
WRIT2050 GENRE NOVEL MANUSCRIPT: DENBIGH

I confirm that this submission is the result of my own research, planning, conceptualising and writing. It is all my own work. I confirm that AI has not been used in any form when writing this creative work.

Denbigh

Prologue

To say that the people of Denbigh thought that nothing ever happened there would not be entirely accurate.

It would, in fact, be entirely wrong.

To say that the people of Denbigh thought that nothing ever happened *anywhere else* would also not be entirely accurate. This was because the people of Denbigh did not know that there *was* anywhere else. Naturally there had to be something beyond its walls, but not once had anyone ever really questioned what. After all, there was only Denbigh.

There is, however, always an exception to the rule. And in this case, there were two.

Chapter One

William Kent sat in a room stacked full of shoes. Black ones, brown ones, blue ones, green ones. But never had William Kent seen a pair of shoes quite like the ones in Callypher's hands. For one thing, he didn't recognise the leather. Its texture appeared to be both scaly and soft—perhaps they were softened from age—and its colour was a greener hue than any leather he knew. Of course, leather could be treated in all manner of ways and—theoretically—with the right combination of dyes, leather could be any colour. But these shoes did not quite look as though they had been dyed. Taking a broader look at the shoes, William decided that the leather must once have been scaly and firm. Yes, that was it. The softness must, he decided, have come about from decades of roaming the streets while declaring fanciful ideas of made-up creatures. Ideas said with such eery conviction that William Kent, unlike anyone else, was almost—*almost*—tempted to believe them. And suddenly, as he remembered the owner of the shoes, William's gaze shot up. He stared

blankly at the lanky man in his doorway. Suddenly he felt like an old pair of shoes discarded to the corner of somebody's room; he could sit, observe, and do nothing else. He became keenly aware of the weight of the shoe in his lap and the stickiness of the black polish on his rag which bled through to his fingertips.

"You are a cobbler, aren't you?" Callypher looked at William expectantly.

"Yes," said William, blinking. This was the first time he had seen Callypher so close.

Much like everyone else, he avoided any interaction with Callypher. But Callypher's eyes were locked onto William's now, reducing him to shoe-in-the-corner state. His wrinkled eyes were fixed on William's and had no remote possibility of moving. It was as though somebody had paralysed his eyes; there was life without motion. William wondered if Callypher was even *capable* of blinking. Not even the strand of white hair falling from his messy bun—a somewhat useless attempt to tame his thick curls—could alter his gaze.

William wished that Callypher would simply turn, grab his greenish brass door handle, twist it, open the dark wooden door, and disappear down Denbigh's cobbled, mucky streets forever. How he had managed to be lucky enough for Denbigh's lunatic to walk through his door William did not know. But, alas, despite the best efforts of William's own stare to will Callypher's disappearance into fruition, he did not go. He waited, and time stood still.

It occurred to William that Callypher was between him and his door. Managing with great effort to tear away from Callypher's gaze, William darted his eyes around his workshop. Between his grimy windows and dim lighting—he had always preferred dim lighting; it was far better for blotting out distractions—no passerby would know of Callypher's invasion. *Ah*, thought William flatly. Another thought occurred to William. He had not actually taken a

proper breath since the door opened, which must have been at least five minutes earlier.

William inhaled deeply. He released the air loudly through his mouth.

To which Callypher replied: “You know, you might be the worst cobbler with the worst customer service from here to Scoville.”

William was rather taken aback. He had never had a customer complain before. Granted he *had* finished his apprenticeship only three years prior, and, admittedly, as with any cobbler his customers were too poor to afford a “proper” shoemaker and so took what they could get. But still, this was quite offensive to his track record.

“I beg your pardon,” William said, pulling himself upright for the first time since Callypher had arrived, “My customer service is *impeccable*. And what is Scoville anyway?”

“A place. Relatively near here, actually, when you consider the extent of the forest beyond it,” Callypher said, still looking down at William, for William was unusually short. *Right*, thought William, *another one of Callypher’s made up places*.

And yet...

He had always wondered. If a wall was a barrier between one thing and another—which was a very good idea when you considered the proximity of the bathroom and the bedroom—then why did Denbigh have such an enormous one running around its perimeter? And Callypher *did* say it with such a definite certainty. His voice was totally even, and his unsettling gaze still didn’t move from William’s for even a moment.

William risked flicking his eyes to the right of Callypher’s head. The grubby silver key to his backdoor hung on a copper hook. Callypher may have been lanky, but there was every chance that he was fast. Well, as no one was here to save him and he couldn’t save himself, he might as well *ask*.

“Is there really a place beyond the walls, Mister Callypher?” William’s voice rose awkwardly.

“There are several.”

“Honest?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” William’s reply was short and flat.

