

# melancholia



mike dickson

## DEDICATION

“What sport are we thinking of today then, Will?”

“Cricket I think, don’t you?”

“Oh not me. What do you like about that terrible sport?”

“The sun. The pock-puck of the ball on the bat. The cry of the stumps on the bales. Sandwiches and tea. And a life together on the village green.”

“Sounds perfect. Pity that you never played.”

“We can’t have everything, can we?”

--ooOOoo--

- It's falling in I'm worried about.
- No, no. I like your overall design, Mr Coote.
- Oh, thank you, sir.
- May I get off now, please?
- Of course, Miss Withering.
- Thank you. You've been most patient.
- Yes. Like Job on a monument.
- And what a monument. Ha-ha!



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**PART ONE**

**TRAVELLING WITH SANDY:**

**THE REAR GUNNER, THE FIREMAN AND THE KING**

## I

*Aristophanes is such a cunt.*

He stares over the lip of his beer and glowers at me. He's had a few. And he doesn't remember anything about the start of the argument.

Sandy sighs in despair in that *boys-will-be-boys* manner she has adopted and fiddles with her phone, checking out our itinerary tomorrow. Is this Belgium? We left Greece on Tuesday 19th.

Aristophanes still barely breaks a grin. So much for comedy.

- So, what will it be, then?

The voice, recognisably that of Charles Hawtry, comes out of the mouth of the Rear Gunner sitting next to me. The difference between sound and appearance is jarring. Then I am reminded of that play I saw in Nottingham last year.

No good. The guy behind me blew his nose and wrecked the *denouement*.

I nod over to Sandy in that sort of 'shall we be going?' way, but she is paying me no attention.

The gunner stands up and squares for a fight. I focus on the space between my feet. Did I start the argument?

*"And a police inspector is on his way here – to ask some – questions -----"*

Is this why Aristophanes is focused on me like this? I was a wit during the course, but called upon to talk at the course dinner I withered and fell away. My mask slipped. The comedy began. I am hopelessly exposed to those around me in the lager drinking suburbs of den Haag.

Not Belgium. Holland. How stupid of me.

## II

Audrey Hepburn seems to like me. We chat about raising baby deer and how we would transform the world using the power of our minds engaged in positive thinking.

The metal clangs in the background. Steam drifts in a thin haze. A factory bell rings and the people start to move. How do they move? Who taught them? How do they learn this when I cannot?

I am alone.

Audrey asks me about the start of the troubles I have been experiencing with Jordan. I declined to answer. Disappointed, she turns to someone else to talk to them.

That answers it. I cannot speak to people at all. I actually think I hate them.

I flick up my eyes to see Sandy with her drink doing that one slice cut-throat movement. I drop Audrey immediately.

### III

It was in that blazing summer of 1947 that I first met Celesta Bryce, who was the celebrated heiress to the biscuit-and-cracker business her grandfather had built up some fifty years before she was ever on the scene. For the time she was incredibly daring and bohemian, sleeping in late, staying up all night, loudly playing records at dawn and generally being a pain in the arse to her family and staff. Her dress sense was definitely of the *thrown together at the last thought* variety and her inability to filter the ideas ringing in her head from visiting her mouth was the stuff of legend. How well we remember that time she brought down the rather drunk Mr Churchill by saying his tie and his eyes matched the colour of her vanity. We laughed then, but forgot what the joke was later, long after Churchill had left us.

Anyway.

Although an adversary to the general view of the right wing in the UK, it was widely known she held European Fascist tendencies, if not outright sympathies, and often spoke on the phone to Nat and David about those sort of things. She firmly believed the war was neither won nor over and that there were other fish frying on both sides of Europe. She was of course correct, being well-informed, but hopelessly wrong in the reasoning that led her towards that conclusion.

- Anyway, David said we should all trip down to his for the weekend. What do you think?

I demurred. I had met the chinless David twice before and found him *such* a boring man. And his brash American girlfriend was worse than he ever was. They infuse me with *melancholia*.

Neither of us had noticed (or we had both conspired and pretended not to notice) that Celesta was only wearing a man's shirt and tie. She smoked cigars. Someone once told me they swore they saw her driving Maurice's K12 around the grounds at Salisbury.

An interesting woman. Sandy hated *the sight* of her, but then again she had time for David which always left me baffled. Her demeanour made me think that David's time was yet to come, but I always felt he'd let himself down not long before he did the same to the country.

And I was right.

Celesta stood up and left the room, swinging her hips towards us as if to say *if only you could ever be this lucky*. Rubenstein still clattered on the keys as she did, an irony I was not about to admit to finding amusing.

## IV

Days without money again. Only enough for bread, cheese and that cheap wine with the silvered angel on the label. The room was cramped and you could taste the damp if you breathed in deeply enough. It was really *picturesque* in a starved-in-a-garret sort of way. We plotted a few things silently.

D\_\_\_\_\_ called on us later that afternoon. She had had enough of things about the town and wanted to see what life was like on the other side of the district. The three of us welcomed her in the tiny apartment, especially as she had brought Old Spanish Brandy and a sense of amusement about the weather and our inclement circumstances.

She told us a funny story. D\_\_\_\_\_ had gone shopping in the west side for a book of the collected correspondence of Rimbaud, Guilliére or Proust or somebody, and hadn't found it so she went back home and phoned a friend to see what she should do next to try and track it down. Google didn't offer her any help, so she suggested trying that little run-down brown shop at the end of P\_\_\_\_\_ 's street, so she took the tram out there and walked in.

The shopkeeper was a little man with a severe stoop. In fact, so severe was his stoop that she didn't see how it was possible that he could reach to the top shelves of his stock, even with the sliding black ladder that creaked every time weight was optimistically put on it. He feigned not to know what she was looking for, then spent some time as though immersed in a feat of memory recollection not unlike the way John K did it on stage that time in Brighton when he was asked to name Bolton's Cup-winning team of 1923. (Amazingly, he knew who 'Billie' was)

A smile smeared its way across his face as he remembered something, then moved to the side window where he had a cardboard box of books, all identical and all being the exact book that D\_\_\_\_\_ was looking for! How did that ever happen?

(Sandy rolled her eyes and filed her nails as the story wore on)

The man was actually Rimbaud, Guilliére or Proust or somebody and the books were file copies the publisher had given to him in advance. Sales were thin so they never looked to recoup the costs. Now how about that?

Hold on. Didn't Rimbaud, Guilliére or Proust or somebody die *years ago*?

D\_\_\_\_\_ swigged from the brandy bottle and smiled a smile of the initiate.

- That's what they *want* you to think, she said

I was never sure who 'they' ever were in this particular idiom of modern conversation, so I kept my mouth shut. I just wish we had brandy glasses.

## V

Midnight in Hyde Park, not far off the Marble Arch and some time just after 1962.

Sitting in a slight haze of cold July rain, wondering if anyone was going to appear soon. A man with a camera thinks he is hiding from everyone on the bench just behind the bushes, but he isn't. We can see him fine. We can also see the drunk man walk into the park, about to let himself down badly. We recognise him as Alain R\_\_\_\_\_ and that his being drunk in public, even at this time of night, was about to be photographed and published, all to make his downfall complete.

We reason about it silently and decide we have to intervene. We know Alain's reputation for high living is like, especially with his well-known dalliances with Th\_\_\_\_\_, U\_\_\_\_\_, Tr\_\_\_\_\_, and most famously Ru\_\_\_\_\_ but we liked him in *that film we saw in Utrecht last summer or was it the summer before that* and had a liking for him for that rather weak reason alone.

I called him over and he walks unsteadily to our bench, clearly having had a good night of it, and presumably thinking we were fans of his, which I suppose we were, but in a more thoughtful way.

- *Que puis-je faire pour vous, une paire de chattes complètes?*

We smile at the implication and indicate the photographer who appears to have been snapping away merrily on the other side of the bench, using it as some sort of shield. Alain makes a wild, sweeping and rather melodramatic gesture as if to say *I care not* and moves away from us.

Sandy didn't care for the name-calling and nods over to the photographer as she gets up and strides purposefully to him, adjusting the straps on the heavy rucksack as she moved. The photographer turns to us and snaps us as quickly as he snapped Alain, the shutter banging away until one assumes the spool ends.

- You trying to get a cheap story?

He seems perplexed by my question and stands up, only to reveal Th\_\_\_\_\_, U\_\_\_\_\_, Tr\_\_\_\_\_, and most famously Ru\_\_\_\_\_ crouched behind him, giving him instructions from within the bushes. He starts to speak, but only German comes out and I never paid attention enough in Mrs Chapman's classes, being far more interested in the shape of Pauline's chest and the impossible skinniness of Hazel to even worry myself about anything as haphazard as *languages*. Mrs Chapman did warn me that *this stuff would come in useful one day, you know* and I never believed her, but now, close to midnight in Hyde Park, not far off the Marble Arch and some time just after 1962, I found her words had a certain wisdom of which I had not thought her capable.

## VI

Enoch rose to his feet to propose the toast, but I insisted he sit down again. A couple of eyes moved over to him but there was no consternation, just a mild sense of unease.

- Mr Powell, what do you think of the introduction of free borders between England and France?

He sipped at the glass of water I had given him and fixed the questioner with that laser beam, borderless glare he reserved for moments of passion and intellect.

- Well, Mr Fraser only yesterday declared it an historic moment in this nation's dealing with our closest neighbours, but I must remind him of the grave threats that such a fraternal handshake contains.
- And that would be?
- Have you forgotten the problems they faced annexing Dahomey? Indeed, have the *French*? As Herodotus himself favoured, when considering the same situation earlier: '*Of all men's miseries the bitterest is this: to know so much and to have control over nothing.*'
- Yes, but...
- And *another* thing that you may have forgotten...

In full spate he was an impressive creature: full of gravity, intellect and delivery; a savage and fecund mind using its greatest gifts to defeat the enemy by simply pummeling him until he can move no more and form no greater a thought.

But my thoughts were miles away from the candles and the dinner and the brandy and the conversation. I had retreated to the home I knew and visited in 1923 when Sandy and I were only just getting to know one another. The house was imposing and featured a huge front room within which was installed an open fire that bellowed with life in the winter when the snows were deep and the windows frozen.

The *maestro* was at the keys. Oh that *note*! That solitary note he picked out and repeated until the nuances in it were so thoroughly explored that the note had no more need to be played again for it had been worn thin by his emotional investment in its expression. The Fireman nodded in approval too, I recall.

His wife was a timid creature, and I later found out why. One night, seeking water, I found my way to the kitchens where I saw her *in flagrante* with the cook who was attending to her with a fully muscular comportment. She lay silent on the preparation table, untouchable and emotionless, being taken by the roughhouse I later found out was named Enoch.

She must have seen me, for she came to me later and said that this was the only way she could keep *the maestro* happy; by being taken by a lower order cook in

order to keep him in their employment and therefore make the meals that powered her husband into making masterpieces. I asked if there was no other way.

- You know neither him, nor Enoch...

She said this with a downward smile that implied there was more to it than she was willing to divulge to me. Oh such a *melancholia*.

Back to reality. He taps my sleeve and nods to the port, which I pass him dutifully.

- You know, at Trinity we had a man who kept a *bear* there. Would you believe it?
- You knew him?
- Not personally, no, but I knew him by sight.
- What became of him?
- The bear?
- No, the fellow.
- Well he dabbled and thought he had a blueprint for perpetual motion. What about that?

Perpetual motion: getting something for nothing and benefitting that something by wasting that exact nothing.

Candles deaden the sound of a hundred hearts pumping.

## VII

Lucien is far too drunk to make any sense, so he has the good sense to lie still and not say a word. I can feel him - in quiet anxiety - trying to feel for the horizontal, hoping that his angular drift doesn't shift from the current stasis.

Deerhoff is less sensible, and talks on.

- We were eighteen to a medium cell, and the heat and smell was really foul, like almost what you'd get in an animal's cage. We were barely fed and the cold could hardly be believed, even with all those bodies in the same room. The water was filthy and one of the younger men caught some form of stomach infection, which made things far worse. Honestly, we thought about killing him sometimes.

Lucien makes a move but The Harker makes an unearthly noise and holds him back, more likely for his own good.

- So where was I? Did I mention the Tongan in the cell too? Massive chap. Took up four times the space of a normal white man and ate that many times the food they gave us, which incidentally was -

Saving us from Deerhoff's endless repetition the boat lists first one way, then the other. Then that Hawtry voice comes up again. Is that the Rear Gunner once more? Can't be. Aside from the fact this is a Naval vessel, it's not like someone like that could get to the microphone. Maybe they all share the same accent at Dartford.

- Sorry to tell you all this, but the ship is going down. Sober shipmates try and make your way to the A deck where you will be evacuated. Leave the drunk ones behind.

We don't feel we can leave Lucien, but we did hear the orders. We exchange nervous looks as the boat lists more dramatically. What do we do? As usual in times of stress, we look to the Harker. His long scraggly fur and elaborate horns separate us from him, as does the piercing red light of his eyes. His is the black flame of the eternal fire.

As one, we turn to Lucien and view him as simple prey.

## VIII

So there I was, singing from '*Tales of Enlightenment and Impossible Perversions*' in *pinched trachea mode* when I heard a voice coming over the fractured Chad radiogram airwaves saying something so fucking remarkable that it stopped me from quietly trepanning the depressed spaniel. I put down the rusted cutlass that forever needed sharpening, turned up the cat whisker dial to achieve *maximal fidelity* and listened to the tremulous blackish voice that warbled across the ether to same ears which had caught the screams of the damndest thing I had ever seen only earlier that day.

Sadly, this was when the Fat Archbishop noisily burst into the room through the bayonet curtains, falling over and generally acting like he'd never seen a naked transvestite in his life, choosing the moment to blaspheme against all that was righteous in a voice that shook the foundations. In doing so he fell over the deerskin rug from which the deer had not been *fully* dissociated and crashed over the squat table upon which lay the radiogram which, by the time my observations had crystallised, had been reduced to small shards no bigger than matchwood.

Still babbling the Babble of the Imbecile, and fighting off an imaginary sexually aroused Antelope named Brian, the Archbishop started howling in a manner that was so unlike his normal demeanour that I found it hard to believe he was in full control of his tenuous senses. I tutted and chose the moment to replace the raffia gown which I had earlier fashioned in a fit of creative energy into...well...*a gown*, and stood up to face the blank wall upon which I had imposed my many fantasies concerning liberty, freedom and the pursuit of happenstance. The wall did not retort. How like a wall. Goddam it. *Call for the Hip Priest!*

Loud screeching alarms went off overhead. Ah yes! The bombers are due! The Pandys Are Coming! The Rear Gunner himself promised me this much. (The Archbishop howled in disbelief, assuming that he was capable of any shade of belief, that is) How many seconds are in **5 hours, 26 minutes, 47 seconds?**

The bars of the cages nearby are rattled by an imaginary nightstick carried down an imaginary corridor by an imaginary guard. A voice calls out 'SANDY!' but there is no reply. A door clanks. Keys. The Archbishop has turned into a buffalo for some reason. The presence changes everything. The spaniel looks up and says the words 'actually, it's *Spaniard*' and a thrashing blow comes down over my head that sucks the daylight out of my world, probably for Good.

## IX

22:43: We crashed through the door to find subject A in the bed with a female, whose name is unknown. Halfway through the act of [REDACTED] congress, the subject was seen to look up into our bright lights, his hair mussed and his demeanour that of complete confusion, clearly being seen at his most vulnerable and least prepared.

22:44: Subject A was dragged from the bed, stunned by a taser, and was wrist and ankle cuffed by officers R and T then kicked on the floor. After consulting with operation control the female was despatched with a .38 round to the temple. This caused the subject to scream in a most unusual manner. He was [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to the waiting car which was due to take him to see the President.

\* \* \* \* \*

- So, Mr Gotti....how does it feel to be trussed up like this?

The President is on his yacht in the harbour, lounging in a most incongruous chair, cracking *nuts* from a bowl and swigging cognac from the bottle. Eight Secret Service persons are around him. Subject A is still cuffed and naked, lying on the deck.

- You know we hold all the cards now. We have you at a disadvantage.
- Mr President...Jim...I know that....
- Shushhhhhh. Your time to speak will come. But not just yet. Assume all questions are rhetorical. Goddam it...I asked for coffee. Where the hell is the coffee? Hey you....get her up here.

The Secret Service man goes under the deck. His voice calls out 'SANDY?' but there is no reply. Confused, he walks further into the boat and opens the door to the galleys, rattling his fingertips along the louvred doors like a nightstick on prison bars.

- When I got myself elected I thought this would be the greatest trip. But it was anything but. You know..when I was back there in seminary school there was a person there who put forth the proposition that you can petition the LORD with prayer. You dig?

The President swayed around, doing some sort of Shaman thing in his head.

- *Ride the snake*, they said. *Seven miles*.

The Secret Service guys seem to have drifted off into a reverie. Subject A was fearful on the ground, his face hard up against the 25mm blond marine ply covered in eight layers of epoxy. It was so new he felt his cheek sticking to it.

- Mr President, I gotta piss..
- Whennnnnn ya Gotti go....you Gotti go

His cronies laughed.

- Kick off the boat, Jim. Let's take this sucker out to the sea. Let's go on a little Moonlight Drive, shall we?
- Uh, technically it's a Moonlight Sail, Mr President.
- Oh yeah. My uh....my badness. Say where is that *coffee*?
- I think she went overboard, Mr President.

He drops the cognac down onto his thighs.

- Not *another* one. Goddam it.
- We'll get another, Sir.
- I guess we'll have to.

The President half mutters and half croons to himself:

- *Peppermint, miniskirts, chocolate candy champion sax and a girl....*

A cough.

- How far out Mr President?
- Ohhh. You know...*far out...there*

He fingers the air casually as though illustrating a general vector. The boat swings a little and some people below deck shout out from their sleep. Having this much power is something he always dreamed of, but to now have it and hold it and keep it was more intoxicating than even the cognac. He smiled that preppy smile he kept for his most private moments of unalloyed smugness. He had a licence to be unbearable and he liked it. That will show his father.

- *The killer awoke before dawn. He put his boots on. He took a face from the ancient gallery and he walked on down the hall...*

Bereft of fear, Sandy hid in that cupboard for four days until she came out at exactly the right moment. Do you want to know what she found?

Then I will tell you.

## X

The four of us had been trekking for Durban across the plains. As always, Sandy was the strongest and made purposeful and confident strides as though she knew where she was going. We all followed her. Beside me, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, both exhausted and both equally vexed with the other.

- *Let's go for a trip*, he said. *It'll be a laugh*, he said. *What could possibly go wrong*, he said.

Marco just takes it, his face set but knowing that he was indeed at fault. Khan is a bit unbearable, but I recognise his relative pain. I suppose I let them both into this as a sort of reunion.

The plains give way to a trek, which gives way to a path, which gives way to a village, which gives way to a town which becomes a street. Shops. People. Life.

We come across a tearoom and walk in, to find a table for three already set and our tea and cake waiting. We eat and drink in silence, nodding only to point out some interesting architectural features of the room which was clearly inspired by a young designer who dreamed of better days.

(The beautiful waitress brought the bill which the Khan touched. Marco muttered *signum manus* and she was on her way)

The loaf is a fruit loaf.

Sultanas and raisins.

Both are dried grapes.

Grapes are also a fruit.

Tomatoes and chilli are a fruit, but would you make a loaf from them?

All three of us are staring at the loaf, thinking exactly the same thing. These are times that bind us, the moments that remind us that while our journeys may differ, the destination is always the same.

## XI

No idea where he is taking us. The car rattles through its worn-out suspension as it trundles over the Vienna cobblestones, the arc of the headlamps lighting up the dimmed archways and broken pillars. We haven't seen a soul or any sign of life in the last hour. The Fireman sent us here, but he has no sense of direction.

Sandy looks askance at me, but I don't return her gaze. Maybe the back seat is the worst place to be at a time like this.

I marvel silently at the driver in his impeccable suit and collar and tie. I am unaware if Sandy realises that he has no face, which makes his driving the more amazing. What I find most amazing though is the perfection of the cut of his suit and the fact that his shirt has clearly been pressed expertly. In a city without power, how did he manage this?

Her voice sparks up from the front passenger seat.

- David said this was the most *remarkable* place he had ever seen.
- I don't doubt it.
- He wanted it right away. Offered them cash for it. Cash! Can you even believe it?
- How *marvellous*...
- But the *little man in the castle* didn't even bother to think about it.
- No?
- Exactly. A flat NEIN from him.

She drew heavily on the cigar.

- Reminds me of a joke.

I shrivel inside.

- Go on...
- My boyfriend and I give each other marks out of ten for our sexual performances. Last night we did anal for the first time. I kept crying out NEIN, NEIN which made him think he was doing really well...

*Oh Celesta.*

I look across to see Sandy doing that one slice cut-throat movement. I drop Celesta immediately. At least for now.

## XII

Hitchcock really loved what she did for the camera when she moved that way in front of him. I remember that day he was over at the Spey Ranch drinking cocktails on the porch with Hetty and that other girl- you know, her from *The Inferno*, the one with the black hair and the weird attitude towards the help - and saying as much. Crazy, don't you think?

The speeches of Churchill make me stir in ways no one can imagine. Just such a pity the things that they made him into to get to that point.

*It's never too late to become a person of substance.*

They may call you from all sides, but you must move on regardless.

So anyway, Hetty (I think) who it was that said we were all moving down to the porch so we sat around in those old bucket chairs and the seven of us were exchanging that witty sort of talk that only comes with everyone trying to be cleverer than everyone else. Hitch just sat there with a Tom Collins and mused on it all. Then he made that celebrated remark and we all laughed with a sort of unexpected joy, which in reality was just a sort of toadying up to someone famous. Sidney didn't stir, he just sat there and looked pensive and detached from it all and tried not to look sideways to see just how much of Sandy he could spy on without giving the game away completely.

That was kind of funny.

- Mr Poitier, I think you are destined *for the greater things*

Every time that man spoke we all listened.

- Oh I don't know. Some have to face up to their talents and some have to make their talents more apparent?
- Your *talents*?

Uh oh. Even Hitch leaned in to hear what the Gunner was going to say to him now.

- Well, yes. You know what I mean.
- How can I *possibly* know what you mean? How can anyone?

Sidney shifts in his seat, making it creak uncontrollably.

- Sorry, but I assumed that...
- You assume rather a lot, Mr Poitier. I think you need to be brought back to the ground, and quickly.
- Are you threatening me, sir?

- It's never too late to become a person of substance.
- I rightly don't understand what you are driving at.
- Then think on it.

The Gunner sat back in his chair and his focus left Poitier almost immediately, as though he was simply discarded. By moving his opinions constantly he never gave anyone the least chance of landing a punch on him, and he knew it.

Her with the *black hair and attitude* stood up and made a disgusted face at Sidney, and we all knew that they had been quarrelling again. Hitch kept out of the focus.

The skies darkened and bruised. Clouds gathered and the rain hammered down over us like a million nails fired down at us from the Almighty. We kept our countenance, though we knew the Gunner had more tricks up his sleeve.

Sandy left to get some drinks in when the news came over that the Berlin Wall had fallen. We all sat around staring quietly into space and thinking disparate thoughts about freedom and its meaninglessness. My thoughts went back to Vienna which was as German as my memories ever got. I wondered if David was still alive. He'd have loved every second of this. I still remember his last words that summer's afternoon in Beren:

- *Let's go for a trip*, he said. *It'll be a laugh*, he said. *What could possibly go wrong*, he said.

He was a dullard for sure, but he had the means to be a better man. A man of substance for sure. I nodded my silent toast towards Hitch who nodded back, clearly understanding everything that I was thinking as though the thoughts were his own and not only mine.

### XIII

The words PAPAN BULL ran through my head as I surveyed the wordy document in my hand. I was appalled at what I was reading and the broader implications that it suggested. The shorter man beside me shrugged and leaned on the wall and suggested by his air that he had had no choice in it.

- This is dreadful, I said to him - These bastards are forcing you to do this...
- I know, I know. But I have perhaps overplayed them.
- How do you mean?

He sighed and looked around the greenery, tasting the tart Berkshire air.

- I gave them no quarters for negotiation. They expected to use some of these *clauses* to give away to me as a point upon which they could secure others. Lots of them are plainly a waste of time.
- So what did you say to them?
- I told them to *take it or leave it*, and sealed it in front of them.

I smiled at his wit and intelligence.

- That's cunning.
- I am not where I am because I am a fool.
- And you have other support too...
- I actually have very little. But I do have one *very* influential friend...
- Well, yes. Has he ever spoken of your promise to crusade?
- No, never. At least not yet. But I think he can be of help. Don't you?
- Without doubt. Since you made the promise, you can appeal to him and say that since you are his *vessel* you have been forced into signing a document that you really have no authority to sign. He'll take one look at half of it and say it's all unethical and throw it out.
- You think so?
- I'm sure he would.
- There is one other issue though; that would make me look weak.

I pause.

- May I speak freely?

He looks at me askance, surprised.

- I think you are one of the few who *can*.
- Alright - most people who see you are convinced you are either weak or weakened already. This will make no difference to their opinions. These villeins - *I regard the sheet in my hand* - think you are too. So pull out the biggest weapon you have. He might even finance you.

That makes him pause and think.

- You think so?
- It's certainly possible. If you say that you need the money to fight these fools and finance your other endeavours...
- In another Catholic country? I doubt he'd do that. Besides, he hates me.
- Really?
- Absolutely. In my cups I may have let it slip that I no more believed him than I believe any other other robed liars in pulpits. Unwise, but at least forthright.
- Well, he is a powerful friend and a powerful enemy, John.
- England lives on. *He* and his kind will rise and fall.

He smiles and walks with me to the small door in the wall,

- Tell me, what's the name of that beautiful girl I saw you with last night at dinner?
- Oh...that's Sandy.
- Are you wed?
- No, we are not.
- Are you in love?

I pause, looking for the right words.

- I think so...
- Ah, I see...
- Just not with each other.

John smiles and laughs.

- You're a queer one, you know.
- We'll sort this matter out and let these beasts know who is actually in charge.
- I very much hope so, but without the funds from *our powerful friend* I am not sure how we can manage. We have to look to France again. And beyond that there is the matter of the Scots.

We walk back up to the high walls of the fortress and ponder the confused picture of the future we are painting. As we traverse the rolling green within we see Sandy sitting on the grass, enjoying the sun that shines down on barons, kings and men alike. I motion to her and make a supping movement to indicate dinner was upon us. She looked across to her immediate left and subtly pointed to the dark figure across the green who was watching both of us intently and clearly with great suspicion.

Damn it all! Have we been found out? I make a shrugging gesture. She replies the same way. The figure keeps looking at us.

A voice from behind me.

- It's for you.

A telephone is handed to me.

- Yes?
- Hello there! I was just saying that we should all trip down to mine for the weekend. What do you think? Feel like a break away?

Another request I cannot refuse.

- Yes, David. Leave it with us.
- Good. And see if you can get that *Celesta* woman too, will you? She's kind of fun to have around.
- Yes...I will see what I can do.
- *Toodle pip then.*

The line goes dead. Sandy gets up and slings the wet nylon rucksack over her shoulder and walks up to me slowly, clearly anxious. The figure is still watching us.

I pause a while.

- I'm not sure, I say in a sort of exaggerated stage whisper. - It's clearly important to him. He was forced into it. I am not sure that we can do much to get away from it.

She looks disappointed.

- And more bad news...

Now she looks alarmed.

- David wants us to go to his this weekend. With Celesta.

With a single stroke, the future looks bleaker than ever.

#### XIV

The car journey is very silent. Clearly Enoch is in the huff, sitting silently in the rear like a brooding silent shadow, determined to say *nothing* despite wanting to say *something*. The President looks out of the other window from the other rear seat, paying obvious and clear inattention to him, finding something fascinating in the dark, wet streets as the yellow street lights flash overhead as we barrel down the road.

- How late will we be?
- Not long now, Mr President.
- Good. I hate being a passenger.

Alain answers his phone, his voice quiet - either not to disturb Enoch's equilibrium, or to hide his conversation. I look to my right, watching him as I drive. His conversation is muted and terse. He clearly doesn't want anyone to know to whom he is talking. Enoch *tuts* without making a sound. Ahead, the gatehouse opens and lets us in.

- How shall we introduce you?
- Just 'Jim' will do for now.

Enoch rolls his eyes. I smirk in recognition.

- Have you met him before?
- No, never...but I will bet you he thinks he has met me...
- I think a lot of people do, Mr President.

He smiles at the words.

- It's Jim for now. Let me get into character.
- OK, *Jim*.

The car rolls up the gravel to the doorway where a small knot of strangers is waiting for us. Alain curtails his conversation and gets out from the car the second it has stopped moving, moving to the rear door and opening it, allowing the President to alight. He turns in a single movement to the person walking towards the car and announces our arrival.

- Mr Archbishop, please meet Jim.

The latter extends a hand to take that of the Archbishop. I see Sandy behind the man's great bulk, signalling to me to come over to her. I think she has to say something.

Jim's wrist has a small leather tie around it. The Archbishop seems to be wearing an expensive watch. He smiles at Jim.

- *Actually, it's Spaniard, he says.*

Jim laughs politely and they enter the building together, followed by the tight group. Sandy comes up along side me and nudges me, inclining her head towards the car. Enoch is getting out.

- Oh don't worry about me, I'll be *just fine*...

He can be a cantankerous man sometimes. I turn to Sandy, a slight concern in my voice.

- Is this Belgium? We left Greece on Tuesday 19th, didn't we?

Sandy looks set to answer, but is interrupted by Enoch.

- You know, *that man* is ruining the office that he currently occupies. He is eroding it down to the quick. Who in the world is letting him get away with this sort of behaviour? And heaven knows where *she* is these days. He's seen with a new women every day and never seems to have a single thought for common decency. I really don't know why we are bothering.

He mutters past us. Sandy and I follow into the seat of the troubles, expecting the fireworks to begin both actually and metaphorically anytime soon. We love moments like these. They make life feel like it could be worth living again. Sandy raises her eyebrows, reminding me that Teddy would call Enoch *exactly* that in years to come. I have to admit, I hadn't remembered that.

Up ahead I hear the music start up and the President starts his baritone crooning. The Archbishop is stirring up his own brand of excitement too. *It's all very new, you know.*

## XV

The tent feels cramped and the rain is starting to come down heavily. Eight of us in here didn't seem too bad back when we made plans, but now it seems much less spacious than before.

- It's all such a fucking *bore*, don't you think?
- Wish we had gone on holiday properly now.
- Where to? Hotham again?
- Yes, at Bognor.

Much laughing.

- This is garbage.

Celesta doesn't think much of the concert. Sandy mouths silently behind her, sarcastically mimicking her mannerisms. She really can be so funny sometimes. But I have to keep my countenance to save her from being found out. Instead I offer around my cigarettes. Celesta refuses, claiming not to smoke. Others seem uninterested. Only the Rear Gunner takes one from me, mysteriously refusing the light I offered and instead taking a match from his top pocket and striking it on the wall.

The Fireman tuts at the scene around him. He's never been into that kind of decadence. Nor does he smoke. He is remarkably abstemious when he wants to be.

He inhales deeply, then lets it out. He looks quizzically at Celesta, then to me, then back to Celesta again. The music thunders on ahead of us, but we pay it little heed anyway. We didn't pay for the tickets.

- How many of them do you know, he asks her.
- *What?*
- How many of them - he jabs his cigarette in the direction of the tent flap and thereafter the stage - do you *know?*
- Who? Them? The band?
- Yes. How many of them?

She looks at me as if seeking confirmation that the world has gone mad.

- Why would I *know* any of them?
- You know a lot of people. Don't you?
- You're a strange man, you know.

He smiles a dirty, unshaven smile. Looking up at her as she lounges against the cushions. He lolls beside her. I watch with avid fascination. Even Sandy seems interested. She mouths something to me. I shush her so we can pay attention.

- No, I mean...how many of them? And I mean *know*.
- What on *earth* are you talking about? You know...I've seen you now and then but I've no idea who you are or what you do. I just know that our meeting has less to do with what I want and more to do with how chaotic my life has become recently. So I am sorry if your question seems strange to me, and I am sorry if I am unable to comprehend a word of it, but I really must pass on this attempt at conversation because my talking to you is like an educated *white man* talking to the Niggers of the Indus, if you get my meaning.

The Rear Gunner just smiles that same dirty smile. He smells of oil and rags, stale smoke and sweat, of work and cheap days with simpler pleasures than these.

- Never met a good *darkie*, he says
- Ah well, in this we have some common ground. Personally I'd give them all the lash for what they have done, what they'd like to do and what they likely will do at some point in the future. That said, I imagine our meeting with them has some points of difference.

Jenny enters the tent with her customary fussing and noise, as though trying to kick start a conversation about how marvellous she is. She is shushed by the dark and distant Zia who is sitting behind us, eagerly listening to the exchange between Celesta and the Rear Gunner. She looks indignant but moves to the back where she noisily makes coffee.

- Like what?
- Like the ones I met were servants and busboys.
- Oh right. Well...I never met a good one.
- How *fascinating*.
- Nor a pretty one.
- Ah well, that's a given, isn't it?

Celesta raises her empty glass high above her head.

- Hey hey. Chop chop. This thing won't fill itself, you know.

Unseen hands hold the bottle and tip another heavy measure into the tumbler. She despatches about half of it in one draught.

- Whisky. Neat. Maybe better stuff than you are used to?
- I don't drink, you know.
- Really? How inhumane. I thought *everyone* like you drank all the time.

He just smiles again, drawing on the cigarette hard. He asks her again.

- So...how many of them do you *know*?

She rolls her eyes.

- Are we back to this one again? I really don't understand the question.
- So you said. But I'd still like an answer.
- Well, I don't think I am obliged to give you one. After all, the question doesn't exactly beg for it, does it?

She turns away and sucks on the filterless cigarette, trying to affect an air that suggests that she is done with such fripperies as this and has *moved on* to other things. But I can see it is an affectation. For the first time ever, I see that someone has got under her skin and is troubling her. The Rear Gunner doesn't move, but just grins and stares at her, as though he knows the same as I do too.

- Who *are* these people anyway?

Jill answers.

- Oh some band from across the water.
- Oh...*those*. *Niggers from the the Indus*. - she stubs out her cigarette - Good dancers, though. I bet the one in the green pants is hung like a fucking horse too.

Polite laughter. We know all the stories. We suggest boredom but actually feel a deep sense of *melancholia*. Well, all those she is prepared to let us hear anyway. Her eyes darting around, surreptitiously looking to see if he is still staring, and he is. The grin fixed and immobile, like a palsied clown.

Ferdy speaks:

- You remember those dancers at Freddie's party?

Everyone laughs in recollection. Maybe just a bit too hard. Celesta:

- Oh my *word*, yes. Remember what happened by the end of the night? The one in the scarlet jumpsuit?
- Oh god yes. Who did he end up with?
- Robbie, I *think*. No one really knew. He was dancing to *Hooked On A Feeling* with a Red Leb in one hand and a Margeaux '67 in the other, balanced on the *Dortier armoire*.
- Where did they all come from? Did they get invited?
- No one knew. I was drunk by the time they turned up, so I don't really remember the details.
- Wasn't Neil playing the zither that night?
- Oh that...the Groucho..thing?
- Oh what's it called?

- *Marxophone.*

On and on went the artifice. The tent became a monument to exaggerated memories and wild movements, false recollections and the worship of *a good time past*, the savouring of names and of part-recollected truths about people known and half-remembered, of yesterday's myriad parties and the feeling that the days stretched on forever and we had no cares and no reason to care, of impossible drinks and lavish meals, of bohemian days and nights spent looking for something to do because anything was better than nothing, and they were all so rich and bold that they could say *I have no idea what you are even talking about* and get away with it because they can disparage like no other. And all the while the Rear Gunner kept that fixed grin on Celesta and she did all she could to avoid meeting his stare because somehow, *he had the drop on her.*

Sandy moved her foot and nodded, looking behind me towards the flap. Above the hashish and the perfume and the cigarette smoke and the billow of Celesta's whisky I caught that familiar scent that I remembered from a long time ago. I sighed, vowing not to look behind me. Sandy looked silently terrified. No one else noticed.

The Harker has come back.

*Where do you think I've been?*

*(Sorry Audrey. I saw the scans. I was there at the final moment of your life)*

## XVI

Belvedere.

- Audrey seemed to like you, you know. Whatever happened?

A Sunday afternoon. People outside on the lawn, the sounds of youth and laughing and drinking coming through the open French windows. He and I are inside, away from the sun, sitting in the yellow room, music playing faintly from the thirty year old stereo in the corner.

- I've no idea, really. I don't think Sandy approved.
- Oh Sandy. Yes, well I don't suppose that would be wise, would it. Where did you meet?
- In Jordan.
- Oh. How troublesome.
- Well yes David. It was.

He's not really interesting. The magnetism is in knowing what he is, rather than in hearing how he thinks. As far as I can tell his thoughts aren't all that mobile at all.

- Heard from Ted recently?
- No...no. I haven't seen him since that really *awful* business with Emily.
- Oh yes. You know, I tried to feel sorry for him but he brought so much upon himself. And he let himself down in the House, so I am told.
- Well...his sort. You know.
- Well yes. No idea what side he is on. Flips from the middle to the right and back again. Weekly, I should think. Even his own people were unhappy with him. That's why they went for the other man. Even the other people were happy with that. They saw him standing down as a victory for them, knowing that those on what he thought was his side also saw it as a victory for them.

