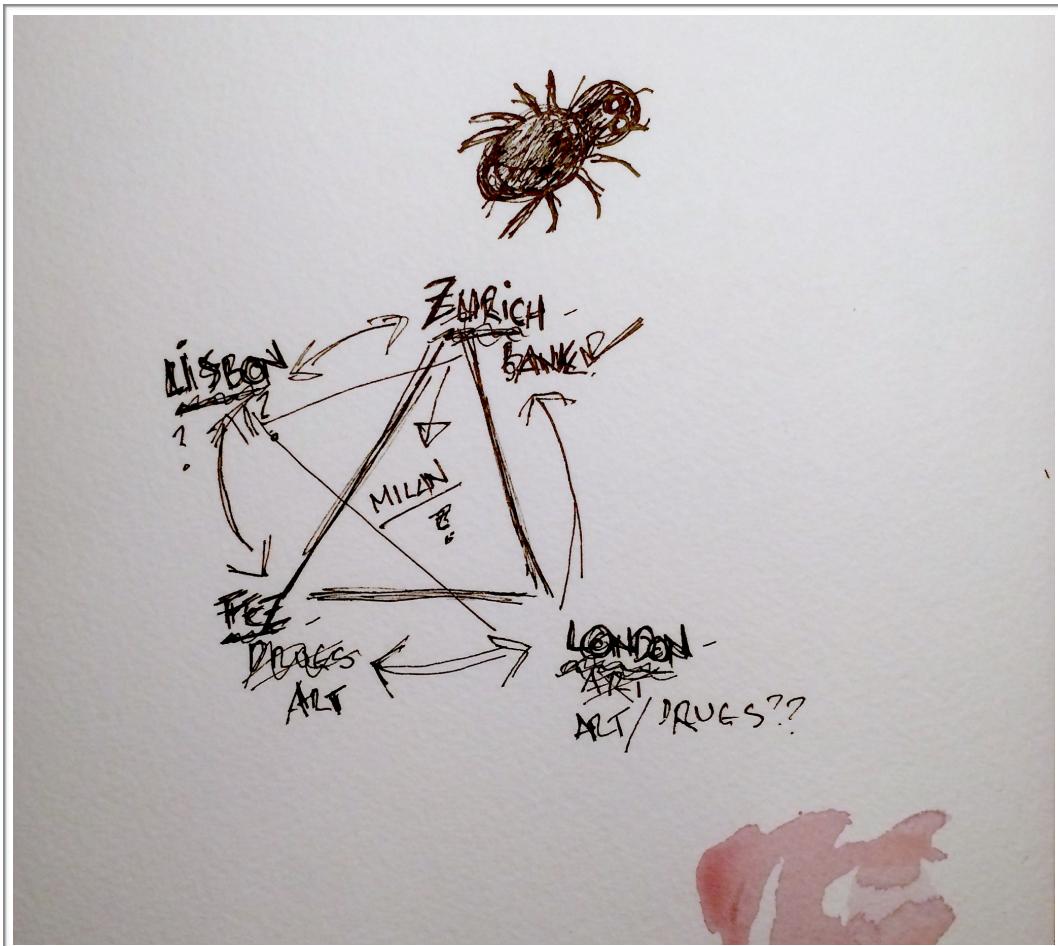


THE SCHOLAR



&

THE BLACK SPIDER

COLIN WIGHT

ONE

A lazy sun peeked through gaps between the trees. Though it was not yet five, he would soon be home with nothing to do – well, nothing he fancied doing. He didn't for one moment regret taking that redundancy package... but there were all those empty afternoons to kill while Ruth was slaving away in Temple.

