well. If it's regarding the Accord I shall need to notify my solicitor. All correspondence shall be through her. Save you lot the trouble of trekking through.'

'And who is your solicitor? For my report.' I had pencil at the ready.

'Ms. Alicia Bell. She does a lot of this sort of work. Of course, we will challenge the claim of breach.'

I could not help but wonder aloud: 'You've caused the death of the son of the Baron Evercliffé. Breach of the second chapter of the Accord.' I roughly – and poorly – paraphrased it on the day and represent it here condensed:

Section 2 – 5.5a – 1 and 2: Hereafter, whereby all parties referred herein are title-holders, authorised squatsfolk and pilgrims of the Holy Church, as defined in Section 1 – 3.1, or any immediate descendent of any party referred to herein as above, shall move and live freely through any space defined through their holdings, demarked hovels or recognised Holy Paths as appropriate, without fear of interruption from any of the Trickster Folk or any dealings and shiftings attributable to aforementioned Folk where interruptions are here defined as inconveniences, annoyances, grievances, events leading to harm, both minor and grave, events stalling or otherwise impeding the ordinary business of the aggrieved party, events leading to damage to the property and/or rights of the aggrieved party, and events leading to incapacitation or death.

On quoting to the trickster this most important passage of the Accord, he were entirely unperturbed.

'I leave that to my solicitor, friend,' he assured me. 'But you'll find I'm quite right in my confidence. A trickster makes no mistakes.'

If that were so, there'd be no need of a solicitor. But worried that he might be right, I bid him good afternoon and set about finishing my works.

On returning to my lodgings, I informed the publican I might stay another evening. I then quickly scrawled a note for Mister Kale.

Mr. K,

Find Alabastor has its charms. See why you've not returned. Case of J. Evercliffé most peculiar, may be contravention - Section 2, 5.5. Copies of preliminary notes herein. Met local trick- unexpectedly. Solicitor: Alicia Bell. He were quite confident of his case. Taking another day for review. Best, AT.

Mister Kale values brevity above all things. I retired for the evening, taking with me my satchel and notes.

It is a little known fact in the mainstream that part of the role of a cartographer is to trace the behaviours of the trickster folk, so as to better

understand their shiftings. Much like a zookeeper observes the happenings in the monkey pen, it is down to us to pay attention.

It were with this in mind that I took to visit the home of Baron Evercliffe and his grieving wife Irena. It were the highest house about, and it were under the guise of a geographic study that I requested to perch meself atop their viewing tower. From there, I could see the haze of my beloved city by day and imagined that by night it would glow in white, pink, orange and blue. To the nor'west, the flattened Jorge View Ranges. I made sketches of the city, mostly still accurately recorded by my senior, Mister Kale. But this were all pretence, for I had in mind something altogether different.

I found Baroness Irena Evercliffe in the parlour with a lady-friend from the city, listening to the 'phone. I didn't recognise the performance playing, but the sound of jazz were a balm to my waning patience with small-town life. After some minutes of chatter, the Baroness were kind enough to speak alone with me.

'My lady,' I said humbly, 'I might ask a question or two, which may at first sound an offence. I must stress that I am here in performance of my duties as cartographer, and that all mentioned between us would be kept in professional confidence.' I then proceeded to explain to her what I had witnessed the day before, regarding the tragic death of Jorge.

'My poor son,' she wept. 'He loved those cliffs. He loved the hills and the slope of the plane down to the shore. The curve of the ocean, nuzzled against the land.' It were beyond my mind how any could romanticise such an ugly patch of dirt. 'Now it has claimed him,' she spoke these last words bitterly.

'You see,' I explained, bringing her back to the point, 'as I understand it, the deed of this Barony is in your husband's name. Killing the child of a Baron would be deemed a clear and direct contravention of the Accord.'

I noticed then her face set darker, but she said nothing yet.

'Given the trickster is set to take this to litigious dispute, I felt it best I approach you directly at the first opportunity. Better these matters are resolved with discretion than in the publicity of the courtroom.' I neglected to add that I would be reprimanded most severely by Mister Kale should I return to the office with a problem half-solved. Better I find a solution to suit him and his dear friends, the Evercliffes.

'What is it you're implying, Mister Trunk?'