At least David is well-informed.



Now for the big one.

- Talking of *sides*, David...
- Yes?
- Well...which are you on? One hears such stories and so many of them that one scarcely knows which way to believe. You know...*this and that*.
- Oh that business... - his pained expression comes across his chinless features as though he had a conscience with which to wrestle - well, it's all a bit overstated you know.
- Didn't you support our enemy in warfare?
- What? Oh no, no...we had civil relations *before* but not during that awful time. No, we had much to say to one another beforehand though. All very cordial really.
- So where does the rumour come from?
- Oh that will be that gazetted shit Beaverbrook, probably. He rakes it to sell what he sells.
- You see what people must think, though...about you, I mean.
- Really?
- Yes, of course.
- Look old man, the truth is this, I don't *really* care. People think you are born to service and all of that tripe, but we all know what nonsense that is. We are in it for the laugh, not the long haul. Look around you. Who'd lose all this for the sake of some *suddenly fashionable* political notions?
- And you are happy about that?
- Yes, of course.

Laughter erupts from outside. A swish of a movement.

- What do you think *the people* expect of you?
- I've no idea. And really...again...I don't really care about that.
- So what do you care about?

He muses, swilling the Old Spanish Brandy and wondering to himself.

- I wish I had proper brandy glasses. These are - what? - whisky glasses?

I smile in recognition.

- Actually, they are fancy water glasses. They are all Marie could find.
- Good Lord. How incredible. She's been here for years.

He ponders again.

- I suppose what I care about the most is knowing that she'll be there with me, no matter what. That's all there is to it. Take it or leave it.

Sandy waves at me from outside. She's in a white blouse and white shorts, barefoot and poised on the green like a still from a study by Renoir. She is striking. I wish she was mine, and not somehow everyone's, yet still no one's.

- David, that's really not much of an answer.
- Well, I don't mind. Who am I answering to?

*David is such a cunt.* I get up and leave, excusing myself. Chimes from the hallway tell me that it's time to leave, and leave for good. I look back to see Sandy, still with the others,  
the others,  
enjoying the day,  
and enjoying a youth  
that she'll never see again.



## XVII

It is a very hot day today - utterly baking hot. Having just been on the phone to *him again*, a Jew and I walk down the crowded boulevard, avoiding the splashing water flashing from the hydrant as it messily relieves itself over the sidewalk. Children run noisily through the street like excited animals on a willing stampede.

We decide to have an ice cream, so I approach an ice cream man and ask him for two large chocolate cones. He reaches into his tub with his special Ice Cream Dispensing Scoop Utensil and almost right away his face is contorted with a profound look of inexpressible disgust and embarrassment. I try not to notice, as it would be bad mannered to do so. The Jew talks to a dog that has approached, thankful for the diversion.

The ice cream man pulls his hand from the tub. He can all see another hand reaching out of the tub, grappling with his lower arm, trying to haul him into the tub. The ice cream man resists well, but the other person within seems to be stronger. Then we notice both arms share the same tattoo. *Not again.*

Over on the other side of the road, a smart new and shiny Ice Cream Van draws up. The running children run for it avidly. The Jew runs for it avidly. The dog runs for it avidly. Sandy runs for it avidly. I run for it avidly.

He has no chocolate ice cream, but we feel relieved. We feel relieved and grateful. We feel relieved and grateful and happy to be alive with the strange dog that belongs to everyone and no one. This is the Chicago of 1961 that everyone remembers.

Sandy whistles over to me and I follow, like a dog. She has ice cream, but I have none.

## XVIII

- So there you are, Demi. It's not going to happen.
- Are you really sure?
- Yes. I've spoken to her and she confirms it. She's sorry, but she cannot feel the same way back.

She cries.

- She *promised* me.
- I don't think Amelia did, you know. Anyway. That's all there is to it. I'm sorry too.
- I understand.

Later, she phones me.

- Tell her I haven't given up yet.

The phone goes down, ominously.

## XIX

The house is old, the room long. It's cold. Somehow I am watching, but this time Sandy isn't there. The room is old and long and feels empty and deserted, yet there are two people there.

The boy looks young and frankly overdressed, with short hair in a severe side parting. He's maybe seven or eight. An older man with alarming facial hair sits with him at the head of the empty table, his words echoing in the hard room. Clearly he is not used to talking with children.

- Now David, I have to tell you something. Something very important. It's about duty, and about service, and it concerns you. Do you understand?
- Yes, father.
- Good. Now...the work we do is terribly important, you know that.
- Yes, father.
- Now, Mr Frederick and Mr Henry will continue to look after you and care for you and make sure you are being raised well, yes?
- Yes, father.
- And one day you will take to the seas, for this is the best start in life for *any* boy, yes?
- Yes, father.
- Good. This is good that you understand. Now, this is the important part. One day, maybe not terribly far away, I will no longer be here. And then it will be up to you to take over this important work, yes?
- Yes, father.
- You see, you are a special boy. And you will grow up to be a special man soon. And it will be up to you *and you alone* to follow me.
- Yes, father.
- Good. I know you understand. Now. We must go to the lodge. We are having supper with Warwick.

The boy is completely confused and understands nothing. He watches his father leave to dress for supper and goes to his mother's rooms where he is stopped by a member of the staff.

- Good evening, young master. I'm sorry, but your mother isn't available.
- When can I see her?
- Come back in an hour?
- That's alright then.

An hour later he returns. There are no staff, but his mother is sitting within. Has she been crying?

- Mother?

She looks up to see him.

- Come in David.
- Mother, father has had A Talk with me.
- Oh yes?

- Yes. It wasn't a long one, but he told me that I am special.
- Well, you *are*.
- And that I had to carry on his work.
- Yes, you will be doing all of that. And it will be marvellous.
- Well...what work is this?
- The work of the Empire, David. The Empire and the Faith.
- I see. Do I have any choice in this? What if I don't want to?
- I'm sorry, but this is your life. It will be wonderful, believe me. But it's what you are made to do.
- I see.
- Is that all?
- Yes. Thank you, mother.

He leaves to walk alone in the heavy draped corridors. Staff move silently and unseen around him. The shoes are always polished. The food is always served. The bed is always made. The clothes are always pressed. Everything just *happens*. Unseen hands are at work. Just like the grey suit left out for him to wear tonight. *Dining with Warwick*. Warwick is a place. Are they dining with *all* of them?

At the table, everything is silent and under perfect control. The soup is clear. The conversation is opaque and without anything to interest him.

- He was always Bertie's favourite.
- He'll be schooled soon by the best. The best start in life for *any* boy.

His brother Bertie is confused by his name being mentioned. Then he remembers.

David thinks about being taken to the seas. It's the best start in life. His grandfather loved him. Bertie stammers and cries easily. David senses weakness in him but avoids exploiting it. He felt sorry for him. His grandfather was Bertie too. He knew that because he remembers his grandmother saying *oh Bertie* when he gave the boys gifts upon gifts.

Cold meat. On a cold plate. Silence of footsteps in the room. The gentle clank of the ladle on the tureen. Unseen hands serving unseen food for unseen guests. This work is terribly important. And one day it will be my work.

## XX

I am the saint of the greatest mediocrity. I am the repairer of damaged reputations and saviour of unachievable goals. Look upon my works and wonder in a cloud of hostility, ye mighty.

Come forth to me, thou hopeless and unbeseched! Fall upon my protecting cloak and let it cover you in my significant acceptance of your apologies! Thoust never quoted nor ever sought? Be thou mine and let me give you the keys to the here and ever after!

Approach me, Preliator and tell me of your troubles! Bring me the saddened and the lost and let me fill them with my hope. Give me your woes and misapprehensions and let me stitch those torn fibres together again.

Put on that crown of halos and cry unto me thy greatest worry. Give me the false hope that plagues your daily dreams and hand it into my all enveloping care. Cry unto me thine speechless debacles, thine areated wisdom and thine farcical truths. (Sandy was always so impressed by this that she found speech incapable)

Come forth, you damage participles and vent to me that which causes your fall with fright.

I am the saint of the greatest mediocrity. I am the repairer of damaged reputations and saviour of unachievable goals. Look upon my works and wonder in a cloud of hostility, ye mighty. I am all things to you all.

The Preliator approaches the plastic dais and cringes before me.

- I never know what to say at times like this, he mumbles
- Never be feared of me for I am the saint of the greatest mediocrity, I reply.

He seems mollified by my response and pulls the sheet over his head. I bless him with my thoughts and divest myself of all power and influence. I tap him with the Mace and he keels over in a dead fright. He is rolled into the carpet and is carried off by the mysterious pair who are looking after all my welfare for the day. I laugh, just to show them I am well and do not need the attendance of the pills and the foils they try to sell me, for I am the repairer of damaged reputations. One of them tightens the ratchet around the hitching post and lifts the carpet up into the air where the winds buffet it powerfully. One of them hands me the tool he just used.

- What am I to make of having a spanner?

The spanner looks up at me and says the words ‘actually, it’s *Spaniard*’ and a thrashing blow comes down over my head that

## XXI

Sandy and I are facing each other on opposite seats of a dirty train. She leans on her elbow, hand over her mouth, gazing out over the view outside. I hope she has the money for the journey, because I have none. Sometimes travel becomes tactical excursions to bathrooms and jumps to the platform to switch to another less conspicuous position. I can tell she is growing tired of all of this - I think her head has been turned by hanging out with D\_\_\_\_\_ again.

Trees swish by in an oddly grazed continuum.

I catch sight of a girl in a rear garden, standing in the rain, hurriedly trying to pull brightly printed clothes down from a washing line. A grey cat jumping down from a garden shed roof. A small red sports car pulling into a double garage. Forgotten waste ground. A junior football pitch with faded lines and rusted metal goals. Allotments filled with invisible elderly men living out their last years in dirt and pottery. Vague industrial units without names. A lorry park with two green cabs in a state of dismantlement. And beyond, more houses made from wood and brick by a major housing construction firm providing cheap home solutions for the first time buyer in the shape of one, two and three bedroom apartments with all furnishing, fittings and equipment, complete with green turfed gardens, short fences and garden paths that will need weeded in twenty years' time when the sheeting beneath them breaks.

Sandy sighs at the sight of it all. I move in my seat and swing one leg over the other, just avoiding the simple-looking man with the nylon striped tee shirt beside me.

- Do you think we could just live like human beings again?

She doesn't answer me. I can never reach her when she is in a mood like this. Maybe she is thinking of D\_\_\_\_\_ again?

- We can go visit her again, you know. She doesn't live far away.

Sandy doesn't move, just continues to look out at the depressing sights outside. Then it strikes me that she prefers looking at this horrid vista than me. Then I look at her eyes and see they are not moving in that rapid side-to-side manner; they are fixed, staring heedlessly at a patch of nameless dirt on the outside of the window. Nameless dirt that, right now, has a company that she prefers to share than even acknowledge that I am sitting there.

- Tickets please.

Damn. I got distracted. We have to move. I indicate with my head that we should move, but Sandy wasn't paying any attention, rapt instead with the life and times

of a dirty window. I nudge her with my foot and she looks at me huffily. I nod towards the conductor and we move upwards through the crowded train, bumping through the other passengers standing in the aisles. Their grumbled complaints are vague and nondescript, but they let us through.

One of our tactics is to get to the toilets, but a better one is to get off the train as it pulls into a station, and as luck would have it, we are. We try not to watch the ticket collector as he approaches through the crowded car.

- Tickets please.

Other passengers get up to alight too, impeding the passage of the rail employee who is offering us the greatest threat right now. I don't discourage them at all. But, to my absolute and obvious shock, one of them is a girl wearing damp, brightly printed clothes. Sandy starts to laugh at the situation. The girl doesn't even notice me.

Then, from the opposite direction:

- Tickets please.

The voice, recognisably that of Charles Hawtry, comes out of the mouth of the ticket collector who is standing immediately beside me. The difference between sound and appearance is jarring. I look in the other direction. The ticket collector is not there. And neither is the girl. Sandy rolls her eyes at the stupidity of it all.

From further down the carriage I see the unmistakable profile of The Fireman talking to someone I once met at The Boxcar in Cornwall.

*We share a memory of the dilapidated house from afar; the windows like sightless eye sockets, the open doors howling at us through its silent screams. Ponderously, we advance.*



- Why would such a creature exist only to hold up a title for what is supposed to be a meaningless moment in time?
- Or was the creature posing for the artist?
- In which case, is the creature intelligent enough to exercise judgement and recognise its will?
- Or was the creature made to do this *against* its will?
- Does it *have* any idea what it's doing?
- By what mechanism is it held in the air?
- What type of creature is it?
- Is it happy or is it sad?
- So therefore...is *it* the subject of the piece, and not the winged female in the foreground?

To be tasked forever with a job you neither understand nor enjoy; to be condemned to float in the air against all known laws of physics and biology; to serve those you will never know for reasons you will never understand.

*That is the essence of what we call Melencolia.*



### XXIII

The Uber driver is a tricky sort. He's spun us around the town twice and is doing a passable impression of having lost his way, muttering to himself and seemingly forgetting to speak English now and then. We've been up and down Marxergasse about four times, his meter ticking copiously always. Sandy has the map on her knees and seems to be filled with a silent patience, but I just think he is taking the piss, like they all do.

My phone rings.

- Where in *Sheer Hades* are you? We started ages ago.

That colonial voice. Put on and strained through years of superiority and indulgence. My hackles rise but I try not to let it become too apparent.

- Celesta, sorry but I'm in a taxi being driven up and down and around by a fraudulent *immigrant* and I think he's at the lash.
- Oh, one of those, eh? Hand him the phone.

I tap the phone on his shoulder without a word. Surprised, he takes it. He doesn't say anything but listens to the voice on the other end and appears shocked by something that is said to him. He mutters a stammered assent after a while then slams the brakes on. Turning, he hands it back to me.

- You get out now. Both.
- Are we here?
- Yes, very close. You must go. Quick.

How very odd.

- How much do I owe you for the...
- Please, no time. Leave now. No fare. Just go. Quick.

Sandy - never one to inspect freely donated equines for their dentistry - is off like a shot from the front seat. I climb out the back and follow her confident strides down the broad and broken pavement and into the narrow alleyway where her map is leading us. Her bobble hat is casting a long shadow from the low and insistent glare from the curved street lights which dazzle enough to render me sightless me as we walk into the murk of the alley. Ahead is a door, lit by a dull haze from an orange lamp. Sandy sighs and knocks.

Nothing.

She knocks again and the door swings open. Another foreign type inspects us and nods us inside like we are co-conspirators in some devious game. We follow the

source of the sound ahead, the listless music and the voices. In the half-light comes Celesta, as though she was told where and when we'd be there. She's wearing the damask she got given to her from Sidney.

- Good to see you both, I'm sure.
- What *did* you say to the driver?
- Oh...a secret. He understands. Get a drink in your hands. The party has begun.
- Thanks.

Sandy shakes off her wet coat and hands it to another willing hand who takes it to be hung up. I try to make polite noises.

- Many people here?
- A few. They mostly came about a couple of hours ago or so, so they have all had a few. Oh, and the Harker turned up. No one invited him, as far as I know.
- Oh well...best behaviour and all that, I suppose.
- Exactly.

We fetch drinks and walk into the flat grey room lit by the flat grey light that shows no details and casts few distinct shadows. I cannot see anyone clearly at all - no faces to recognise, no outlines to discern. Everyone is seated randomly aside from the Harker who is gently hovering just under the ceiling. I don't want to say anything as the proceedings seem to have started. The soft edged sounds of slowed down strings fades down to a mere whisper.

A man's voice in the startling murk, preceded by the *ting* of cutlery on glassware.

- Ceremony twelve must start now.

Some voices seem to carry agreement of a muted sort. Sandy holds my hand tightly as we stand just off to the side, enough to be hidden from general sight, even in the dim and anonymous light of the windowless night.

A woman stands up from some form of cushions in the centre of the room and shrugs off a sheer gown to reveal herself completely nude. A man approaches her and opens a robe to stand equally naked before her. Her hand is held out and touches him intimately. Their movements are slow, studied, unhurried and measured. It looks like a dance.

Sandy squeezes my hand. I squeeze back.

The couple lay down on the cushions and he mounts her, guiding himself inside her in a single exact movement. As they move the voice says:

- Ceremony twelve has started. Please mark this time and place.

A fainter voice further away, in another room:

- This is study number *one*.

As the couple copulate on the floor I look around the room, trying to make out what sort of a place this is. We had been invited quite quietly earlier that day with only an address and a time and the promise of Celesta that we'd be witness to some form of event unlike any we had ever seen before, but that she was unable to give any other details. Sandy thought it a fine idea as we had had enough of Vienna already and we had to move on, so we may as well fill the evening with *something* interesting. We hadn't seen Celesta since the night Enoch had his heart attack, so we were relieved to find that not only was he well but that we'd still see her and get the chance to socialise a bit again before we went dark again. *The life has its many benefits but causes so many problems*, as someone said to me once.

They move steadily in front of us, the man lifted from the woman's body on his arms, rubbing himself inside her sex in an effort to drive himself into orgasm inside her. He looks like he might be in his thirties. She looks a day over twenty if she is lucky. Into the grey air around us, clouded by what seems to be cigarette smoke and what smells like jasmine incense, I try to make out the faces of the audience. Celesta is easy to spot, what with her hair and the damask. What is maybe more unusual is that she is seated next to a man with her hand in his lap, slowly and intimately massaging him back and forth in her fist as he watches the display in front of us. What's peculiar about all of this is that it seems to be David, and that the brash American is seated next to them both without a care. She doesn't even seem to want to watch the show in front of her.

- Take a moment?

A voice to my right. It's *him* again.

- Hello again. I didn't expect you here.

The man nods across the room to some people in the far corner.

- So...how many of them do you *know*?

Oh not *this one* again...but I lack all of Celesta's poise and wit so I try to humour him with the unadorned truth.

- Well really, none of them. In fact, I can hardly see them from here.
- Oh *I* have...
- You have?

- Yeah...I have. A right lot they are. All dressed up like they don't know it's supertime, yeah?

I've never heard the idiom, so I smile and remain silent.

- And you don't know any of them?
- Afraid not. This place is quite new to me. It's all very...*Bohemian*, you know?
- Oh I sure do, you know. All very modern for me too. I like the idea of tradition. A bit of *now and then*.
- Yes...quite.

Awkward silence. I break it.

- So how come you ended up here?
- Oh I move around and find where I want to be quickly enough. Some people are drawn to me and I am drawn to some people.

A voice, recognisably that of Charles Hawtry, comes from the far side of the room within the meagre clutch of people the Rear Gunner drew to my attention.

- You hear that?
- Yes, I do. I remember you sounding like that once.
- Yeah. With that *Greek cunt*. Whasshisname.
- *Aristophanes*.
- Gave me the high hat he did so I pegged him. Fuck him. No one gives me the high hat like that. No one.
- Well, he is a rum sort you know.
- Never could understand the fucker.
- You never can trust them.
- The Greeks?
- No, playwrights.

He draws hard on a cigarette and nods in David's direction.

- I'd see *her* in a dark room, he says.
- I'm pretty sure I know where you're driving with this.
- Well yeah. You never?
- Me? Oh surely no. I'm with Sandy. Been with her for years now. Never even thought of anyone else.
- Yeah. The quiet girl?
- Sometimes. Other times you just can't shut her up.

The couple are still moving slowly and deliberately, placing their bodies into graceful arcs and thoughtful poses and giving every appearance of having rehearsed this a hundred loveless times.

- So...how many of them do you *know*?

I smile and pretend I didn't hear. A distracting gasp from the centre of the room and I see David jerk suddenly forward, spending himself into Celesta's hand. Her voice is faint but clear.

- And there you *are*...

The American doesn't even stir from her reverie. Another voice:

- Ceremony twelve has started reaching its limit. Please mark this time and place.

A small gong. The female on the cushions gives a short cry and climaxes as the man on top of her groans himself into her body. Their movements slow. Unseen, a small drip of apathetic applause comes from distant hands as they show appreciation. The man and woman stay still for a second, then get up, drawing unseen sheets around them. The woman walks silently barefoot over to the table where David and Celesta are sitting. David looks like he has almost passed out, lolling in his seat. Celesta mops her hand and tidies him away. The woman is given a drink and inaudibly chats with them both. The American is excluded.

- Hey fella, the man in the sheet smiles jovially. - Fancy seeing you here.

I absolutely cannot place him. I see Sandy move over to the far side of the room to the group I have barely even noticed through the particulate light and smoke. All men wanting a piece of her, no doubt. I hear Celesta's voice again.

- Well I know that I am *very, very good* at that.

The man in the sheet noticed this.

- I think she went overboard, Mr President, he says.

I nod in complete agreement.

## XXIV

Sandy found Audrey and me together at the flat that Sunday evening. I wasn't expecting her to appear - I thought she was miles away. She seemed to hide her feelings so carefully and quietly. We sat together in the lounge afterwards. Thoughtfully, Audrey wore Sandy's bathrobe.



- You see, she said - I've never seen the issue in the loss of life on that scale.
- Are you saying that you'd do it willingly?

Audrey thought for a moment.

- No, but then that's only because I don't want people to remember me as the biggest mass murderer that there ever has been. But in principle - intellectually - there is nothing wrong with it.

I look up at Sandy who is leafing through a copy of *Private Eye*, studiously and contemptuously ignoring us. But I know she is listening.

- Go on?
- Well - if you could push a button and take out a life *without that life knowing what had happened to it...*would you?
- Of course not.
- Why not?
- I'm not sure...humanity? A knowledge that we all have a right to life? A basic sense of right and wrong?
- Ah yes...so...lead on from that. If you forfeit that right to living then what of it?
- I don't understand.
- Then you just don't exist. It's not as though you are disadvantaged by the lack of life. You don't exist. So recourse to that 'right' is meaningless, and hence the forfeiture of life - as long as it is instant and immediate - is

perfectly morally alright because no one has suffered and no one is now being disadvantaged anywhere by the circumstances.

- What about their relatives? Their friends?
- My point exactly. So you don't stop with them. You take out a household. A street. A city. A country. A planet. Who cares. First they *were*, then they *were not*.
- That still sounds barbaric. It still sounds appalling.
- Yes, but that is only because there was a single witness to it all. They should have taken her out at an earlier stage.
- I still don't agree.
- Then we need a referee. Who can we call?

I suggest we call Lucien. Audrey doesn't know who she wants, but doesn't like the idea of Lucien.

- He's a drunk and a blowhard.
- Hetty?
- Oh good god no. I'd rather it was Lucien then.
- He knows a lot about the subject. And he has a good handle on moral philosophy.
- Oh go ahead then.

I pick up my phone and dial Lucien's number. It rings numerous times. Neither of us had even thought about asking Sandy. She turns the pages noisily.

- He'll be drunk, she says.
- Maybe.

A dozy voice answers.

- Yes?

I pitch the phone to Audrey who catches it, surprised.

- Luci? It's Aud. I have a question for your fine moral mind. We're having a disagreement. It's on the subject of the ethics of mass murder.

I can hear Lucien warming up to the idea. It will appeal to his sense of self-importance. Audrey looks up at me as she phrases the question down the line.

- Do you think it was an act of moral cruelty for Darth Vader to vapourise Alderaan from the Death Star?

A pause. I hear his glutinous voice on the end of the line. Sandy impatiently flaps the pages of the magazine. She doesn't like Audrey one bit, even less since she started bumping into her more frequently, firstly around town and then around the flat. I think she resents her always being around in her life in some respects. I do

realise that Audrey has her favourite bathrobe on, but she has never been precious about that sort of thing before. Actually, I've never known Sandy to be precious about very much, but that's a longer issue to be discussed another time. We're just renting for now. It's not as though we are *enmired* in the financial whirlpool of mortgages and loans quite yet. We're not even certain about where each others' source of cash comes from. I know she seems to have enough to keep her happy, whatever she wants to do, and she knows that I can pay for almost anything I want, so the issue never comes up.

The notion of actual commitment bothers me, though. As we once laughed about, we're in love but just not with each other. In her cups she will doubtless say that I'm in love with myself, but I refute that by my *laissez-faire* approach to my personal appearance, but then she presumably takes that to mean that it's all cultivated to look like that.

Audrey consciously uncrosses then recrosses her legs, winking at me as she does. If Sandy had been looking up she'd have seen an eyeful under the bathrobe. The problem is that Audrey is sufficiently juvenile to do the same trick again and again, thereby (a) reducing its humour value, (b) reducing its shock value, but worse (c) increasing the chances she will be caught, and of course I will be implicated. I'm not quite ready for that yet, so I frown and shake my head in a tight little movement, punctuating it with a slight frown, as though I was admonishing a child I had just caught out in some minor misdemeanour that I wanted to shield from their other parent. I'm never very sure why I am wasting my time with her, sometimes.

The conversation with Lucien goes on at some length. Sandy looks up at me from her paper and then looks to Audrey who is still listening, oblivious. Then she looks back to me. I smile and shug silently. Her face is impassive. She never liked her from the first time they met, I could tell but Sandy is far too circumspect to have said anything.

I consider the spectre of being committed again and shudder a little inside. Why have one when you can have two? Who am I to concern myself with the visceral attitudes towards relationships that others endure? Sometimes I wonder just why so many put themselves through all of this stuff.

- Lucien is away to ask Finn.

Audrey is covering the handset with her palm, careful not to give anything away that might constitute anything approaching an answer received. She laughs and grimaces, crossing and uncrossing and recrossing her legs again. This time I flick up my eyes to see Sandy doing that one slice cut-throat movement. I drop Audrey immediately.

## XXV

- You're worse than *Enoch*. At least he was more guarded about what he said about people.
- *Enoch* is an intellectual coward who never says what he really means. He is more concerned with what people think of him than of what he might be able to express to them. I wish sometimes he'd just shut up his notions of common popularity and just get on with the business of preaching.
- Yes, but there is preaching and there is preaching, David. That just goes too far.
- But it's *true*. Look at them. In their housing estates and in their clubs and dance halls and heaven knows what else. All out for trouble, all out for each others' women or drugs or money. Or that weird notion of *respect* when you're just a stab wound away from being the next story on page two of *The Standard*.
- Oh David...
- 'Oh David' *nothing*, Amelia. These people are barely people. They are semi-articulate apes. Animals who have learned tricks. A subspecies that we have to live with because they were better off when they were in chains and doing our labour. Give them a house and roof and enough to eat and they will start to want more. Keep them in a state of confused cruelty and they will be way better off than they are now.
- Are you actually suggesting we go back to slavery?
- Suggesting? I'm insisting!
- Oh you *cannot* be serious...
- Of *course* I am. We were prosperous, they were out the jungle and all our heavy lifting was done by them, which gave them a purpose in life. A reason to be. Back home they would have been just another dirty simian living up a tree to escape the predators beneath. Don't try and tell me they are human.
- How can you even say that?
- How can I? *Because it's true*. These may be unpopular words to hear, but we have prisons filled with those of thick lips and curly hair. At least the whites are in there for frauds and minor larceny, as opposed to the raping and killing that these *gibbering chimps* get up to.
- David, may I remind you that the biggest mass-murderers England has ever seen have all been white.
- Yes, yes...aberrations I am sure. That's because the white man has the intellect and the foresight to do the requisite planning. Hand that mantle over to the average nigger and they'll get as far as two because their planning is about as organised as a box of frogs and because two is about as far as these shit-chucking *gibbons* can count. They are parasites in our society and they don't deserve the freedoms they demand, and which we have been stupid enough to grant them.

D\_\_\_\_\_ shrugs her shoulders and picks up the empty cup and walks out of the room quietly.

- Girl doesn't know her own arguments, does she?

Sandy seems a little gobsmacked. Her silence says it all. I speak up.

- I didn't think you were very fair on her, David. She has her opinions.
- Then she really ought to learn to express them better, shouldn't she?

The American pulls a crass face.

- David's so right. Look at the mess they made of Zimbabwe. Or what they are doing to the South Americas. I mean, what else is the point of South America?
- Or South Africa...
- ...or South Africa. These coons aren't fit to run a convenience store. Really, I thought you might be more sensible about this.
- She's right, you know. Fit only for the market or the boxing ring. Or the circus.

A short pause. Then she sniggers and adds - ...or the trees.

They laugh at the cleverness of it all. Sometimes I wish the Fireman was here again.

## XXVI

The Fireman is here again. He looks distraught, distracted by the visions in his mind from which he can never flee. A lifetime of service without any real thanks from anyone. Poor bastard. We feed him whisky and keep him as quiet as we can, but it's not enough. He'll stop anyone for long enough to tell them of the latest horrible thing he saw, with those mesmerising, bedevilled eyes of his. *The way corpses explode in the heat...how someone black with flames can still scream...how bones sound when they burn...*

We try and humour him but it's far too long in the day for him to be fixed. He's a lost cause now. So we give him drink and thank him for his service. I even once heard Hitch - hardly a lover of the working man - say that he was a *good sort* and that *he was a martyr for all of us*. Hardly the cattle capable of doing nothing very well, we all thought.

The singing gets a bit louder and a bit more boisterous as we reach the off-colour lyrics of some of the verses. Sandy knows all the words but refuses to sing them, choosing instead to squeeze my hand in time to the accordions and the piano as they play. I'm scanning the room for the man we came to meet, but I don't see his face. Who I *do* see - to my improving sense of *chagrin* - is Alain, lost in conversation with someone who looks so much like a young version of Hetty, but who was too open of features to be her. They seem to be getting on quite famously.

I tire of Hetty easily. She's loud and overbearing and has a tendency to be a hypocrite, shouting down people for doing something she does all the time herself. In a rare moment of wit, the Brash American said that she was the sort of person who would advocate for veganism yet still have shares in the slaughterhouse. Sandy and Hetty had a stand-up row in Charles' restaurant one night over her political views which were at once Libertarian yet which reeked of benevolent Liberalism. Confronted with the obvious contradiction, Hetty gave away the fact that she thought they were one and the same thing, which hardly sits well for someone allegedly schooled in political theory as she claimed. She does have a kind streak, but you are always thinking that this kindness will have to be repaid at some point in the future, either to buy silence or to back her up in one of her stupid lies about her life, normally signalled in conversations by her discreetly shared raised eyebrows, followed by a nod that always feels like a cue.

I dated Hetty for a few months, but mostly because I had no other options at the time. We were both living in London at the time and found that we were only a few streets apart, so we went to shows and restaurants together. She had a taste for the distinctly plebeian at times. She liked cheap wine because she could buy more of it, and preferred the types of proletarian eateries because the food was cheaper and, in the end, 'it all comes out the same way'. She hated theatre but loved cinema. She read very little, but had a surprisingly wide knowledge of European film of the 1940s and 50s and its eventual influence on American cinema. Just to please her

and fulfill a lifelong ambition of hers, we went to the straight road just outside that little town in Kent and recreated the long walk scene between Joseph Cotten and Alida Valli.



For the shortest while it almost made her happy. What perplexed me the most is the way she carried it through completely.



I was surprised, I admit. She walked straight past me, never breaking stride or character for a second. I had to return to London alone and only heard from her three days later when she called at mine to say that she was now *out of character* and that it had gone magnificently. So magnificently that it seems she chose to celebrate it with Lucien and spend the last three days in her apartment with him. The only reason she came to mine was to congratulate me on the set up, and to ask me for thirty pounds so she could buy some wine and groceries. Of course, I gave it to her. What else was I to do? The thoughts of her and Lucien robbed me of focus for days. Maybe even weeks. I was distraught, distracted by visions in my mind from which I could never flee.

I think glasses with the Fireman and feel our kinship grow.

- You thinking of Sandy?
- No, I'm not. Actually I am thinking of Hetty.
- You miss her?
- No. I tired of her easily. I dated Hetty for a few months, but mostly because I had no other options at the time. We were both living in London at the time and found that we were only a few streets apart, so we went to shows and restaurants together.
- Sounds like fun.
- Not particularly. We have divergent tastes.
- How so?
- Well she liked cheap wine because she could buy more of it, and preferred the types eateries where the food was cheaper because, in the end, (as she put it) 'it all comes out the same way'.
- That's horrible.
- She also never really got over Lucien either. I was a sort of go-between.
- Everyone has their price, you know.
- Well, if you want to sell your services, I'm not willing to be the price.

The Fireman gives a rare grin.

- Look at yourself. They have a name for faces like that.

After I leave I realise that I still could make the five fifteen appointment that I was putting off, but then realise on top of that, that I was only putting it off because I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I stop at a payphone and ring the apartment and find Sandy there alone, making our dinner. I tell her to stop - she's not much of a cook anyway - and join me at Zolo's. They make a terrific round of Coquilles St Jacques there which we both love, and the Muscadet Sur Lie has that fabulous fizz on the tongue that only makes you want more. Cunningly, they serve up the bread and the wine far in advance of the entrees, so you eat bread and drink wine with some complementary charcuterie and vinaigrette salad and end up ordering more wine and bread for the food. Sandy seems a bit put out by my

assessment of her cooking, but she comes to meet me anyway, sitting at the table we always occupy there, far in the distant corner within the receding light.

I am overjoyed to see her, worried for inexplicable reasons that she will walk past me and out the back door. I stand up and hold her, and her previous sense of resentment - if ever existed - melts away. We order the wine and drink it together with the meats and the breads just as we always have done, glad to be in the same time and place as each other, in that ever-changing circle of happy coincidences that keep the constellations turning and the Earth moving.





1. Order



2. Chaos



3. Substance

## XXVII

Lustig left us behind at the fruit market to speak with Monte and his friends, so Sandy and I went to dinner with Demilla ourselves. In a way this was a relief, as her conversations exasperate us- when they are not about herself and her many travails, all of which sound self-inflicted, they are with other people's wealth and other people's relationships. She has little regard for her own, of course.

Demilla is an expert on all things. Fair, she shows some degree of knowledge here and there, but for the most part it's all put-on bullshit and sometimes needs to be called out that way.

- Oh, how I love *sheftalies*, don't you? I've had them so many times, I've memorised the recipe. You make them from minced beef and mix that up with cinammon and parsley and some onion and serve it from a charcoal grill. Honestly, you would *love* them. I met a cook here when we were here years ago - a little out of the way place you'd *never* find if you were a tourist...

The waiter gently corrects her, as he is still in earshot.

- Madam, they are actually made from pork or lamb, never beef.
- Oh that sounds like a *delightful* variation. Shall we try them?

Sandy and I exchange glances without looking at each other. Then she is off on some pointless rant about how hard done by she has been in respect of her mother's estate, where she was only left forty percent of it, instead of the fifty five she thinks is owed to her. Her siblings don't deserve any more. - They both work, so why should they be given anything?

She hasn't lifted a finger in years, and has a way of talking to service staff to remind them that she considers them as mere servants - adjuncts to her important life, like maladjusted mechanisms whose bearings have to be continually altered to ensure they function as she wishes and requires. In the streets of Paphos later she points us the way towards the hotel, never having been in the town before this evening. She is wrong by three blocks, forcing us to backtrack. As we walk through the darkening street we see a cafe closing up for the night, the staff stacking chairs on tables.

- Oh you *must* need an ice cream, don't you?

...and she steams off to them to speak in broken Greek about how we are needing ice cream and how they should stay open. They look at one another and point to their watches. I try to aim for clarification.

- Look, it's OK....we really don't want a....

- These lazy bastards won't stay open. Something about having to *close up*. Surely they can see we are customers? Don't they *want* trade?
- We don't want ice cream. It's fine.
- What? So why did you want it a minute ago? Are you trying to embarrass me?

She makes a dismissive gesture to the staff and we walk off. I can feel them staring after us, one action now branding us all as entitled tourists from somewhere foreign in both senses of the word.

We walk the rest of the way in silence, guided by Sandy's unfaltering ability to sense direction. We pass by a small black and white newly-painted hotel with the sounds of gentle music and the smell of good food lingering in the air from within. She enthuses about it.

- Oh, that's the Mutton's Hotel. I've heard so many good things about there. We really should stop in some time.
- Actually, the sign says 'Dalton's Hotel', I point out. The hotel's *art nouveau* style lettering is tall and hard to discern.

Sandy covers her face with her hand to stifle the outburst of mirth which she manages to ingest with great expertise, hiding it as a cough. However, none of this breaks Demilla's stride, even if she knows.

- Yes, well it has *great* reviews...

And we walk on without further comment.

Shortly after, we come out at the junction immediately next to the garage which is opposite our hotel. I suggest we go in for a drink, so we file into the hotel bar which is crowded and noisy. Finding a table, we get three gin and tonics, though *her* gin and tonic has to be from a specific type of English gin ('not that green bottle stuff you hide under the counter...I know what you are like') and a very specific type of American tonic. Sandy sometimes thinks she does this to avoid taking part; if they cannot formulate the precise concoction she demands then she will refuse it, and not taking part gives her something to feel superior and hard-done-by at the same time. She once turned a drink down because '*the ice wasn't cold enough*'. I think she does it just to give herself fuel for complaints to make her feel justified in her constant demeanour.

She blathers to Sandy about her ex and how appalling he was to her. I allow the noise of the bar to overshadow the sounds she is making and to take in the people around me. Everyone is incredibly dark and incredibly serious looking. For a noisy bar, the noise isn't generated by *bonhomie* at all. It seems to be animated by serious discussions with serious faces. Sandy makes a point of fiddling with her bag's content and allows Demilla to take this as a sign of distraction, so she gets up

to find the restroom. I wink over at Sandy and switch my and Demilla's drinks to see if she notices. Sandy laughs.