Instead of walking on to Green Park tube station he turned into Albemarle Street and, on a whim, decided to pop into a commercial gallery whose name recognised from the Royal Academy magazine. A cat may look at a queen – not that Max thought of himself as in any way feline. He pushed the door twice before realising it was locked to keep out the riff-raff. He was about to leave when he saw the bell. A pretty young woman came to the door. She was wearing a close-fitting sky-blue suit, and nearly as tall as him in her matching stilettos. There were blue-grey eyes behind the oval horn-rimmed glasses and she wore her long, brown hair in a pigtail. Slim, certainly, but curvy with it. Perfect pearlies. Like an air hostess in an advertisement (in stark contrast to the reality.) Would Max be expected to announce himself? He thought he might pass as a journalist or an artist – but not a collector, not even a very eccentric one. He could have worn a Savile Row suit and still look like the man who comes to service the photocopier.

“Excuse me. Can I come in to see the exhibition?”

“Yes of course. Please.” Not English then. He followed her into the room; she retreated behind her desk. Nice rear view. Private view. He smiled at his wit.

“You desire to look at the catalogue?”

“Yes please.” She reached under the counter and came up a hefty brochure and a press release. Max studied the press release as if it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen. Just the two of them in the big, echoing room.

“It must be lonely, being here on your own all day,” said Max, immediately regretting it.

“Oh, there are persons in the office under,” she countered, assessing him as a security risk. He nodded and gave an understanding smile, keeping his mouth shut in case he said something to cause her to push the panic button. Catalogue

in hand, he pushed his glasses up his snout and moved to the far corner of the room from where he could discreetly examine the receptionist, who had returned to whatever she was doing on her laptop before she'd been interrupted. The gallery had an Italian name, and she looked and sounded Italian too. She was too young to be the owner. An intern? *Annamaria*? Or something classy-classical like *Valentina*.

The room was far too large for its purpose. Every wall had been painted navy blue. The curator was a Dr Furtwängler from Switzerland. Mustn't laugh. A dozen paintings, all 99.9% blue, were sparsely displayed. One monochrome canvas was precisely the same shade as the wall; Max knew enough to recognise an Yves Klein without having to be told. The wall was cocking a snook at the painting. "What's so special about you, eh?" It was a *homage* to the Klein and, at the same time, a cheeky attempt to make it redundant. Max wondered if the Swiss doctor might have been on to something. He executed a sharp quarter turn and stole a surreptitious look at *Valentina*. Her duties did not seem to extend to keeping an eye on the customers, if that was the right word. In his pomp Max would have sauntered over and employed his legendary charm to chat her up — and maybe even ask her out. After all, he was a fine-looking man. Well... had been, once upon a time. But youth was no longer his ally; he took little pleasure in examining himself in the mirror. He was pushing 60: paunchy, unfit and balding. He didn't look like a wealthy, successful man — which, indeed, he wasn't. A pervert, a stalker? He could easily pass for one of those.

He strode around the room like an old pro, scrutinising each canvas with intense concentration, glancing down at the catalogue from time and time, an inscrutable smile playing on his lips...

He was surprised to see he'd been there for half an hour. No-one else had ventured in. He had no idea how the art business sustained itself. What was this place really for: an extension of the owner's ego? A safe house from a John le Carré story? He'd once dreamed of becoming a spy and applied for the so-called Diplomatic Service, confident that a good degree in languages at one of the world's top universities would open the right doors. Unfortunately he wouldn't be able to boast about it — all that convoluted lying to friends and family! But a

week after his second interview the rejection letter came. He quickly got over the disappointment, telling himself that he didn't fancy it anyway... not really his thing. Another glance at his watch prodded him on his way.

“Very interesting, thank you.”

“You wanna be on the mailing list?” He was on the point of declining; but, on his second whim of the day, said “Yes please”, and carefully wrote his name and email on the card she handed him. It would make him look a bit more like a journalist and less like a stalker, although the two were by no means incompatible.