William rolled his tongue across his front teeth. Scoville. Scoville was definitely one of those made-up places. He cast his mind back, trying to remember some other mad ramblings. He’d scurried past Callypher the week before, and when he strained his memory, he could just remember something. It started with s. Scraps. No. Saven. No. Scave. No. Scravens. Yes, that was it. Scravens. He remembered Callypher talking about them. Was it bat-like creatures with scales and leathery skin? He glanced at Callypher’s shoes again. Scaly leather. And if, hypothetically, places beyond Denbigh *did* exist, then, hypothetically, an animal like a Scraven could exist...

It took a while before William asked: “Is that where you came from?”

Again, Callypher was as blunt as his stare was fixed: “Yes.”

“Ah.”

William dropped his rag into the tin of polish by his side, moved his hands to the shoe on his lap, placed it next to the polish, and leant back in his chair. His hands found the cleanest part of his apron, which was barely dirty rather than filthy, and he rubbed his fingertips on it as he let his eyes wander.

“I don’t suppose that’s where your shoes are from?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s where I have to go to get the leather to repair them?”

“Yes.”

Callypher had still not moved an inch. William returned his eyes to Callypher’s gaze. He squirmed. He asked a question but figured he knew the answer.

“Is the leather from a Scraven?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

And then, very quickly, William blurted out another question: “And how do I go beyond Denbigh’s walls?”

Callypher finally moved. But not all of him. Not his legs, arms, or chest. Not his neck, fingers, or feet. Only his *face*. He grinned, his crooked mouth stretching his cheeks to flash his crooked teeth, contorting his face further than any face William had ever seen. It looked as though it should be painful, as though the sheer effort required to twist his features into their current position should have changed them again, pushing them into a screaming grimace.

His eyes went wild: “My dear boy. Haven’t you ever wondered what the great big gate is for?”

“Ah.”

William’s previous wish was fulfilled. Almost. Callypher did not disappear forever. Instead, he turned, grabbed the handle, twisted it, opened the door, and left his shoes behind. Derby boots with thin coils for laces. Green. Scaly. Smelly. Worn.

Well, thought William as he took a mental image of the shoes for later, *today has taken a rather unexpected turn.*

As William strolled idly through the market, almost tripping on the cobbled road a few times, he thought about two things. First, what he should have for dinner that night, and second, how he should go about leaving Denbigh when he knew that there was nothing beyond Denbigh's walls. It was quite the upheaval to his world view, really.

William had, of course, seen the gate before. He seemed to be the only person, other than, perhaps, Callypher, who had properly looked at it. Its thick layer of russet rust virtually fully obscured its ornate iron filigree. Other parts of it were as black as his own rag, covered in decades worth of filth. The two sides of the double gate intertwined like delicate vines, latching onto each other, holding, and never letting go. Or at least they would have been like delicate vines if it weren't for the rust fusing them together. It was the intertwining metal that had first drawn him to it. The skill it must have taken to connect the filigree with such deliberate delicacy reminded him of a cobbler's ability to stitch together two pieces of leather so neatly that they seemed never to have been separate. Callypher had told him that this gate was a way *out*. But it must have been shut for *decades*. And to where? Was it like Denbigh? What would all his neighbours think if he left? What would a passersby think if he opened the gate and disappeared? And anyway, could he *trust* Callypher?

Just as William thought: *I suppose I could just... you know... walk up and open the gate*, a gruff, familiar voice beside him called out. The sandpaper voice had the remarkable ability of cutting through the noise of the market coming from both sellers and buyers.

“Alright t’day, M’ster Kent?” asked William’s favoured butcher: Nine Fingers.

“I’ve had a rather odd day, actually,” said William.

Nine Fingers wiped the blood from his knife and set it aside.

“Now th’n, M’ster Kent, why would that be?”

William paused. Was it wise to tell his butcher—a man with a rather large knife and a habit of wielding it—that Callypher had bowled through his door, presented a pair of shoes, told him that he needed to go beyond Denbigh’s walls, and left. He stopped himself. Perhaps it was, in fact, *unwise* to share such details.

He opted instead for the other thought occupying his mind: “I can’t decide what to have for dinner.”

Nine Fingers stared at him for a moment, his deep brown eyes screwed up tightly. He wiped his hands on his white bloodied apron (aprons covered in the trade’s relevant liquid was a theme in Denbigh) and mopped his brow.

“I s’ppose,” he said, his face screwing up like he’d sucked a particularly sour lemon, “that depends,” with particular emphasis on the ‘de’ in depends, “on wha’ a fella’ such as yerself migh’ *want* to eat.”

Nine Fingers had a lot of talents. He was good with a knife. He was good with selling meat. He was good with babies, actually. But what he was *not* good with was *thinking*. For him to miss the point of what someone said as he had here was not unusual. William sighed.

“I’ll have two lambchops, please.”

“Gladly, M’ster Kent,” Nine Fingers smiled gently as he whipped out a bag and, in a flash, presented William’s dinner.

“Much obliged,” said William as he handed over two silver coins, also stained slightly black with polish.