- How on earth can you stand listening to her?

Sandy did tell me that she had a great streak of kindness, but I said I thought it was a ploy for showing off her own style of mannered munificence that should leave everyone else feeling in her debt. It's true she paid for a plane ticket for Sandy when her business was faltering and needed her help, but that gesture - whilst generous one - was not to let Sandy enjoy a holiday, but to get her there to do work which she should have been perfectly capable of doing herself.

Sandy leans over, about to answer when Demilla returns and sits down quickly.

- The toilets are a fucking *disgrace*. I blame the arab cleaners here. Lazy, all of them. I used to hire arabs to clean for me but they made more mess than they cleaned up. You know they used to use my bedsheets to peel *mangosteens* over? *Mangostains*, I think they should be called. They *knew* what they were doing, I'm sure.

I bet they did.

- So what are our plans for tomorrow, I ask.
- Oh I think we should rise early and go to some of the little food stalls down the coast and see what they do for breakfast? That would be better than sitting in this place and watching the white people, don't you think?

She has promised this ethnic gastronomic tour for ages, but for reasons I have never quite come to terms with we always end up somewhere dreadfully *high end* instead, ending up paying for a German chef's impression of what the local cuisine should taste like, based on a travel show he once saw on some Dutch repeat channel.

- Sounds fine to me.

Sandy nods in enthusiastic agreement that comes without her eyes vouching for it. Her tenuous links are more with Lustig these days, so she just puts up with this. I had to remind her that they were actually at school together and that Lustig only came as an afterthought. She doesn't thank me for that.

Demilla is shouting for table service which arrives eventually. She orders another round and waves the used plastic straw from her first drink in the waitress' face, saying that these have been *banned* on the island already so why are they still using them? The waitress blanches and moves away. The order takes a while to get here. When it arrives she then asks for a menu, but the waitress says that they don't serve food here, just bar snacks.

- Not even *ice cream*?

No, not even ice cream. She turns to us and gives us both a *this place is hopeless* look and dismisses the waitress who doesn't look back. The gin has a cloud to it, which makes me think that someone has spat in it. With or without evidence, I pass on it. She drinks hers, looks into space for a second then declares that they hadn't used her specific gin and tonic recipe, so she marches up to the bar to complain.

Sandy and I exchange another glance without looking at each other. Why spend your life complaining about *something* when it makes you incapable of enjoying *anything*?

Later that evening, after I had stared into space for a while, Lustig arrives. He has brought along two of the *Limmasols* who have pronounced Russian accents and shaved heads. He seems unaware of their true nature. We chat amiably, but I am on guard all the time. Sandy, meanwhile, is still trying to counter the other's twin obsessions of failed relationships with impending divorces that beg for messy financial settlements, and actual wealth. The similarity occurs to me that neither she nor Lustig's friends are interested in working for their money at all, being much more willing to take other peoples' once they had done the hard business of acquiring it. Lustig doesn't seem to pick up on this at all.

One of the bald guys says that he is actually Catalan, which I find hard to believe. I test him with a brief *en quin hotel us trobeu?* and he seems not to understand a word of it. He speaks to the other bald guy a couple of times in what seems to be *French*. Imagine a Catalan doing that? The other guy has an even weirder dilemma - he seems to have taken a shine to Demilla, which makes me think his grasp of English is less tenuous than his judgement of women. To be fair, she doesn't seem to be reciprocating completely, but then again it would be hard to know what she felt anyway. Someone mentions the Frenchman but it seems he has failed to appear, something that clearly irritates.

The gins continue. She's forgotten her special recipe obviously, as I saw them all being poured from a bottle of Gordons and she has lost her ability to complain. Sandy is sitting in her usual sphinxlike state of isolation, watching us all with a cool look of detached amusement. Monte joins us, along with his wife who is a silent, striking, sultry creature. We seem to be the biggest party in the bar which makes me wonder if we worried all the others away with our noise. Or do they know Monte?

Demilla is holding court about her many times in Paphos. Her ability to exaggerate has now grown into an ability to simply make stuff up as the booze flows, and nothing involves Lustig's name so we are unable to verify any of it. Others show up, all of whom know Monte and some of whom seem very deferential to him. Eventually I draw Lustig aside when we are at a bar visit.

- So who is Monte? Is he some sort of big noise around here?
- Who him? No. But you deal with him if you want to be dealt with.
- Huh?
- He's not the local gangster he thinks he is.
- Then why are they all scraping to him?
- Because he's the local gangster that *they* think he is.
- So it's all a put-on?
- More or less.
- How did he manage to acquire such a beautiful wife, then?
- Oh Zia? Yes, she's pretty impressive to look at but she's another shill. She claims to come from some royal stock but in truth she is just another person with empty pockets and deep dreams. She latched onto him because she believed he could provide. He took her on as a sort of camouflage. Weird sort of relationship.
- Very.
- How did you meet Sandy?
- Oh you know...travelling here, there and then.
- Are you serious about things?

I've always wondered about that sort of remark. Like you might be in some sort of *comedy relationship*.

- We're not making any assumptions, I guess.
- Right. The best way. Demilla and I have been together two years now, and I'm loving every minute of it. She's brilliant and beautiful, don't you think?

His pause makes it clear that this is a question needing an answer. Or an opinion needing a bit of validation.

- She's certainly interesting, I muse.
- Some people seem to treat her really badly, but she's a good sort. And she is great to travel with. None of the nonsense with locals or with any shops or hotels. She can speak eight languages. Can you imagine that? Her mother was an Austrian related to the Habsburgs, and her father was of some type of noble birth in Italy, plus he was a boxing champion too. She went to school in England, France and Hungary. Quite a life.
- It seems so...
- I think...I think one day soon I am going to ask her to...

His reverie about matrimony is cut off by a cry from the table. It seems the non-Catalan guy made a move on Demilla who promptly felled him with a left hook worthy of a prizefighter's daughter. He lies prone at her feet, face up, weakly waving his arms in front of him. He's out cold.

- Sorry, she says to Monte. - I know he is one of yours but I am not having that. I was taught that move and I've put it to use a few times.

Monte is aghast and gets the Catalan to haul the other away. Sandy and I exchange looks, this time making eye contact. We say nothing because, even if we did, we wouldn't know what to say because we didn't really know what we were thinking. Our group attracted the attention of others around us. Two Japanese girls come up and try to introduce themselves to Monte in fractured English, a language Monte doesn't grasp even now. Both are very made-up, softly spoken and have a wild assortment of clothes on that are designed to give the appearance of disarray but which in fact are clearly carefully chosen. The taller of the two girls is wearing a fake US military combat jacket with stencilled words on the back and sleeves. One the back it says **CAN THE MAN? ARRIVAL CAME AROUND AND NO ONE NOTICE!** which makes *no sense* to me at all, other than it giving a cool effect of having English lettering on faux Western clothing. Their eye make-up looks like it took them hours. Anything but to look like what they really are.

The Catalan and the other are away now. Monte and Zia- who has now arrived - are talking animatedly with some locals. Sandy and I sit off to the side, listening intently without giving away the fact we are really interested. Lustig is less subtle, craning around to hang on every participle of every syllable. Demilla is floating about some place, though who knows where. Zia is taking a detached view of the Japanese girls who appear to have a greater interest in Monte than they ought, or at least that's the way I read it.

Myself, I am thinking about the fruit market again and what we should have bought for tomorrow's breakfast. I'm sure Sandy is thinking the same thing entirely. The pineapples looked really good. *In this country, the fruit eats you.*

- No, the rent is not *too high*. If it was set 'too high' then it would be unpayable and then there would be no point. You can set it *high* but should always avoid overcharging. If I did that I'd be cutting my own throat and I've never done that.
- Sure, but you're not exactly broke, are you?
- Yes, but I let out a load of places to a load of people. You don't throw all your eggs into one basket and hope they'll stay in one piece, do you?
- So what happened with Gregor? I thought you were both tight.
- Oh him? He didn't pay up. He could have, but he chose not to. He was renting three apartments and two offices.
- Why three apartments?
- He has a wife and a mistress. They know about each other, so it's cool. He just needed places to separate things out.
- So why three?
- He needed alone time too. I think he was also cheating on them both anyway.

Sandy holds her glass up and smiles. She needs a refill. I haven't had one in an hour so I take hers and get two more at the bar. The barman looks exhausted.

- You want the special kind?

I assume this is a reference to the variety Demilla asked for.

- No, just give us anything you have got.

This seems to please and relieve him in equal parts, so he starts off with his limes and his shakers. I see that the idea of equal measures here has not found any traction; he's throwing the drinks together by eye. A cool and emollient voice comes from behind me.

- What are you having?

Zia has silently walked up behind me and is surveying the array of half empty bottles along the gantry.

- Sandy and I are on G and Ts. You wanting one?
- Sure, count me in.
- Make that three, will you?

The barman nods.

- So when did you last see Bryce?

I was expecting her to say that.

- A few months ago now. We saw her in Vienna, along with David.
- Really? I thought they hated each other.
- Well, not so you'd notice this time.
- How come?
- It was a sort of party thing that she threw. Sort of...intimate. You ever been to anything like that?
- I think I'd sooner die.
- Funny enough, I think Sandy felt that way too. We were just invited in, but had no real idea what to expect. Anyway, while stuff was going on around us I saw David and Celesta together.
- Wow. What of the American?
- Oh she was there too, looking pretty bored by everything going on.
- She's a racist, you know.
- Actually, that might be one of her more *endearing* traits. I cannot find much about her to like.
- Did you know she wants to move to France with David and live there? She has some guy there who has offered them his chateau, for a price.

- She'll get someone else to pay for it, I bet.
- Oh David's pockets are very deep. Remember, his family goes back a long way.
- A long and *larcenous* way. I am not so sure they are as supportive of him as you may think.

The drinks arrive. Chin chin. Clink. We stay at the bar.

- So how long have you been with Monte?
- Well...it's pretty complicated. We're not really a couple, though people think we are. We live together, but not actually *together*. I have my own space and my own life.
- And your own wealth?
- Some of it. I've heard the stories that people tell about me, about coming from exalted blood and the likes. All nonsense, and likely all put about by Monte. He likes to think of me as his cover.
- For what?
- For his aggressions.
- I'm not sure I know what you mean.
- You were speaking to the Catalan?
- Yes, I was, though I don't think he's Catalanian.
- You're right. He's actually Dutch. And he and Monte are *much* closer than Monte and I will ever be.
- Ahhh...I see. So he tows you around as what...scenery?
- More like a costume, I think. He appreciates the 'scenery' but only in that he can see what other people like about it too and what it must make them think of him. I just pick up pieces from him and he pays my way. He's a brute, but he is kind to me.
- I'm glad to hear it. Are you staying with him?
- For now. I have my plans to move on to go back to Italy, but for now I'm happy here. Maybe a couple of years?
- Chin chin.

Sandy slinks up, takes her drink -with melting ice - and haughtily returns to the table. Zia grins.

- Oops?
- Ah, she'll be fine. I drift in and out of conversations anyway. I cannot be expected to sit with them all the time.
- What does Mika have written on her jacket? It looks like it should make more sense than it does.
- It doesn't. It's just English words.
- She's deep trouble, you know.
- You know her? I thought she was just a drifter here.
- No...she and Soka are big problems. They are sisters. Their father is a problem for Monte up in the North.

- Are they spying on him?
- In a manner of speaking. The furthest they got was in sharing Monte's bath one night in Athens.
- They just look like young girls.
- All very mannered. Mika is nearly thirty, but Soka is older. They dress well and starve themselves for the occasion. Their faces are a tribute to the power of cosmetics when used in abundance that even their manufacturer had no plans to envisage.
- Who do they represent?
- The *Bolas*. Their father is from a line of *Yakuza* I am told. Don't underestimate either of them.

I watch Sandy across the bar, staring at me. She seems less than happy. I try to remain detached, but smile across at her, together but not together. I try to look as though I am not completely aware of what is happening, but she knows I know and I know that she knows I know.

We took a taxi across town to the Frenchman's house. Sandy elected to stay behind and keep tabs on the others. Zia and Monte seemed to disagree so only she and I made the journey.

- You know Bryce well enough?
- I guess so. As well as most, I suppose.
- She's opaque.
- She guards herself but in such a manner that really reveals her insecurities, I think. She overdoes it at times. She's opaque but at the same time has a streak of the transparent. Why do you ask?

Zia watches the traffic pass in the evening.

- No reason, really. I just sense we'll be in conflict soon.
- About what?
- She hasn't picked that battle yet. Are you hungry?
- Starving.
- Let's go in here.

She picked out a small roadside eatery which seemed to be doing a pretty good trade. As we walk in she turns heads. I feel that I am in her reflection.

- The menu's pretty barren.
- Just bring me a jug of beer and whatever the cook recommends.
- I'll share what she has ordered.

The waiter slides off and brings us water, bread and salad to start. Zia picks at it.

- You know the Frenchman?

- On and off. He kept the tower for David once. He had some pretty odd parties there. Why do you ask?
- Just curious. He wanted to marry me once.
- Oh really? You and he were...?
- Hardly, really. I was just looking for leverage against them.

Leverage. It's always about leverage with these people.

- So, did you speak to *the American*?
- No, but it was under some weird circumstances. We were in Vienna.
- Yes, you said so...in that old house of theirs? You know she owns it?
- I did not.
- Yes. She and he bought it from the pocket change left over from the sale of the place in Montmartre. Excuse me.

A distant voice in the passing sounds:

- *Where do you think I've been?*

She takes a call.

- Sorry, that was Dominic. He was wanting to know where we were.

Never heard of him, but I play along.

The food is delivered to us. Small bowls, something like bouillabaisse.

- Every time he calls me I sort of shrivel inside. What were we talking about?
- The American selling Montmartre.
- Oh yes. Well, she flogged that off to the President's niece as a way of getting to her father. Pretty amusing.
- The French President?
- No, the American one.
- Oh...him. Have you ever met him?
- A couple of times. Just socially. He's another one in Dominic's orbit. Everything about him has that smell of corruption to it.
- The President?
- No, Dominic. He just emanates a malignant sort of bonhomie. The President was just entranced with him, though.
- How do you know?
- Well, Dominic once said to him *James, you know how much I admire you and take the lead from your thinking...* which stroked some part of his viscera I'd rather not think about.
- How did he...

My words are cut off by me noticing a familiar face across the room. Marco.

- Are you OK?
- Yes. Just someone I'd sooner not see again.
- I have an idea. Do you think you can drive?
- Not sure. I've had a few of these. What about you?
- I'm sure I could, but I'd sooner you did.
- Alright then.

I try not to catch her face as we leave. *Be back soon, Sandy.*

Darkened streets, weirdly deserted. Swishing over rainfall. Trying not to drive too fast, but the power in the engine was hard to deny. German engineering.

- Nice car, I say.
- Yes, I bought it from a singer.
- Really? Who?
- Bonnie Tyler.
- *Bonnie Tyler?* Really?
- Yes. Nice car. Runs well. But every now and then it falls apart.

We both laugh and drive down the dim street, turning off into a side road off a Y junction, between two high sided buildings whose purpose I wasn't able to make out. She points to a parking area where we stop and get out. The first emblems of the dawn light sneak out from behind the tall offices ahead.

Inside, a long room with styled furnishings.

- I have a thing for the 1970s style. Tube seats and leatherette. Maybe it was the way I was raised.

I nod in agreement. Long shadows turn into the room as we sit ten feet apart. A decent Beaujolais too.

- Would Monte mind this?
- Monte wouldn't know anyway. This space is mine and mine alone. He doesn't even know where it is.
- Where are we?
- Down on the east side. Probably the last place he'd think of looking for me.
- Are you hiding from him?
- No, but I reserve that as an opportunity.

Phone hasn't even buzzed or blipped since we left. I check. Good signal too. I try to evict some unappealing images from my head. She has music playing.

*Plato the Greek or Rin Tin-Tin. Who's more famous to the million billions?*

*I am wondering just how I managed to get here. Not from the party. Not from Sandy. But from that council house in Dartford that I shared with mother and father who regretted me even being there. Lonely Sunday nights. The sound of faraway trains taking faraway people on faraway journeys. I see you. I hear you. Alone. Sounds on the bridge. Timed always to 8:50pm. Far away. The sounds of other people. Always far away. And now. This.*

My head spins a little as I struggle for a moment with the reality. Her phone rings and she takes it again, barely noticing me.

Later. Me to her.

- Does it amuse you to have me here?
- No, I just feel the need for a kindred spirit around me. I don't get that anywhere else.

Later. Her to me.

- Do I have a reputation?
- You do, yes.
- What is it?

Later. Me to her.

- This feels like a dream.
- It is. Neither of us is awake any more.

Later. Her to her phone.

- No, I'm sorry, but I haven't seen him in ages. I really haven't seen him. When I do though I'll let him know that you're looking for him. I hope he comes up soon. I hope he's OK. OK Sandy. Bye.
- That was a terrible lie.
- What would you rather that I had done?

Later. Me to her.

- Do you think we're doing anything wrong or do you think we're doing anything unusual because this all seems extremely dangerous to me. I really don't know how anyone is going to react to these new circumstances.
- What new circumstances are you talking about?
- This here - us being together like this and nobody knowing where we are or what we are doing or if we are alone.
- You really do overthink things sometimes don't you?
- Yes maybe sometimes...

- You really need to learn to let go and not take everything so seriously so often.
- I take Monte seriously.
- That is definitely your first mistake.
- You say that like you mean it.
- I know it.

Later, over coffee on the long terrace. Zia dressed in white.

- Have you ever seen a ghost?
- No. Sandy says she has, but I never know when to believe her.
- I have.
- Really?
- Yes, only last weekend actually. Monte's brother saw it too.
- Did he believe what he saw?
- No, he's a moron.

My phone vibrates on the metalwork of the table. It's her, presumably looking for me. Zia notices it too but elects to say nothing. She carries on discussing her unlikely experiences with a spectre.

- So how did it appear?
- A sort of dishevelled man. And he seemed confused, even disoriented. I had this theory that he didn't actually know he was dead.
- That's curious.
- Well, maybe those taken from life suddenly never get a chance to adjust to the new circumstances. They just think they are still alive and end up feeling lost and wandered.
- Curious. What told you he was lost?
- He kept repeating the same damned thing to me. Or to whoever he thought might be listening to him.
- Do you remember what he was saying?
- Yes. He was asking me something like *how many of them do I know* or something vague like that.

Oh.

- That's curious. I kind of knew someone just like that. But it was a long time ago.

The phone rattles again.

- You knew Audrey too, didnt you?
- I did. Actually, it was Sandy who introduced us at first. Through Monte.
- What was she like?
- A lot tougher than she probably appeared. A lot of that stuff was just an act.

- I never really cared for her much. Maybe I was misjudging her. Maybe I was jealous of the attention she got. I always thought she was silly and superficial.
- Anything but.
- And what about Celesta? She's another wild one, was she not?
- Now *there* is someone silly. She does a lot just for the shock value. Sandy loathes the sight of her. I think that has rubbed off on me too. She has some strange friends too. The little German ones, most notably. Those and the chinless brigade.
- Ah yes. David and his mob.
- *That woman*. The worst I've ever met.
- Celesta?
- No, *the American*. A bloody awful person. You know about her and Martin?

I sit up, more interested now.

- No, but I'd love to hear.
- She and Martin used to travel around Europe together while David was doing whatever it is that David does. He knew about it and wasn't at all concerned.
- Really?
- For sure. And he knew what they were doing together too.
- Good grief.
- The fact they both came back from a trip into Salzburg carrying exactly the same strain of clap as each other kind of tells you all you want to know about what they were doing. David was incandescent about that.
- So why did he let them go?
- He wasn't concerned about that. He was much more worried about them bringing back a memento of their journey. Rumour has it that he got it from some Romany whore in the town and gave it to the American but you'll never know the truth. The really interesting thing is that Martin disappeared for about three months afterwards and popped up again in Vienna, this time at Celesta's place where he was valeting for her boyfriends. I mean...what sort of a climbdown is that?
- Quite a slide. I assume that this all had David's hand behind it?
- For sure. He was never sure about Martin at all, really. He never thought he was committed to their cause.
- Are you kidding? *Martin*?
- He never thought you could trust a Prussian. I don't know. I never got the measure of anything that went on in David's head. I think he just saw Martin as a completely pointless bureaucrat who liked to create drama through paperwork. Quite an unattractive man. Very close to Adi, of course.
- Of course. I guess that is what made him attractive to her.
- Oh probably. The weird thing is that for all that David had and lost, he always looked to Martin and Adi as if they were better than he was. Crazy really.
- So Martin really did get away after all?

- So I am told. He's not long for this world, though. You can tell that from one look at him.
- Does he still see Celesta?
- From time to time, but she has grown tired of him I think. She let him loose again and found him an apartment a couple of streets away where he has been living quietly for a while. I think David gave him some money, mostly to keep him quiet. Between the two of them they have kept him quiet for a while.
- I saw him at a party in the Westminster about a year ago, I think. I always wondered how he got into the country.
- Oh he comes and goes as he pleases, I think. He has a passport in the name of Bryce and poses as her cousin, or so I am reliably told. All quite crazy, really. I'm never sure why she tolerates the situation with him.
- I saw her at home last summer, I think it was. Her place in Salisbury?
- No, she sold that. All she took with her was the K12. She moved.
- Well, that was the last time I saw her. I don't remember much about it. Only that she was walking about wearing only a shirt and tie.
- Sometimes I thought she was such a juvenile show-off, but there are other times I wondered to myself if it really was something with her - that she had no concept whatsoever of what we'd call decency or decorum, and saw nothing whatsoever wrong or even unusual with the fact that she was exposing herself like that. Anyway, in time most people got used to it and took it all in their stride. When did you last see her?
- A few weeks ago, actually. In her place in Vienna. One of her parties. I was there with Sandy. It was...quite unpleasant.
- Oh dear yes...I have heard about them. Was the American there?
- She was. With David.
- Strange. They seldom go to these things together. They have their separate interests, it seems.
- Oh they were both there. I watched Celesta wank David off while she was sitting next to them both, looking mostly uninterested.

Zia seems interested by this.

- Really? That's curious. You know the Spaniard's girlfriend?
- The one with the...erm...unfortunate upper lip?
- Yes. She told me David was anorgasmic. No matter what she tried, he just couldn't. He later told Enoch that what tied him so tightly to the American was that she had some sort of technique which broke that condition. So if Celesta could do it, I assume that either she got lucky or that she's tighter with that awful woman than anyone would guess. Tight enough to share that sort of intimacy about her partner. It's a terrible admission, don't you think?
- I guess so.
- Frida even told me that David couldn't DIY, if you know what I mean.
- Really? Is that even possible?

- It was supposedly a psychosomatic disorder. Something about his ancestry or some nonsense like that. His whole family really were such a shower of fuck-ups.
- He seemed keen enough in Vienna.
- Well there you go.
- You think this is the root of his problems? You know...throwing it all away for her, buying into her extremism full time?
- I'm convinced of it.

A telling pause.

- Have you ever been with him?

She seems shocked.

- I'm not attracted to chinless men, you know. There is something about their self-importance that really grates with me. Anyway, when he and I first met she was already on the scene.

I let the obvious question hover in the aether between us.

- No, afraid not. I'm resolutely and tiresomely straight. Some people would prefer it otherwise.

The phone again. Demilla's number. I excuse myself, but not from the room.

- Demi?
- Where the fuck are you? Sandy is going *frantic*.
- She knows where I am. I'm with Zia at her place.
- Are you having a laugh? Monte will crucify you.
- Why?
- I refer my dishonorable friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.
- It's all very chaste, you know.
- You might be able to convince me - though you are not really succeeding - but you'll have to convince Monte, not to mention Sandy.
- Send him round, if you like, assuming he knows where we are.

Zia furrows her brow and points at the phone, quizzically.

- *Demi*, I mouth almost silently

She seems content.

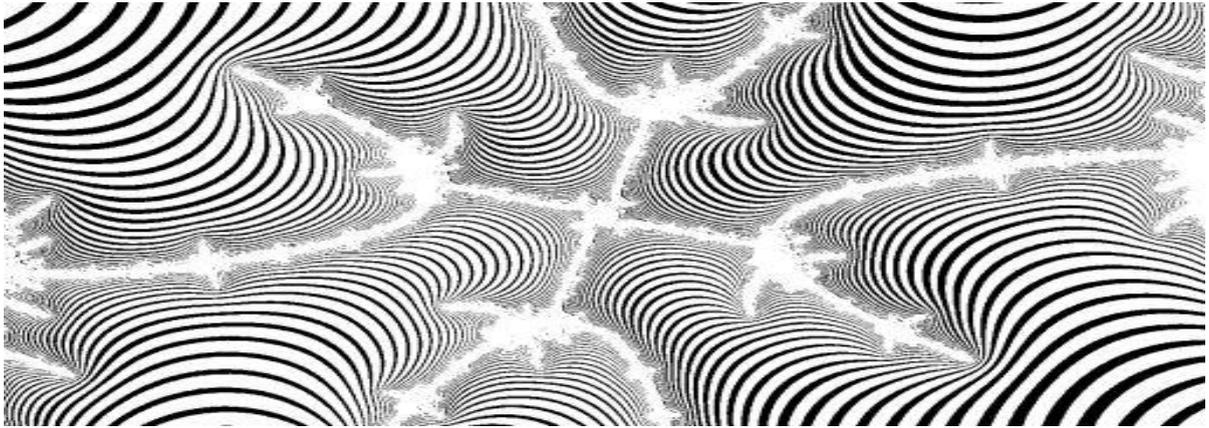
- Can you at least call Sandy?
- I guess so. Is she with you?
- No, she left for the apartment.

- Okay then.

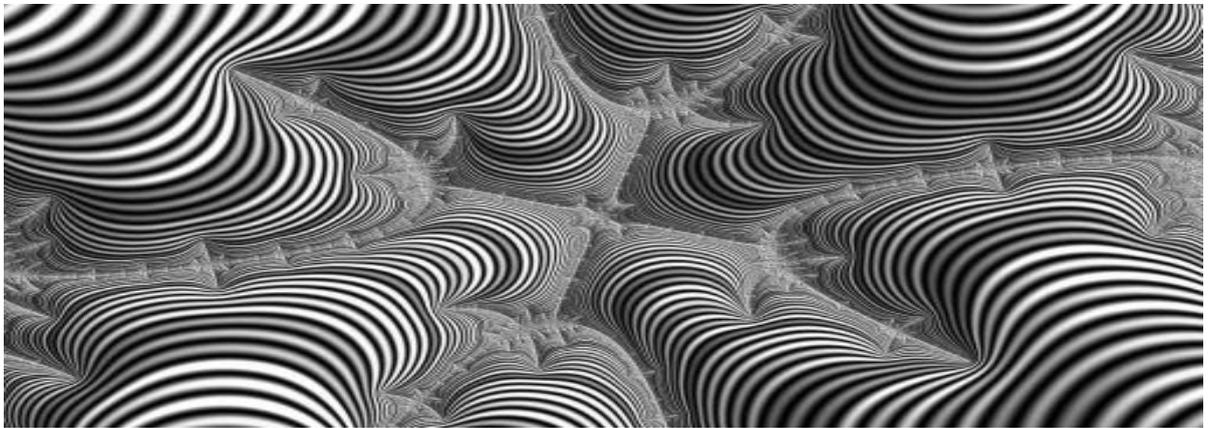
She hangs up. I smile up to Zia.

- Let's get breakfast. They do oysters on the terrace at seven, and we can bring some of that Muscadet.
- Let's go then.
-

XXVIII



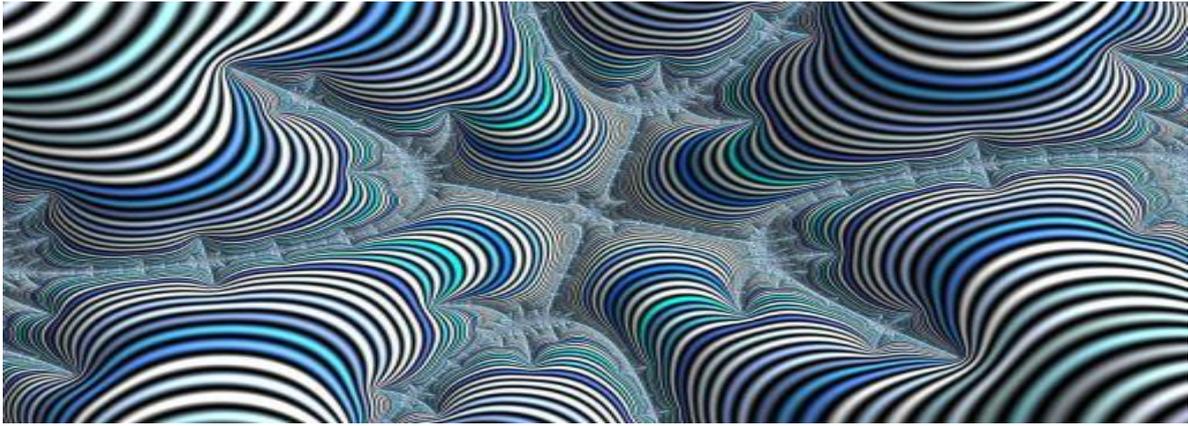
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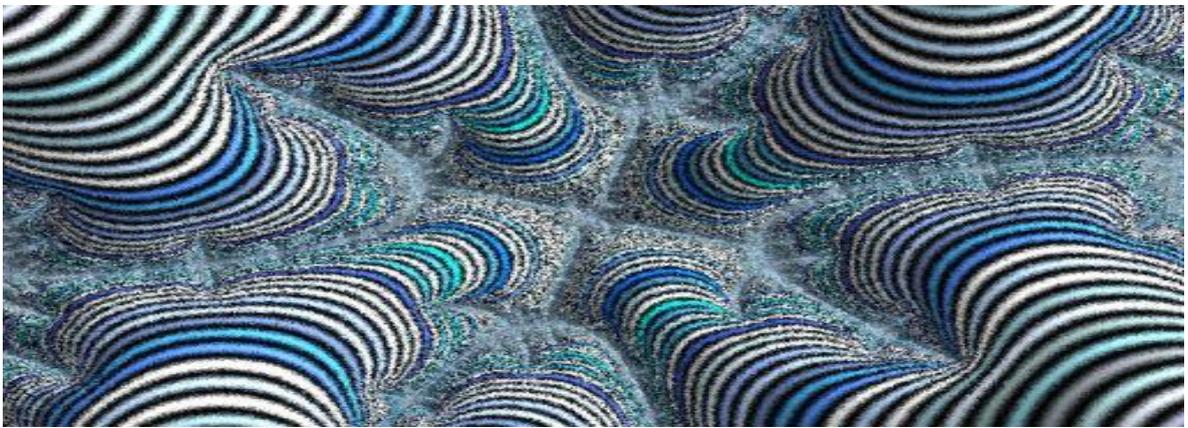
Potential



Actual



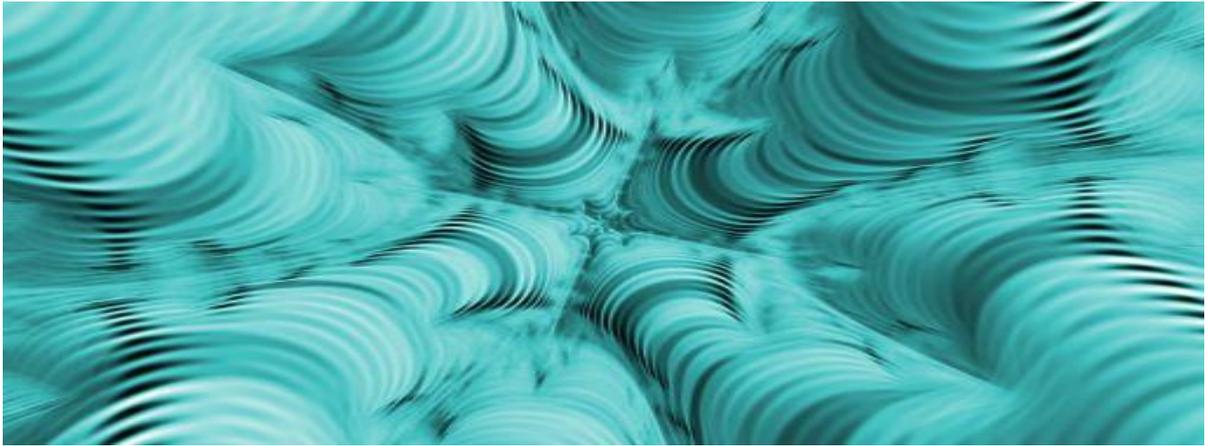
Realised



Experienced



Remembered



Recalled

## XXIX

- Oh well I think it's just a *divine mess*, say Hawtry. - But then again what do I know about anything anymore?

Sandy nods, sagely. The smell of old tobacco and dirty fingers is all too apparent.

- I mean, when did Enoch think he could *fucking paint*? Is this what happens to all great thinkers when they have run out of oil in the tank? *I must remember my muse.*

Hawtry is a revolting little Pierrot. We only know him because Barbara introduced *this little pissed cunt* because she wanted to move over to chat to Alain R\_\_\_\_\_ whom she had had in her beady sights for the longest while. Sandy loathes him, but puts up with him sometimes because of the stories which amuse her. I have to remind her that if you add together the content of his stories and subtract that from his time spent conscious then you'd end up with a very small number indeed - improbably small. Still, he amused her a lot.

- And look at this one! What's he called it? *The Marchioness*? What is he playing at?

I gaze at the artwork on the walls, trying not to be a part of his squawking unless our host should overhear us together, and assume I shared his low opinions of his gazetted ambitions.



We can hear him outside, listening in on us. His ambitions are to know without seeing and see without being seen. He'd make a fabulous *voyeur*, I think. Likely he is. I must check his guest bathroom wall for indiscreet holes.

Sandy taps me on the arm and nods towards the door. I subtly nod back. We'll give it all five minutes and then get out if we cannot excuse ourselves before that time is

up. If we are stuck here all afternoon we'll have to put up with the weasel all day, and that is something that would stretch my patience to breaking point.



He stinks of stale booze. How can anyone freshly drunk stink of stale booze? But stink of it he does.

- The man's a talentless arsehole, really. If he has *any* talent it's for covering up for his *lack* of any talent.
- I thought you liked him.
- I like almost no one, really. I don't think that's hard to realise.

Enoch waits. Listening and waiting. He's here just to catch you out, just like he did with Th\_\_\_\_\_, U\_\_\_\_\_, Tr\_\_\_\_\_, and most famously Ru\_\_\_\_\_ that weird day last year when he found them laughing over his talents. *He'll show them.*

- Enoch! *Love!* I was just admiring your...
- I think that will do from you, Mr Hawtry, if you don't mind.
- Oh please...it's *Charles*.
- Have you been drinking that foul stuff again?
- I'd be lost without it.
- You're lost - with *or* without it.

Sandy is right behind me. I can feel her shaking in silent mirth.

Enoch turns to me, his face very stern indeed.

- And I suppose *you* think it's funny too, do you?

I'm shocked.

- Far from it, Enoch. I think you'll find that I've always liked your work. Why else would I buy that one of Stechford Cross?

Enoch is a bit taken aback.

- You have it? I thought I had lost it! Oh great and good heavens....you have it!
- Of course I do. I bought it from Donna about five years ago. I gave it to Sandy who also likes it. We have it hung in the dining room.
- Oh my...what an honour.

Sandy emerges. Enoch's face lights up at her arrival. Charles is forgotten for now, so Enoch conspires not to notice that he is rummaging on his sherry tray for something to gulp.

- It was close to my heart. I really thought I had it lost. Come on, let's have some tea.
- Nothing but sweet sherry, Enoch?

Enoch's face darkens a second.

- *Cook* will have some in the kitchen more to your ruinous palate, I think.
- Oh *three bloody cheers* for cookie.

He's off in search of booze. Enoch pats indicates the armchairs and we sit. Helen brings the tea. We pour. We drink.

Enoch says that real horror only happens when the familiar is juxtaposed with the unfamiliar. On that, he's right.

We reflect.

We are not *good* people  
But we are not *bad* people  
Just *fortunate* people

Fortunate to be alive in these excellent years  
And fortunate to have an example to avoid in Charles

### XXX

- Ceremony fourteen has started. Please mark this time and place.

Glasses clink in silence. Have we seen this room before? A voice, recognisably that of the R\_\_\_\_\_ G\_\_\_\_\_, comes from the far side of the room within the meagre clutch of people drawn to my attention. Celesta and David are at my table. The floor show only holds my attention for a fleeting moment, but I turn away. Sandy stares, fascinated at them. There is a tired, low hush of voices breathing between the walls. We join it, in lowered tones that make us feel we have secrets to share.

- I hear you had a run-in with Enoch the other day?
- Oh not really. It was Charles. He was just drunk and stupid.
- You say that like it's rare.
- He's a certain and singular trouble, and mostly to himself. But he has his uses.
- Use. Singular.

Celesta smirks. I have to agree.

- He will never be what he once was, and that is what drives him mad, you know.
- Who, him or Enoch?
- Very witty, but you know they do see a lot of similarities in one another. Both are failures, but only one of them knows it for a fact. The other just doesn't care.
- Whereas it drives the other mad?
- He was driven mad by his own logic some time ago.

David seems distracted, quiet and distant. For once he shows some depth.