Back on Albemarle Street he was in no great rush to go home, dithering along without noticing where he was going. He'd always fancied being a *flâneur*; it sounded like a French pastry chef. He regretted having eaten nothing more than a few miserable nuts with his lunchtime pint. Mayfair gave way to Marylebone, a part of London where a few relatively normal people still lived and worked: people who ate crisps and sausage rolls and stuff like that. He was thinking about food when a tempting arrangement of pastries and sandwiches caught his attention. He stood and stared for a minute, trying to make up his mind. Through the glass he saw two young women in beige uniforms behind a counter. They beckoned him in. How could he refuse? They were laughing and sharing a joke in Portuguese. He got some of the words but not the meaning. He wondered if they had become friends in London. Or had they woken up in Portugal one day and decided to leave their families and go to work in an English sandwich shop? But they were young enough not to have to think ahead. One was slim, dark and tall for a Portuguese. Brazilian, perhaps? The other was short and pretty, with skin gleaming like bronze and big brown eyes. Her long, straight hair was pushed behind her ears, which stuck out and made her look like a teddy bear. Max realised that he was looking at her more closely than a minor commercial transaction merited. He ordered a slab of lukewarm mushroom pizza to take

away. Too late, he saw a hill of tempting ciabattas filled with *prosciutto crudo, mozzarella e pomodoro*. But he'd make do with the pizza for now.

Max was all but home when he saw that the St Ockwell's microbrewery was hosting an open evening to celebrate its anniversary, or something. The beer was half-price all night. An invitation to a piss-up in a brewery was something he couldn't ignore – especially as the missus was meeting an old chum in Cambridge and wouldn't be back tonight. The trestle tables were mostly occupied by 30-something men with untrimmed beards and young women with bare shoulders and legs that showed off their ghastly tattoos. They seemed to be having a fine old time, swigging craft beer and cider from the bottle to a soundtrack of '70s rock.

*I'm a fool to do your dirty work oh yeah,
I don't wanna to do your dirty work no more*

"I bought this when it first came out," shouted Max in the direction of Ollie and Holly opposite, "*Can't Buy a Thrill* by Steely Dan." They smiled politely. He offered to buy them a drink, but they were moving on to somewhere in Brixton. Where did they find the energy? It was only nine o'clock, so he decided to have another pint and a pickled egg.

Arriving home at a quarter to midnight, Max found the lights on and the front door unlocked. Either he'd forgotten to lock it or there was someone else in the house. There was no obvious sign of a break-in. He dropped his bag and coat and listened for a few seconds, but he could hear nothing above the tinnitus. He laboriously climbed the stairs, aware of how wheezy his breathing was these days. At the top of the second landing he stopped for a second; he could already make out a familiar rasping snore. He yanked off his pullover and T-shirt in one

go, and shouldered into the bedroom door, more violently than he had intended. He pulled off his shoes, nearly losing his balance, unzipped his trousers and rushed to the toilet. He desperately needed a wee. As he switched on the bathroom light the extractor fan started up, and he heard the creaking of the bed. Despite the racket she'd been making, Ruth was half-awake.

“I thought you were staying over in Cambridge, love?”

“Felicity has a nasty virus so I got an early train back. Didn’t you get my text? And I tried to call you.” Max’s phone was somewhere at the bottom of his bag.

“Sorry.”

“What time is it?”

“Gone 11. Go back to sleep, Ruthie.” She was too tired to ask where he’d been and he didn’t feel like telling her. It wasn’t that he had anything to feel guilty about exactly, but he liked to keep a small part of his life to himself. He flopped into bed, and immediately remembered he hadn’t locked the front door. With a mutter he set off downstairs, eventually finding the spare key in a vase. He wheezed wearily back up the stairs, hanging on to the banister. Ruth was already sound asleep and silent as the grave. He lurched into the bedroom, feeling his way gingerly round the furniture, and eased himself into bed, trying not to touch any part of her body and set her off again. But after a few seconds she was snoring like a trooper, and the orchestral manoeuvres in the dark had begun.

TWO

When the radio came on at 7.01 Max was already comprehensively awake. He was sure he hadn't slept for more than a couple of hours. His pillow was soaked in sweat.

"It's your turn to make the tea, Min." He was playing possum.

"Min – are you going to get the tea?"

'No,' he whispered, bravely.

"Why not?"

