

## THE TRACE OF HIM

Christopher Priest

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Chris began writing soon after leaving school and has been a full-time freelance writer since 1968. He has published eleven novels, three short-story collections and a number of other books, including critical works, biographies, novelizations and children's non-fiction. His most recent novel *The Separation* won both the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the BSFA Award. In 1996 he won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his novel *The Prestige* (filmed in 2006). His latest projects are a book about the making of *The Prestige*, and a collection of short stories. Another collection, a revised version of *The Dream Archipelago* (to include 'The Trace of Him' and another previously uncollected story) is in preparation. More info on [christopher-priest.co.uk](http://christopher-priest.co.uk)

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The study was lodged high beneath the eaves of the house, and it was imbued with traces of him. It had not changed much in the twenty years since she was last there—it was more untidy, a mess of papers and books, standing on, lying beside, heaped below the two tables and a desk. It was almost impossible to walk across the floor without stepping on his work. The room was otherwise much as she remembered it. The window was still uncurtained, the walls unseeable behind the crowded bookcases. His narrow divan bed stood in one corner, now bare of everything except the mattress, although she had never forgotten the tangle of blankets she had left behind when she was here before.

The intimacy of the room was a shock to her. For so long his study had been a memory, a hidden joyful secret, but now it had become tragic, bereft of him. She could detect the scent of his clothes, his books, his leather document case, the old frayed carpet. His presence could be felt in every darkened corner, in the two squares of bright sunlight on the floor, in the dust on the bookshelves and on the volumes that stood there in untidy leaning lines, in the sticky ochre grime on the window panes, the yellowed papers, the dried careless spills of ink.

She gulped in the air he had breathed, paralysed by sudden grief. It

was incomprehensibly more intense than the shock she had felt on receiving the news of his illness, his imminent death. She knew she was rocking to and fro, her back muscles rigid beneath the stiff fabric of her black dress. She was dazed by the loss of him.

Trying to break out of the grief she went to his oaken lectern, where he had always stood to write, his tall shape leaning in an idiosyncratic way as his right hand scraped the pen across the sheets of his writing pad. There was a famous portrait of him in that stance—it had been painted before she met him, but it captured the essence of him so well that she had later bought a small reproduction of it.

Where his left hand habitually rested on the side, the invariable black-papered cheroot smouldering between his curled knuckles, was a darker patch, a stain of old perspiration on the polish. She ran her fingertips across the wooden surface, recalling a particular half-hour of that precious day, when he had turned his back on her while he stood at this lectern, absorbed suddenly by a thought.

That memory of him had haunted her as she set out on her desperate quest to reach him before he died. The family had delayed too long in telling her of the illness, perhaps by choice—a second message she received *en route*, while waiting on an island, had broken the final news to her. She had travelled across a huge segment of the Dream Archipelago with the unchanging mental image of his long back, his inclined head, his intent eyes, the quiet sound of his pen and the tobacco smoke curling around his hair.

Downstairs the mourners were gathering, awaiting the summons to the church.

She had arrived later than most of the others, after four anxious days of hurriedly arranged travel to this island of Piqay. It was so long since she had made the journey across the Archipelago. She had forgotten how many ports of call there were on the way, how many lengthy delays could be caused by other passengers, by the loading and unloading of cargo. At first the islands charmed her again with their variety of colours, terrains and moods. Their names had memories for her from her last journey, all those years ago: Lillen-cay, Ia, Junno, Olldus Precipitus, but they were reminders of breathless anticipation on the voyage out or of quiet thoughts on the journey home, not actual recollections of events or experiences ashore.

The remembered charm soon faded. After the first day on the ship the islands simply seemed to be in her way. The boat sailed slowly across

the calm straits between islands. Sometimes she stood at the rail, watching the arrowing wake spreading out from the sides of the vessel, but it soon came to be an illusion of movement. Whenever she looked up from the white churning wake, whichever island they happened to be passing still seemed to be in exactly the same relative position as before, across the narrows. Only the seabirds moved, soaring and diving around the superstructure, and at the stern, but even they went nowhere that the ship did not.

At the port on Junno she left the ship, trying to see if there was a quicker passage available. After an hour of frustrated enquiries in the harbour offices she returned to the ship on which she had arrived, where the protracted unloading of timber was still going on. The next day, on Muriseay, she managed to find a flight with a private aero club: it was only a short hop by air but it saved visits to the ports of three intervening islands. Afterwards, most of the time she saved had slipped away, while she was forced to wait for the next ferry.