- He's miles away.
- *He and she* have had words.
- Oh what about?
- About him being here. Among other things. But this most of all.
- Why on earth is she choosing to be so....*picky* now?
- She's all about the leverage. She doesn't pick fights, she sort of dreams them up and imagines they are real.
- Isn't that very tiring?
- For her, I doubt it. But it keeps *him* on his toes.
- I don't think I could live like that.
- Why not?
- It's so...complicated?

She takes a gentle swig of the spirit in front of her.

- Is that not a bit rich coming from you?
- You confuse me.
- Well I heard an extraordinary rumour about you and Monte's girl. Was that true or did I just imagine that was real too?
- Oh who told you this? This was months ago.
- It was Lustig. You've not seen Monte since have you?
- Well no, but that's not because...
- I'd keep it that way, if I were you. He's not your biggest fan right now.
- Actually, nothing happened between us. We just ghosted a bit.
- He doesn't see it that way.
- Can't she set him straight?
- I would think that it has gone some way beyond that. No one has seen Zia in weeks now. We think she's gone back to France, when we are not imagining Monte beating her to death.
- Over me?
- Over *both* of you. You really made a bad choice.
- We just talked and drank, then went for oysters. All very innocent.
- Where did you go?
- She has an apartment in the town.
- Ah yes, the apartment she keeps from Monte's prying eyes. You starting to see the issue?
- I guess so. I never even thought it was a problem.
- With Monte, *everything* is a problem. He's a ball of paranoia. He thinks his enemies are out to kill him and his friends out to steal from him. When you're living the life you get lost in this sort of thing all too easily. When all around you are in competition against you then all you can ever hope to see are competitors.
- Even his friends?
- You met the Catalan?
- I did yes. Is he friend or foe?

She toys with the glass and smiles at the table.

- Well, since he has disappeared too it seems it's a bit of a moot point.

I furrow my brow and make it all too-obvious.

- Him and Zia?
- No, I mean *disappeared*. On what seems to be a fairly permanent basis.
- I'm confused. Zia said he was Dutch and was Monte's squeeze.
- You're pretty naive. Zia does tend to make stuff up to keep the audience happy.
- Well, she also mentioned you.

She looks up at me. I pause and lift the small glass with the yellow liquid to my lips. The liquor tastes like it's corroding my mouth. I wince.

- *Becherovka*. They love it here.
- It's like a brain haemorrhage. Who could love it?
- The Bohemians. They love it in Prague.
- I thought this was Vienna.
- It used to be. Now tell me what the exotic Zia told you about me.
- Well...she mentioned you and Martin.
- Oh. Just a sec.

She turns to David.

- How are you doing there, old sport? Enjoying the show? Two new ones tonight.
- Very nice. Very nice indeed.
- How's it downstairs?
- Oh pretty quiet, really. We'll see how things progress.

David is clearly a bit the worse for drink. She turns back to me.

- Poor soul cannot get off on his own, even. The American seems to help sort that out, which is why he's so tied to her. I'm not even sure if he and she are really in anything but the worst kind of symbiotic relationship where each gets what they want but at the terrible cost of being together. Isn't life weird. Hello - she's doing well...

I turn to my left to see Sandy watching the action in the middle of the room, oblivious to all around her. The glazed expression on her face, her unmoving concentration, and the steady movements of her hand up her print blue skirt makes it quite obvious she is masturbating intently. I smile to myself.

- She can be quite open about things when she needs to be, I explain.
- Oh no need to say anything round here. I find the fact people feel that secure to be both pleasing and comforting. If only we could all be like that. Is she like that at home?

I laugh quietly to myself at the thought.

- No, nothing like it. We live a very quiet existence. Almost modest.
- Yes, I've noticed her line of chat is pretty impressive. Anyway. You mentioned me and Martin.
- Well is it true?
- Hmm. What do you mean by 'true'?
- I mean 'is it true that you and Martin were lovers'?
- Hmm. What do you mean by 'lovers'?
- Oh come on...

- Well, if you're asking if he and I were ever *in love* then the clear answer to that is 'no' as I have no earthly concept of what that word means. If you are asking *did he stick it in me* then of course the answer is yes.
- That should make you revise your view of Zia and her audience, then.
- Maybe. But she doesn't understand what it was like.
- She said that you both came back from a trip into Salzburg carrying exactly the same breed of clap as one other.
- Guilty as charged, but we probably got it from the same person. We used to go to the Hotel Pascha quite often and find what we could there. Damn it all, how did Zia find out about that?
- Doubtless she has sources. Monte probably has tabs on everyone. He's an animal. Is it a secret?
- Just a discretion, that's all.

She drifts off in reverie, and mutters some words to David that I cannot make out. I turn to watch the action on the floor and am distracted by the faces of those around the space in the middle, all either watching or half watching the couple copulating in front of them. Well-dressed people in a well-dressed house with nothing better to do with their privilege than watch what's going on. It's like watching the city burn and do nothing about it. *I am too much to do anything about this.*

Movement to the right. A figure has walked in, carrying a glass, a brash walk carrying her. The American says nothing but sits at the table and appears to be completely distracted. Neither she nor Celesta exchange as much as a glance. David doesn't even seem to break his conversation with Celesta. I'll never understand them. What's peculiar about all of this is that she is seated next to them both without a care. She doesn't even seem to want to watch the show in front of her.

*Deja vu?*

I look across the room and see two figures I remember. One is wearing some sort of bobble hat. How curious. I almost recognise them, but then I forget.

- I say, do you think you could...yes?

David has removed his semi-flaccid member from out of his trousers and exchanges a smile with Sandy, presumably bonding over what he thinks are their shared needs or something. Celesta looks to me but I shake my head a little which gives her the cue to take it in her hand and massage it slowly back and forth.

- He is going to need all the help he can get, I think.
- So it appears. What about...?
- Oh she won't do this. Besides, I think she is distracted.

She's right. The American isn't even flinching, more concerned with looking around to see who is seeing her there. It's the act of not just *being* but in *being seen* that has the pull for her. She flat-out amazes me sometimes. I occasionally imagine the wicked and fabricated upbringing that could possibly have created such a hideous, needy creature, then remember that I actually know one of them, and he was not as bad as I had feared.

Sandy by now realises what is going on and turns in her seat, unsmiling, her face reddened with her intent, now boldly hitching up her dress a little to give him a full and undiluted view of what lies between her legs as she strokes herself rapidly. David makes a short groaning sound.

- Oh yes that works very well...

Celesta sees what Sandy is doing and watches David become very much more engaged. She winks at me, knowingly. She seeks direction from David.

- So shall we keep this up?
- No. Not this time. Just relief, please. And quickly?
- Your choice.

Still the American does not as much as blink. Sandy by now has found an intimate rhythm which Celesta expertly matches. David says something unintelligible and with his eyes fixed unashamedly between Sandy's pale thighs he creases forward with a lurch, ejaculating fully and copiously across Celesta who takes it all in her stride.

- And there you *are*...

Having seen this, Sandy opens her mouth wide and in silence, inhales sharply and spasms hard next to me as though in the grip of a voiceless fit, the intensity of her orgasm removing any sense of privacy or reserve from her demeanour. The American doesn't even stir from her reverie. Another voice:

- Ceremony twelve has started reaching its limit. Please mark this time and place.

A small gong sounds in the distance, in another part of the house. A short pause of breath-regaining quiet. The couple on the floor appear to climax too.

- Terribly sorry about that mess. You can probably tell it's been a while...
- Oh it's perfectly OK. I do know how these things work, you know. It's not the first time.
- No, of course not. Silly of me to think that it was, I suppose. You need a flannel or something?
- No, no. Just leave it. There will likely be others later.

Sandy, flushed, has rearranged her clothing and looks like she might regret her recent actions. She pulls down her skirt and sits upright again, taking the liquor in front of her in a single draft. It makes her eyes water almost immediately, so I know how she feels inside; the pain of the liquor no match for the pain of her immediate memory. Celesta is quite breezy about it.

- Enjoy yourself, my quiet one?

Sandy nods and smiles politely, as though thanking her for dessert.

- That was very beautiful. Thank you.

David sounds almost grateful, if gratitude ever escaped his lips. A snatch of conversation from behind me:

- ...can the man?
- ...arrival came around....

And the voices are gone. Sandy stands up and leaves the room smartly. Celesta raises an eyebrow.

- Some people react like that. Don't worry about it. It can be an *overwhelming* feeling. I just thought she was shy.
- She's certainly quiet. A bit like *this one*.

David is referring to the American. She seems to have barely moved.

- I should go see if I can get her back.
- Oh wait a while. She'll be back. She has left her bag, after all.
- She's inclined to be forgetful, sometimes. Especially if she's feeling stressed.
- I didn't realise she had that streak of exhibitionism in her.
- Oh she's full of surprises, you know.

The floorshow clears. The man walks over to someone across the room and starts up a strangely lop-sided conversation with a clothed man I barely recognise. The woman is wound into a sheet and comes over to our table, sitting down and quite openly taking one of David's cigarettes from the packet. He smiles languidly.

- Have you all met Amelia?
- I think we met awhile back in the flat in London?

She blows the smoke over everyone's head, her manner factual and abrupt, lacking what would masquerade as tact and using her front as a secondary sheet around herself.

- Well yes, that was quite a while ago. I seem to remember that *this fucking racist* was there.
- Oh steady on, Amelia. Like you say, it was a while ago.
- And you were in your cups, I suppose.
- Well....yes.
- Lots of truth is spouted through drink, David. *Lots*.

The American looks across at Amelia, trying not to be noticed that she is noticing.

- Who had the action, then?

Amelia nods towards the wet mess over Celesta's outfit.

- Oh that was David. It was quite the bucketful.
- Well *someone* has him on short rations. You'd think the war was still on. Not that you'd know which side *he* was on.
- He needed a kick start.
- A kick start. *Marvellous*. It's actually kind of flattering, in a way. If only he wasn't such a weird fish.

The American taps the table with a rigid forefinger.

- Actually, he wasn't watching *you* at all.
- Oh well then who? Surely couldn't be you, could it?

I can hear her fizz from across the table.

- She left, as a matter of fact.
- Can't say that shocks me. He has a dreary history of that happening. Did you ask first or did you just claim privilege?
- Actually she was quite the willing partner.
- Then why did she run?
- I've really no idea. Maybe she saw you coming.
- I think most of the room did.

General quiet laughter in the dim table. Smoke hanging limpid in the air like a displeased light fog. I think the American senses she is losing this battle, and she is not used to it.

- Well at least I don't have to pay my way on my back...
- And *that* is a hugely ironic statement that I always felt was beyond your gift to realise...

The American stands up, her face creased by fury.

- You say that again.
- I am not doing *anything* that you tell me to.
- Shows how... She falters - Shows how weak you are then.
- Yes thanks for that. Three out of ten. Sit down before you...

Her words are cut off by the American throwing what's left of her drink in her direction. To her credit, she doesn't even flinch.

- You done?
- Totally. David, follow me out of here.
- I can't. I really want to stay. I think I will need to do it again.
- If all you need is  *jerked off* then I can do that. I am sure that I can find a bauble for you to lose yourself to while I do.
- No, I'd sooner stay here - it's why we came along, isn't it?
- I'm only just *here*, David.

Sandy quietly reappears. She sits to my side, holding onto me. I look to her and she only nods. That tells me all I need to know about how she feels.

- David, I think your *bauble* needs taken away from here.

Celesta's words are quiet, measured and hostile. David stands up, adjusts his shirt a little, and leaves. In silence, the American follows him from there.

- Some people need to know where the real power lies, says Amelia.

Celesta shakes her head.

- *That woman* will be the death of us all, someday.
- How so?
- She's indiscreet. And brash. And worst of all, she doesn't know she is either of these things. How the fuck did old money like him find new money like that?
- I don't think anyone is sure. I also wouldn't rate *old money* that highly. This club doesn't have a very high admissions barrier.
- You need a drink, Amelia?
- No thanks. She gave me hers.

We all laugh. It's funny. And its relief of another kind. The voice:

- Ceremony twelve has closed. Please mark this time and place and return to us later.

The small gong sounds again. People seem to stir as though something has ended. Some get up and make for the door, chatting amiably. Sandy takes my hand

quietly, guiding me without movement. She needs to get out of there, and right now I fully understand why.

## XXXI

Lying in the dark beside her, our bodies pointedly not making contact. I listen for her breathing, trying to tell if she is asleep, but she is breathing silently, as though dead. But I fear she is awake, that inside the dread of the silence she will say my name, accusingly in the dark, as a cue to skewer me at my most vulnerable place.

So I make it seem like it will be futile. I lie as still as a frigid corpse, not giving the least indication that I am in any way sentient, and that I am completely unreceptive to anything she may have to say. I breathe steadily, making the sounds I hope I make when I am sleeping.

The darkness presses around me like a filthy, cold blanket.

My eyes adjust to the depthless blackness around me to see that the space next to me is empty, and that she has got up silently. To do what? To check something on me? To write an email to her sister telling her what a shit I have been to her?

No. I hear her pissing around aimlessly in the kitchen. She assumes *rather a lot* and needs to be brought back to the ground, and quickly.

Drawers open and close. Cutlery is moved. Plates stacked. Is she emptying the dishwasher? Is she busying herself to avoid thinking of what is preoccupying her? Should I stay here, or will the magic of the light in the kitchen break the spell of my own fear? Maybe I should get up and confront her? Face the unpleasantness square on.

I get up and walk towards the kitchen, but find that the sounds have stopped. Instead of the full light there is a dull glow which I know is coming from the halogen.

Inside the room, she is sitting quietly, and fully dressed. Car keys on the table. An open bottle of wine. One glass, half-empty. Sandy looks up at me, her face completely unreadable, pale and impassive.

She speaks.

- *We have to talk.*

**PART TWO**

**THE DEAL:**

**HEROIN, THE GREEN MAN AND AUDREY**

## XXXII

Time slows down again.

The Associate tries her best to look chic and complex, but we all know she is essentially just another gangster. If you assume that then the rest will follow.

She stares over the lip of her beer and glowers at me, because she's had a few. And she doesn't remember anything about the start of the argument. Sandy sighs in despair in that *boys-will-be-boys* manner she has adopted and fiddles with her phone, checking out our itinerary tomorrow. Is this France? We left Holland on Thursday 21st.

Sandy tried not to notice

- So, if you were given this to do then how would you carry it out?

I wish she'd not try that air of menace because it's not working. I can smell the Harker's poison all over her.

- Well, I'd stash it elsewhere?
- Such as?
- I don't know. I have some properties along the river. No one would ever think of looking there.

The Associate seems to think little of this plan.

Demilla sits to one side, in Sandy's line of vision and just into my periphery. She is shaking her head imperceptibly. I am definitely failing this test.

We're in her apartment. The rain is hammering down outside.

- Right, we have someone who is prepared to cross over for us.
- Okay...who?
- An insider. They'll play the white man for us. But we must play back. And there are considerations.
- Such as?
- He's fourteen.
- Oh give me a break!

### XXXIII

It's all just *biscuits and crackers* to her.

I keep one eye on the GPS. Sandy isn't far away from us now.

- If we keep driving until dawn then we'll make it in time.

I'm understandably nervous.

- Really?
- Yes, really. It's a lot of money and I don't know just how comfortable I am being in charge of it all.
- It's in a bank, for crying out loud. *They* are looking after it, not you.
- You know what I mean.
- And anyway, Demilla is taking it afterwards. If we can pry her away from Monte for long enough.
- Demilla and *Monte*? Are you being serious?
- They've been like that a while, it seems...
- ...does....?
- ...and before you ask, no, Zia has no idea. So I'd be careful about mentioning this arrangement to anyone.
- Oh their life together is pretty complicated. They're not really a couple, though people think they are. They live together, but not actually *together*. I am pretty sure Monte is gay anyway.
- It's not that much of a secret. He and Alexander shared a bed at my place at least twice.
- Who's Alexander?
- His real name is Toshiro, but he prefers Alexander. He's Mika and Soka's handler. He's pretty terrifying, even by my jaded standards. I think Monte is with him hoping some of that shine comes off onto him.
- Is Monte all mouth?
- Well...not entirely. He has his moments.
- Zia seems unafraid of him.
- I know you're fond of her, but she is something of a fantasist. Just be wary of her.
- It's actually not like that.

She smirks at me.

- Try that again.
- I'm serious.
- I really don't think Sandy would mind, you know.
- I think *I'd* mind, thanks all the same.
- Ohh...*deep and meaningful*, is it?
- Just because you don't understand it.

- Just keep your eyes on the road, your hands upon the wheel.
- *Ride the snake*, they said. *Seven miles*.
- Yes yes. And the blue bus is following us.
- Actually, that's 'calling us'.
- Whatever.

The car sticks to the road. German built. It moves and adheres. Silently from within, silently from without. A fresh cargo in the boot. It's all just *biscuits and crackers* to her.

- Does David even suspect?
- David wouldn't care, trust me. He's got his eyes on bigger and better things.
- Such as?
- Oh this and that. He even thinks he could make the next *Hip Priest*.
- He's kidding. No one cares for him that much.
- He certainly doesn't feel appreciated, for sure.
- And where is the American?
- Who gives a shit?

We cruise through the French mountains at speed in the darkness, the soft glow from the dashboard lighting up her features, taking the hardened edges off them and making her seem almost attractive. If only she weren't this unpleasant all the time then we'd maybe have the basis for a beautiful friendship.

I keep one eye on the GPS. Sandy isn't far away from us now.

#### XXXIV

We set down someplace near the border. She insists on having breakfast, but I am conscious that we don't have time on our side. Which she patters about with her waffles and coffee, I retreat from her hearing and call up the Controller. He seems much less pleased about this than me.

- Does she have no sense of urgency?
- I don't think so. She marches to her own tune.
- This isn't a game, you know.
- I know.
- Who is driving?

Metaphor? Literal?

- She is.
- Get the keys off her and get her back to the car.
- How?
- By *any* means necessary. This is a lot of money.
- It's in a bank, for crying out loud. *They* are looking after it, not you.
- Just do it. We can worry about the dirty washing afterwards.

I flip it off and walk back to her on the yellowing terrace.

- We have to go. Now. Give me the keys.
- You can tell *him* that I haven't an inclination to rush.

The click of the catch going off raises her eyes from the table.

- Any means, he said.
- Good grief. We're quite the gangster now, are we not? Does Sandy know?

She hands over the keys, expecting nothing more than a threat. That's when I shoot her in the face.

Back to the car. Dialling with one hand.

- Mission accomplished.
- Good stuff. Is she a problem?
- Only for whoever finds the body.
- Oh. I see. So she was an issue, then?
- Only briefly. Is the boy with you?
- Yes. We're keen for us to meet.

You and me both. I flip it off. Immediately it silently vibrates on the seat. It's Sandy. She knows, I am sure.

## XXXV

David and Monte. Monte is quietly incandescent. David seems confused that anyone would ever even think about double-crossing him. He does the talking. The noise from the distant beach party is distracting me.

- There seems to be a misunderstanding. We need this commodity quite quickly, otherwise we will have a problem with distribution. You understand?

I do, but I don't let it show. I let him continue unchallenged.

- If we lose it then we stand to lose millions. And Monte here doesn't care to lose, and neither for that matter do I. So can we have a sensible discussion about what we are doing, because I for the life of me and mine have no idea what you are up to. Now....where did you meet?
- In Jordan.
- Oh. How troublesome.
- Well yes David. It was.

Monte taps his watch impatiently. David sees this and nods, an open palm calming the younger man. *Stay back, I have this one covered.*

- What were you saying about the value of the cargo we are carrying?
- Only that it's all just *biscuits and crackers* to her.
- Oh. I see. *Bryce*. Christ, that is tiresome.

He turns to Monte.

- Seems we have little choice but to go along with this. What do you think?

Monte thinks whatever Monte wants to. He needs little coaching. His menace is all show, and I know it, and he knows I do. David is too gullible to be aware of that.

- I think I'd like to wring his neck.
- Yes, well that would be *fairly* unwise. After all, we don't know where the deal is being concealed, do we?
- I think I could get that out of him.

I realise the strength of my position, and also realise that even the chinless David could work that one out. It's so apparent that I don't have to remind them. David turns back to me.

- You know, my family has centuries of secrets kept and never revealed. This would just be one other. It's not really that important, is it?
- David, your family hates you.

- Yes, I know but we can all get over that. After all, I'm the Golden Child. The Chosen One. The Defender of the Faith. What can *you* possibly do to me? That my family loathes me and would see me just vanish into the sea is nothing new to me. I couldn't care less. All I am worried about is that we get out of this intact, right?
- Sure.
- So. Let's be sensible. Tell me where the stuff is hidden and we'll move on from there, and we all get rich and no one gets hurt.

I pause a second.

- Okay. Then I'll tell.
- Splendid.
- But not you. I cannot trust you at all. I will only tell it to someone so utterly beyond reproach that I would share any secret with them because they will not have any interest *at all* in exploiting it.
- Oh this is tiresome. I assume you mean Sandy?
- Oh good grief no. She is staying out of all of this stuff. No, I need someone much more opaque.
- Then who?
- I'll only tell the Harker.

Monte seems confused.

- *Who?*

David blanches and twitches slightly, as though I had slapped him.

- *Are you out of your mind?*
- I will only tell the Harker. No one else.

My phone rings. Zia. Right on the money. To the second. Without looking I take it from my pocket and slide it over the table to Monte.

- *That's for you.*

He looks utterly bewildered and stares down at it. Then he picks it up and she speaks to him. David still seems incredulous.

- It will kill you. It won't even do it consciously. It just *will*. Surely even you know that. It's not one of us. It's *beyond everything*.
- Hence my reasoning. What use will it have for all of this? He will be our go-between.
- The Harker isn't a 'he' or a 'she'. If you don't know this then you're in for trouble.
- I'm doing it. Set up the meeting.

Monte rails at this and cuts off the conversation.

- Who the fuck put *you* in charge?
- I did. How's Zia? I hope she's not suffering.

Monte eyes me up silently. His lips barely move.

- When this is all done, I'll come for you and I'll destroy you.
- No. When this is all done we'll all be so relieved that it's over that no one will be destroying anyone.
- So why be a prick about this?
- Because I don't trust him.

I jab a pointed finger in David's direction, then face him.

- Set up the meeting.

## XXXVI

The room is pleasingly dull and bare. Celesta and the Associate sit around the table with me. Hidden tapes spin. Eyes all around.

The boy is fourteen but looks twelve, eyes fixed on the pale blue tiles of the floor in front of him. He's soaking wet and visibly shivering even though the room isn't cold. He knows he is about to cave in. I suspect he has been beaten by Mira's thugs. I've seen them at work before - they are brutal.

Celesta leads.

- You know we have to talk?

He nods.

- You said you'd tell us everything, didn't you?

He nods.

- And you know that it's dangerous, and that you're going to have to tell us things about people who you think love you?

He nods.

- But that we will protect you, yes?

He doesn't move.

- Yes?

He nods, mostly - I think - because that's what he thinks we want to see.

- Right. Because they don't care for you at all. Only we do.

He doesn't move. I suppose it wasn't actually a question. She isn't good at this active interrogation stuff at all. I take over the line of questions. I know she'll be pissed off, but that's too bad.

- Where can we start?

He shrugs, silent.

- Can we start with the business about the phone call last week? The one between your boss and the **Green Man**?
- He's not my boss.

His voice is sullen, but he doesn't make any eye contact. Curious for one who feels so brave. I press on.

- So when was the delivery due?
- Next week, Tuesday at seven.
- Morning?
- No, night. He has a huge truck where he can carry this stuff easily. No one will suspect. No one will know a thing.
- Who is he meeting?
- P. I don't know his real name.
- And what will they be carrying?
- Are you the police?
- No, we're going to take it back off him. It's ours, you see.
- You'll need guns. Lots of them.
- No, we won't. We have other means. Better means.
- He knows a lot of people. Heavy people.
- We know. We're heavier.
- You lot?

He scoffs.

- Your boss isn't quite the man you think he is.
- He's not my boss.

I press on again.

- Do you know the **Green Man**'s name?
- No, but I have met him. He's...dangerous. I mean like....*really* dangerous. Like fucking crazy.
- Describe him?
- Little guy. Wears a green suit - woolen or something. Smells bad. Missing teeth. Do you know these people?
- I might, but...
- How many of them do you know?

I am taken aback. But I move on.

- It's unimportant. What I need to know is what you know about the **Green Man**. Have you spoken to him?
- Yes.
- And did he have any accent?
- No. He sounded...rough. We're all afraid of him. All of us.
- Lucien too?
- Yes.
- Is your boss frightened of him?

- He's not my boss.

I move on this.

- Okay. So how would you describe him?
- He's just him...y'know.
- Does he pay you?
- Yes.
- Do you get a lot?
- Some.
- Does he pay you often?
- Sometimes.
- And does he tell you what you have to do?
- Yes.
- Then how is he *not* your boss?
- He's just not.

This isn't going well.

- What else does he do for you?
- He takes me places. Sometimes.
- Like where?
- His place.
- And what do you do there?
- Help out.
- Doing what?

He looks up a little.

- Is he going to know I'm here?
- No, not a chance.
- OK.
- So what do you do to help out?
- Carry stuff for him. Speak to others. Run errands. Messages. Are you the cops?
- No. Ever do any heavy stuff?
- What do you mean?
- Have you ever hurt people for him?
- No, never.
- Who does that for him instead?
- Some Polish guys. He has about four of them. They do that for him.
- And he pays them to do that?
- They'd do it for nothing, I think.
- Why?
- I think they really enjoy it.

I look up at her. She shakes her head a little. The Associate speaks from across the table.

- What else does he give you?
- Dunno.
- Drugs? Booze?
- Sometimes.
- Girls?

His face reddens.

- Sometimes.

Hmm.

- Does he bring them to you?

Celeste's question unnerves him.

- Dunno...
- Oh you *must* know. Does he bring you girls?
- Well...
- Come on!
- Yes....sometimes.
- How often?
- I dunno. Sometimes...
- Once a day?
- No!
- Once a week?
- I...I dunno...
- Once a month?
- I dunno...sometimes

We exchange looks. His face is bright red.

- What do you do with these girls?

No answer.

- Or what do they do to you?

Still no answer, until...

- They're not all girls. Not all of them.
- Oh? Boys too?

He looks up, suddenly electrified into response.

- No, not *boys*. I'm not like that.
- Well...not girls, not boys? Then what? Cats and dogs?
- Some of them are older. Women. Grown up women.

Now we are getting somewhere.

- So can you name them? Describe them?

He bites his lip.

- One was foreign. An accent or something.
- What language did she speak?
- Oh it was English. Just her accent was strong. And she used words I couldn't follow. Stuff my *dad* might have said.
- Like what?
- You know. Racist stuff. Horrid stuff, really. But she thought she was able to get away with it. She sounds like she is in films.

*The American.*

Celesta shakes her head, *sotto voce*:

- *That woman* will be the death of us all, someday.

I focus on the subject.

- Anyone else?
- Yes. But isn't one enough?
- Not to us.
- Come on son, be brave for us. Be a *fireman*.
- I've always wanted to be a fireman. Ever since I was little.
- Well now, be a fireman right now. We need more names.

All the time I am thinking *leverage, leverage, leverage*. I am thinking of Monte's smug face and how much I want to close it forever.

- Give us names, son. You promised to help.

Mumbling, face down.

- He can't know. He'll kill me.
- I know. But give us names.
- Two more?
- Names...

- *Zia and Sandy*. That's all I know about them.

My world collapses down beneath and takes me with it.

## XXXVII

Sandy looks up at me, her face completely unreadable, pale and impassive.

- *We have to talk.*

I sit down. I admit that in private I have been dreading this moment for years. And now it is here. And I have to face up to it.

- Is this going to need a drink?
- I don't know. I don't think so. I won't be here that long. I'll leave soon.
- I see.

There is a pause between us. An unspoken chasm that doesn't need to be bridged with words. She looks at the tabletop, trying to choose the right words.

- *This isn't the life I wanted.*
- You never said.
- That's my fault. I think our problem is that we are not good people.

I find that an odd remark, but I let it drift. And she stands up, lifting her coat from the back of the chair and draping it over her arm, taking the car keys from the table.

- One last thing for you...

I hang on her words...

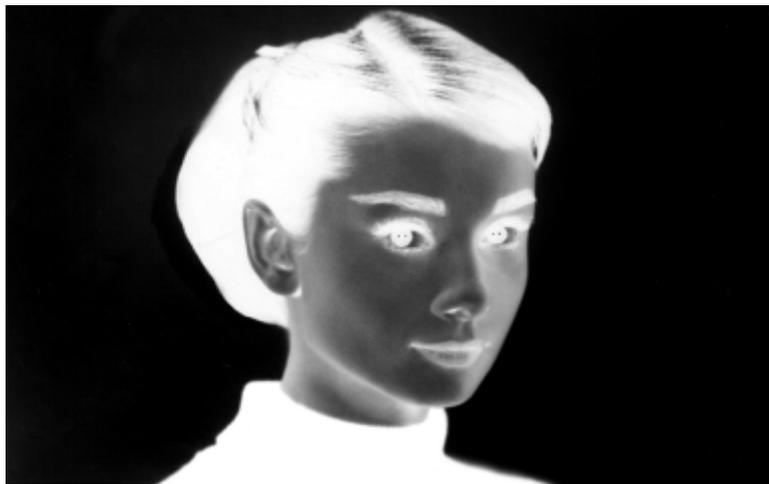
- ...I left you something. Under the floorboards of the front room. Use it carefully. I'd have that drink you spoke about before you dig it up, though.

And she was gone.

### XXXVIII

Audrey was kind to me. She let me stay at hers while negotiations took place. I told her that she had saved my life on more than one occasion, and that this was another. She would hear nothing of it. We grew close.

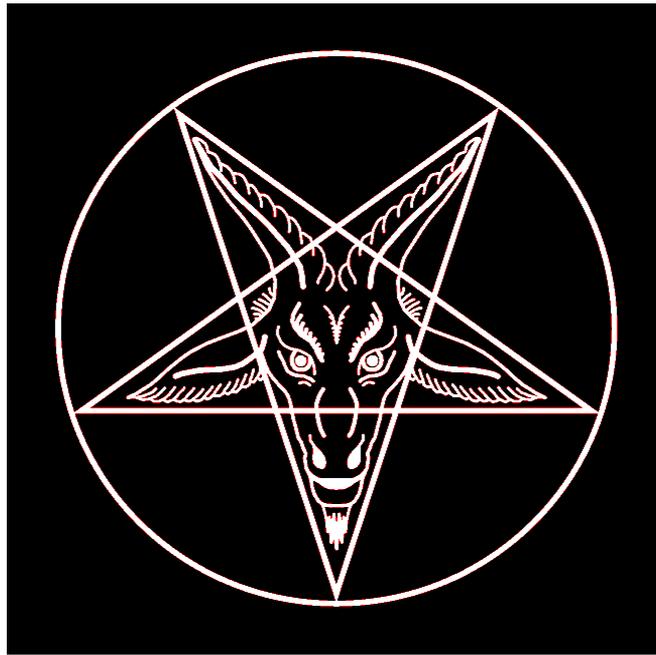
Close enough to give me reign over her little apartment. When she was out I'd familiarise myself with the place. That was when I saw the scans, hidden in that folder on the bureau disguised as bills. My heart stopped. Then I remembered her limits with me. Then I realised that something was troubling her as much as it was troubling me.



Five days into my stay with her the phone rings, waking me from a deep and warming dream. My instinct is that she was back, but then I hear the voice at the end and I know what is coming.



From far away, a face. And a movement towards me. It wasn't her at all. Something moves inside me and tore parts of me out.



- Don't keep the Harker waiting, will you now?
- That isn't my intention.
- One bit of advice for when you do meet him?
- Go on.
- Use all your well-learned qualities.

The phone goes dead. I haven't been given a time or a place.

I imagine time and place will come looking for me.

I square up to my future.



## XXXIX

I am the saint of the greatest approachable mediocrity. I am the repairer of damaged goals. Look upon my works and wonder in a cloud of hostility, ye indivisible!

Come forth to me, thou hopeless and unprepared! Fall upon my protecting cloud and let it cover you in my significant acceptance of your shortcomings! Thoust never quoted nor ever sought? Be thou mine and let me give you the keys to the here and evermore!

Approach me, Prelate and tell me of your hopelessness! Bring me the saddened and the lost and let me fill them with my forgiveness. Give me your nonsenses and misapprehensions and let me stitch those torn dreams into one again.

Put on that crown of aspirations and cry unto me thy greatest fears. Give me the false truth that plagues your daily debacles and hand it into my all enveloping wisdom. Cry unto me thine speechless horrors, thine areated wisdom and thine farcical truths.

Come forth, you damage participants and vent to me that which causes your fall with fright.

I am the saint of the greatest approachable mediocrity. I am the repairer of damaged goals. Look upon my works and wonder in a cloud of hostility, ye indivisible! I am nothing, just like you are!

The Prelate approaches the plastic dais and squares up to me.

- Are we still putting up with your nonsense, Spaniard?
- Actually, it's *spanner*.

The blow threatens but never arrives.

## XL

- Well. *That* was a fine journey.

Sandy looks across the rain-dotted sea in silence. She doesn't seem to hear me over the roar of the ship's engines as we pull in towards the open arms of the harbour, gulls swarming behind us to pick up whatever we are trailing in the breadth of our wake.

- It could have been better, says the tall man beside me.

I have no idea who he is. He just seems to have arrived by magic. I try not to focus on him at all, but his nagging presence makes me think he is either looking for a fight or an introduction. So I offer him neither.

From the coast, given some moments to take bearings from the open point up on the summit ahead, you could just about make out the sprawling remains of what Hitch humorously called *The Pile* but which we knew was actually the run down remains of the manor. Behind that, hidden from sight and at the end of a steep climb, lay the cottage where we were heading for. It seemed so far away from this aspect that it felt we'd be walking for ages yet. Maybe that's why she was so quiet. I know how that must feel. Enoch felt the same. Then I remember Enoch died here, and how sad they all were for him.



I reserved my pity for the fading Margaret. Still. No harm done.

The boat curves across the lapping slow tide. Others pick up their bags and move to the deck where they will disembark. Sandy looks up at me quietly and takes my hand. The tall man muses on the weather.

- If this gets much worse then there'll be no good shooting to be had. Maybe just a couple of bags.

I smile without feeling. One hand in my pocket, closing around the cold metal, the other in Sandy's warm grip. This is going to be a long day.

## XLI

I wake in a daze and reach out beside me to find the bedclothes pushed back and the fabric cold and empty. I'm afraid there will be more days without money again. Only enough for bread, cheese and that cheap wine with the silvered cherub on the label. The windows are wide open, the morning air bracing enough to wake me, still enough to only move the thin drapes in tiny increments. I leave my arm stretched out across the empty space in the bed where Sandy ought to be, mulling over thoughts of absence.

My other hand rests on the back of Audrey's head as she takes me into her lips, her elegant shape framed beneath me, only partly visible in the particulate light of four in the morning. She's still dressed, laying on her side partly across me. She means well. We all mean *well*. Always her lips: never her sex.

I think thoughts about absence and loss in that blazing summer of 1947.

Is this a first? It is. She is impossible to resist, so I release into her.

- And there you *are*...

Did I hear that voice? I imagine I did.



Then I remember I didn't.

## XLII

David and the American again. I can hardly look her in the face now. So shocking to realise that she was worse than I had ever imagined. We're seated at the dining table at *Château Le Bois* and everyone seems to be mostly in fine form. David is muttering something to George who is taking little notice, really. Monte is sitting next to the American and seems to be having a fairly intense conversation. I strain to hear, but only pick up phrases concerning shipping prices and cargo schedules. She is nodding throughout. Sandy looks across the table at me and subtly taps her watch. Time to go? Time to act?

Monte starts up the usual diatribe about the costs of trade, and David gives his opinions if only to make him appear to be a statesman, which of course he isn't. I think Enoch is giving him silent cues from across the room, but I cannot see him clearly enough to tell. It wouldn't be the first time, though.

- Don't you think you're being just a trifle *melodramatic* with all of this? I mean, if you are relying on the tariffs being lowered or at least *less high* then you're essentially basing your business on a gamble, and we all know that's a case of blind luck most of the time.
- I don't like to take chances, as you know...
- So why are you complaining? If you know this is the way the game is played then why on earth are you complaining when the game doesn't turn your way?

No one else would dare to address Monte this way, but frankly David's right, and Monte - not being stupid - knows he cannot say anything to contradict him, so he remains quiet. Then he realises that to do so would imply that he is being chastened, so he opens his mouth to speak, but realises that nothing he can say will make any difference, so he closes it again. Behind him I see Zia, quietly enjoying this sudden turn of events. Her glee is all too obvious, yet expertly contained.

- So, if you need to have some favours pulled I am sure Viv and Albert can do something about it? They likely know someone who can slip this stuff through, assuming you have you deal in this stuff at all?
- It's a high yield.
- It's also a *monumental* risk.
- I know which palms to grease to keep it all going.
- Well, if *that's* the case then why not just stick it in the back of a pick-up and sail away regardless?

Mild amusement. Monte shifts.

- We both know why, David...

- Then we all know that you're in no position to complain. You're in a filthy trade with a filthy outcome taking filthy risks. That said, most business is filthy. Let me see what we can do with regards to the transportation.
- For...the usual considerations?
- Yes, well...

As ever, David is a diplomat, throwing Monte a bun when he realises he has defeated him completely. Good for him, even if I loathe him.