"I don't feel well."

"Go on."

"No."

"Go on."

"Urrhh... alright then." A few seconds of silence followed.

"Are you going or not?"

"I said I bloody would, didn't I?"

"Well *go on* then!" It was only 10 past bloody seven. It was not as if *he* had to get up. He didn't have a job to go to, but it would have been unwise to draw attention to that. He girded up his loins and plodded downstairs to fill the kettle.

Max rose again at 10. He fancied toast and Marmite with his coffee. He opened the fridge and removed a few slices of sourdough that Ruth would have chucked in the bin, before contemplating his luncheon options. He could survive quite happily on leftovers. A generous portion of home-made tomato sauce from... well, from when exactly? A couple of eggs. Three hard, cracked, little orphaned shards of cheese. In the freezer he found two half-eaten tubs of so-called "Madagascan" vanilla ice-cream and two generic, mincy efforts. Both had turned to grey gravel, blanketed in frost – like frozen dog food, but less appealing. He'd have to defrost them to work out what they were; was it worth the effort? Lurking underneath was a half bottle of Żubrówka: a long-forgotten present from

Jasia the cleaner. There was an unopened bag of slimy, blackening salad. If all else failed, there was tinned crap in the cupboards. What he craved was a full English: bacon, eggs, chips, sausages, beans and all the illicit trimmings. Followed by a nice long siesta. He could get up at four and still have time to make it look like he'd done something while Ruth was at work. As for dinner, the congealed tomato-based thing could be forcibly converted into a *chile sin carne* with the assistance of a tin of kidney beans and a goodly shot of *pimentón picante*, accompanied by boiled rice, "Greek" yoghurt with an only slightly slimy in places salad. Ruth would find that acceptable as a supper dish. But did he really want beans twice in a day? Was it sensible, on top of all that real ale?

He forced himself to burn off some calories by walking down to the shops for the few extras he needed. His back was aching, his arthritic knee throbbing and his tinnitus roaring. Then there was the hangover: more serious than he had originally estimated. Only the prospect of a decent breakfast was keeping one foot going in front of the other. But in the end he couldn't summon the energy to get as far as Franco's and caught the bus home. He was obliged to stand as there were no priority seats for retired gentlepersons with a hangover. Then he had a poached egg on Marmitey toast. Then he went back to bed and slept soundly for two hours.

He dragged himself out of bed for the third time that day. Make the bed. Put yesterday's clothes in basket. Wash face, clean teeth. Pull on trackie bottoms and T-shirt. Rustle up tasty and nutritious supper. It took nearly 10 minutes to prepare, while another 10 were spent on a superficial wipe-down of the kitchen. On went the dishwasher, his faithful servant. He humanely disposed of a pile of Sunday papers, mostly unread advertorial supplements apparently aimed at millionaires.

Some months ago he had been allocated the job of researching their next holiday which, last time he'd checked, was to be in the Algarve. (It wouldn't be until September though. Ruth's colleagues took their leave during the school holidays, but she batted on all through the summer. She acquired the brownie points, and it also meant she could run the show in their absence.) Max had studied Portuguese for a year; but he also possessed an O-Level certificate in

Physics and he was no Einstein. He located his dog-eared and yellowing *Rough Guide*. The prices were in escudos. You could get a bed and all you could eat and drink for 100 escudos a day, back in the days of the good old Estado Novo. Maybe not so good if you were arrested and tortured by the DGS, but excellent value if you were a backpacking tourist. As he refreshed his hazy knowledge of England's oldest ally, he drifted off in his chair...

THREE

A visit to *André Le Coiffeur Artisan* was long overdue.

“Maxi! Where you been? Looking good man. Wossit to be? Five and zfree?”

“The usual six and four, André, *merci*. Really I don’t mind. Whatever you think.” Was he really looking good? In what way? He gave himself a long, hard stare in the mirror while The Parisian Artisan mowed away at what little remained of his once luxuriant locks.

“You let ze beard to grow?”