'Naught, but you see, there are likely to be many logical ways the trickster could have caused such a horrible act and not contravene the Accord, as he claims is the case.'

Her eyes narrowed. She had such remarkable grey eyes, colour of slate. Colour of deep clay. And under that gaze even my stalwart resolve softened. 'Such as?'

I cleared my throat. 'Say, for just one of many examples, young Jorge Evercliffe were son to another, and not the Baron' I cleared it again. 'This is just the sort of thing a trickster is often privy to.'

Baroness Evercliffe set her opinion of my profession clear: 'It seems to me cartographers do better work in the out of doors,' and promptly showed me the exit.

So I plied my trade less directly, seeking out the whispers of widows and the rumours of the rheumatic. But no one seemed to think that the Baroness might have had a secret liaison, perhaps on a visit to the city.

A frightful suspicion occurred to me then: Perhaps my Mister Kale's interest in the case were not because it were requested by Evercliffe the rum-runner. Perhaps the distance he had maintained were not a dislike for Alabastor. Perhaps it were a need to maintain a distance from the case in order to keep appearances. Perhaps it were a favour to Lady Evercliffe, and an interest in the fate of his own son.

This thought worried me, for no sooner had it occurred than I assured meself it were correct. I do not like to let the tides of my intuition pull me here and there. But once had, the thought could not be got rid of.

I could not very well go to Mister Kale with this 'discovery' and hope to advance my career. Better I go with nothing. Yet I could not help meself. I set out to confront the beast, knowing he had an answer and hoping he might give it. I found him in the late afternoon, bathing in a new-formed pool. Irritated, I retrieved my notes and made the addition.

'Come to join?' asked the sly beast.

'Just information, thank you,' I replied.

'It is a dangerous thing, asking a trickster for a favour.' He teased me, and

I were irritated further.

'We needn't go to court. A few little words from you, and I'll have my report.' The trickster listened, so I continued. Against a trickster wordplay would do me no favours. I took a direct approach. 'The father of the boy. Were it the Baron?'

'It was.'

This bland admission had removed of me my steam and assurance. I were truly perplexed. And there, as the trickster sat in the pool and bathed, I could swear I saw the thickness of his horns growing, the hardness of his skin setting. It were him, aging before my eyes, becoming more a trickster by the moment.

Grinning, he watched my confusion, my curiosity. 'The trickster folk,' he told me, 'are no more timeless than anything else in this world.' As if to demonstrate, he rapped a knuckle on his setting skin, 'We grow, and we die like plants and towns.'

In all my readings of the trickster folk, I'd never once heard of such an admission. Being that they were known for trickery, I decided he were trying to fool me.

'In dying, we bring an unbalance to the world. As there has been an unbalance here, in Alabastor, these past five years.'

I admit I were puzzled, and implored the beast to explain hisself further. 'Balance to what? Push away the world of men and claim the coast to yesself?'

The trickster bowed his head, then looked upon me for the first time with remarkable, familiar eyes. Eyes of deep clay. 'Giving back to the world what life is taken from it. Rejecting the stillness of people, and embracing the wildness of the world around. Giving movement to the shifts of nature. This is a world of more than men, Mister Trunk, and I chose to join it.'

Staggered, I found I could make no words. I admit I fled, fearful of what he might say next. Somehow – I could not then figure how – the boy had given hisself to the world. So much and yet so little had been left behind.

Deciding I were finished with the whole affair, I returned to the Marching Toad to retrieve my coat. When I arrived, there were already awaiting me a return letter from Mister Kale.

Trunk,

Interesting notes. Town not much changed – until now. Return back presently. Also, Alicia Bell. Selfsame solicitor as to the family Evercliffe? Cruel humour, these tricksters. K.

Perhaps it were a cruel joke played on the Baron after all. His own son, finding a way to reject the very world his father did represent. Becoming a plague to the man's shores, to the running of his rum. Moving with the tides, instead of against them. Reminding us that our markings and

divisions on the world are only ever temporary. As is our stay here, until we, too, return to the earth.

Much more spans beyond the light of my city. I knew it then, as I do now. But on that late afternoon I were pleased to see the Henrietta arrive, unwelcomed by all but meself, to whisk me up along coast. I took time for a change of clothes, to wash off the dust of Alabastor, so to speak, before making my way to Bella Berty's for a drink.