The American is deep in conversation with Cassius, maybe the most intent (and quiet) as I have ever seen her. Is there something between them more than anyone else suspects? As far as I know their main connection is that her father is in business with his company, but who knows with these people? They share a love of brutality and seem to have the shared conflicted morals of a rapist in a girls' school. At least David can finesse the situation better than most, even if he hangs out with some weird bedfellows.

I nod over to Sandy in that sort of 'shall we be going?' way, but she is paying me no attention.

Enoch taps the arm of his chair and coughs slightly, all whilst pretending to listen to Audrey. David flicks his eyes up and sees him, then ends the conversation. Enoch jerks a single nod and turns back to the conversation, all whilst Sandy sits across the table from them both, her eyes hardly ever leaving Audrey. I catch Sandy's attention once or twice and find her scowling back, as though she had found something distasteful on her plate.

*Well - I muse to myself - that's one mystery solved.*

## XLIII

Belvedere.

Back to the grind again. We are still upstairs when we hear the shouting from below. Just at that point, Finnegan knocks on the door and comes in with the breakfast tray and leaves it on the bedfoot armoire. The rain is utterly hammering down outside in noisy metal sheets. The voices of the estate workers are heard shouting as they get the vehicles into the byre before their interiors fill with water. More shouting from below overwhelms their voices.

- What's the racket?
- Oh sorry about that, sir It's the master - he has one of his *black dog* moments again.
- Oh dear. Are they getting worse?
- I'm not sure about that - maybe more *frequent*, sir.

David and his Black Dog.

A howl from downstairs:

- Oh those fucking *cunts cunts cunts cunts.....*

Finnegan shakes his head a little.

- I should really apologise.
- No need, chap - it's not something you can help. This must be difficult for you.
- It's very trying sometimes, yes.
- Has he seen a doctor?
- No. He refuses. He almost seems to *enjoy* it. Almost. He accepts his *melancholia*.
- Too bad. Maybe one should be called anyway?

The tall man leaves slowly and allows me a moment or two to listen to the frightening sounds coming from the chinless one downstairs. Two female voices are also heard; one is terrified and the other angry. I've no idea who is who.

Later I venture downstairs and find that one of the voices was that of the American and the other that of Audrey who had been paying a surprise visit. David was lying on the sofa, mostly in silence but sometimes turning over and voicing a note of such disaffection that it barely seemed to be coming from the same man. He doesn't really notice me being there so I elect to remain. I admit to myself that this is a bit of a spectator sport.

- *Oh fuck oh fuck*

The voice is muted as his face is thrust into the soft cushion, as though trying to stifle the thoughts that he was incapable of being pronounced. I imagine Celesta would love this, as David was forever saying that her inability to filter the ideas ringing in her head from visiting her mouth was the stuff of legend.

Audrey looks into the room and sees David prone, then looks up at me and raises her eyebrows as though to enquire for his welfare.

- *Oh cunt oh cunt*

My silent gesture in return is that of *see for yourself* and she rolls her eyes and shakes her head a little. Instead of leaving, she lingers undecidedly. David starts mumbling something about *making it go away* but who knows what he is babbling about. He pulls onto the blanket covering him, despite the morning sun streaming through the window, bathing the room in warm yellow light. He's oblivious. And Audrey looks simply fabulous. Distractingly so.

A woman's voice from outside:

- Will someone make him shut up?

David screams out loud into the soft fabric. It sounds like an animal being slaughtered by surprise. Audrey jumps and looks genuinely shocked. The voice from outside:

- David, *stop this unforgivable shit right now.*

He pays no heed. He turns to me, despairing.

- How come you're always so fucking *balanced* about everything?
- How do you mean?
- You're all settled and happy and so *fucking joyous* and here I am, throwing it all away for that *cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt*

His self-loathing and self-pity are not spectator sports.

- Oh you still have so much, you know.
- I have *fuck all* and you know it. Why the *buggering arse of Zeus* did I ever choose this life instead of the other?
- Look, old chap. You make the best of what you have and deal with it.
- But I had it and I threw it away. *Fuck. Fuck fuckity fuckity fuck fuck*

He turns over, buries his face in the antimacassar and screams loudly enough to start the dogs barking. He seems to be convulsing, but I realise it's just a temper

tantrum from someone old enough to take his own choices on the chin, but too ruined by delusions to ever fight for them. No wonder Sandy hates him.

I walk out and into the back drawing room where Audrey and The American are sitting. Audrey seems definitely upset by things, but the other woman just seems steel-edged about it.

- He isn't fit for the company of beasts when he's like this. I am so tired of it all. It's like living with a...*mad baby*.

Audrey tries to engage her.

- How often is he like this?
- Oh so fucking often it is becoming a habit. At least twice a week these days. Can you believe it? I've no idea what the matter is with him. Is it the booze? Is it the regrets? Is it an issue with his family? Sometimes I think that all that he needs is to be *fawned over* but that doesn't seem to be the case. God alone knows what is on in his head.
- It sounds like he regrets something?
- Oh that would be me. Once he was the Golden Child, now all he is is a debauched loser who hangs around with other debauched losers and pretends they have the market in fashionable snobbery cornered. And if it's not that showy pig Celesta it's the other *stripper pig* that has his mind in a boil. I have no idea why I stay here, sometimes.

Audrey and I exchange looks. We both know *exactly* why she does. She is the very essence of what she claims to loathe, and she knows it. Another scream from down the hall, followed by another bellowed oath.

- Oh to hell with all of this. I'm going outside.
- But it's utterly pouring with rain...you'll be soaked in a second.
- Good. Anyway, I'm going to the pool.

She opens the French windows and steps outside and, as predicted, is drenched in a lash of cold, unsympathetic rain in a heartbeat, but unperturbed she walks out to the pool in the west garden, the deep splashes in it visible even from this distance.

- She's crazy. She told me that she wanted to leave.
- I doubt she will. David is bathed in regrets and would probably be happier if she left, but some insane polarity is keeping them welded together. That screaming is just a spoiled child looking for attention, but it's hard to be too critical of such a disgusting performance as I think he genuinely feels like that.
- She's drinking a ton too.
- So is he. They really are in a completely poisonous relationship. The worst of it is that I don't care.

- Why not?
- I really don't like him much - he's a bore and a coward. And she is just *loathsome*.
- She has a softer side, but it never comes out. She can be kind.
- I think I'd find that terrifying.

From our vantage point on the sofa we watch her walk to the pool, kick off her shoes and pull her dress over her head, revealing that she was nude underneath. Even from here and through the haze of the rain her body looks like it has seen better days. Although slim she has a boniness of stature and her skin seems to hang off her inelegantly. She dives into the water within the grey stone pool which is being torn up by the incessant bolts of the stupidly heavy downpour. It must be freezing. She takes long slow strokes to and fro, crossing its forty or so feet with a relaxed ease at odds with her earlier demeanour.

- You really hate her don't you?
- Very much.
- For the way she treats him?
- No, I'm no fan of his, and I'd hate her independently of that. I just cannot abide her neediness.
- Just like him, you mean?
- It's a different strain of needy.

Knock at the door. Finnegan again.

- Apologies. I was just wondering if there was any news of...*oh....*

He sees her in the pool, her head just above water. The open glass doors letting heavy spots of rain blow into the room, wetting the fine lace curtains and darkening the fringes of the Chinese rug.

- I think she is looking for some time away from the noise, says Audrey.
- Yes, I think she is.
- You were looking for her?
- Yes, to see if there was any news of the doctor. I think she called him.

Audrey seems puzzled.

- She hasn't called anyone.

We stand and watch her in silence, her head just above the dark water, swimming slowly from one end of the cracked stone pool to the other. Weeds grow between the slabs. The dingy grey stone urns are covered in moss. Her clothes lie in a cold, soaked bundle by the side of the ruined steps leading down to the edge. The noise of the rain increases. A distant roll of thunder from above as the skies darken

quickly. The stretch of garden looks like it is set for some biblical epic, a deity's show of meteorological strength.

One of the estate workers runs out from the outbuildings to the side of the pool and shouts something at her, but we cannot hear him. They seem to be in some sort of a conversation, but what they are saying is lost to us both. Heaven knows.

She swims to the side and gets out, facing us, her body boyishly thin, her ribs clearly visible, showing an enormous amount of dark pubic hair. The estate worker unfastens his belt and kneels behind her as she gets on all fours by the side of the pool and looks at us directly as he takes her. Her expression is neutral, the only sign that anything is happening is the jerking of her body from his efforts.

Behind us, another muffled scream. I look back to her and wonder just how seeing this would affect the balance of his mind. Then I realise that he is howling a word and that word *may* be Celesta's name. Finnegan watches the couple outside without expression. Audrey has no idea where to look.

- You know, sometimes I think that this place is a bastard *madhouse*, says Finnegan.

#### XLIV

The meeting didn't last long. With one incapacitated and the other unavailable, the spirits were better than expected.

I looked into the Harker's empty eye sockets and told it all I knew. It neither accepted nor rejected what was said. I am not even certain it was absorbed. I just ignored the malignant odour and the slowly beating wings and said what was needed to be said. Then I withdrew.

I left the room, then left the building, took to my car and drove out of the city into the suburbs where normality was a disease shared by everyone and where I could regain my thoughts of my life, my ambition and Sandy.

I opened the car door and vomited hard into the gutter until the tearing pain in my diaphragm and the incandescent screeching in my head made me stop.



## XLV

The Associate is impatient.

We have driven to the apartment across the road from the real one. There is where we laid the stash. We waited for the call. She drums the table, then plays on her phone.

I take the air and inhale on an unaccustomed cigar from the rear elevated deck overlooking the slow industrial river. Such beauty in ugliness.

I watch back again at the frantic Associate. Such ugliness in beauty.

The stash lies in the wardrobe in the second bedroom beneath a sparse collection of disrupted clothing. We bought it in a rush at the market. The furniture was bought in a jumble at a sale. The flat is expensive yet fitted in a demented budget. It reeks of sudden artifice.

I return to the room. She is intent on ignoring me.

- Why are we waiting here?
- Whyever not?
- Whyever so? This place is hot.
- It's the plan. Sit down and keep away from me.

I lay across the soft and worn charity shop armchair and sing gently to myself.

- *It's my wife and it's my life....*
- You say those words one more time and I'll kill you, yes?
- I'd welcome it.

Later - across the road, a commotion. Screeching to a stop. Shouting. Guns and lights. She and I cower in the gloom and watch from the other end of the long room. Flashes of gunfire. Bodies produced. More arrivals.

- I'll do it.

I exit for effect. This used to be such a quiet neighbourhood.

She calls me back.

- He is on the phone. Negotiating.
- Tell him eight million. The risk has just gone up.

I can hear his startled yelp from here. He hangs up. He calls back. Agreements.

The Associate brokers. I crawl. She smirks and chews billy with the nicey-nice. He frets and offers up fewer. She holds tight. I sinew. We glom, tight together. Night barks down and the caddies are shunting in the streets. Venus is *rising*.

I telegraph:

- Eight and no more, no less. Eight or no deal.

More screaming and weeping. Then a lesbian agreement. Hidden intimates and long slow evenings of mystery discussions. No entry for you. You don't fit.

She cups off.

- He says OK.

I nod and telegraph another. The night comes down.

*Oh Mercury.*

## XLVI

Five days later I get the call. It doesn't surprise me. Sandy feigns indifference.

- Two fifty one. Be here at eight.

Room 251, eight. I hang outside the adjacent, watching. I listen. Movement? Voices? None. Nods. One advances and places knuckles to wood, gently. Nothing stirs. The door opposite is suddenly opened. 252.

- Oh *hello*.

Oh fuck. It's him. The voice is recognisably that of Charles Hawtry.

- What are *you* doing here?
- Oh don't mind *me*. I'm just the hand around here, love.

The mincer makes us flinch. I can see Monte wanting to tear him apart with his bare hands. Bad air beckons within. Stale life.

- Well come in then. We've got stuff to *go down* on. So to speak.

He looks Monte up and down, which reeks of protection from within. The three of us follow the little drunk into the room, the door closing behind us. It's very dark within. A familiar smell is in the air. Flexing hands.

- I think you've all met my friends, says Hawtry. - Anyone fancy a stiffie? I'm having a G and T myself.

We are thankful to see him vanish, leaving behind the Preliator who stares up at us. There are two others with him, but never having met them I cannot name them. The smell persists.

- We talk business?
- Yes, we talk business.
- We ask for eight million. You've seen our *bona fides*. Time to do the deal.
- Well...as we say over here, *time to do the laundry*.

Something shifts. A weight moves and overbalances something. The mind bristles with eight million reasons. I think back to the wardrobe, and the apartment.

- Where are you carrying it?
- We're not. I don't think we are that stupid. Why do you think we are?

The wardrobe. Now empty. Cargo now in the car outside. We are actually stupid, are we not? The Associate cracks a smile. She moves towards them.

- Outside, the blue Chevy. The trunk.

Are we being double-crossed by her? Something deep down and resentful starts to build up in me. I can smell Monte's feelings too.

- I think you are because that's the perfect way to describe you.

He nods over to a shadowed figure who recedes. A click of metal close by. And still, that smell. Not just stupid. Doubly stupid.

- So now I have the cargo *and* the eight million. And the car, I suppose, though I have no use for it.

We *ride the snake* downhill. He was right. *No one here gets out alive.* We're not going anywhere.

Quick thinking. Assess. One gun clicking on us. Associate has a knife at least. One other shadow man, no idea. Monte is heavy. I have the gun. I step back slowly. The smell gets stronger. Something behind. Monte shifts, uneasy. I assess. Two to the left, one to the right, one outside at the car. Just to wait a second for the thunder. *Riding the snake.*

- So what will I do with all this stuff?

His last words. Outside, huge muffled thunderclap of primer and plastic. All faces distracted from the situation. No need to as much as nod to Monte who flails in and lets the Associate have it full in the face. I duck and *haul it* out of my sock and let it go in two or three rounds. The Associate is *down*. The Preliator is *down*. The second shadow is blown back. Another round would work but Monte steps in a cracks him twice. He goes *down*. A low groaning from the floor.

- Never liked her, he says. - Never liked her, never trusted her.

The tension between us fades. Brothers in combat and in planning. The wardrobe. Now empty. Cargo now in the car outside. Fake cargo, wired up. Monte knew, I followed. Flash back: Monte with cargo, stuffing into closet; identical bag filled with fabric lifted; stuffed in trunk; Associate there always, believing. The real bag was hidden, the fake bag filled with flashes.

Assess: Preliator badly wounded, Shadow #2 perhaps dead with hole in neck; Associate concussed and disassociated. Monte recovers and fixes up with cable ties to all. I swerve. Leave them lying for now. Take ourselves outside. Chevy trunk open, trunk lid blown *back*, back seats blown *in*, Shadow #1 blown *fucking headless*. Fake tags on car left for the finding. And who will care? Back to the office. That *smell*. Step inside. Monte: assesses. Considering options. Clinically stands over

Shadow #2 and thinks, then gives him a loud double tap. Preliator stirs. Associate cries out. Beaded curtains part and a face looks out, incredulous.

- Good *god*.

Hawtrety filled with fear. Legs buckling, G and T in his hand, now on the floor. Monte reaches into a drawer, finds the keys.

- Come on if you're coming.
- Do I have a *choice*?

I don't care but don't voice it. Preliator and Associate are dragged outside to the 4x4 and pushed into the back. Hawtrety to keep watch from the back, Monte drives. We brodie off and skim down the road. I put on the radio. WKAF 503, playing *Starman*. We all sing along, loudly to ourselves as we bounce off the shore on the way to somewhere.

## XLVII

Zia seems to be lost, but is dealing with the situation well.

Sandy is nowhere around this time, and we are all the better for it.

Stuck in the apartment for days now, hiding. Monte has her back tight in his clutches and she seems to be bravely living through it, but we can all tell she is unhappy. Demilla is trying to make us all feel worthwhile, but it's not worth it. Time ticks away, just the four of us. I seldom move from the sofa.

- Tell me again about the Fireman, he asked.

I sigh and down the orange juice laced with vodka.

- You've never met him.
- I know, but I am told he interested you?
- Not really. He was pretty dull.
- Then why do you mention him?

I don't feel like countering.

- Seldom do I mention him. He's of no interest to me, really.
- How many times have you met him?
- Three? Maybe four? Why is he of such interest to you?
- Did Sandy like him?

An odd question.

- I'm not certain. I never asked her.
- I *bet* you never.

Monte stares at me, filled with a boiling hatred he cannot express. We both know.

## XLVIII

A lazy summer afternoon. A small crowd by the river side, enough to be a party, but small enough to all be heard.

- When did you first realise what you were?
- I'm sorry?
- When did you first realise...who you *were*?

Demila rolls over and raises herself on an elbow, looking right at the questioner.

- Who I *am*?
- Yes, you know. What you're doing. What you're for.
- David, that sounds close to asking me when I first felt like an adult.
- Perhaps that's what I am asking, then.

The Fireman appears interested and takes up the question.

- I never have, I don't think. Other than the business on the train.
- Me neither, says Lustig. - At least not in the way my parents were adults.
- Do you think *they* ever knew that's what they were?
- I'm not sure. I don't suppose I asked them. I just assumed it.
- I've never been in any doubt, says the American. - I've never had any need to grow up because I know I can have whatever I want without responsibility.
- Well that's jolly self-aware of you, says Demila. - I don't suppose you have any insight, David?

For a moment, David appears wistful, almost intelligent.

- Probably back at the Old House one day. My father sat me down in the long room and said "David, I have to tell you something" and it all went downhill from there. I knew what the rest of my life was going to be. So in other words I knew my future.
- How old were you?
- Ten.
- Jesus Christ. Really?
- I always felt like I was older. And I was in no position to *control* that future, but it was what I was going to do and be. And I sometimes wonder how all of the rest of you manage.
- Oh we don't have any control either, David. It all happens inside little accidents and moments when you feel useless.
- For me it was when I bought my first house.
- For me it was learning to drive a car and getting that freedom.
- The moment I left school, probably.

- All well and good, continues David. - but none of that really encapsulates what I mean. I mean, I knew where I was headed from an early age and was geared into doing that. In some ways I was an infant, briefly a child and then was straight into adulthood before I was emotionally aware enough to handle the change.
- Do you think that's a fair way to treat a child?
- I don't think it's a fair way to treat anyone, but on the other hand it's all I have known.

Chablis is splashed. Bread and cheese broken.

- Didn't you have an interesting take on this, Celesta?
- I don't really know if it's actually *interesting*, David.
- It's different.
- Well, as you all probably know I was raised by an aunt and uncle near Antwerp. From the age of about ten I was drinking his wine from bottles stolen from his cellar and discarded into the river outside. I was smoking the year afterwards, having decided that schooling at St Paul's was going to do me no earthly good.

The party moves together to better hear her words. The air closes around us.

- So one day I was sitting by the river with a cigar (*laughter*) and a bottle of pretty dreadful chardonnay (*laughter*) when I realised that I was in essence living on my own. I was a stranger to schooling of any form other than what I picked up from books and films, and since no one came looking for me I went looking for no one else.

I didn't eat that much and got sustenance from what I raided from their larders and whatever money I managed to steal from the petty cash jar that the departed cook had left trustingly in the pastry cupboard. (*laughter*) I genuinely think they had forgotten I was even there.

This all went on for a while until one morning - it was a Tuesday, not that the days made any difference to me - when there was a huge knocking on the door. I seldom paid attention to it, mostly as these things seem to take care of themselves by magic, but this day the knocking didn't go away.

She draws on the cigarette and continues.

- I went to the front door and presumably they saw me move behind the glass, so I opened it. Two men in suits and ties ask me - very politely - if they would be permitted to come in. I let them into the parlour and they told me that they were *dreadfully sorry* but that they had to determine what was going to happen to the house, now that I owned it. I was, of course, a bit

taken aback. I was eleven or twelve. Maybe I looked a little older, but I still looked like a child, I guess.

Silence around her.

- It seems that, in an act of hitherto unforeseen religious enthusiasm, my aunt and uncle had formed a suicide pact and had killed themselves by gunshots in the fruit store outside - presumably to hasten themselves to *Valhalla* or whatever - and were found by a local who had come onto the land to poach. (*gasps*) I hadn't noticed as they were pretty quiet and left me alone most of the time anyway. This was about a week before, maybe a little longer. So they told me that they had left a lengthy letter telling the world that they were leaving the house and all its material wealth to me in its entirety and that they were of the opinion that I was perfectly capable of looking after myself. When these guys turned up, they assumed I was with a guardian. I was not. I was quick on the uptake though and told them that I'd refer this to the people who looked after me and saw to my education, and refer the issue back to them. They asked to speak to them, but I fluffed them off with some excuse.

Another drag.

- I lived there alone for a bit, now conscious that this old heap was completely empty, and suddenly it felt quite scary to be this much on my own, especially with all the statues knocking about - I always expected them to start moving.

I was faced with my future and had to start thinking like an adult, and that didn't just mean smoking and drinking. After a couple of weeks I cabled my father, told him the news and got him to sell the place for me, which he did. The cash it realised was placed into a trust for me which was payable either on me reaching majority or the death of the trustees, which of course were my parents. I high-tailed it back there and generally made a pain of myself to them both, living like a bit of a wild child (*gasps*) until I was sixteen or seventeen when they both had the perfect sense to die together in a plane. (*laughter*) So I not only got the invested money from the place in Belgium, I also got the cash from the biscuit-and-cracker business my old grandfather had once promised me, which included their house. So I found myself not yet twenty, with seemingly limitless pots of cash, and no idea about my future at all. So in that sense I never really grew up. I just stayed afloat on a sea of wine and imagined adulthood which never really had to materialise because I had no need to make any sort of adult decisions.

A whole bunch of people tried to get in with me - men mostly - most of whom just saw me as an opportunity to fill their futures with mine. (*laughter*) One guy who thought he would try and be my suitor expressed the

dismay that so many others must have felt: how do you attract the girl who has everything? And for that matter, I did. I had four cars when I was twenty two. I had all my family jewellery. I had four houses. What can they do for me, really?

There is a bit of a pause.

- So what did you do?

Celesta drags on the cigarette, then stubs it out vigorously.

- Drank and fucked, mostly. I was used to the former, so I took up the latter in earnest. I became the ultimate lady of leisure and pleasure. I got used to spending it all on my friends and letting us all get drunk and laid, so it wasn't really wasted. I got used to living on my own terms, completely. The world was somewhere else where it didn't matter. For that matter, it mostly still is.
- You really have had a gifted life, Celesta.
- Oh I'm not so sure. I can tell good wine from bad and can delight the flesh of any man or woman who actually chooses to be with me, but I can't find any pleasure in books, have no real interest in politics beyond the radical, and can barely name you ten useful things you ought to know. I was never schooled, really. I regret that, I suppose. And in the words of my parents I have never *settled down*. Most people actually take that to mean 'she never married' but to me there is a more visceral meaning, a restlessness of spirit that means I have a very low boredom threshold for *everything* and mostly *everyone*. That actually includes most of you lot.

She says *actually* a lot, which I usually associate with mental freewheeling allowing the mind to catch up with the ideas.

I notice the American is tutting silently, looking the other way and generally sending out signals of distaste and disapproval. I compare her with Celesta; she with her straight-up-and-down skirt and flattened cotton blouse, her pale limbs and body looking and more worn older than she really was, and Celesta in a white cheesecloth shirt and tasselled skirt with a finer and more sturdy frame to her. David was making little attempt not to admire Celesta, and I had a sudden glimpse of the power she held over him, and by extension the power than the American once did too. That glimpse is further strengthened by the fact that David was clearly fully aroused, something his flannels could barely hide. The American could hardly fail to notice this too.

- I was first aware I was an adult when I found my father was spying on me.
- Amelia? *Really?*

- Yes really. He was a troubled man, and I loved him, but he grew obsessed with me and neglected my mother. Her life was filled with needs she'd never be able to satisfy. It was all such a tragedy.
- How did it end up?
- Oh not well. She left him and went back to the Trent, and he stayed there with me. We were there for a while with all that tension going on. But in the end he confessed to me that his feelings for me ran beyond that of a caring father.
- How did you react?
- How would you?
- Badly I guess.
- The begging was the worst part. Not just the fact that he viewed me that way, but that it showed my father in a completely different light now that he was off the leash. I got a lock fitted soon afterwards. I used to wonder if he'd ever try to break the door down. It was like living with a complete stranger on whom one had to rely.
- *Begging?*
- Like you wouldn't believe.

There is a sudden drop in the conversation. The American starts to stir as though it was time to pack everything up and head back to the house. No one else moves, though. So her movements are futile and strange. She is starting to become the insider finding herself locked out.

- I grew up when I picked the bits of my dead sister from the trackside.

People turned to the source of the words. The Fireman went on.

- She had told people she was down, and insisted that she wasn't going to snap out of it. She was pretty once, but had lost her looks. She lost her interest. She lost her childhood. She went days and days without seeing anyone, or speaking to anyone. Just locked away. Then one day she left the house and didn't return. I went looking for her and heard that there had been some sort of accident on the north line just four streets away. She had walked onto the tracks and waited for the London express. It hit her square on. She was showered over the rose bushes, across the path and over the shelter. They had cleaned it up a bit, but there were still some bits of bone and stuff I picked up.

It was fucking horrible, but I knew I had to do a man's job over this, so I did. I didn't sleep well for weeks after that. Eventually the smell got too bad and I had to throw the jacket out. I couldn't bring myself to throw her away, so I kept her pieces in my pockets. My parents never got over it. I had to run the house from then on. I was barely a kid.

There is a pallid cloud over the group now. Celesta:

- Oh for crying out loud David, *do it yourself*.

The group breaks in laughter over the embarrassment. David being David. Celesta being Celesta. We are all who we deserve to be.

The American gets up and, for the third time that week, leaves on her own, the insider walking out.

## XLIX

Discreet efforts are never enough. I knew enough of what Celesta had told us all was a lie, but it was an entertaining lie so it was allowed to pass by.

The Fireman's story was horrific, but it was compelling, so it was also permitted.

Amelia's story was both shocking and surprising, especially to those of us who knew Gerry. Some just didn't believe it could be true, but she and I had spoken before and I knew that what she said was at least plausible. So that was allowed.

David's was dull, but in those few words lay centuries behind him. And you must realise that those words have been uttered by so many famous faces to other famous faces in the same line of business. So of course it stayed.

The American's story wasn't even a story. It was just a reminder of how drab and awful she was, so it was struck from the record.

It's a pity that Demila didn't answer, as her response would have been amusing and informative, although it would also likely be a whitewash of what she wanted us to know about her, rather than an accurate account.

Zia and I discussed this later in the little cafe in Rue Mart. The noise from the tables and waiters was distractingly loud. The shouts from the card table even more so.

- They can be an amusing little crowd.
- They can be, but there are some there I'd willingly do without.
- Such as?
- I've never cared for Demila. She's full of her own misplaced confidence. Like she has been around the block about twenty times and has seen all, done all and knows all.
- She can make me smile, if perhaps not deliberately.
- And I'd shoot *the woman* tomorrow.
- I think you'd be in a queue. The only person I've heard say anything even remotely good about her was Audrey.
- Oh really? What did she say?
- Something about her having *a streak of kindness* or similar. I said I found that prospect terrifying.
- I've never seen any evidence of it. Why on earth did she say that?
- Have you ever seen David...hang on...

A waiter passes.

- *Monsieur? Encore?*
- *Oui, bien sur.*

He disappears.

- What was I saying?
- Her streak of kindness.
- Yes, Audrey. Have you ever seen David with his 'black dog'?
- No, but I've heard about it. And what I heard wasn't great.
- What?
- I said what I heard wasn't great.
- Well I was there at Belvedere one day and he was *possessed* by it. She lost her cool and went skinny dipping in the ornamental pool on the lawn.
- Are you kidding me?
- No, I'm not. But there is worse.
- Oh this I have to hear.
- We watched some gardener type from the estate doing her. Right at the side of the pool.
- *No way.*
- No, really. Audrey, me and the man at the house. I forget his name. You know, the help.
- *No way.*
- And I think it was then that Audrey made the remark.
- When was this?!
- Maybe two or three months ago? She's never mentioned it since.
- Audrey?
- No, her. *That woman.*
- Did she know you saw her?
- She was watching *us* watching *her*.
- Good god. I mean...that is amazing. And what was *he* doing?
- Having a screaming fit in the lounge.
- For crying out loud.
- Yes. Oh, and guess what: when he was screaming he was screaming Celesta's name.

Zia's mouth drops open.

- *No wonder* she hates her.
- She does. Did I tell you about the party in Vienna?

Zia is rapt.

- Go on.
- It was a big black tie do, with the usual pick of the crop, but with live sex shows on the floor.
- Is this at Celesta's place?
- So I am told. So at one point it's Amelia on the floor with that guy Max - I think - and David gets excited by this and Celesta gives him a 'hand' which he uses to completion. And the woman was sitting right next to him.

- This...this is almost too much to contemplate.

Two coffees arrive.

- I know.
- So what were you doing there.
- Celesta invited us.
- Who is 'us'?
- Me and Sandy.
- Yes, Sandy - I actually have something to ask you about her...

## L

The firelight lights the room in dramatic, silent flickers.

We stare at each other across the floor.

The gentle music playing from the quietly mistuned radio: Chopin.

A voice is heard, but soon forgotten.

Inside the room, she is sitting quietly, and fully dressed in white.

Car keys on the table.

An open bottle of wine.

Two glasses, both half-empty.

She looks away from me, her face completely unreadable, *dark and distant*.

I speak, because I have to speak.

- *We have to talk.*

## LI

We awake before dawn. Somehow the birds have anticipated us. Audrey lies beside me, silent and still, her back to me, the shaded curve of her back shining slightly in the thin grey haze.

She gets up and leaves the room in silence, her movements slow and deliberate. Is she maybe trying not to wake me? She moves to the stairhead and disappears, the silent steps of her naked feet on the wooden floor a mark of her absence.

I lie there in the dull light and wish for her to return. But she does not.

Eventually I get out of bed, throw on a robe, and quietly make my way downstairs. When I get to the foot of the stairs I see no light and no sign of her being there. Just the pallid light from the streetlight on the other side of the road makes it obvious there is no one there. Puzzled, I return to bed and slide back under the covers. And there she is, beside me, the curve of her back shining slightly in the thin grey haze.

She gets up and leaves the room in silence, her movements slow and deliberate. Is she maybe trying not to wake me? She moves to the stairhead and disappears, the silent steps of her naked feet on the wooden floor a mark of her absence.

I lie there in the dull light and wish for her to return. But she does not.

This time I lie still, facing her empty side of the bed, the door left ajar, waiting for her to walk back through it.

But she does not.

A voice behind me. My name.

I turn and see her, lying beside me. The bed has changed shape and dimensions. I feel behind myself and can only touch the edge of the bed. She is where I was. I am where she was. I reach to touch her and find that she is me and I have become her. Overcome with fright, I get up and leave the room in silence, my movements slow and deliberate. Am I trying not to wake her? I cannot tell. I move to the stairhead and disappear, the silent steps of my naked feet on the wooden floor a mark of my absence.

Soon, I hear her getting up and following me down. But she cannot see me, for I am she and she is me. She is chasing a phantom of herself without knowing it.

We sit side by side on the same sofa, miles apart, joined in our mutual blindness for one another.

## LII

Reverie, alone. Broken by the imperious sound of my phone. I let it ring, but they are insistent. I take it out of my pocket and flip it open. The name on the display: AMELIA. I press the green button.

- Hello?

A pause. Then a deeply troubled voice:

- This is terribly important. Are you alone?

Amelia's voice. Insistent and urgent. Something is amiss.

- Yes, I am.
- Is Sandy anywhere with you?
- No, she's not.
- Are you *sure* about that?
- Yes, of course. I'm alone in my house, Amelia. What is it that you -
- If I were you...I'd check.

Those words hit me at the centre like a concrete block. Now my breathing seems too loud.

I try to remain calm, sitting perfectly still, sensing around me. Looking for her without looking. No sounds of her. No scent. No feelings.

- Are you sure?
- I think I am. You better check. Be careful. Please be careful. Call me back.

She hangs up. A voice.

In my left ear.

Close and immediate.

- *Where do you think I've been?*

I try not to cry out and whip round to the source of the sound. But there is only a vague outline of a face. And it's gone. I crush myself into the corner of the room. Eyes searching. Breathing laboured. Hunted. Still the voice. And it is behind me. In the walls.

- *Where do you think I've been?*

The lights snap off. A moment to digest the fear. A moment to stifle a scream. A moment to recognise the scent. That malignant scent.

Unashamed, I piss myself with fear. I don't need any of this. Not now. I plead.

- *I thought we understood?*

It neither accepts or rejects what was said. I am not even certain it absorbs. I ignore the malignant odour and the slowly beating wings and say what needs to be said. But it has caught up with me. Are they one and the same?

The breathing is close. The slow movement of wingbeats. That feeling of overwhelming power, so close, so utterly dangerous and so utterly pure. And it seems to be moving closer.

The lights snap on.

Nothing and no one. Just me.

I get out of the house as quickly as I can, only to find it's now night.

Phone. Amelia.

- Where have you been? You were going to call me back.
- I am. I have. How long was it? *Where do you think I've been?*
- About two hours ago, and I've no idea where you've been. Are you alright? Was she there?
- No. No, she was not.
- Okay. I'm coming over. Is that OK?
- Yes.

She hangs up and I wait for her outside. Hunted and waiting and horribly, horribly frightened.

*True* horror is when the known becomes unknown; when the familiar becomes the unfamiliar.

Her car arrives within ten minutes.

### LIII

Alone, in a boat, on a lake. Just thinking. Assessing.

Remembering.

- Do you know the *Green Man*'s name?
- No, but I have met him. He's...dangerous. I mean like....really dangerous. Like fucking crazy.
- Describe him?
- Little guy. Wears a green suit - woolen or something. Smells bad. Missing teeth. Do you know these people?
- I might, but...
- How many of them do you know?

How many?

- Smells bad.

*He just smiles that same dirty smile. He smells of oil and rags, stale smoke and sweat, of work and cheap days with simpler pleasures than these.*

After all this time. I suppose it explains why he managed to get into all the best places. Maybe even why Celesta let him annoy her.

- *What on earth are you talking about? You know...I've seen you now and then but I've no idea who you are or what you do. I just know that our meeting has less to do with what I want and more to do with how chaotic my life has become recently.*

Ah yes. Our old friend *chaos*. This explains so much to me.

The fish pass under me, silent in their indifference.

## LIV

The American. The Associate. Me.

- He was just a boy...
- And I like to think we all made him into a *man*.

The Associate looks at me. I look back at her. She's a striking woman. The cubic blue cardboard box sits under my chair. The American keeps looking down at it, trying not to be seen to be looking, trying not to let a human weakness like curiosity spoil her demeanour. The Associate starts over again.

- So how did you meet?
- Oh what, *again*?
- Yes, again.

She draws lightly on the cigarette, puffing the smoke in an elegant cone above our heads.

- He was a bauble. Just a nothing. He was found, he came, he stayed, he left.
- Whose 'bauble'?
- Oh something we found below stairs.

Celesta snorts.

- You really are a treat. Straight out of 1928.
- Ah yes. The blazing summer in Utrecht...and you'll *never* guess who I danced with...
- We don't really care about all that stuff right now. All we want to talk about is your 'bauble' and what you did with him. You see, we've spoken to him. And he's naming names.
- And should I care about this?
- Well perhaps. He named you quite specifically.
- Then maybe you should ask him. I really don't have a memory for this stuff at all. A bauble is just a bauble, after all. Why do we even care about these *little people* anyway?

I try not to let my feelings show.

- These little people have named you.

The Associate turns the screws on her. But she isn't flinching.

- And who made *you* god almighty? Last I remember you were working in a casino for some of Albi's team.

The Associate loses a little composure but steadies herself. She looks over to me. I look back at her, knowingly.

- Who brought him along?
- Oh I forget his name. Little guy.
- Yes. Maybe you knew him as the **Green Man**?

She's rocked but tries hard not to show it.

- Never heard of anyone with that ridiculous name.
- You sure about that?
- Yes, of *course*. Are you going to carry on with this nonsense much longer? Sandy will be missing you.
- We might come to her soon. And Zia. But for now, we'll stick with you, if you don't mind.
- Oh this is ridiculous....
- So you are saying quite categorically that you don't know the **Green Man** and have never heard of him?
- Didn't I make that much obvious?
- Just checking.

The Associate nods to me and I hook the box from under my seat with my right foot, pushing it in front of me. It's about a foot wide on the edge and is surprisingly heavy. I decide to throw her.

- When did you last speak to Enoch?
- What?
- I asked when you last spoke to Enoch.
- Is *he* part of this nonsense too?
- No, but he has some interesting things to say.
- Such as?
- He says that real horror only happens when the familiar is juxtaposed with the unfamiliar. When you see something you know in circumstances that are unfamiliar? You follow?
- I cannot see what that has to do with anything.
- Well...let's see, will we?

I lean forward and catch a peripheral glimpse of the Associate looking away quite deliberately. I open the flaps on the top of the box, reach in, grab the hair and pull out the Rear Gunner's neatly severed head and hold it in front of me.

The American screams like the whistle on a locomotive, but of course cannot move due to the restraints we placed on her. She cannot look away, but she wants to look anywhere else. She's hyperventilating.

- See? This is horrid, *innit*?

The Rear Gunner's eyes open and he squints against the light. He stares directly at the American and feigns a grin.

- So how many of them do you know?