“Not on purpose.”

“Looks good, you wanna trim?”

“Why not? Keep it short.”

“Number two. So, what you zink about ze greengrocer?”

“What about them?”

“Zay move to ze shop round ze corner but zay dump all zare shit ere.”

“Do they?”

“Yeah! Of course! And zay sell drugs. Like Marseille or Napoli. They all mafia. I am telling you!” Max was finding André’s constant moaning about his fellow traders, justified or not, increasingly tedious. He was running out of sympathetic responses. André finished off with the cut-throat razor and held up his mirror in both hands.

“Straight across ze neck, yes?”

“Brilliant as ever, André.”

“Always a pleasure, Maxy.” He let rip a hysterical guffaw. “Just £10 to you, *mon ami*.” Max gave him £11 as usual.

“*Au revoir.*”

“*Au revoir, Max.*”

He was nearly home when his phone bleeped to inform him of incoming mail. LinkedIn was telling him cheerily about work anniversaries – including that

of one poor bugger who'd been dead for six months. There were the usual annoying communications from Amazon, Rohan, M&S, John Lewis and everyone else he had ever bought anything from, plus some shameless phishing from BT's Nigerian office. And one from the posh art gallery.

Dear Mr Maxell, Materazzi Gallery is pleased to announce the premiere London exposition of Italian Expressionist painter Giambattista Gaetani. A vernissage will be held...

He had no knowledge of, or interest in, the subject. He couldn't draw for toffee. He was vaguely interested in art, the way most of their middle-class friends claimed to be. He would eavesdrop on people's conversations as they shuffled around the RA or Dulwich Picture Gallery or Tate Modern. One of his pet hates was people who said they did not like "modern art" (or "modern music", for that matter) when the artist in question had been born in the 1860s! He'd long ago concluded that most *soi-disant* art-lovers knew even less about art than he did. Starters for 10: "What century did Botticelli live in?" / "How would you pronounce Velázquez?" / "Who was Rodchenko?" But above all he wanted to ask: "Why are you wasting your time here?" There should be an entrance exam at every museum door, and the British Library should conduct an intelligence test before considering issuing a pass. The pensioners strolled in just for something to do, whilst the young 'uns went to bolster their self-esteem or – more likely – meet their mates in the bar. London's museums were chock-a-block with dopey tourists and doting parents/shouty teachers with badly-behaved children. And they were getting in for nowt. In the north of England there were far fewer tourists, so the badly-behaved children had more space to run amok.

He caught himself ranting again; he could add Angry Old Man Syndrome to his long list of ailments. Why not accept this unexpected invitation? He didn't get many, and certainly never to a *vernissage*.

FOUR

What does one wear to a *vernissage* these days? The last-minute decision to dispense with the tie seemed to be a good move. As he approached the Materazzi Gallery, fashionably late, he could see a dozen or so people through the glass. Fewer than he'd expected, so it would be more difficult to hide. They were gathered in little knots and chatting away like old chums — some in suits, some apparently in fancy dress, with handlebar moustaches and stupid hats. Only two or three wore ties, and one of those was a woman. He looked down to see his shirt front poking out of his trousers. He stuffed it down and tightened his belt to the point where he was in actual pain. No canapés for you.

This time he didn't have to ring the bell to gain entry. In he went, bold as brass, but already convinced that it was a mistake to have come. There was no-one on the reception desk, presumably because it was assumed that anyone who'd intended to come had already arrived. A sparkly young creature flounced over from the centre of the room.

"Max Bennet," he announced. She looked down at the guest list. There he was, third from the top. Thank God, he wouldn't have to wear a badge.

"Monsieur Benné," she read, as if he were French. "*Bienvenue.*" She looked up, smiled, and carefully poured a flute of authentic-looking champagne. Her long nails were glossy gold.

"Thank you for the invitation... you won't remember me but I came to see the show a couple of weeks ago. A Tuesday afternoon." Why did he feel so bloody nervous?