At last she arrived on Piqay, but according to the schedule of funeral arrangements that arrived with the news of his death, there was only an hour to spare. To her surprise, the family had arranged for a car to meet her at the quay. A man in a dark suit stood by the harbour entrance, holding a large white card with her name written in capitals. As the driver steered the car swiftly away from Piqay Port and headed into the shallow hills surrounding the town and its estuary, she felt the commonplace anxieties of travel slipping away, to be replaced at last by the complex of emotions that had been kept at a distance while she fretted on ships.

Now they returned to her in force. Fear of the family she had never met. Apprehension about what they might have been told about her, or what they might not. Worse, what they intended for her now, the lover whose existence might undermine his reputation, were she to become known to the public. The bottomless grief still sucking her down as it had done from the moment she heard the news about his illness, then latterly his death. Defiant pride in the past. The untouchable sense of loneliness, of being left only with memories. The hopes, the endless hopes that something might yet live for her. And the confusion about why the family had sent the messages to her. Were they motivated by concern for her, by spite at her, or by just the dutiful acts of a bereaved family? Or perhaps, and this was what she clasped to herself, he had remembered her and had made the request himself?

But above all these, that endless grief, the loss, the feeling of final abandonment. Those twenty years without him, holding on to an

inexpressible hope, and now the rest of the years to come, finally, absolutely without him.

The driver said nothing. He drove efficiently. After her four days aboard ships, with engines and generators constantly running, the bulkheads vibrating, the car's engine felt smooth and almost silent. She looked out of the dark-tinted window by her side, staring at the vineyards as the car speeded along the lanes, glancing at the pastures, at the rocky defiles in the distance, at the patches of bare sandy soil by the roadside. She must have seen these the last time, but she had no memory of them. That visit was a blur of impressions, but at the centre were the few hours she had spent alone with him, brilliant and clear, defined forever.

She thought only of him, that time. That one time.

Then, the house. A huge crowd at the gates, pushing aside to make a way for her car. People stared curiously. One woman waved, leaning forward to try to see her. The gates opened to an electronic signal from the dashboard of the car. They closed behind, as the car moved at a more stately pace up the drive. Mature trees in the park, mountains behind, glimpses of the cerulean sea and dark islands, far away. Her eyes remained dry, but she found it painful to look around at a view she had once thought she would never forget.

On arrival she stood silently with the other mourners, knowing no one, feeling their silent disdain. Her suitcase stood on the floor outside the room. She moved away from the cluster of people and went to an inner door, from which she could see across the main hall towards the wide staircase.

An elderly man detached himself from the group and followed her. He glanced up the stairs.

"We know who you are, of course," he said, his voice unsteady. His eyelids fluttered with apparent distaste, and he never looked directly at her. She was struck by a facial similarity. Surely not old enough to be his father? There was a brother, probably the right sort of age, but he had said they were alienated. Years ago. "He left clear instructions for us to pass on to you," the man said. "You are free go up to his room if you wish, but you must not remove anything."

So she had made her escape, went quietly and alone up the staircase to this room beneath the eaves. But now she was trembling.

A faint blue haze remained drifting in the room, a vestige of his life. This room must have been empty for several days, yet the light mist of the air he had breathed remained.

With a sudden flowing of renewed unhappiness, she remembered the only time she had lain with him, curled up naked on the bed beside him, glowing with excitement and contentment, while he sucked in the acrid smoke of the cheroots and exhaled it in a thin swirling cone of blueness. That was the same bed, the one in the corner, the narrow cot with the bare mattress. She dared not go near it now.

Five of the cheroots, probably the last ones he ever bought, lay in an untidy scrambled pile on a corner of one of the tables. There was no sign of a packet. She picked one up, slid it beneath her nostrils, sensing the fragrance of the tobacco and thinking about the time she had shared one with him, relishing the dampness of his saliva transferred to her lips. A delirious exhilaration moved through her, and for a moment her eyes lost focus on the details of the room.

He had never travelled away from the island during his lifetime, even after the prizes and honours began to be bestowed. While she lay naked in his arms, exulting inwardly over the touch of his fingers as they rested on her breast, he tried to explain his attachment to Piqay, why he could never leave to be with her. It was an island of traces, he said, shadows that followed you, a psychic spoor that you left behind if you departed the island, but if you did you would become diffuse in some way that he could not explain. He would never be able to return, he said. He dared not try, because to do so might mean he would lose the trace that defined him to Piqay. For him, the urgency to leave was less powerful than the urgency of staying. She, feeling a different and less mystical urge, quietened him by caressing him, and soon they were making love again.