The words come from him in a strange wheeze, which in itself is shocking as he clearly has no lungs with which he can form speech. The American has pissed herself with uncontrollable fear, scrabbling in her seat to drive distance between what she sees and where she is.



- Nice that he remembers you. This is the Green Man, isn't it?

She neither affirms nor denies, just shakes like an impaled rat.

- We'll take that silence as a 'yes'. Anyway, he told us that was anyway so it's a moot point. So what did he bring you?

She's too freaked out to speak. She's doubting her sanity, debating the reality around her. Eyes wide with revulsion and *juxtaposition*, fixated in the air of detached *melancholia* that the sagging face before her radiates.

- Hey you. What did you bring her?
- Lots of lovely toys and games. Just like Christmas for the little 'uns.
- Well that's just lovely. What sort of toys and games?
- The usual. The brown stuff from faraway. And of course her little treats.

She manages to get a sentence out.

- Stop this now. Right now. I cannot face this. Stop it....please.

Strange voice. Lost so much of her accent at this point of greatest stress. The Associate softly sings:

*Up the ladder and down the wall  
A halfpenny roll will serve us all  
You'll find milk and I'll find flour  
And we'll have a pudding in half an hour*

- **Please. Put that *thing* away.**

The Rear Gunner joins in:

*Boys and girls come out to play  
The moon does shine as bright as day  
Leave your supper and leave your sleep  
And join your playfellows in the street*

She retches deeply. We have her now.

- Are you going to speak?
- **Yes. *Anything*.**
- Good. We need to talk.

I drop the head back into the box, hearing him groan a little as the back of his skull cracks off the bottom against the concrete floor. I push the closed up box back under the seat and turn to the Associate who is still turned away, her face blanched of all colour.

- All gone.

She faces up to the American.

- So let's start. What did you do two with all that lovely heroin?

**PART THREE**

**THE BROWN STANDARD:**

**FOUR STUDIES OF ZIA**

## LV

- Of course the Yanks never have the courage of their own words. They talk about their brutality, but they never actually realise it. They avoid using torture under almost any circumstances as they think it's unreliable as a means of getting information. As we all know, it's anything but. Torture the first guy until he breaks, but make sure his mates are watching. When they hear his balls popping from the pliers I can guarantee they will be falling over themselves to tell you everything they know and more.

Some of those African brutes use all kinds of means. Never actually harm the source, but harm enough around him or her to put the fear into them so badly that they will think you are not only capable of anything but that they will be next. And *never* let them know they are the source you want the information from. Let them think it's their big gaming chip that will get them out of all of this. They'll tell everything. And if they are not the last person you speak to then let them go. If you kill them anyway you'll get fuck all out of the rest of them.

Of course, if they are the last and you get what you need then do what you like with them.

I like this Spaniard. He talks my sort of game.

- What did you do with her in the end?
- We still have her. We can play with her if we like and take from her what we need. It's simple, really.

He carries on sharpening the wicked looking machete. The blade looks like it would slice through granite.

- Good, isn't it? A hard swing from this would take off a rhino's head with one movement.

David seems to be impressed.

- We can use you, I think.
- Well that's good of you. What do you need me to do?
- You're really not afraid of killing, are you?
- Certainly not. I'm not afraid of blood and I don't believe in ghosts.
- Well, in the case of the latter you don't have to, in my family. You tend to find that they come after you regardless.

They shake hands.

## LVI

Zia. Why was Zia mixed up in this? How did she come into this awful picture.

There are four ways.

Study One:

*She tried to be something she is not. Her looks opened doors into rooms she could not understand. She is swept along with things and pretends to know, when she knows nothing.*

Study Two:

*She is here as part of a subterfuge and is smarter than we give her credit for. She may be in the pay of one or more governments.*

Study Three:

*She was brought here by another party and placed here to be something else, but found herself caught up in the workings of the underworld.*

Study Four:

*She knows exactly what she is doing and is doing it by choice.*

I do not know which is the more likely, so I will explore each of them.

Audrey takes my hand and leads me into the darkened lawn, by the dark water of the aged cracked stone pool. Weeds grow between the slabs. The dingy grey stone urns are covered in moss. There are ruined steps leading down to the edge. The rain comes down hard. There is no one else around.

We look back towards the slightly opened doors of the back drawing room and see a bony figure sitting there, unmoving. She was not there before. Even from here and through the distance her body looks like it has seen better days. Audrey and I exchange looks, wondering where this next development will take us.

Audrey takes out her phone and calls up someone on speed dial, looking up at me as the phone rings on the other end. She has the look of someone who is finally facing up to a task she really ought to have completed months ago. She speaks:

- "David, I have to tell you something"



there was a shining desire to float economies on gold, but any fool knew that there was not enough to go around, and making more was never an option. The monetary standard of nations wasn't a metal, but a fabulous and all-consuming addiction to what happens when receptors flood your mind with dopamine. Who needs wealth when you have that at your fingertips?

No one had seen it because no one had to. They all just had to agree that it existed and that bargains could be made against it. And they had to guard against it, which is why all production from competitors had to cease, hence the movement of troops all over the East in the 1940s. Everything else was a front. Eighty five million died in the end for something that we can synthesise in a lab. They all died for that sweetest of feelings.

Later, when things were smoother, I challenged Monte on it.

- Show it to me. Convince me.
- We're not so stupid as to store it all in the same place, you know.
- So show me some of it.
- I'll take you.

Monte, Zia, Audrey and I travelled to Berne where he took us to a nondescript basement in a nondescript house. Under a nondescript carpet was a metal door which was opened with a coded device he wore around his neck. Such was the trust placed in him. So down we went, into the darkness until we stopped at what sounded like a cement floor. He fussed in the dull red glow from the desk and flicked on a dull white light that beamed around the room, easily the size of four or five football pitches in total and perhaps the height of a London bus, filled with racks upon which sat neatly packaged bundles, wrapped in paper and wrapped again in film. Not dozens of such bundles, but thousands. Maybe even millions, each of them the size and shape of a large dictionary, piled up eight or nine per shelf space, all catalogued and indexed and all racks labelled precisely.

- Go on. Take a look at the Wealth of Nations.

Monte's cue was all I needed. The first rack I saw was pristine, all bundles simply perfect. The labelling precise and clearly the work of someone with a fine craft in penmanship. Mysterious Arabic notations:

د هوتکیانو ټولو اکمني

Below, in English script. HOTAK 1711.

Further on, many more. The oldest date I saw was 1634.

- There are some older than that, said Monte. - But not here.

- Where?
- In Tana they say they have some going back to 1305.

I can barely take this in. Audrey is not moving. She seems overwhelmed.

- How many other places like this are there?

Monte thinks a bit.

- I'm not certain really. Probably no more than thirty.
- And what is it worth?

Monte smiles.

- I'm not sure anyone has worked that out. This place alone - maybe ten trillion dollars?

Audrey gulps and says the first thing her beleaguered mind could think of.

- American or Canadian?

The pause after is broken by a laughing fit from all of us that comes of several things:

- Audrey's comment
- Monte taking us into his confidence
- My relief at being close again to Monte, realising that the threat between us is over.
- Zia pretending to know what is happening, when all along she knows nothing.
- My pleasure at being near Zia again with the insurance of having Audrey

A fainter voice further away, in another time:

- This is study number *one*.

## LVIII

We stayed in Berne for a few days and seldom spoke of the visit we had just paid to the nondescript, simply because it was so embedded in our minds. But we did talk *around* it.

Audrey seemed to have a zap on her head from it. She seemed deeply unsettled by what she had seen, as though the comforting knowledge of a working mechanism around her. She picked at her food in a detached, disinterested manner. Zia seemed to revel in it, having (at last) some reference to her hitherto hidden life with Monte. She shot me apprehensive looks throughout, when she knew neither Monte nor Audrey were watching. I tried not to react.

- We can do pretty much whatever we want, you know. It's not a question of money to buy things, as it is just leverage to remove.
- Isn't omnipotence a bit dull?
- Far from it. There are always people to conquer, especially if they threaten you. Gold doesn't grow on trees. This stuff does. Sort of.
- I see.
- So a lot of what we do is to find and prevent anyone else doing the same.
- And how many are in this organisation of yours?

Monte swirls the wine and thinks.

- The number is fixed, so you don't have an 'in'. It's all built in layers of fifths?
- Sorry?
- Fifths upon fifths. Harmony. Cycle. Eternal rebirth and the worship of the neverending. *Do you understand what they mean by that?*
- I do, yes.
- Centre layer is limited to seven, inner is limited to forty nine. The next layer is outer inner, which has 343, and the inner outer has 2401.
- Wait. You said fifths.
- I did yes.
- Those are powers of seven. Why not fives?
- They are *bound* fifths. Each five resting on two supports which are supported by one other from another fifth. Five plus two us seven. That takes us to the outer which has 16807. So we have 19,607 altogether.
- Is that significant?
- Of course. 19607 is  $7 \times 2801$ . 2801 is 20 knights by 20 fables by seven kingdoms, with one left on top.
- Meaning?
- Meaning everything has a meaning...
- ...if you look hard enough.
- Of course

I glance up. Audrey is piloting her frites around the *sauce au poivre* on the plate, lost in thoughts. Monte is trying to get the waiter's attention to bring over some more of that electrifying house red. Zia is looking right at me. Everything about her breathes both the exotic and the hopelessly lost. I think she wants me to save her.

Wine arrives. Glasses are filled. Audrey shakes her head a little. *No more, thank you.*

I carry on with Monte.

- So, say you are actually threatened by a new power or country....
- We actually call them all *agencies*.
- Alright, you are actually threatened by a new agency. What do you do?
- Well it depends on what the centre think we should do. They are well informed. They may wish to simply absorb them, or colonise them, or employ subterfuge.
- Such as?
- Such as purporting to help from within and in effect destroying their ability to function.
- And you can do that from *without*?
- We'd never do that. Far too risky. No, we'd do it from within. Where do you think presidents and kings come from?

If I appear astounded, it's because I am.

- Kings?
- Yes, kings.

My mind turns to *that woman*.

- I suppose you can dispose of kings too?
- Seldom do we do that. We just encourage them to leave.
- And desert their duty?
- Absolutely.
- For what?
- Love usually. Give them their poison in a skirt and high heels and they drink it because they are fundamentally stupid. And because they don't think the rules even apply to them.

Monte laughs. I hear Audrey quietly in tears next to me. Monte appears concerned. Zia looks over at me. *Save me*, she says in silence through her gaze.

## LIX

The house is old, the room long again. It's colder than before. The room is old and long and feels empty and deserted, yet there are two people there.

The young man looks cocky, a squinting look in his eyes almost comically surveying what he sees with disdain. A much older man with alarming facial hair sits with him at the head of the empty table, his words echoing in the hard room. Clearly, they have never spoken much before.

- Now David, I have to tell you something. Something very important. It's about duty, and about service, and it concerns you. Do you understand?
- Yes, father. Haven't we spoken about this before?
- Yes, but this is different. And I have to be candid and forthright, but that is my right. You understand?
- Yes of course.

The older man pours the whisky into the glass and draws on it, neat. His son watches, not touching his. He needs his edge.

- When I am gone, David...you'll ruin yourself in a year. Mark my words. You'll ruin yourself and everything in a year. One year. And this....all of this will be over.

He looks around the room, dramatically.

- What makes you say this?
- Because, *I know what you are and what you are like and I hate it.*

The old man quietly thunders down at him, a quiet rage only contained by infirmity and a sense of inevitable defeat. His son reels, a slight memory coming back to him of former beatings and raised voices..

- Father...be reasonable. And calm yourself. This is never going to happen.
- It will...because you never play by the rules and please only yourself. And when the time comes, they will feed you something to make sure you're out of the way?
- Feed me? Poison? And who?

The old man actually laughs.

- You know, David. You're actually *stupid*. Actually, functionally *stupid*. And that is *why* they will win and why they *deserve* to win. They'll feed you poison alright. Poison in a skirt and high heels, and you'll drink it because you are *weak* and *stupid* and will not even *understand* the rules *when they are given to you*.

Coughing fit. Hacking. Rheumy eyes. Pallid skin. He's seen a lot and been through much and yet he cares more about all of *this* than anything to do with himself. It's

all about the legacy and the continuity and the dreary old subjects of duty being what you are, not what you do.



How much of it means anything to David? How much of this life that he enjoys comes from all of *this* and how much of it comes from within? Does the old man suspect as much? Which of them is better at keeping secrets? What has he seen? Socialism? Communism? Indian mutinies? The Irish doing the same? How did he react? What did he see as his best possible training? And what unuttered suffering did *that* bring to him?



He coughs again. His eyes watering. Every cough brings about the death of the old world and the springing of the new. Slow by slow.

- We really should be seeing about getting to you cleaner air, father.
- Where to? Hotham again?
- Yes, at Bognor.
- *Bugger* Bognor.

## LX

Monte is in full flow now. Audrey left for the hotel room. Just Zia, myself and Monte at the little bar. He's full of wine and stories.

- Take 1915 for example. Why do you think they started to wipe out the Armenians?
- Tell me?
- Because they didn't. That was us. And that led to 1922, which led to the major collapse of everything and a power vacuum like you've never seen. And we just walked straight in there. That's what we can do. You see? What we cannot get we engineer.
- Is it wise you being so free with this information?
- It's all in the past now, you know.

And so he goes on. The wine is great and they even comp us a couple of bottles for our longevity. As I slow down, I see Monte speeding up. Zia stopped drinking some time ago at the table and hadn't had anything in here. She is a willing audience.

- I better go, check on Audrey.
- Alright. We're going to bed anyway.

I find her asleep in the bed with the covers thrown off, most unlike her. She speaks sometimes, but her words are incoherent. I drift off beside her, but not with her.

Barely any time has gone by. The phone rings in the darkness and sets me bolt upright. Audrey lets out a cry as she is shocked awake. I reach for the phone and snap it open. Unknown number.

- Hello?

Zia's voice. Oh no. A meeting, perhaps?

- Yes?
- *Monte's dead.*

Sat up. Light on. Audrey faces me, eyes screwed tight.

- What happened to him?
- I don't know. I went to the bathroom, came back and found him out of the bed.
- What do you mean?
- The window was open. I checked the balcony. He was there. Still is.
- Oh my god.
- I don't know what to do.

Audrey is fully awake now.

- Who's on the phone?

I whisper back.

- Zia. Monte's dead.

I expect Audrey to react, but she doesn't. She just seems weirdly reflective.

- He spoke too much. Too much and too loudly. He always did. This is what happens to these people. It's the way they live and die, all the time.

I turn back to the phone.

- Zia, close the balcony doors. Call reception.
- Really?
- Yes, then come down here right away.
- Okay.

Phone goes down. Audrey:

- You should be careful.
- Why?
- Look, I don't know Monte or this *Zia* woman at all, but they reek of danger. You have to watch them.
- I thought you knew them both...
- No, I don't.

Uh oh. What have I just remembered?

- *You knew Audrey too, didnt you?*
- *I did. Actually, it was Sandy who introduced us at first. Through Monte.*
- *What was she like?*
- *A lot tougher than she probably appeared. A lot of that stuff was just an act.*

I look back to Audrey. Enoch was right, as usual. *True* horror is when the known becomes unknown; when the familiar becomes the unfamiliar.

We wait in silence for five minutes. The door knocks.

## LXI

The authorities suspected that it was a heart attack or similar. There was a doctor in the hotel at that time and he was able to announce Monte's passing from this world to whatever paradise he imagined. He came up with a death certificate on the spot. Zia was not as distraught as I thought she might be, but Audrey was harder than I have ever seen her. I was surprised, to say the least.

I did see Monte before he was zipped up. The look on his face was one of complete surprise. I've seen heart attack victims before now, and there is usually pain there somewhere. This just looked like a surprise party had been sprung on him and a big cake wheeled out to be cut up and shared around.

The police had a gentle poke around and left. The undertaker took the body away. Zipped up and shipped out. For Zia, I had a look around the apartment because she didn't want to go back in. I picked up his wallet, his car keys, some small personal effects and bagged them all. I was about to leave, when I saw that he had put a watch and a couple of bits of jewellery in the bedside drawers. Bagging them up, I noticed one was a slender chain with that coded device on it.

Things were moving too fast.

I pocketed the device and took the rest away upstairs to find Audrey and Zia at the small table with coffees. Neither looked tearful.

- This is all rather sudden. I just got up, went to the bathroom and when I came back, there he was.
- Was he asleep when you got up?
- Yes. He was out cold. He had had a lot to drink, after all.
- Do you know if he had a history of this?
- No, he never took any medication for anything like this. His father and mother are still alive and well in their eighties in the Alps. They still go rock climbing. His brother Paulo has twenty years on him and he is the picture of health.
- Bizarre.
- Could happen to anyone then.

I catch from the periphery of my sight a flash of a smile aimed between Audrey and Zia. I don't know from whom or to whom, but it was there. And then it was gone.

Breakfast came and went. A call from the mortuary. Another from the undertaker. Zia: *his final wishes were to be cremated and his ashes scattered anonymously. Yes, your Garden of Rest will be fine. No, he has no family. No, I am just a friend. Sadly, he died without ready assets - yes, they were all tied up in an offshore Maltese firm. His business partner will be taking that all on. No, that's not me. Yes, I will be in touch. No,*

*there are no effects from his body I require. Thank you for your kindness in these difficult times.*

All done with the sort of haste that defines 'indecent'.

We lunched over at the small brasserie on the other side of the street and consumed tapas in a contemplative silence. Little was said, because there was little to say, really. Zia was literally inconsolable because she seemed to need no consolation, and Audrey had perked up to such an extent that she was unrecognisable from the person she was in the nondescript house with the surprising basement. The only person left without a surprising transformation is me.

When we checked out, there was a distinct feeling of loss. I took Monte's car and gunned it towards the south, me in the front, them in the back, asleep. Loss and escape. I have the feeling that I am sharing the car with an unshared joke.

## LXII

I got to keep the car. Zia said she had three altogether and I could have one.

We got back to her place around one the next morning, all of us deeply exhausted and not wanting to spend any time discussing or dissecting anything. We all fell into Zia's bed and slept for twelve hours solid. A sleep so deep and dreamless that I could have been convinced that I was dead. At least until...

*No idea where he is taking us. The car rattles through its worn-out suspension as it trundles over the Vienna cobblestones, the arc of the headlamps lighting up the dimmed archways and broken pillars. We haven't seen a soul or any sign of life in the last hour.*

Damn. That one again.

I awake to daylight. The smell of a bakery downstairs signals late morning. The sound of horses on cobblestones, voices in a distant market, a faraway train taking distant people I'll never meet to places I will never guess.

The bed is empty. The shower in the adjoining room is on, steam escaping from the door left slightly ajar. The room is taller than I remember, and brighter - the shutters have been opened. I can smell the plants on the balcony. A voice to my left startles me. Zia:

- Coffee in five minutes. I have bacon sandwiches. The newspapers are full of the story about the recent events.
- Zia?

She is sitting on a small wooden table, wearing a white bathrobe and Monte's electronic key visibly around her neck. Her hair is wet, slightly steaming still in the hazy light.

- Yes. It's time you knew the truth, I think. How are you feeling?

I can only really say one word:

- *Melancholia*
- I was hoping you'd say that. Look out. Here comes the entertainment.

Audrey steps from the en suite, her body wet and perfectly nude, her attitude seemingly indifferent to our presence. Seeing her makes me long for Sandy. Thinking of Sandy makes me yearn for Zia. Seeing Zia makes me ache for explanations.

- I was saying that I have bacon and coffee coming up.

- *Whatever.*

Audrey is strangely indifferent to this news as well. I try to focus.

- What truth do you mean?
- Oh various truths. Mostly about where we all stand in this.
- In what way?
- In the way that you're thinking about right now.

I feel disarmed.

- I'm not sure I understand.
- Well, you and Audrey are or were an item, and so were you and Sandy, no?
- 'Were'?
- Sandy is no longer here.
- I was referring to what you said about Audrey.
- I am sure she can speak for herself. I am just repeating what I understand.

I look over to Audrey. She looks like a perfect sculpture made from dreams, as she fits herself into her underwear. Delicate and tough, like marble. The lustre is back in her eyes.

- This truth that you just mentioned. Are you going to tell me something?
- I suppose so, yes.

They exchange looks again.

- This is all planned, you see.
- What is?
- Monte. Sandy. Demila. David. Even the business with Enoch. All planned.

I'm puzzled.

- By whom?
- Us.
- 'Us' being..?
- Audrey and me.
- Oh I see. And what's the plan?
- To get to David.
- *David?* All this is about *David*?
- Yes.
- Via the American?
- She's actually *not* part of the plan. She just sort of appeared late on. *That woman* is just an impediment.
- Alright...so you get to David. To do what?
- Well, the first thing is that he's going to impregnate Audrey.

- *What?*

Audrey seems not to be bothered by this news.

- It's true. I need his child.

I try to gather myself for a while.

- You were there with me, at Belvedere. He's mad. He's lost his reason completely.
- Yes, which is to our advantage, I think.

Zia chips in.

- You see, if Audrey has his child, he'll have a claim.
- I thought he renounced all that...
- *He* did, but he cannot speak for his lineage.
- They won't hear of it. You do know that, yes?
- We're almost counting on it.

My head is slightly spinning.

- So...what are you planning? I mean, for one thing David won't do it with Audrey. He only has eyes for the American, no?
- Kind of. He certainly has eyes.

They laugh together.

- Okay, I'm lost. Just tell me.
- David is what they call *un voyeur*. He goes to Celesta's little events to enjoy the view and get off, usually with outside agency. What makes it more interesting is that *that woman* has learned to put up with this, being his exhibitionist. They are hardly ever intimate now, so she entertains herself with the staff to satisfy her many unusual needs. Meanwhile, David seeks his relief elsewhere. And he is pretty careless with himself, usually. So we've been *harvesting* from him.

Even my surprise is surprised. Audrey:

- And I've been feeding myself from that.

Zia:

- Ever wondered about what she has been withholding from you?

*My other hand rests on the back of Audrey's head as she takes me into her lips. We all mean well. Always her lips: never her sex.*

*The scans.*

Good god. Audrey:

- I have to make sure that whatever happens, it's his. Sorry.

Good god.

- Does Celesta know?
- No. She's too tight with them both. She hates the American and vice versa, but they both sense trouble.
- Hold on. Just suppose this all works and Audrey does bear this child. Then what?
- We claim. David was usurped, after all, so the lineage was more direct.
- But if they wouldn't take it from her, then how in the name of sanity will they accept it from Audrey?
- Oh they won't. But they will negotiate.
- With whom?
- With the Associate.
- Why?
- Because she has something on both of them.
- Which is what?
- Well, that's where the Harker comes in...

### LXIII

Back at mine. Alone. It's cold. Amelia's car arrives within ten minutes.

- Sorry I'm late. Bit of an issue downtown.

I elect not to question this.

- Do come in.
- No signs of Sandy then?
- No, none. I doubt I'll see her again.
- Too bad. I always thought you were good together.
- Shows how wrong you can be.

*Sad song.* She walks in and takes in the decor.

- You like a minimalist look?
- It's just functional. It's not a statement or anything.
- I quite like it. I live in a constant state of motion and clutter. This place feels weirdly peaceful. A bit Zen Garden.

She comes in and sits. I give her a drink which she seems to need, avidly.

- So...what's the occasion?
- I need to speak to you about something.
- Oh, really?
- Well, *someone*.
- Okay. Who and about what?
- Demilla. And how she is causing me problems.
- Well, I'm sorry to hear that. But what can I do?
- You and she are friends. Can you speak to her?
- Of course I'll try, but I cannot give any assurances. What sort of problem is she causing for you?
- Give me another, will you?

I pour her another shot. She keeps her arm out, indicating that she was needing more. I oblige.

- Well, it's been going on a while. Probably going back about ten years now. She used to be close to my sister and I came to know her that way. Demilla is an expert on all things. To be fair, she shows some degree of knowledge here and there, but for the most part it's all put-on bullshit and sometimes needs to be called out that way.
- That sounds familiar. She's like that with most people.
- She's been poor as a mouse most of her life, but has just walked into a pile of cash from an inheritance which her family has been squabbling over.

- I didn't realise that. Is it a lot?
- Enough to guarantee that she won't have to work again.
- I see. So how does this affect you?
- We were over lunching with Enoch and Martin last week and she was itching to make some announcement. Enoch just *hates* showy types and could read her in a second, so he stopped her from doing so or saying anything. That just made Demi quietly livid, so when we all repaired to the sitting room she sort of cornered me in the kitchen and told me. First she said she was just bursting to tell me something, then she said that she'd been forced to keep quiet for it for so long it was hurting her.
- Dearie me. She sounds particularly needy. It's just money, after all.
- Well that's the thing you see, it's not. She told me about the inheritance and all that, and I was pleasantly shocked and surprised and congratulated her on it. Then she told me that this wasn't the big news at all that she wanted *me* to hear.
- That sounds confusing.
- It was. So I asked her.
- And?
- And it seems she now has enough money to never work again, never worry about where to live or what to eat, and never concern herself with making ends meet ever again. In fact she was so content that her future was secure that she said she was now in a position to get married.
- Really? I never saw her like that. *Not really the settling down type*. Does she have someone in mind?
- She does. It's me..

I do an internal double take and then let out an unfortunately unstifleable laugh.

- Are you being serious?
- Afraid so. I asked her the same question.
- Demi? Really?
- I know.
- What on earth did you say?
- I asked if she was joking. She said she was not. She said she has been in love with me for years.
- But...she's straight, isn't she? She's not interested in anything like that. Is she? Wasn't she involved with that dissolute Dutchman?
- She was. She says she is straight, but she also says that isn't the issue. She says she is in love with *me*, nothing else. But she still maintains she is straight.
- Oh...I see. And for how long has this been going on?
- She says 'years' but that's all very vague. However...she did say that she had had an 'experience' which crystallised this in her mind.
- Like a physical experience with someone else?
- I presume so.
- Who with?

Amelia toys with her glass. It feels like she has something contentious to release and it's coming my way.

- I'm sorry, but she says it was with Sandy.

I should have guessed she would say that. I try to remain composed. I'm finding more and more I know her less and less. Know. Knew.

- I see. This is a bit of a shock.
- I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you.
- No, really - I would rather know than not know. Thank you.

This time she pours one into her glass and hands it to me. I hold it, steadily.

- When was this?
- She says 'not long ago'? She's seemingly wanted me for years but was with Sandy quite recently.

*Inside the room, she is sitting quietly, and fully dressed. Car keys on the table. An open bottle of wine. One glass, half-empty. Sandy looks up at me, her face completely unreadable, pale and impassive. She speaks. We have to talk.*

- I think I know when. And I think that Sandy wanted to let me know but couldn't find the words to leave me.
- How long were you both together?
- If you could call it 'together'...four years, just about.
- Good. Then I should tell you that she and I did something similar about seven years ago in London. It was a one off. An embarrassing glitch.
- Oh my god...
- We had hardly seen one another until the event in Marxergasse.
- I think I can explain her behaviour now. Did Celesta know about you?
- Not sure.
- I think she might have tried to engineer it - to get you both back together again.
- Well, it backfired as I ended up as the main attraction that night. Serves me right for losing the lottery. In any event, I'm a traditionalist. She was with you and serial monogamy is something I believe in.
- Some people think it's confinement.
- Well, you know: *bigger cages, longer chains.*
- Quite so. So anyway...what can I do about Demi?
- Can you speak to her? Can you let her down for me? I know you are both close, and as soon as I start to talk she just smothers me with her affection. I really cannot take much more of this.
- What does she say?

- Oh how we're perfect for one another, and how we'll always be happy and well-off and the rest of it. She seems to be able to overlook the fact that I'm not "interested" in her.

She does those *air inverted commas* with her fingers around the word *interested*. That usually irritates me no end. Somehow with her it's endearing, even ironic.

- Well, frankly I don't see how I can put her off if she is determined to be with you. I'm also not nearly as close with her as you might think. And I assume she knows your history with Sandy too?
- Yes, she does.
- How?
- I think it may have come from Sandy, quite recently.

I never knew her to be this indiscreet...

- Okay, so she thinks you are game for it and won't be put off. How am I supposed to interject here?
- Speak to her. Tell her that I asked you to because I didn't want to crush her. Tell her that we - you and me - are an item. Can you do that for me?

This sends me into a shock. One thing to lie a *little*, another to lie a *lot*.

- Amelia...really...
- I am really desperate...
- I know, but for one thing she'd never believe it. We don't even live together.
- She doesn't know that...
- No, but as soon as she is told that then she will check, for sure.
- Then let me stay with you awhile? You have this place to yourself, after all.
- Are you forgetting about Audrey?
- *Audrey?*

Uh oh...

- Yes...I thought everyone knew.
- I didn't...sorry. Good god. You move fast.
- Audrey was kind to me. She let me stay at hers while negotiations took place. I think she saved my life on more than one occasion, this just being another. Since then we have...grown close.
- Are you in love?
- I don't think she is the type to be 'in love', you know. I am pretty certain I am the same, so we suit each other.
- Well I'll be *damned*...
- Quite possibly. Anyway, you'll have to deal with the Demi thing. Whatever I say will only delay her. She sounds a little unhinged, really.
- No...just in love. You wouldn't understand. You're *not the type*, it seems.

I relent.

- Okay look let me call her. I'll try. I can't promise though.
- Thanks so much. I really mean it.
- I'll take the tack that you're not interested in her, as much as you like her.
- That will do enough, I hope. And you can always fall back on Plan B if only you need to.
- That's not going to happen.

Five minutes later, Amelia had left. I am alone again, in the house haunted by the ghost of someone who was still alive, being somewhere with others, living her double life without me, and perhaps not even thinking of me because of her new and exciting surroundings. Who is she with, right now?

Perhaps to fill the air with sound, I take the moment. I pick up the phone and dial Demilla's number and wait for her voice on the end of the line. Waiting, I think of Sandy with Demi. Then Sandy with Amelia. Then I think of Zia.

The voice - recognisably not that of Charles Hawtry - on the end of the line:

- *Oh hello?*

## LXIV

- Demi, hi. Sorry to call so late.
- That's alright. I was actually up and about, just off the phone to my brother. He's been sniffing around a lot looking for his cut but I'm not giving in to him. After all, it was left to me and he was specifically not mentioned anywhere. He'll doubtless contest it, but my lawyer says it's watertight and anyway, it's all with me now anyway so he'll have to extract it from me. I mean, legally. And that means he'll have to admit to all manner of things that I'll throw up at him, including the fact that he took the shares in my business and sold them off to...
- Demi...
- ...some fucking charlatans from *Ceylon* who had no idea what they were dealing with and who ripped him off good style, only to
- *Demi...*

She falls silent.

- Sorry, were you trying to tell me something?
- Yes. Demi, this isn't just a social call.
- Oh...

I can hear her mind working away on the end of the line, trying to second guess me.

- I'm glad you're solvent and seem to be enjoying life, but I've got something quite delicate to discuss with you.
- Is it about Sandy?
- No, nothing to do with Sandy. Well, not directly anyway. This has more to do with you, really.
- With *me*?
- Yes. And about plans you've been making.
- You're talking in riddles again, Jay.
- Sorry. It's been quite a day. Look - I've been speaking to Amelia. She told me everything.

Silence. I cannot perceive it.

- You understand?
- She told you everything about what?
- About the plans you have for her. You understand?
- What *has* she been telling you?
- She told me that you're in love with her.
- So what?

Hm. Not quite the response I was expecting.

- She asked me to talk to you. To let you know that it wasn't happening. That she is not interested and has no feelings like that for you whatsoever.

She's silent.

- Do you understand, Demi?
- Why did she come to you, of all people?
- She's a friend.
- So am I, but I wouldn't come within a mile of you if I needed anyone to fix my love life. What's your motivation?
- She's a friend and asked for help.
- So why can't she speak for herself?
- Because she thinks you are not listening. She wants me to convince you because she clearly cannot do it herself.
- Well, I am convinced that I won't be convinced. I'll still feel like this about her no matter what, and nothing you can say would affect that.

Plan B. The plan that won't be happening.

- It's more complicated than that, Demi. Amelia and I are...well..we're kind of...it's complicated to explain, but she and I are...how can I put this...
- She and you are shagging together behind Audrey's back and you're calling me off?
- Not quite in so many words, and not really behind Audrey's *anything*, but yes. In effect.
- Where is Amelia now?
- She's out. She's out.
- Where?
- Back to London.
- Why?
- Why does it matter? She just has. And you've upset her.
- Have I now?
- So there you are, Demi. It's not going to happen.
- Are you really sure?
- Yes. I've spoken to her and she confirms it. She's sorry, but she cannot feel the same way back.

Unexpectedly, she cries.

- She *promised* me.
- I don't think Amelia did, you know. Anyway. That's all there is to it. I'm sorry too.
- I understand.

Later, she phones me.

- Tell her I haven't given up yet.

The phone goes down, ominously.

## LXV

The front room echoes with Demi's words.

Then they echo with another's words:

- ...I left you something. Under the floorboards of the front room. Use it carefully. I'd have that drink you spoke about before you dig it up, though.

I pick up Amelia's glass and fill it, then empty the contents over my throat. Then I do the same again. Then once again. It hits me strong.

Three chairs, sofa all pushed back. Table moved aside.

Roll back the Chinese rug, revealing the boards screwed down in the centre. The varnish on the heads is broken. Someone has been here not long ago. Sweat on my forehead. Not exertion: anticipation.

Screwdriver. Lifting the boards. Looking down, a drop of maybe four feet under the house. Blackness. Vaguely damp smell. The whisky curdling in my stomach. I see nothing. The odour hits home *hard*.

Torch. Down below, in silence, a cubic blue cardboard box sits quietly shining in the light. In the dirt under the floorboards it is clean. Tied up in string.

Window hook. Down to the box. Lifting it out, strangely heavier than expected.

It sits on the floor. I lift it to the coffee table.

A voice from the box:

- *Thank heavens for that. You took your fucking time, love.*

The voice, recognisably that of Charles Hawtry, comes out of the box sitting next to me.

I go to look for scissors to cut open the string.

## LXVI

Belvedere.

- I have to say. This is the most perfectly *weird* thing I've ever heard.
- Sorry David. It's true though.

Not proud of myself. If I stop Zia's plan then at least I will have a chance with her. It will cost Audrey, but that is a price I will pay.

- I had no idea. And the *commodity*. It's not all that it seems?
- No, it's not. It's very much not, actually. Just a drop in the ocean.
- Well. That changes things completely. I have to say...I am shocked. And it's *Audrey* you say?
- Yes, Audrey.
- I won't give in to them, you know. This story is too preposterous.
- Well, they have another bargaining chip. Quite a big one.
- Oh? What can they *possibly* have?

I give myself a little pause.

- It seems they have the Harker on board too.

David sits up, his face a strange mix of fear and incomprehension.

- *How?*

So I tell him all they told me. All of it. The confession. The betrayal. The need for a bargain. The promise, and the ultimate sacrifice should it all go wrong.

- Does Audrey know how *utterly dangerous* this is?
- She does, and she admits it gives her some worry, but it seems that she won't be put off, no matter the danger. She's seen the prize.
- How does Monte feel about this?
- Ah. One more detail I missed out. He met his end in the hotel.

David doesn't even flinch.

- Well that moron was essentially asking for trouble all his life. Sounds like he got it. It does, yes. Did he suffer, do you think?
- Hard to tell. He wasn't really marked, so it's not obvious. The authorities suspected that it was a heart attack or similar, but we won't know. He was cremated and disposed of. All in the most extreme haste.
- Yes, thought they might do that. Typical of them, really. Fucking *wops*.

We'll let *that* one slip.

- I'm not sure how you want to play this one, David. Do we just let it happen and watch it fail?

David seems to be thinking. It's quite frightening to watch. I've never seen him think before.

- No. We stop it.
- How?
- What's the most effective way?

David shifts in his seat, a sign that he is going to make a remark aimed at me personally.

- How close are you and Audrey?
- Well...I thought we had grown close, but this obviously changes everything. I admit I am...well...
- Shocked?
- Yes, shocked.
- Well then, if you are agreeable to it, then an obvious situation presents itself.

This. The moment I have been waiting for all this time.

- I suppose it does, yes.
- We will have to be quick. They are mobile, after all.
- They are. I am not sure if Zia has to be involved in any of this.
- Oh she does. Anyone who knows anything has to be dealt with accordingly. The way you phrase it, it seems like she's deeply involved.
- Actually, I am not so sure. I think there is more than meets the eye.
- Such as?
- Monte was only put away because he was after her too.
- What do you mean?
- I think he was stalking Audrey because he knew what she was up to.
- How can you tell? And why would he anyway?
- To do you a favour. Because of the commodity.

David's eyes widen.

- That would place me in some danger.
- It would. So, to be on the safe side I'd take off somewhere. That way you're out of harm's way and cannot be tied back to whatever may unfold.
- That's remarkably clear thinking. I should go quickly.
- Yes. Make your plans first.
- I was hoping you might..volunteer?
- No, I cannot. I'd be the first person they'd suspect.

A reflective pause.

- Is she really carrying my child?

Uh oh. I was hoping he would avoid this.

- She's certainly pregnant. I saw the scans. She's definitely pregnant. And given the timing, it must have happened while she and I were together.
- My child...an heir. You realise what we are discussing here, don't you?
- Yes, I am fully aware. That's why it has to come from you.

*Knock*

Finnegan and two staff. David and I exchange looks.