"I remember you. Most people doesn't say nothing when they come. They are always very boring." The once dazzling blue walls were now battleship grey. He toyed with the idea of saying that she looked different too. The horn-rims had gone. Her long hair was loose, and she was wearing a very short and doubtless very expensive black lace dress, set off by a massive gold and pearl necklace and a gold snake bracelet studded with what might be rubies. They would not have looked out of place on Cleopatra. She was smiling.

"Excuse me *signorina*, but your name is...?"

“Cleopatra,” she whispered. Was that really what she’d said?

“Cleopatra?” he repeated, with an exaggerated Italian drawl. “Funny, but I was sure it would be Valentina. Don’t ask me why!”

“How amazing! Cleopatra for tonight only, but my real name is Valentina!”
She giggled.

“Not bad eh?”

“How amazing!”

“It’s a sort of innate gift, ha ha.”

“You have been googling me!”

“No really! Of course not — as if I would, ha ha. And anyway, I don’t know your surname.”

“Materazzi — like the gallery eh.”

“Of course,” he grinned, winningly. So she was the daughter of the owner. Or... wife? He’d better stop flirting right now.

“I will introduce you to my father.” She took his arm. “Babbo, this is Max Benné the art critic.”

“Not exactly.” Daddy was around 50 years old. He stood five foot four at most, noticeably shorter than his daughter, with glossy, black hair in tight curls, receding from a peak, and white at the temples. Distinguished. Confident. Successful. Stinking rich. His face was smooth and tanned. He was dressed in a seaweed-green, made-to-measure Harris tweed suit, his white Egyptian cotton shirt open at the neck. A few wisps of chest hair were on display. His dazzling white cuffs were set off by emerald cufflinks, and his hands had been recently manicured. He smelt gorgeous; it was enough to make you swoon. No doubt he was shod in hand-made English brogues but Max did not dare look down.

“Babbo, listen! Max has ability to guess the names of people!” The other man and the two women shuffled across to make room.

“He will already know mine, I am sure.”

“Actually, I’m afraid I don’t — although I really ought to,” he added, needlessly. The audience is on tenterhooks... Materazzi... think Italian... Galileo Galilei, Pier Paolo Pasolini... “Marco?” he ventured at last. She giggled, showing off her dazzling gnashers.

“Oh no, you think of the footballer!” She was right. Your cultural framework is showing, Max.

“I was joking... so... is it Matteo?”

“No, but was a good try. He is Massimo – like you Max.”

“The biggest... and best!” Max blustered. Perhaps a bit too matey, and cheeky with it. Materazzi was easily the shortest man in the room. “OK. How about 8 out of 10 then?” Everyone laughed and Materazzi spoke again.

“So what do you do, Max?”

“I’m a writer. An art historian.” You mendacious so-and-so!

“And what are you writing about... in this moment?” An excellent, penetrating question! Max took a sip and stifled a cough. Better make it obscure.

The Rough Guide...

“The Manueline Monastic Architecture of Portugal.” Sounding drunk already.

“Oh yes... the Abbey of Batalha... *è uma maravilha!*”

“Indeed, it most certainly is.” Lord have mercy, he speaks Portuguese.

“What is the name of the architect... Huguet?”

“Actually I’m specifically interested in the lives and legacy of the English sculptors who came over with Philippa of Lancaster.” Impressive, eh?

“I regret I do not know so much about the English Gothic.” That’s excellent news. So we have something in common after all.

“You will send me a copy of your book when it’s published, no?”

“I’d be delighted to. But I’m just one of the team you understand. And it’s early days... Anyway, I’m taking up too much of your time, Dr Materazzi. Please excuse me.” All Italians seemed to be doctors. Best to err on the safe side.

Max nodded to his public and backed away. Let’s quit while we’re ahead – assuming, just for the sake of argument, that we are. But be polite and show some interest in the daubs on the walls. He saw that it was nearly nine o’clock. The remaining guests, heading off to their usual tables at the Ritz, were beginning to kiss and hug their goodbyes, so he would not have to stay much longer and suffer further interrogation. But it could’ve been a lot, lot worse. At least he hadn’t been ignored. He joined the slow-moving queue for the door, wondering if he still retained any of the old charm.