She would never forget that one day they had spent alone together, but afterwards, in the years of silence that followed, she had never been sure if he even remembered her.

Too late she had had the answer, when the messages arrived. Twenty years, four days.

She heard large cars moving slowly on the gravel drive outside the house, and one by one their engines cut out.

The blue haze was thicker now. She turned away from the lectern, aroused by her memories, but despairing because memories were all they

could ever be. As she looked away from the dazzle of the window it seemed to her that the blue air was denser in the centre of the room. It had substance, texture.

She moved her face towards it, her lips puckering. The haze swirled about her, and she darted her face to and fro, trying to detect some response from it. Streaks in the old residue of smoke, denser patches, coalesced before her eyes. She stepped back to see them better, then forward again to press her face against them. Smoke stung against her eyes, and tears welled up.

The swirls took shape before her, making a ghostly impression of his face. It was the face as she remembered it from two decades before, not the one the public knew, the famous grizzled countenance of the great man. No time had passed for her, nor for the trace he had left. There were no features painted in the smoke, just the shape of his head and face moulded in the blue, like a mask, but intimately detailed. Lips, hair, eyes, all had their shapes, contoured by the smoke.

Her breath halted momentarily. Panic and adoration seized her.

His head was tilted slightly to one side, his eyes were half closed, his lips were apart. She leaned forward to take her kiss, felt the light pressure of the smoky lips, the brush of ghostly eyelashes. It lasted only an instant.

His face, his mask, contorted in the air, jolting back and away from her. The eye shapes clenched tightly. The mouth opened. The lines of smoke that formed his forehead became furrowed. He jerked his head back again, then lunged in a spasm of deep coughing, rocking backwards and forwards in agony, hacking for breath, painfully trying to clear whatever obstructed him below.

A spray of bright redness burst out from the shape that was his open mouth, droplets of scarlet smoke, a fine aerosol. She stepped back to avoid it, and the kiss was lost forever.

The apparition was wheezing, making dry hacking coughs, small ones now, weak and unhoping, the end of the attack. He was staring straight at her, terrified, full of pain and unspeakable loss, but already the smoke was untangling, dispersing.

The red droplets had fallen to the floor and formed a pool on one of his discarded sheets of paper. She knelt down to look more closely, and trailed her fingertips through the sticky mess. When she stood again, her

fingers carried a smear of the blood, but now the air in the study had cleared. The blue haze had gone at last. The final traces of him had vanished. The dust, the sunlight, the books, the dark corners remained.

She fled.

Downstairs she stood once again with the others, waiting in the great hall to be allocated to one of the cars. Until her name was spoken by one of the undertaker's staff, no one acted as if they knew who she was or acknowledged her in any way. Even the man who had spoken to her stood with his back against her. The family and the other mourners spoke quietly to each other, clearly daunted by the seriousness of the occasion, by the thought of the crowds waiting in the road at the end of the long drive, by the passing of this man.

She was given a seat in the last of the cars, bringing up the rear of the cortège. She was pressed against the window by the large bodies of two serious and unspeaking adolescents.

In the crowded church she sat alone to one side, steadying herself by staring at the flagstone floor, the ancient wooden pews. She stood for the hymns and prayers but only mouthed the words silently, remembering what he had said were his feelings about churches. The tributes to him were formal, grand, spoken sincerely by illustrious men and women. She listened closely, recognizing nothing of him in their words. He had not sought this renown, this greatness.

In the churchyard on a hill overlooking the sea, standing near the grave, back from the main group of mourners, hearing the words of committal distorted by the breeze, she was again alone. She thought about the first book of his she had ever read, while still at college. Everyone knew his work now, but at that time he was unknown and it had been a personal discovery.

The persistent wind from the islands buffeted against her, pressing her clothes against her body on one side, sending strands of hair across her eyes. She smelt the salt from the sea, the promise of distance, departure, escape from this place.

Members of the public and the cameras of the media were only just visible, kept in the distance beyond a cordon of flowers and a patrol of policemen. In a lull of the wind she heard the familiar words of the committal uttered by the priest, and saw the coffin being lowered into the ground. The sun continued to shine but she could not stop shivering. She

thought only of him, the caress of his fingertips, the light pressure of his lips, his gentle words, his tears when she went away at the end. The long years without him, holding on to everything she knew of him. She barely dared to breathe for fear of expelling him from her thoughts.

She held her hand out of sight beneath the small bag she carried. The blood had congealed on her fingers, cold, an encrustation, eternal, the final trace of him.