- Leave it all to me, he says. - And I'll introduce you to someone who can deal with The Harker.



That was the last time I ever spent there.

And I miss it still.

## LXVII

- Sorry, but I just saw them. I couldn't help it.
- Can't I have *any* secrets from you?
- You have to admit...this is a big secret to hold back.

She lights a cigarette, indifferent to the effects on another.

- It's not yours.
- I know. We're sort of...unconsummated.
- Yes well. I'm getting rid of it.
- How? And why?
- How? The usual ways. Why? Because I don't want children. It was an accident.
- Who with?
- Some fellow I met at Belvedere. One of those parties. You never went to any, did you?
- No, I have no appetite for that. Who was he?
- Just a random stranger.

Something is not adding up.

- So...if you don't want it, then why are there scans?

She flounders.

- They just gave them to me. Thought it would be good news. I cried.
- Yet you kept them.
- Yes.
- And even hid them.
- Yes.
- From me?
- From everyone. I need them to show that the abortionist will have something to do.
- When?
- Next week. I have the appointment in my diary, if you want to check.

I let this all slide. Some terrible and irreversible damage has been done.

## LXVIII

The Catalan seems amused by the prospect.

- Fast and clean, alright?

He nods.

- And try to avoid actual suffering?
- *Combien?*

Wow. Confusing.

- You'll be paid in commodities. Half now and half later. Yes?
- Agreed. *Quando?*
- I will leave the planning and execution up to you. Just make it soon, and *no suffering.*
- Of course.
- God.
- So where is it?
- Where is what?
- The 'commodity'?
- Ah yes. That case over there.

A wide black briefcase. He picks it up, popping catches. Inside tight packed bags, stamped and official. He nods in approval.

- Some of your own at last.
- Yes, the fence no more.
- Yes. Call me when it's done. And give me the evidence we agreed.
- Of course.

And he was gone.

*'Here it is. Turning in Wed., Jan. 29, 10 am. Had my fun at police'*

## LXIX

Four days later.

The cubic blue cardboard box sits on my desk, the strings uncut. The paper within uncrumpled to find her looking up at me, her extended smile showing teeth and gums, her eyes half open, gazing up, dazed and without the clarity of vision.

Beside it, another much, much smaller cardboard box in the same shade. This one is unopened. I could not bear it. I call the cab and have it taken to Belvedere so that it can be buried and hidden. His grief will be powerful. Perhaps powerful enough so that she will resent him. That alone signals *mission accomplished*.

--ooOoo--

Far off, another duty is carried out.

A white case is picked up and removed to a flat where an envelope lies on the unfurnished kitchen worktop. Within it is a sequence of numbers.

The numbers open the case.

The case reveals the contents.

The unholy power of the contents roars from the confines and tears his body, mind and soul to unrecognisable, irreparable shreds.

--ooOoo--

My phone rings once. Twice. Three times. Her voice, on the line.

- *We have to talk.*

I smile and make my way to her apartment.

## LXX

The downtown flat. David is inconsolable. She's gone. He thinks it's permanent. But he has no idea of permanence.

He's also drunk. Really drunk. Two stages off paralytic.

- I've flirted with this stuff all my adult life. Time to consummate the relationship, I think.
- David, that really won't do you any...
- Oh *fuck off* you tedious man. This is how I want to be forgotten. This is how it ends. Not with a bang, but with a whisper.
- Isn't that *whimper*?
- Oh fuck off, *Spaniel*. I'll tell you what's right and what's not.

Here we go again.

- Robbed of my birth, robbed of my rights, robbed of my lineage and now I'm robbed of my wife...
- That's a *bit* of a pattern there, isn't it?

David glowers. His eyes look demented through indignation and wormwood.

- *You'd think that...*
- Hardly anything to do with me.
- No. Nothing ever is.

The Spaniard smiles and lifts the whisky bottle, pouring its contents into the heavy sparkling glass. I am not offered anything. So I sit and watch. Just like the others.

- The boy. You know.
- What about him?
- Before Mira's thugs got to silence him forever we found out a few things. One of them was about one of your friends. And a couple of others. One gone, and one still around and seemingly protected. Weird eh?

David's not really listening. But I don't think this conversation is really aimed at him.

- The quiet one. We'll catch up with her sooner or later. She's indiscreet.
- They all are. *Cunts. Cunts. Cunts. Cunts. Cunts. Cunts. Cunts. Cunts.*
- The other more exotic one? I think I know where we can find her...
- Oh *goody*.
- ...but I think there is someone here who can find her faster.

## LXXI

- I'll be fine. None of this stuff really bothers me.
- You have to make yourself scarce.
- Why the panic?
- They have The Harker.
- Oh *shiiiiit*....

Fifty minutes later she had her bags and she was in the back of the car, hiding down low and I pushed it out of the city and into the poorer area of the town, all industry and broken walls and mysterious buildings with signs that probably mean nothing to the people working within.

My phone rings.

- I promised an introduction.
- Yes, you did.
- To the one person who can deal with the Harker, right?
- I remember.
- Well what you will do it this; drop her off at the agreed rendezvous, then drive to the address she will give you. You'll meet someone there.
- Okay, I will.
- Be on your best behaviour. Try to control your thoughts - assume nothing is private. Speak only when invited to. Don't interrupt.
- I assume they know what they are doing?

David gives that sneering laugh that most people take for a cover over ignorance.

- Oh I'd say so. I was defending them for a year of my life.
- I'll take that as a 'yes', then.
- Oh, and go there alone.
- I wasn't planning on taking anyone else.
- Good. Not that it would affect them at all, but I don't want the story to leak out.

There's a short pause before he picks up another thread.

- I got the delivery, thank you.
- OK. Two boxes, yes?
- Yes, two boxes. We buried one earlier. The other is still with me.
- That sounds unbearably sad.
- It is. Now I have to go. Let me know how things turn out, will you?
- I shall.

I take her to the filthy row of houses in a degenerate, deserted street. Number 52. She ejected with considerable haste, along with the bags. She looks completely out of place here.

- You alright here?
- Yes, number 52.
- He said you have an address for me?
- An address? No. I was just given a number.
- What number?
- 82.

Must be the same street.

- Go then. I'll be in touch.
- Right.

She turns and walks up to the door, disappearing inside without anyone else being visible. The door closes. Overhead, the dark clouds gather in a vast silence, and the light drops dramatically. Deep down, I almost sense the sound of oppression in my skull. I try to fight on and drive up the street, where only parked cars are the abandoned ones. Silence. No people, no birds, nothing. Not even any smell.

I find number 82. The front windows are broken. The weeds in the small patch of the front garden are easily four feet tall. A stack of broken wooden pallets and bricks sits by the door which gently swings unlatched on its broken hinges. This will have to do. Handbrake. Do I lock the doors? Why bother? The garden path is broken and uneven. A hand on the door to push it inwards. Smell of damp and decay. Inside, a short hallway, open door to the right and left and a closed door further to the right. Ahead, and staircase leading downwards which I know I have to follow. The treads creak hard as I stand on them, presumably the only weight they have carried in years. To the bottom where a cream coloured shipped door stands closed, without sounds within. Pressing back against whatever I fear, I push it inwards slowly. As soon as it moves, a voice says to me

- Come in and have a seat. The kettle's on.

Inside. The familiar kitchen from 1958. Clean and tidy, without modern appliances. A press cupboard. Jars in rows on a plinth. Cutlery in a rack. Plates stacked vertically for drying. Belfast sink. The heat from a stoked range within, burning on a small pile of logs piled a discreet distance away. A fridge with a locking door. Chopping board, knives in a block, cups on a series of hooks. High above, a line running up to a series of wooden slats upon which clothes are being dried. Something on the cooker. My favourite. The best. Lamb stew. *Her* lamb stew.

And there she is. Just as before. As she was and as she will always be. Efficient, methodical, precise and practised.

- Well there you are.
- Yes. Here I am.
- It's been a while, hasn't it?
- Yes. Sorry, mum. It's been a weird life.

## LXXII

So here we are. Man and mother together again, at last.

- You do realise that this is only to make it easier for you?
- I do, yes.
- And that I could really be anyone you want me to be?
- Yes.
- And you're happy with this?
- I am, yes.
- I see. You don't actually have to be so diffident with me, you know. It's not something I demand.

I realise I am sitting tense and knotted at the table with a simulacra of my mother, whereas in fact I am in the company of something I wasn't even sure I always believed in.

- I know, but you believe now, don't you?

My face reddens.

- Sorry. But there was never enough evidence. Why give us reason when we cannot always apply it?
- That's a fair point, but I am not the self-questioning type as you might understand.
- So much I want to ask you. So much and so many times have I wanted to know.
- I know. Sometimes the mystery is better. Some things are best left unknowable. There are barriers for a reason.
- I realise that now. But we are such a curious type. And it's your fault, isn't it?
- I take the blame for you needing to question everything, always. I admit that I never thought of the consequences.
- Oh...doesn't that mean that you're not...you mean...there are things you *don't know*?
- Of course. I might lie outside time, but I can only look in and see what chaos ensues. I don't steer it.
- I find that surprising.
- It would be so *dull*.
- I also find that very....comforting.

We drink the tea.

- Can I call you 'mother' as opposed to 'mum'?
- Why? What's the difference?

- I called my real mother 'mum', and it would be confusing to call you the same even if you look like her.
- It's all the same to me. I've had that many names in my time that another won't really make much difference. The Dogon people called me Amma and looked upon me in the same way, so the experience isn't novel.
- Then 'mother' it is.
- And try and relax, will you?
- Sorry. It's not every day of the week one finds oneself in the actual presence of The Almighty, is it?
- I suppose not.

More tea.

- So...I know why you came here, obviously. And I know of the plot and I know of the reason and I know who sent you and all the rest of it.
- Can you help?
- I could help in so many ways your mind would start to smoke, so I won't. The plot and what drives it are neither here nor there to me, and I am not going to interfere, but I do realise that a small intervention from me would be helpful and steer things back to the right path.
- Before you do, please understand that I don't approve of...
- It's okay. I understand. There is a greater good to be had out there, and that's all any of us want, yes?
- Yes. I'm just sorry David is such a meaningless shit.
- Most people in your universe *are* meaningless shits. I don't really need to know the details, just have to give you a bit of agency.

A pause.

- So you want me to reign someone in?
- Yes, exactly. If that one is suppressed then they have no leverage.
- Then that's what we'll do, yes?
- I'd be obliged if you did.



- Most people think he's a symbol of evil. He's not. You want to know something interesting about him?
- Go on?
- I made him when I was really young. You know. When you feel strong and start to realise your powers?
- Sure, I know what you mean.
- You see? *Fashioned in my image*? Well anyway, I wanted to see something powerful and frightening to others. Just to keep them in line. So I came up with him. I think he's kind of handsome, in a way.

Just then I see it. The Harker, in her hands. Tiny and squalling a bit, unable to be released by her willpower. So small and helpless.

- See what I mean?

No smell this time. Just a faint squeaking.

- I cannot kill him, you know.
- Cannot or won't?
- Both, really. I cannot because I made him immortal. And I won't because everyone needs a chance, and whatever bad is done will always cause some good. Maybe even a *better* good. You understand?
- I think so, yes.
- I just have to remind him of his place. What he can respond to and what he cannot. Sort of like reprogramming.

I watch as the Little Harker becomes calmer, then quieter, then almost joyous like a small kitten discovering play for the first time. She teases him for a while, gently speaking to him in a tongue I cannot recognise. I smile as they play, an elderly woman and her pet.

- Can I touch him?
- You better not. He's still your *Harker* and could fry your soul without a second thought. With me? He knows his place without any doubt.
- He looks so cute and defenceless. Almost like a child.
- Well that's a strange tale. That's *exactly* what he is. When I made him I was a child too, in a sense. And in imparting that to him, I forbade him from growing up. My fault, I'm afraid. *Mea Culpa* as they would have said.
- Without the help of this one then they won't win anything. The right side will win.

She flicks her eyes up at me with a look that suddenly *stops my heart*.

- *Right and wrong* are moral constructs put together by people like you to convince one another to follow their intent. It is not the way *I* would do

things and implore you to follow that example. Don't try and sell that stuff to me, okay?

- Sorry. I wasn't trying to be....
- I know. But just watch your place, okay?
- Yes. Sorry. Absolutely.

She holds my gaze hard. She's not just looking into me. She's looking through me. Sifting the atoms and compounds that make me up. Assessing the electrical bonds that hold my borrowed quarks in place. Dissecting. Assaying. Destroying me from within.

She smiles at me.

- How does that feel?

I cannot speak. I am transfixed by fear and the power she has over me and everything else in the universe, and that - of all things existing - she is focussed entirely on *me*.

- I had you going, didn't I?

She turns to the reddish figure in her fingers which she lets drop to the floor, allowing it to disappear in a steady cloud of grey mist until it is no more.

- He'll bother you no more. He'll still be around, and you'll still see him and others will speak of him, but he knows where you are placed, and that you know me. He cannot harm you now. He knows the rules. He cannot even register with you now. Anyone tries to use him against you, I'll know about it right away.
- Don't you know everything?
- Not really, no. Like I said, the descriptions you read of me were written by the easily impressed. Like beetles describing Picasso. They will just look at what they see and try and relate their experience, but they fall so far short. Not because they aren't trying, but because they just aren't in the right universe to do it. Do you understand?
- Yes, I think so.
- I mean, until now you never believed in me, did you?
- No, I didn't.
- That's excusable. I didn't believe in you either. But that is because I had no idea about you. And vice versa. So now we believe in each other. But before that moment happened, we weren't doing any harm to each other were we?
- No.
- So you see, all of this *believe or he'll slay your first-born* stuff is just made up trash put out by hucksters who would want to run your life by using me as a front. Nothing new here. Nothing to see. Move along now.
- That's...refreshing to hear.

- It shouldn't come as any surprise.

We sit in silence.

- Mother? Can I ask something?
- Sure can.
- You seem ignorant of me, but know about the likes of David. What's the difference?
- Ah, good question. David came to attention because of his status, as well as the sheer number of flaws in his character. He's a complete fuck-up and yet wields authority over others who are forced to look up to him. So they take him as an example.
- Oh...my real mum would never use language like that!
- Sorry...force of habit, I suppose. I'm more used to conversing with bishops and the likes. I'm sure you get the message, though.
- So it's his fame?
- Hmm...partly, but also his authority.
- Or lack of it?
- Well, he threw that away.
- What's the worst thing he has done?
- Probably sending you to see me, if I think about it. Now you realise just how helpless you really are. But...too late to go back on that now. I have a small skirmish on the other side of the galaxy to deal with now, so you have to excuse me. Go and do good. Do no harm. Be kind to everyone. And do your best in all things. OK?
- Yes. Thank you, Mother.
- There is much rubbish written about me, but I do love you.

With that. I am back home immediately. Lying in bed. Beside Zia.

*She tried to be something she is not. Her looks opened doors into rooms she could not understand. She is swept along with things and pretends to know, when she knows nothing.*

Cannot be true.

*She is here as part of a subterfuge and is smarter than we give her credit for. She may be in the pay of one or more governments.*

Cannot be true.

*She was brought here by another party and placed here to be something else, but found herself caught up in the workings of the underworld.*

Cannot be true.

*She knows exactly what she is doing and is doing it by choice.*

Has to be true. Study four works, in the end.

**PART FIVE**

**THE HARKER ASCENDING**

### LXXIII

Zia wakes next to me, slightly dazed from the day's events.

- Before you even ask, it's six.
- Why so early?
- Because it is.

She reaches over to confirm the time with her watch. Even at times like this she still appears in a lustre of beauty.

- She's quite the Chatty Kathy, your one.
- Sometimes you cannot shut her up. What time did she go?
- About one, maybe. Couldn't shut her up.
- Really?
- Yes. In the end all she wanted to talk about was you.
- I ought to be flattered.
- She was fishing. I let nothing on. She finished the wine, though.
- That sounds like her. Why are you awake so early if you came to bed so late?
- Worry. But that's part of being 'me' so don't you go worrying about it.



- I promise I won't.

We get up and get ready. He's come a long way to meet us and we have to be ready for him. She packs a rucksack with provisions, I take the practical stuff.

- Remember to take the shades. He said we'd need them.

## LXXIV

He leads us for a while across the border, always watching for the patrols. They are told to shoot on sight, he says. He also reassures us that they haven't found their target yet. Oddly, this is no reassurance. The light is dim. It's midday. Around us is an embrace of almost complete silence, even an absence of birdsong. Nothing but the giveaway sound of our feet on the gravel track leading to the fence, and the faraway sounds of diesel engines and shouting.

We make it to the fence intact. He turns to us urgently.

- Now listen carefully. You follow me. Do not wander off the path I take. Do not linger, so keep up the pace. You - leave that bag here. We can get it on our return. We have to travel light and move carefully. Any deviation from this will mean extreme danger for us all, so mark my words, right?

The five travellers nod in agreement. The Fireman continues with the same sense of urgency in his voice.

- In here things are not as they seem. Up is down and left is right, but we must be prepared for whatever we encounter, however strange it seems. If we meet a talking cow we treat it as if we have always known talking cows. If we see a fish riding a bicycle we say 'good morning Mr Fish' and walk on without a care. *I cannot emphasise this enough*: we are about to walk into another world where nothing makes any sense. You'll see what appears to be normality, but it's not. It will appear to be deserted, but it's not. We are strangers in here and we must behave like that. We all understand?

The five travelers nod again.

- Right, follow me. Stay ten feet apart at all times. And show respect.

He ducks into the gap in the fence and into the vegetation behind it. One by one we follow him in, the last one taking care to fold back the tear in the fence carefully.

Inside, we fight through the hedgerow until we appear in a small clearing. We stand in a circle, trying to maintain the distance needed.

- Look over there. Can you see the spire?

We peer through the branches and make out what looks like a broken spire of what once must have been a church. Jude points at it and Fireman nods.

- That's the direction where we are headed. To get there we take a spiral path, out of these trees and down the path, then off to the left. The church will be visible on the right. We are not taking the direct route because that would

place us in danger right away. On our descent you will find the mouth of a tunnel. Stop there. That is our first landmark. Now we move on. We don't stop until the tunnel, right?

We nod our compliance. And then he sets off at a brisk, positive pace through the trees and out the other side, heading down the slope, following the path, then veering off it and over the grass. The ground is wet and slippery. There is a gloomy dampness in the air, and the skies have darkened. I glance at my watch. It says it's quarter to nine. Somehow we have gained three hours.

Zia picks up the pace behind me, taking care to observe the ten feet rule that the Fireman had been so careful to explain to us when we gave him the money.

I cast a glance to the right. The skies appear darkened, almost purple. The wind picks up a little, eastwards. The long grass moves, leaning westwards. I have the overwhelming impression of being watched. Eyes front. Jude ahead of me, then the Fireman taking long strides, then disappearing over the edge of the hillock and downwards. A moment's panic, then I see Jude do the same, then I follow, the grass flattened by previous travellers.

Then I remember the stories. Last time there were ten travellers. Two came back. They denied any knowledge of the other eight. Then they denied knowledge of entering this place. They showed photographs of themselves at work at the same time. But the Fireman had been there with them.

Up ahead, perhaps two hundred yards, an overgrown mouth of a circular tunnel. It gapes at us, as if it intends to swallow us whole. The wind picks up in the other direction now. The grass falls into it. Jude strides towards it, following exactly where the Fireman has led us. Behind me, Zia is following at a safe distance. Behind her are the Poet and the Bandit. The Fireman leads us downwards, but as we walk there, we get slower and slower. The tunnel recedes, now even further away. I turn behind me to look at Zia, to see if she is experiencing the same thing. She has an expressionless look on her face. I turn forward again and find us at the tunnel. The Fireman seems exhausted.

- How far was that?

The Fireman catches his breath to answer Jude.

- Not sure. We should rest here.

I express surprise. The journey has only just begun, surely? The fireman addresses us.

- We've been walking three hours. We're tired. Drink from your supplies. Keep hydrated, remember. And don't eat anything while we are outside.

- Why not?
- No one is very sure, but it seems to slow people down.

I move out of the group and towards Zia. We converse quietly.

- Have we really been walking three hours?
- Yes, we have. You were here all the time.
- It feels like we just set off.
- Maybe time is out of shape here?

The Fireman sits and drinks from his water bottle kept in his rucksack. His eyes are tired. Jude looks worn out. Zia looks no better. The Poet is on his back, appearing profoundly exhausted. Only the Bandit seems as surprised as I am. Our eyes meet but there is no sense in expressing anything, for it will either be misunderstood or used against us.

- We rest for an hour. We can use the mouth of the tunnel as shelter, but don't go further into it.

We follow the Fireman's advice and sit in the open maw of the entrance. I can hear sounds from within. Animal sounds, magnified. The skies darken again and the rain falls steadily. Watching carefully I feel the rainwater wet on my face. I see the grass and the deviated path completely dry. This feels like a place where we really shouldn't be, but the quarry is worth the pursuit.

The sun ducks behind some deep clouds and dullness envelops the entire atmosphere. We discuss lighting a fire but the Fireman advises against it, saying we will be safer to remain together without that, as it will only attract attention.

- Do they know we are here?

The Fireman faces down the Poet's question with a fierce look of hopelessness.

- They *always* know when you're here. It's just a matter of how you deal with it. If you are quiet then your chances are better.
- Who are they anyway?
- No one's sure, nor certain how this place came to be. We just know it is.
- How was it discovered? I mean, the real story....not the one that the authorities put out?

The Fireman weighs up the possibilities, then answers.

- About a year ago, someone heard cries for help coming from the house. No one knew who was making the noise, but some people living nearby heard the commotion and went to investigate. They found the house empty - dark and cold. But the screaming and shouting came from within. Even when

they went in and searched, they found nothing. They said that the screaming always seemed to be muffled, coming from a distance or a nearby room, wherever they went in the place. Eventually they gave up and telephoned the police. They came down and found nothing. Then they realised that the screaming had stopped and that they were in a dark and empty house. They radioed back to say that there was something going on, but they couldn't find what. They even discussed ripping the walls down in case the sound was coming from within, but they didn't get that far.

- What happened?
- No one knows. They never came back. Neither did the people who reported it. They all just vanished. They sent in a search team for them. They vanished too. Then the army went in with vehicles and guns and lights and maps and cameras. They vanished too - you can see a couple of the vehicles on our path later. The decision was then taken to fence this place off and treat it as hostile.
- How big is it?
- About a square kilometre, we think, maybe a bit less. No one is really sure. It can seem small, yet be large inside.

Zia voice our collective fear:

- Will that happen to us too?
- I won't fuck with you. It might, but if you know what you are doing here then you should be alright.
- How many times have you been here?
- This is my seventh time inside.
- And have you had any...experiences?
- Yes, but I realise that it might not be real so I will not talk about it. Time and distance play tricks with you here, like I said.

I pipe up.

- That first journey we took. From the fence to here? It seemed to take only a few minutes, to me.
- Me too, said the Bandit.
- Yet you all looked exhausted and needed to rest, as though you had been walking for miles. Yet, if this place really is only a kilometre across how can anyone walk for an exhausting period of time? A child could do it.
- I know. That's part of the mystery. I think that in here, time and distance are fluid. The basic laws of motion and distance don't have meaning. Or at least, no meaning that I can think of.

We sit in silence for a while. Zia definitely looks perturbed by this, but it was her idea.

- Anyone got a spare water bottle?, I ask. The Poet gives me a refilled Evian.

- Come on, let's move in. We take this tunnel into the curtilage of the farm and then walk around the back of the house. The next landmark is the end of this tunnel.

We file into the wet darkness. The Fireman fumbles with a bright torch which illuminates the brickwork inside. It's large enough to take a train.

Walking through puddles between the dripping water from above, stumbling through broken stones and bricks. All around is wet and dark and damp. Ahead, that low growling again.

- Ignore it, say the Fireman. - It's a trick of the wind. There's nothing alive in here.

I refuse to believe him but say nothing. We walk on ahead, perhaps two hundred yards at a painfully slow pace, following his path through the stones, never varying for an instant. The tunnel bends gradually to the left, away from the general direction we are wanting. As the tunnel straightens out, a light ahead. Then without warning, the Fireman.

- Wait...

We stop like startled horses. I think the Poet even cried out at this point. The Fireman snaps off the torch.

- What is it? I thought you said there was nothing...
- *Shhhh....wait*

We are frozen still, the sound of silent fear boiling in our ears. Underground, in darkness, led by a man whose sanity isn't always beyond doubt, in a deeply mysterious, hostile territory surrounded by the sounds of predators unseen. Things couldn't be worse, could they?

For what seems like an age, we stand there without moving. Then the light comes back on. The Fireman again.

- Wait here.

He moves on ahead in the tunnel, the light swaying ahead of him as he picks through the debris on the ground, moving steadily ahead towards the light at the far end. We wait. A minute. Five minutes. Still he walks ahead. I cannot see the others, but feel I have to say something.

- What the fuck is he doing?
- I don't know. I think he heard something?

Still his light moves away from us.

And then it goes out. And stays out.

After a minute, the Poet panics. I can't make out what he is saying, but I hear Jude shushing him.

- Zia?
- Yes?
- Just checking...

A voice.

- Does anyone have a torch?

Sounded like the Bandit. Fumbling with a small backpack and a dimmer light illuminates us. Shining onto our faces. All five of us are here.

- What do we do?
- He told us to wait.
- Well...I can't see him. Shine the light up the tunnel.

Whoever has the torch shines it in the direction the Fireman went in. And there is no one there.

- Oh fuck almighty...he's gone.
- *Oh shit. Oh shit.*
- Quiet, all of you.

Jude takes charge. He seems like a natural leader.

- We're not standing here any longer. Let's move *carefully* towards the end of the tunnel. Slowly. And don't disturb *anything*.
- Why the fuck did we come here?
- We all have our reasons. Let's just get through this.
- Should we all hold hands?
- No, just be careful and follow the light. And stick together.

We pick our way towards the light slowly, stepping around the puddles and the twisted metal and the broken stones. The light shines on the brick walls. No stones or bricks are missing. *Where did all this debris come from?* Slow pace through the ruins. Always confirming in low voices.

- Is everyone still here?

Four other voices agree they are still in existence. Still making our way towards the light at the end, though it hardly seems to be getting closer. Is that a fence or a gate across the end? And is it getting wetter as we move on?

A sound from beside us. The Poet stifles another yelp. A pause. Someone picks up something. A pause. Then bright light. It's the Fireman's torch. Shined up and down the tunnel's length. No Fireman. Nowhere. No branches or corridors to disappear down. Just a straight tunnel. And no Fireman.

- We're fucked.
- No we are not. This is a test.
- We should go back.
- Who is testing us?
- I say we stay on course and come out the other end. We shouldn't go back. We walk towards the light at the end and rethink. We cannot do that here. Are we agreed?
- Yes.
- OK...
- Yes..
- I don't like the idea of that at all. But yes. We should pick up the pace a bit.
- Alright, but be careful.

We make better progress with two torches now. The ground is still littered with objects, but we anticipate them.

Behind us, the growling of the wind is heard. We move faster still. The end is now in sight. It's a gate across the end, but it looks bent back and accessible. The Poet is moving faster than all of us, such is his fear. Jude walks carefully carrying the Fireman's torch, shining it on the ground to light our path. He hisses at the Poet.

- Slow down. Remember what he said.
- It didn't do him any good, did it?
- Well in the absence of any other advice, I think we should still be careful. Let me move ahead at the front. At least you're not going to run into darkness.
- Be my guest.

We move ahead slowly. The end is now closer than ever. Maybe a hundred yards away. Then fifty. Then twenty. We can feel the cold air from the other side of the broken gate, and can see the twisted barbed wire wound loosely across it. Not far now.

- *Shit...*

Jude's light goes out and he seems to disappear. Zia runs forward to assist but I hold her back.

- Wait! You, the torch..

The Bandit shines the lesser light ahead. There is a huge pool of water right in front of us, from which Jude is emerging. The water is murky green, opaque and still and threatening. I lift Jude out. The water is also freezing.

- I never saw it...
- It's OK
- I lost the torch
- It's OK

The light is shone onto the pool. Maybe ten or fifteen yards across. So still. It must be very deep. No way around it either. We're probably too weighed down by baggage and clothes to swim through it, and the cold may well kill us. I kneel and drop my hand in. The temperature would stop your heart. The Bandit explores the area with the faint light. No path around it. Nothing. We're stuck. And the growling gets louder. And we hear movement behind us.

Panic starts to spread between us. No way forward. Something coming towards us from behind.

- What do we do?
- Do we swim for it?
- We can't. We have to stand our ground.
- Against *what*?
- Against whatever comes our way.

The movement gets closer. The Bandit almost looks like he is squaring up to fight. The Poet is whimpering. Zia looks over to me. *Help me*, but I am helpless. We all hear it advancing, disturbing the bricks on the ground. The Bandit tries to find it with the torch but the light is too dim. Then he looks back to the water, still showing no way across.

- We're going to die...

And then. A blinding flash of light blinds us completely, dazzling us and stunning our senses. It's overwhelming, like a physical blow. The growling is beside us. Right beside us. And it's a voice.

- I told you to wait.

The Fireman. With his torch.

- But...we did.

Zia is crying with relief. I think deep down we all want to cry with relief just like that.

- When I say *wait*, I mean *wait*. I thought we understood who was in charge here.

We cannot explain. We cannot offer any explanation. The Fireman looks at us with contempt, and steps onto the water's surface and moves to the gate. It's barely a puddle - almost a wet floor and nothing more. Less than an inch deep. We walk through it and up to the cold iron gate, with its twisted wire and broken spines. The light outside is dimmer than ever. My watch says midday. The Fireman speaks.

- I wouldn't bother with that, if I were you.

He steps through the hole in the gate and into the marshy foliage on the other side. We all follow, as he leads us through tall reeds and mud, until we emerge onto a tiny hillock where we collapse. Jude is still soaking wet. The Poet looks like he wet himself, which causes him great discomfort. Zia has her composure back. The Bandit flicks off the torch and pockets it.

- So what just happened?
- You went on ahead and told us to wait. We waited. You disappeared. We went on ahead and you came up behind us.
- That's not possible.
- But that *is* what happened.
- Perhaps. But it's still not possible.

A pause.

- The map. It says the tunnel is fifty yards long. And straight..

The Fireman doesn't disagree.

- Maybe, but I wouldn't bother with that one either. Maps and clocks don't really seem to matter here. Anyway. There it is.

He looks behind us. As we turn, we see a huge face in front of us. A huge screaming face, bellowing in frozen silence. Zia actually screams out loud. And then our nerves settle and see it's a farmhouse, with two windows for eyes and an open set of double doors beneath.

- But that was way in the distance...
- I know. And now it's here. And we are going around the back, past the upside down jeeps and in through the hole in the wall.
- I can't see any hole in the wall...

- Does that really surprise you here? After all you've seen? This place *makes no sense*.

The Fireman strides off towards the promised military vehicles. As we pass we see signs of life. A helmet. A firearm. A bag. A box of ammunition. No life. No persons. Just the ghosts of ghosts. The grass beaten down by previous travellers – maybe even those who were here before all this started, now pushed back by military vehicles on a farm. A discarded clipboard with large letters scrawled on it: *'Can the man who did this please report? The latest arrival came around at 08:40 and no one seems to have noticed'*. The jarring sight of such lifeless signs of life such as this a shocking emblem of absence. We try not to linger and stare, but walk around the back fence and over the rocks there, now only yards from the rear of the whitewashed house.

At the back is a large shed, the roof blown off and the interior exposed. The flat ground stretching way off into the trees behind, with the only signs of any previous existence being a set of overgrown narrow rail tracks that came from the direction of the woods and just stopped some distance from the shed. No signs of any vehicle, loading facilities or anything else. Just a sudden end. Dead tracks. It was such a surprising thing to see that we all paused, trying not to stare. Why did they end? Who took that decision? Did anything ever travel on them?

- Move on, said the Fireman.

Despite hearing the words, the Poet moves closer to the tracks, seemingly fascinated by the missing humanity.

- What on earth happened here...?

I mutter sidelong to him to get back, but he doesn't hear me. He seems transfixed by the sight. The Fireman leads the others on, but being distracted by the Poet leaving the group I slow down, with Zia coming up closer behind me. The Poet doesn't hear me.

- Hey!

I stage-whisper to him sharply, but fail to get his attention. I do manage to startle Jude who sputters out

- What is he doing?

The Fireman turns around and reacts to the Poet's wanderings with a cry.

- Get back here!

But the Poet doesn't seem to realise what is happening. Whatever is driving him on is in control of his spirit, and is taking him onto the long grass towards the cold rails. The wind whips up with new vigour. I move in his direction but the Fireman shouts at me to stay where I am. Unconsciously, Zia comes up beside me which earns her her own rebuke for getting too close, and she jumps back like a chastened child. The Bandit calls out for the Poet to come back, but he may as well howl into the wind, as he gets nothing from it. The Fireman tells everyone to stay on their ground and not to move. We obey. The wind gets stronger, appearing to localise right on the Poet as he walks. Then he shouts out to us.

- *It's here! It's right here. I can see it. It's right here. Stop me.*

His last words seem to be the last thoughts of his psyche struggling for control as he closes in on the rails. His steps are slow, mechanical, driven by something he doesn't know and cannot control. The wind is powerful now, forcing us to crouch to avoid being blown over.

The Fireman shouts to all of us.

- All of you, turn round! Face the house!

We turn. Only the Bandit seems unwilling.

- Turn round! Now! Don't look, whatever you hear! Don't look!

The Bandit turns and faces the house. The Fireman shouts out to the Poet once more. There is a low feeling of current in the air, a sense of energy, a charge in the atmosphere. I hear Zia shouting out in fear, but her words are lost in the whirling gust of wind which is obliterating all other sounds. I crouch down, fighting against the power of the elements whilst the Fireman throws himself onto the ground like a soldier taking incoming fire.

A burst of starlight.

Perhaps a sound. Perhaps not.

The wind drops to nothing *instantly*.

A smell in the air, acidic and familiar.

The Fireman stands up and looks behind us, a look of defeat and despair on his face.

- *Renewed energy*, he says.

We slowly stand and turn to see - nothing. Same grass, same dead rails, same trees in the distance, plus a light pallor of smoky residue which drifts in the still air. Then moves, dissolving. The Poet is gone, completely.

- Where is he?
- Gone.
- I know, but to where?
- I don't know. He's gone and we'll never see him again.
- No...body? No nothing?
- No. Just gone.

We stare awhile at the lack of evidence he ever existed, feeling numbed and worn out by his complete erasure.

- Did anyone know him?

Silence. We don't even know who to tell now he has gone. The Fireman:

- I met him at the First Stop. He knew what I was doing and offered me money to come in here. He seemed strangely desperate.
- Did you speak much?
- No. He's a writer of some sort, but I think more of a scribbler. He struck me as more of a dreamer, really.
- Why did he want to come here so badly?
- I don't know. I don't know what drives anyone to come here, other than to get in here. But he was silly and didn't listen.

He looks up at the rear of the house.

- We should move on. Keep to the path, and don't bunch up.

Around us: broken vehicles, rusted fixed winches and pulleys for unknown farming means. An upended trough needing repairs. Tarpaulin. All around us decay. Wet and decay. The tall rear wall of the house white and windowless.

We turn our backs on the Poet's last location and walk around the corner to find what looks like the front of the house. Zia seems surprised by this.

- Hold on. I was expecting a third wall before the front. Is it triangular?
- No, there are four walls. We've just walked around it.
- But we only passed the front, the side and back. How are we back at the front? Shouldn't there be another side wall?
- There should. But you are making assumptions. Stick to the path.

Beside the open mouth of the house is a narrow doorway that wasn't obvious before. Or it wasn't there. Or it was and chose not to reveal itself.

- We move in now.

The Fireman steps onto the single stone threshold and walks inside. We follow, keen to escape the uneven landscape, but at the same time I am worrying about what is ahead. Our mission is to get to the heart of the place.

- Do we put the shades on yet?
- No, I will tell you when they are needed.

Inside. A narrow corridor of dark stone walls, damp to the touch. Wooden steps take us downwards. Slow descent.

- Watch your footing as you come down. And count your steps.

Heavy footsteps on loose boards, each of us apart by three or four steps. The descent steep, the steps narrow causing you to crab down them sideways. Doubtless this is why we have to travel light: big rucksacks would make this journey impossible. And all around us is darkness. The Fireman's torch seems to dull slightly, as though being drained of its energy. Ahead, firmer footsteps, the light shone onto the ground. Stone floor, pools of water everywhere. Jude avoids them carefully, mindful of his last experience which has left him still wet through.

- We can rest here. Eat if you like, but not too much. We have a way to go yet.
- Are we underground?
- You'll see. That's not really a valid question to answer.
- I don't understand.
- Well, my best answer is *it depends*.
- On what?
- On what you see.

A pause. Silence all around, except for the house flexing in the wind which must have picked up again. Jude takes out bread and cheese and offers it. No one really wants it much. Another silence.

- I can sense your questions. I still have questions too, so I may not be able to answer anything.

The obvious one first, from the Bandit.

- What happened to him?
- He's no more. That's all I can say.
- What killed him? Was it that he annoyed whoever is working the control here? Or was it something he triggered by just *being there*?
- In this place I find anger indistinguishable from physics.

We wait a little longer. Dripping of water around us. The darkness dulling our already feeble senses. That ozone odour still hasn't left me.