“Thank you so much... Cleotina. I’ll come back another time to do justice to this excellent exhibition.” She giggled again.

“Please return, Max. My father and I enjoyed to speak with you.” Quite a novelty to hobnob with the glitterati, especially that gorgeous girl. Not his sort, of course, but he’d enjoyed himself – much to his surprise. It was starting to rain when he hit the streets but he didn’t care. He hummed the tune to Captain Beefheart’s “Long Neck Bottles”. He was starving, but he’d soon be home, tucking into a cheese ’n’ pickle sarnie. He’d already laid a false trail, saying he was at a college reunion with some folk Ruth didn’t know.

“You know, Ruthie, what with all these funerals it’s time I invested in a new whistle and flute. One that fits.”

“All these funerals.’ Two in a year.”

“And more to come, no doubt.”

“Actually, I thought you would be next to kick the old bucket. But do you seem to have shed a few pounds. God knows how.”

“I am making an effort, thank you! Cutting down on the sausage rolls and chips and taking more exercise: 15,000 steps yesterday.” He’d rounded it up just a bit but there was a modicum of truth to it.

“You’re expecting a medal, are you?”

“Between you and me, I’m lobbying for an OBE. Then they’ll make me an earl and I’ll become an earlobe. Boom boom!”

“I can think of a more appropriate part of the anatomy.”

“It’s you who’s got HRH for initials.” An old chestnut, but the best he could come up with. Although she wasn’t much more than five feet tall, after all those years she still intimidated him with her green eyes and sharp, slightly hooked nose. He always felt, and looked, guilty, even when he had done nothing wrong. Her hair, still thick and curly, was not the subtle rusty hue Nature had intended. She didn’t give a hoot that it was obviously dyed. It suited her personality: full-on scarlet. He might have been her match in brains – but there was no question that

she knew how to use hers. That was the difference between them. One of them anyway.

“Well go ahead, Min; you do have a pension of sorts. You are allowed to spend a few bob occasionally. But don’t get carried away now.”

FIVE

“I was just passing so I thought I’d take another look at the show before it closes.” It was most unlikely she’d believe he was “just passing”. But then again, she didn’t know that he inhabited distant Stockwell. It was the third time Max had passed by that week, but it was the first time Valentina had been on duty, rather than the skinny black lad with the dreadlocks. Not that there were ever any customers, if that was the right word for them. On each occasion he’d been dressed in his new Aquascutum navy blue suit and Church’s half-brogues. He was a proper English gentleman, and no mistake. Very smart by his usual standards but not enough for her to think he’d made a great effort: the *aurea mediocritas*, as Aristotle put it (but in Greek).

“Hi! I thought you were not returning to us, Max.”

“I’ve been very busy with the Portuguese project... Cleo... and teaching,” he added, for good measure.

“Maybe I’ll tell you about it over a coffee... some time.” Flirting again, you dirty old man! He swallowed.

“I wanna hear, but no today.”

“Of course. You have your work to do.” Whatever that was.
“Come tomorrow, eh?” He didn’t expect that. Better not make it look like you have nothing to do.

“Oh sorry, I’m teaching. What a nuisance... Friday any good?” Teaching what exactly? But she didn’t enquire.

“Perfect.”

“Four o’clock?”

“Perfect!”

“You wanna catalogue?”

“I brought it with me.”

“Cool. Enjoy!”

He paced around the room as before, taking meaningful steps forward and back, gazing up and down, then side on. He stared at the pictures. He added the occasional oblique squint for good measure. He took off his glasses and put them

back on. He consulted his catalogue. He looked up again. He stroked his chin and scratched his ear. Having announced himself as a leading scholar of Anglo-Portuguese medieval sculpture he didn't need to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of Italian Expressionism. He didn't have to be a polymath; an intelligent and confidently-expressed opinion was all that was required. All the same, he'd done a hard day's graft in the Tate and the Estorick.