- How far is the heart of this place?
- It's close, but the journey is longer.
- I don't really understand.
- Neither do I. I am just reporting the answer. I know it's close, but the truth is that to get there takes much further.
- We must be fifty metres underground. That staircase was very steep and long.
- I counted 134 steps, I think.
- Odd. I counted 145.
- I got 143.
- Well, I am sure I counted 152.

The Fireman smiles in the shady light.

- I got 152 the first time. The next time it was 129. I don't think it has been the same number twice.
- I don't get this place. What is the point of this?
- I don't think there is one, is there?

Jude looks thoughtful.

- Is it possible that this is a simulation of sorts, and that the person or whatever that is doing it isn't very good at making a consistent picture?
- Interesting.
- Maybe also quite poor at keeping people alive.
- Or keeping their curiosity at bay?

We let that one hang in the air, quietly. The Fireman speaks up.

- I've really no idea, other than some I will keep to myself. But I will say that in about two minutes, all you have seen so far will appear almost normal. Just to warn you, alright?
- We're near the heart?
- No, but we are on the way.
- Care to explain?
- Alright. From the outside, what did you notice about this house?
- It was white. Derelict?
- It had big doors downstairs that were open. And two windows above.
- The number of the outside walls didn't make any sense.
- Yes, all that is correct. But *else* did you notice?

We look to each other in the murk, confused.

- If you were to describe it, what's the first thing you'd say?
- The colour?
- More basic than that.
- The size of it?
- Relevant, but even more basic than that.
- Location?
- You got it. *Where it is*. Now hold onto that thought as we move on.

The Bandit looks uneasy.

- This all sounds so terribly...dangerous.
- You'll see. Come on, just a short walk through that corridor and up to the door at the far end where we will stop.

We stand, pick up our things and move into the slightly wider corridor under the house. Water seems to run down the walls here. There have to be rats here, even if we cannot see them. The smell of damp and earth and dirt is sickening. It's freezing cold down here. No lights, save the glow from the Fireman's torch up ahead, illuminating the wooden rafters strung with decades of cobwebs and filth. Our steps are hindered by our shared apprehension, mostly kindled by the Fireman's words.

- We must be outside the walls of the house by now, says Jude. The trip down and along must have taken us farther than the house extends. What is holding it up?

The Fireman walks ahead, his beam illuminating a filthy broken wooden door at the end. On the back is a hook on which hangs a dirty coat and a short scythe.

- Alright. Now we are going in. This is not the heart, but prepare yourselves for a shock. This might change your lives forever.

Our nerves tighten. He holds the thumb catch and pulls the door open, and what we see makes our heads spin as though we are looking into the fourth dimension. Which in a very real sense, we are.

Ahead of us - a long type of corridor, the walls painted light blue.

The corridor is maybe three metres wide, the same tall, and about a hundred metres long.

Along the walls, spaced at five metre intervals are square windows, exactly like the pair we saw from outside.

Beyond the window, a view. It's London.

We appear to be several hundred metres in the air looking down.

And the view is *exactly* the same from both sides of the corridor.

No one speaks for at least a minute. The Fireman lets us all in, the warnings about staying apart seemingly forgotten. I stare into the impossible and try to understand what I am looking at. I see the dome of St Paul's far down below me, then I look behind me to the window opposite and see the same scene. I move to the adjacent window and the scene is the same there. I can only think of one thing to say.

- What the *fuck*?

The Fireman nods, closing the corridor door behind him carefully and quietly.

- I *still* don't know what the fuck. But it's real.
- Not just pictures? A broadcast?
- No. You can actually open the windows. Try one.

I grasp the lever and twist it. The window opens perhaps two inches, but enough to have a gasp of cold pure air blow in, along with the sounds of the city far, far below us.

- But...we're underground. In rural Poland. So how come...

We all seem to have the same reaction, understandably. We are somewhere we are not. And it's not an illusion. It's real. It's London right down beneath me. I look over at Zia. She seems spellbound, and not surprisingly so. The Bandit pipes up.

- Does anyone have a mirror?
- What for?
- To look directly down. The window doesn't open far enough. I want to look out and see down the walls.

Good thinking. No one has a mirror of course, but we find that Jude is carrying a penknife whose main blade is shiny enough to reflect. He carefully leans it out the space in the frame and reveals the white of the walls of the house. Rotating it to look down, we see the foot of the building maybe forty feet below. On mud and grass. In other words, we see rural Poland.

But out the window, we are looking down from hundreds of metres up. Looking down on London.

- This isn't right, says the Bandit. - It makes no sense at all.
- I don't get it, replies Jude. - I just don't get it...

Of all of us, Jude seems the least equipped to deal with it. No one is exactly enjoying this feeling of dissociation, but he seems to be taking it hard. I walk up to him and put a hand on his shoulder but he doesn't seem to react, just stares out at

the scene beyond the glass and shakes his head. Zia comes up beside us, in a consoling mood.

- I don't understand it either, she says. - I'm just letting the experience in.
- It's all very well for you two, says Jude. - I haven't seen this in years.
- Me neither, says Zia. - Although if you look hard you might be able to see the street where I was born.

I look to her, puzzled.

- I never knew you were from London.

She looks back quizzically.

- That's La Paz, dummy. Southern District is just over there, with Calacoto just to the east of the...
- Wait, *what*?

Jude makes us both jump with the suddenness of his reaction.

- Woah there. You alright?
- That's La Paz nothing. That's Los Angeles. How in the fuck is that La Paz?
- Well...I actually see London.
- Wait, *what*?
- I see St Paul's and Big Ben. That's London.

The Bandit contradicts all of us.

- Well I can see Munich pretty clearly. What about you?
- I can see Manchester, says the Poet. - As clear as day.
- And I see Vienna, the Fireman chips in. - And have done so every time that I have been here. Others have seen other places too. Most see the place of their birth but in my case I...

All words tail away as our eyes move back to the Poet, standing not ten feet from us. He appears well, unscathed and seemingly oblivious to anything untoward that may have happened. I repeat myself:

- What the *fuck*?

It's him. Still standing and still there. Zia shrieks. Jude seems to be blown out of one reverie into another. Even the Fireman seems shaken by this. Odder yet, the Poet seems shocked too.

- What's wrong?
- You. What happened to you?

- What *happened* to me? Nothing...what do you think did?
- Outside, only about half an hour ago you went off the path and just...*vanished*.
- No I didn't...
- *You did. We saw smoke. There was something like a whirlwind. You just disappeared.*
- I've been here all the time. We came in the door, down the stairs, along the dirty path and came out here.
- *You couldn't have*, exclaimed the Fireman, now getting quite animated. - You were not there.
- I was so. You told me that I was badly equipped for the journey and that I should have brought another flashlight.

We look at one another in disbelief.

- No he didn't.
- Yes he *did*. I told you that I had brought one but that you had told me to leave it with the big rucksack outside the fence.
- That conversation never took place.
- Yes it did! You even replied by saying that I wasn't even properly dressed for the weather.

Zia yelps in indignation.

- *What?* I never said such a thing. Not to you, not to anyone. You were *not there*. We saw you one minute and you were gone the next! We thought you had just disappeared, like all the others.
- What others?
- The army went in, remember?
- I don't at all.
- We had that conversation right outside the tunnel.
- What tunnel?
- Is this a wind-up?

The Bandit rounds on the Fireman now.

- Wait...are *you* behind this?
- *What?*
- Are you stage-managing tricks to fool us?
- Of course not! I am as freaked about this as you all are.
- Have you ever seen anyone vanish like that before?
- Yes, twice. And it's horrible.
- Is that why you told us to look away?
- Yes.
- Not just so Mr Writer here could off and hide?

- No, of course not. Look around you, for fuck's sake. Does *any* of this make *any* sense?

The Bandit cools down a beat.

- Look, I say to them all, - we cannot start bickering like this. This is a hostile place and we are here for a reason, right?
- Right. But I don't get any of it. And I don't get *him* being here again.

Zia interjects.

- Is it possible that he is from a different past? That somehow all of us are being truthful? I mean, *look out the windows*. That's real but we all see it differently. If the present can be forked like that, so can the past. No?
- I think she might be right.
- Hold on, I say. I turn to the Poet. - Check your bag.
- What?
- Check...your...bag. Look for a water bottle.
- Really?
- Yes. Do it.

The Poet looks into his little shoulder bag and rummages a bit then pulls out a bottle of Evian. The bottle looks fine.

- Hand it to the Fireman.

The Poet complies, puzzled. The Fireman looks equally puzzled. I examine the bottle.

- Have a look at the label. Above the third peak. What do you see?

The Fireman looks. Shrugs.

- Nothing?
- Look closer at the paper. Right on the edge.
- Okay....a little tear?
- What shape?
- Maybe...L-shaped?

I take the bottle from my bag - the one the Poet gave me before the tunnel. I signal to the Bandit.

- You. Have a look and compare. What do you see?

He takes the bottle and examines it. He blinks.

- It has an L-shaped tear. Right over the third mountain peak.

The Foreman and the Bandit compare bottles. They look at the bottles. Then each other. Then me. Then the Poet.

- They look the same, says the Fireman. - There's also a mark on the plastic, same on both.

I sense Zia's moment of triumph.

- How can we possibly have identical bottles if we are both in the same time continuum?
- Holy...fuck.

The wind picks up through the unlatched window. Jude closes it. There is a general silence. We all regard the Poet with suspicion. He was gone. Now he is back. He senses this and backs off a little.

- Is he real?
- I don't know.
- Does *he* even know?
- Look, I know I am real! I have no fucking idea what you are all on about! I have been here all this time.
- I don't trust him now. Not completely anyway. I am sorry, but I cannot. I don't even know if he is human.
- Not *human*? Have you listened to yourself?
- He's right. It's too odd to trust.

I address the Poet directly.

- I'm sorry, but I really don't know what to think either. I think you are sincere, but if you are a simulation of some sort then what you think you are thinking is what some other entity *thinks* you should be thinking.
- *This is fucking nuts!* I know who I am, for crying out fucking loud!

The Fireman interjects.

- Look, the truth is that he is back with us and we don't know how or why. We cannot leave him, so we take him along. We don't have any other choice. Now buckle up. We have to be at the end of this corridor in twenty minutes.

For some reason we accept his authority and reluctantly get ready to move out. I take a longing look at London down below. Is this when I will last see you? Is that even really you? I catch sight of Zia at another window, perhaps thinking the same of La Paz. I walk up the corridor and she turns, taking my hand tightly. I squeeze back. Such a strange species. In the wake of time and space fluctuations we neither

can explain nor use, in a land that seems calculated to confuse and paralyse, and in a company we don't know and cannot trust we still find a bond.

- I love you, she whispers to me

My heart jolts as we traverse the long corridor at a light jog, the scene below us never altering from the movement we saw before. I grip her hand and bring her with me. If we get out of here alive, she is coming with me, for always.

Feet tramping on what sounds like a hard, solid floor. Stone or brick or hardcore?

The end of the corridor nears.

The fireman opens the door. To *immediate* stairs down. Longer, less steep. And fewer. We run down fast and get to the end where we fill out into a bigger room. Long, with wooden sides visible in the dull sunlight, rattling chains or similar, smelling of - animals. Stables. Square doors at the end. Seen from outside.

- Get your shades on *now*, says the Fireman.

We fumble to comply. The Fireman ducks into Stable One and up to the back. A door. Shoulder to it, hard. There is something coming closer to us, and we cannot tell what it is. The door opens with a splinter.

- In here. *Quickly*.

Running through ankle deep water. The shades incongruous on our faces. Until.

Boom.

All falls dead and silent around us.

The light comes on, like a hundred winter suns, blinding and baking.

I scream as loud as I can from the fear and the light and the pain.

But there is no sound. I neither hear nor feel nor speak.

The air is hot, yet cold.

I cannot sense anything. Blinded, deaf and dumb, without sensation. We all stand, and I know we are close together. Zia's love for me is overwhelming. I want her to feel the same *and to know it*. And I feel myself shaking beyond all control.

*Wherever we are, this is the heart.*

Floating in an unfocussed haze. I have no hands but I know I can feel them. She takes mine in hers. And we move on. Soundlessly, I am screaming with laughter, exulting in a physical, emotional and spiritual joy like I never believed was possible. I feel her doing the same. We're one at last.

London?

La Paz?

Los Angeles?

The Moon?

Who cares?

*I am tripping endlessly on life like eternity fucking depends on it.*

## LXXV

- ...tripping endlessly on life like eternity fucking depends on it.

She looks up from the page.

- Is that it?
- Yes, so far. What do you think?
- It's hackneyed, although marginally imaginative. It reads a bit like the plot to *Stalker* although you've taken it much further. It just seems to come to a sudden halt, that's all. What happens to them all? Who are they? Where do they come from?
- I didn't want to dwell on that - it's not relevant.

Audrey taps her cigarette out on the ashtray she has placed on the bed.

- When is he needing this for?
- Some time next week, I think.

She ponders on the last page. Reading it and then re-reading it.

- What about ...cumming endlessly on life like eternity fucking depends on it instead?
- Isn't that a bit...you know...blatant?
- Well, it's about him and her being together. You know, the strength of their unspoken feelings.
- Perhaps, but I prefer to leave it a little less of a blunted instrument than that.
- Hmm, and yet back on page 83 you manage to describe Sandy 'masturbating intently'.
- Yes, but that's a plot move. How it affects David, and the knock on effect it has to the American and hence The Harker.
- Yes, this 'Harker'. When is he doing any *ascending*?
- He will be. Just give it time.

A pause.

- One other thing.
- Yes?
- You seem to be trying to weave yourself into a love story with Zia, but earlier there was the promise of *explaining* her. You haven't really done that.
- It's organic. That's how we react to it.
- Hmm...not convincing, though. Has David seen any of this?
- No, not yet though he knows about it.
- If he was to read what happens to his love then he'd likely have a fit.
- David is too self-absorbed. He's going to be more concerned about what happens to himself.

- That business in the garden at Belvedere - I don't remember any of that. She had her dalliances, but she was never one to flaunt it, nor make it public like that. It's also so...*perfunctory*.
- Exactly. She is a passionless solipsist. She'd fuck the gardeners and the estate workers, not for personal pleasure, but to declare 'look what I am doing', as though to qualify for their club you have to behave like that. She never really behaved naturally, you'll notice. It is like she studied people badly and imitated what she assumed was their behaviour.

Audrey scans the last page again.

- I still think that my 'cumming' phrase is a better one. It makes more sense.
- It's not realistic enough.

Her phone rings.

- I dunno. I once had a forty minute orgasm when I was twenty. Just a sec.

She examines the incoming number and flips open the phone.

- Demi? Hi there. What's happening? (*pause*) Okay, that's actually perfectly normal. Did you write it down like I asked you to last time? (*pause*) Okay. (*pause*)

I stand up from the wicker chair and walk to the window. A sultry haze rises over the vista from outside, an early and bright moment of sunlight through the gloom that we have stepped from.



Bangkok. That time of year again.

## LXXVI

Who cares?

*I am cumming endlessly on life like eternity fucking depends on it.*

The light is burning hot around us, but none of us are troubled by it. The sound overwhelming yet silent. Around is a tight embrace but none of us can feel it. The only thing we feel is physical ecstasy unlike anything any of us could possibly experience anywhere else. The feeling so intense and so irresistible and overwhelming that any thought about what we were actually doing there is forgotten. The here and the now is our only reason to be there.

The Fireman spreads his arms and screams. His scream is silent and enormous.

I hear it in every fibre of my soul.

## LXXVII

David let me see it one day at the library at Belvedere. The American was nowhere to be seen. I could tell that the strain of this was playing on his mind.

- The codex was found some decades ago in a collection house in Austria. It's printed on a form of paper we cannot quite identify, but it has been carbon-dated to the 10th century. The ink is organic too, and was dated to around the same period. Many people have seen it. No one has cracked it yet though.

The manuscript is drab outside and colourful inside. Filled with drawings whose tones have not faded over the centuries. And lettering in an alphabet either forgotten or neglected.



At dinner that night, David holds court on it.

- Someone told me they had found it in Austria anyway, but I have heard other rumors about it.
- Like what?
- Like it was actually found in a Polish farmhouse by some people who should have known better.

The American slouches beside him as he speaks. She looks so bored, like she has heard this so many times. Sandy looks attentive. Audrey sits next to me, eating tiny pieces of bread with even tinier sections of cheese cut from the enormous truckles on the table. The other ten or so people are unknown to me. Sandy's companion for the evening seems not to know who I am, which bothers me. After all this time and all we've been through? Not even a mention?

- Who was that?
- Some type from the town. He used to take people there for a thrill, pretending it was *enchanted* or something. Who knows? But whichever story is true, here it is anyway.

It sits open at a centrepiece, its folded pages unfolded to double width to reveal watercolours of plants that clearly never existed on this earth, not now and never

before. It's a work of imagination, clearly. Somehow, David thinks otherwise, so I cannot bring myself to voice this concern.

By craning my neck I can see part of it on one side. It's almost grotesque.



- And did you know that *fruit* is actually younger than dinosaurs?
- Is it really?
- It is?
- Assuming you *believe* such nonsense.

The American pipes up the last words, despite her apparent reverie. People try to ignore her. David continues.

- I found that quite fascinating.

A few looks are exchanged by strangers around the table. Such is his devotion to her it could be her asinine remark or his fruit-related revelation. Who can tell?

- It's dreary. Can we get more wine?

Some servants move into action.

- So who was this person from the town? And where in Poland?
- Oh I am not sure. I once was told it was near the Czech border, around Katowice. No one is very sure. The actual location always seems to be in motion.

Audrey stifles a giggle. *I know, I know.* At what point does it become mannerly to inform someone you've invented everything about them?

- Has anyone ever translated the codex?

- No one. It resists all attempts to be converted from anything other than gibberish.
- Could it be a hoax?
- It's a pretty elaborate one if it is.
- So are many things.
- Such as?
- You must have read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*?

David opens his eyes completely and sits up which somehow disrupts the lethargic American. It becomes apparent to some that she has been giving him a half-hearted handjob under the table, an observation borne out by David pushing himself back in and looking animated.

- That was *no* hoax you know. None at all.
- Oh not *this* shit again, please David! Can't we just enjoy our dinner without all this again?

The American looks incandescent at the suggestion.

- Leary, you can leave, thank you.

Leary - whoever he may have been - drops his cutlery and stands up. Muttering something to the woman beside him, he leaves the room without comment, his expression impassive and yet at the same time apparently weary. He's seen this before, I'll wager.

- Any other comments? Anything else you want to say to insult your hosts?

Silence around the table. Some might be in agreement. Some might not. Others might be thinking that anyone who was prepared to be groped by his partner at the dinner table isn't really in a position to command the moral advantage.

- It's no hoax. Never let that escape your thoughts.
- So why was it exposed as one?
- Who exposed it? Let me ask you that, hm?
- Wasn't it the *Times*?
- It was. And who published that? Some kike named Wolf, that's who. He saw it for what it was - a damning and accurate account of him and his type and their need to take over the world. And who saw to it that it was printed? That hideous little man Steed, who was thick with Engels and Bebel. Anything for those Marxists to discredit the truth. They wouldn't know the truth if it came along in a horse and cart.
- I think that this work has been discredited too, no?
- By *whom* exactly?
- By a very prominent Irish writer who both was a captain in the British Army and who has nothing to do with the argument one way or the other, David. If

you want to believe that there is a plot then you may well be justified in doing so, but heavens above man! This isn't the best place to plant your flag.

- I think I'll be the judge of that. You always know the truth when it resounds in front of you.
- Hear, hear.

That was the old man at the far end of the room.

- Thank you for the support, Jack. It's always needed, it seems.
- If it's good enough for Ford, you know...
- Absolutely old fellow. Good enough for him then it's good enough for anyone.

Another voice, unknown.

- I hear there are *Israelites* in government. What can we do about that?
- Whatever we can, I think. And wherever that takes us. We have a plan, you know.
- 'We'?
- Yes, those right-thinkers of us left.

The American seems a little more energised now.

- We'll finish them off, believe me.
- And how are you going to do that?
- Well, one great man made a start of it, you know.

Even among their friends there is an audible gasp. One woman stands up suddenly and lets her cutlery crash to the floor noisily. A servant moves forward but she brushes him silently aside. Once on her feet she seems to not know what she must do next, so she turns towards her hosts and moves forward. The American seems confused by her movement, if not amused.

- Going somewhere, Sandy?

Sandy steps up to the American and without the slightest preparation unloads a direct mouthful of her spit into her eye, causing the latter to howl. In another movement, Sandy picks up the now refilled red wine glass just as David jumps to his unsteady feet to make some form of chinless protest, and receives the entire glass of wine straight into his still-opened flies. David yelps as Sandy moves in a steady glide to the door, followed by her companion scuttling like a flustered puppy behind her. The American jumps to her feet and storms out after them both. I wonder if I should intervene.

I look round at the other guests. They seem to be as put out as I am.

- Never a dull moment at David's little lunches, eh?

David is still on his feet, nursing a wet crotch with red wine stains covering his sandy flannels.

- *God fuck and damn that cunt*, he howls. Then he turns on me. - *Why can you not keep that bitch under control, man? This is all your doing, you know.*

I can barely understand it.

- She has nothing at all to do with me, David. She's her own person and has her own responsibilities.

Servants fluster around David waving tea towels and cloths without any effect. He barks something at them and they run off, followed by David who is either looking for a change of clothing, the American or Sandy. The very austere looking man at the far side smiles and says something about Sandy being a *really good shot* and that they ought to *have her out on the grouse shoot soon*.

I excuse myself, knowing the lunch is now over, and trail after the open door in the hope I might get some clue as to what is going on now. Outside, from the dark wooden hall I see that the French windows from the lounge are open and the gravel has been kicked up, which suggests to me that Sandy has brodied her car off into the afternoon with her companion. Far beyond is the stone pool, and sitting next to it is the American. I weigh up the possibilities and then walk through the lounge, out the doors and up to the American who is sitting in silence nursing a handkerchief to her face.

- I'm sorry. That was pretty much completely out of order for her to do that.

The American drops her hand and looks up at me, revealing the trail of blood down her nose and over her chin.

- And *then* she chose to punch me. Can you even explain her?
- Sandy is touchy about some subjects. Your view of the Hebrews is one of them.
- Oh *fuck the Hebrews*. I'm more concerned about her not realising who she is with and whose charity she is taking. Next time you see her tell her I want to see her to return the favour.
- Where's David?
- No idea. I barely care right now.
- Sorry.

I think back to the time when Audrey and I watched her swim here in the pouring rain. She seems to read my mind.

- Do you know why I did that?
- Did what?
- Swam in the pool that rainy day?
- Erm...not sure, really. David was having one of his moments, as I recall.
- Yes well, that didn't help at all. Sometimes they came at us thick and fast. But no, that wasn't the reason why.
- You wanted to surprise us?
- No, not that. I just wanted to see if I could distract you. To see if I still had it, you know? I used to have it. Now I wonder if I lost it.

Her voice takes on a ring of pathos, which I find repulsive.

- Why?
- Because I'm stuck here with *him*. And I wonder if this is all I am.

How to break this to her gently?

- Well, we did see you. I suppose seeing anyone like that might be distracting. And the guy from the stables still thought you had it, clearly enough.

There is a pause.

- Sometimes I do...shameful things. And think shameful thoughts and utter shameful words. It's just part of the malady that I am, I guess.
- I really don't associate you with *shame* at all. We all saw what you were doing with him under the tablecloth, you know.
- He likes it. He thinks it makes him seem powerful and in control. Like he doesn't have to care about what the world thinks of him.
- Perhaps. I never thought of it that way. Does it bother you?
- *Everything* here bothers me. Sometimes I think I am wearing a mask just walking about here. What they expect of me and what I deliver are so far from what I really am, you know. But now I have this reputation and I live up to it. I smoke, I drink, I fuck and I outrage. His family sees me as poison in a skirt.
- From their perspective you *are*. And David drank of it willingly. You really ought to understand that. They have long-term plans which you may very well have derailed.
- It would have happened with or without me. I was more a catalyst than anything else.
- If I ask you a question, can you give me an honest answer?

She suddenly looks directly at me, immediately prepared for the attack.

- Do I have a choice?
- Yes.
- I'll try.

- Did someone send you?

She understands exactly what I mean. And nods.

- And this person who sent you - was it your people who put him away afterwards?
- It was.
- At the time the authorities suspected that it was a heart attack or similar. I found a doctor who was able to announce his passing from this world to the next and came up with a death certificate on the spot. Audrey was barely upset.
- I'm sure you can guess why.
- Funny, I always thought it was Zia.
- No, she was just scenery.

There is a small pause while the new truth hovers between us. She speaks.

- Can I ask *you* something now?

I feel just as defensive now.

- Okay.
- If I give you a time and a date, and a method...will you kill him for me?
- Frankly, I'd love to.

Her kiss tastes of cigarettes and wine behind which is hidden a glimpse of whisky, behind which lies a whole host of unspoken explanations.

## LXXVIII

Audrey thought the story was hilarious.

- Did she really? Anyone have any idea where she is now?
- No, sadly. I'd happily just find her to tell her how much most of us enjoyed it.
- She *actually* tipped wine into David's trousers?

Amelia and Audrey both laugh out loud.

Amelia -

- And she was serious about wanting to have you kill David?
- I think she was, yes.
- Sure it's not one of her traps?
- How can I tell?
- Oh that's easy. Did she try and kiss you?

I feel my face redden.

- More than just 'try'...

The two women look at each other and nod as if to confirm how stupid I am. I ask the obvious question.

- Have I just been served poison in a skirt?
- Yes, you have.

Audrey seems to want to know more.

- Just a kiss, yes?
- Yes. Very boozy too. We just had wine at the meal but she definitely had whisky on her breath. It was actually quite unpleasant. As soon as she did that I could tell I was being set up, but there is always that doubt.
- This is all part of her plan, you know.
- Audrey, to be fair your plan against David was just as mad.
- 'Was'?

Amelia clearly knew nothing of this. Audrey shushes her with a shake of her head that says *tell you more later*.

- So you're not going through with it?
- I don't see how I can. It's all pretty insane.

My phone rings. I excuse myself. It's Celesta. Drinks at seven. Be on time.

## LXXIX

- So tell me more about Amelia and Demi. Did it ever happen with them?

The last time I saw this room it was filled with people in dull light, watching a couple performing a floorshow for them. In the warm haze of day the pale blue and alabaster gives it the refined air of good pottery and light. The place is smaller than I imagined, but larger than any person living alone would find necessary.

One of Celesta's servants let me in with a quiet air of resignation. His demeanour was that of someone declaring inwardly that he was *too old for all this shit*. He presented me to the room where I found Celesta wearing a set of jodhurs and nothing more. She never went riding any more.

- I am not really sure, you know. Amelia seemed less keen and thought Demi was barking up the wrong tree.
- Oh she'd say exactly that. It's obvious with Demi, but Amelia has more to hide. She has other interests.
- I think it's sometimes hard to find Demi attractive.
- Maybe, but she is loaded and that always helps.

She tinkers with her brandy, slouched in the wing chair, one leg draped over the arm. She registers quiet boredom.

- I was thinking of getting the place done up again. Make it less of a museum. *They* used to like it like this, but honestly I don't. What do you think?
- What I'm thinking is why you chose to bring me here at all. And why you chose to dress like that.

She looks mildly offended.

- You know how I am, Jay.
- I know. But I also see your blouse stuffed under the cushion, so I have to assume you just took it off.
- I did, on a whim. And it's OK. I'm not going to fuck you. Anyway, your heart belongs to another, I am told. How is Audrey these days?

We smile together at the mention. She keeps herself well-informed, as ever.

- It's much more complicated than that.
- Yes, well it must be with Zia hanging about like that.
- Like I say, it's complicated.
- Of the two, which would you prefer?
- I'd prefer one of them to be more honest with me.
- Which?

- I'm not fussy. Sometimes I am keeping things from one at the insistence of the other, sometimes they are keeping things from me.
- You're getting no rest.
- Certainly not enough.

Birdsong outside. The small garden stream bubbles. The French windows slightly ajar, letting in the slightest of breezes. The house is silent, old and solid. I feel that it is patient, waiting to outlive her and her habits. She knows what I am thinking.

- It's all just *biscuits and crackers* to me.
- Weird to make so much from something like that.
- He invested wisely. The bakery would never have provided this much for him. He actually bought the Parsonage and sold it at enough to get this place. Plus there were takeovers and the likes. He was a wise old bird, you know. More than just shortbread in a tin.
- I love this room.
- It's my favourite too. It impresses people easily. Especially those who are willing to be impressed. You don't strike me as being like that, though. You like it without gasping. I find that more admirable.
- High ceilings and elaborate cornices are fine, but I've known something like that all my life.
- Exactly. So you see past the wow and into the thought that lay behind it.
- You could have a great dinner service in here.
- Oh I keep that to the dining rooms. Too big and it feels like you're eating in an art gallery with an audience. And talking of which...I heard there was a very stimulating lunch at Belvedere.
- Oh that...
- Yeah. Do tell. I only got old Fran's version of events and she is shocked by regional accents, so you can imagine her take on it.
- Yes well...it was eventful. There seems to be no end of melodrama when we all get together. Some people just bring it upon themselves.
- I hear David was up to his usual nonsense?
- Yes, the usual stuff about Jews and those who conspire against him. Frankly if I were him I'd be more concerned about his family. But as one old Fascist to another, he and I are still poles apart. Is it true about Sandy?
- Yeah - she tipped her wine into his open flies.

Celesta lets out a cackle of untamed laughter that echoes on the hard walls.

- Oh that must have been fabulous! All of it?
- As far as I could tell. And that was just after she spat in the American's face.
- Oh how *delightfully disgusting*. Please God tell me she had been eating blue cheese just before that.
- Sadly not. She left and they chased after her, but she was gone. I imagine she'll never be invited back now.
- David will have her back - no problem.

- On what basis?
- First, he likes people who behave badly, secondly he'll be contrite because he knows he probably started it, but most of all because he'll remember her from the time they last met here.

I think back. The floorshow. David and Sandy watching each other.

- Oh yes. Maybe so.
- And I also hear you got very friendly with the American afterwards.
- We talked outside.
- More than that, I am told.
- Oh *really*? Is nothing safe?

She enjoys my discomfiture.

- Tongues?
- Yes...
- I never thought I'd see the day. And how was it?
- It was just after lunchtime and she tasted of four hour's of booze.
- You should go round the back of their kitchens. That's where they keep the empty bottles in blue crates. She's going through Black Label like it's keeping her alive.
- Which, I am guessing, it is.

Celesta stretches out slowly, flexing herself carefully. She knows what she is doing. And so do I.



- I never know who to trust around me these days. I wouldn't trust her with anything. Certainly not money or love.
- Why do you say that?

- Because she's the most appalling gold digger I have ever encountered. You think she loves David for his looks?
- Well, *obviously* not.
- Not even his title. It's his access to cash and *others* that does it for her. The house, the cash, the lifestyle, all of it. Being with him is just petty taxation.
- I imagine he knows it.
- He *counts* on it, fellow. If it was actually love then they would be shackled forever. If it's just a financial arrangement then you can leave her to get on with herself and pursue your own interests.
- Yes, Audrey and I saw that once up by the pool.
- She carries a reputation. The hired hands know her better than he does. But you probably guessed that much already. She reeks of snobbery but would see her way with a mechanic if it suited her.

I muse over the next step.

- She was actually sent to him.

For the first time in ages, I see Celesta looking uninformed and surprised. She sits up.

- *Do go on.*
- I think it was Monte. She was sent as his poison.
- Why?
- To ruin him. You know, *within the year* as his father said.
- To keep the line going?
- Something like that.
- So who sent Monte? I mean, he hasn't a principle to his name so I assume someone sent him.
- *Hadn't* a principle. He's dead.
- Wow. I never knew. What happened?
- We were out one night with him, all very convivial although he was a bit...loud. Next morning Zia tells me she found him dead in bed.
- How was she?
- Oh fine. Cold. Prepared. You know?
- That's terrible.

A pause to reflect.

- So whoever bought him got rid of him?
- That's my working hypothesis.
- Does that hypothesis identify anyone?
- Sort of. But it's not something one can really battle.
- Who?
- He was at your soiree where David encountered Sandy.

Her face creases in thought. Then in realisation.

- *Him?*
- His agency for sure. And he has been in the ascent since then.
- You know David is protected from him?
- Yes, I do.
- You know how?
- Yes, I do. By that codex?
- Yes, that's it.

I pause to assess.

- What's your take on David? You seem close?
- I loathe him and I loathe her. Why do you ask?
- Oh just curious. I may actually have endangered them.
- Good. I hope they suffer.
- They will.

I reach into my overnight bag and drop it onto the table in front of her. Her face is an utter picture of amazement.

- *Are you kidding?*

The Codex sits out there between us.

- He'll be dead by now.

She sits and thinks, in silence. Then she looks to me, as though poised to say something. Then she thinks again. Then she opens her mouth to speak. Then she stops again. Then she bends her knees and pulls down her jodhpurs, dropping them at the side of the chair.

- Come upstairs with me. And bring your bag. You'll need it.

## LXXX

Overnight? I stayed for three years. There was little incentive to do much other than live off our earnings and enjoy it. I left only twice for longer than a day, that I remember, and that was to sell my place to D\_\_\_\_\_, who moved in with Th\_\_\_\_\_, U\_\_\_\_\_, Tr\_\_\_\_\_, and most famously Ru\_\_\_\_\_. I even left a load of my things behind. Enoch used to visit there and stay when he was in town and the rest of them were abroad. I always liked that flat. I just hope they don't find what I put back under those floorboards.

They haggled a bit over the price. I never understood this, so I told them to *take it or leave it*, and sealed the deal in front of them.

Celesta and I made plans. I suggested she get rid of the staff who were mostly doing nothing anyway, but in the end she compromised and got shot of them all aside from a cook, a gardener, two cleaners and two other general staff who served as kitchen assistants and valets as the moment required. In time she hired a full time housekeeper and two serving staff to assist with her parties.

We had parties most weekends, where the usual gang turned up. Sometimes it was a themed party, sometimes it was drinks and canapes, sometimes it was musical, and one famous time it was simply tea and buns, where everyone got utterly wrecked from Minnie putting cannabis in the baked goods. And baked they were.

David and the American came over once but were strangely subdued. They were never the same again, really. Several years later, David became really ill and some of his old friends rallied round him, but having lost Belvedere to the Associate he had lost a lot of his attraction, and his parties became fewer and angrier as the years went on. He moved to that villa in France and tried to make it all look like old glories, but it wasn't to be. It took twelve days for the news of his death to emerge, mostly because the press no longer cared about him and his staff had dwindled to such a paltry number that there was no one left to leak anything. In the end, the American made the announcement, drunk, on French TV. She didn't last much longer after him. I dropped the codex into his grave at the funeral.

Sandy came back to see us. She seemed almost cordial, but she was never the same person I had travelled with all those years ago. She was in the company of Lustig but made it plain by word and body language that there was nothing to see there.

We never did talk, after that night. After that, she left forever. There is still a huge hole in me shaped just like her, but whether that's because she's a jigsaw piece missing from me or because she blew through me like a shell is open to considerable conjecture.

Amelia and Demi are a one-sided item. Demi never recovered from the rebuff and never really took the retribution she promised, nor the actions to try and get

Amelia onside. As far as I could tell, Amelia was never happy again, but was happier to remain resolutely single. She took up the business left behind by the absence of Monte, which surprised me greatly.

Zia is not a concern any longer. She moved on and away once she had served her purpose. I was told she went back to her family, but we never spoke again. Never saw her again. I wish I missed her, but I don't.

I still love Audrey but I have found happiness with Celesta, after all this time. Her plan never worked, in the end. It was a strange plan anyway. She eventually married a very wealthy man and moved to the south of Italy where she lived a long and happy life and much later became an activist for animal welfare. She found a new younger following which not only got her message across effectively, it also revived her earlier career which came as a welcome surprise to a number of people. She became really popular and won some medal from the Italian government for her efforts.

The Harker took them both to the Rear Gunner. No one knows where their graves are.

The Rear Gunner went back to his posting at Wolverhampton. He never got to find out who knew what and was always at the centre of things without realising it.

Monte is dead. He died by foul means in an expensive hotel in *god knows where* when I was asleep and I regret not being awake to witness it to this day.

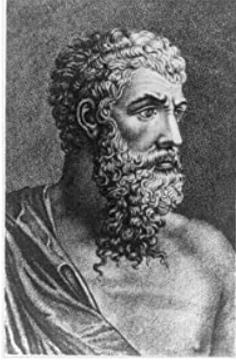
Hawtrey died alone and drunk in Deal. W\_\_\_\_\_ was envious of his acceptance of his sexuality: "He can sit in a bar and pick up sailors and have a wonderful time. I couldn't do it." In later years, Hawtrey would frequent local pubs, get drunk, insult people and make a general nuisance of himself, calling others in his local pub 'peasants'. A heavy smoker and drinker throughout his life, he was "habitually drunk" when performing in pantomime in his later career. Actually he died with his boots on, completely sober and doomed to be alone.

And Aristophanes is still a cunt. He stares over the lip of his beer and glowers at me. He's had a few. And he doesn't remember anything about the start of the argument.

Sandy sighs in despair in that *boys-will-be-boys* manner she has adopted and fiddles with her phone, checking out our itinerary tomorrow. Is this France? We left Germany on Tuesday 19th.

Aristophanes still barely breaks a grin.

*So much for comedy.*



**THE END**