"I recognise something of Morandi in this one. Not the subject-matter or the palette, obviously, and certainly not the technique! But the intensity... And of Modigliani." Hedging his bets, he added, "Curiously enough".

"*Madonna!* You know everything eh! They are a great influence, for sure."

"*Allora*, until Friday Cleo. I mean Valentina. *Ciao.*"

"You call me Tina, OK? *Ciao Max!*" Unexpectedly, she turned her head towards his and pecked him lightly on the cheek. He nearly tripped as his half-brogues touched the pavement. He strode briskly down to the Red Lion and celebrated with a pint of Cornish bitter and a jumbo sausage roll and chips. Feeling slightly guilty on several counts, he took a jaunty stroll through the park to Victoria.

Of course it was highly unlikely that this attractive young woman would be interested in him *in that way*. He would have to learn to act *avuncular*. But you could never tell. Neither of them had mentioned a partner, but they'd barely spoken. He wasn't planning on telling any serious fibs, but he did want to hang on to his aura of mystery for a little bit longer. He could already tell that anything he discovered about Valentina would lead to disappointment.

He dreaded asking Tina where she wanted to go in case it were the Ritz or the Café Royal, but to his relief she suggested Caffè Concerto. It was packed with overdressed matrons and tourists, so they had to wait 10 minutes for a table. Tina fancied a gooey strawberry cake. Max demurred, although he was starving. He could always grab a packet of crisps later on.

"So Max, when you will go to Portogallo again to do studies?"

“Portugal? Oh, August or September. Probably.” He omitted the words “with my wife”.

“To what city? Lisboa?”

“Maybe. Or further south by the sea. Medieval city of Faro,” he added, remembering that he was a scholar.

“Because I need to go to Lisboa soon.”

“Oh really? When?”

“I dunno. Maybe in two or three weeks.” Lisbon in May sounded very pleasant.

“Why?”

“OK,” she sighed, “I explain. One of the pictures we are not sure about it, so needs to be... authenticated.” She struggled with the word. “And the big expert in Gaetani is Portuguese doctor. Strange!”

“So why doesn’t he come over to London?”

“No, we need to take to Dr Fonseca so he can compare and make tests. Is only a little one.”

“Well, enjoy, it’s a fascinating city.”

“I visit one time before with my parents. I was little, so don’t remember too much. But Babbo... is not happy for me to go alone. Mediterranean men, you know!” Giggle.

“Valentina,” said Max with all the pomposity he could muster, “Portugal has no Mediterranean coast. It faces the Atlantic, as you ought to know.”

“I have been to school too, Max.” She laughed again.

“But you must have a... fiancé? Why not go with him?”

“I had, but Babbo not like him.” She made an exaggerated frown. “So he think maybe if an English gentleman, like you, can accompany? Only two days, one night. Everything paid. Or more if you wanna?” Max did not like to look a gift filly in the mouth, but there were a few minor administrative matters to resolve.

“And Dr Materazzi can’t go himself?”

“No, no for a long time, because he is busy with the exposition and many other things! He must go to Zurigo to see Mamma. And to open new gallery in Fes,

Maroc. Work, work – he always working. You have meet our partner already? Régis, African man who works in gallery? Tall, very thin like a *peen!*”

“Cleopatra’s needle,” he said, not being able to resist a weak witticism. Fortunately she didn’t get it.

“Babbo trust only me with the picture, so it must be me to go.”

“Well, it’s a tempting thought, of course. I have to go to Portugal at some point so I will definitely consider it. Will you excuse me just one minute?” He needed to go to the toilet and he also needed to think. He rose slowly to his feet, holding his jacket in so that it would not make contact with the sticky remains of her gâteau, and sidled from behind the table towards the toilets. He took the opportunity to look down the front of her emerald silk blouse.

He was soon back at the table.

“*Dunque*, what you think Max?”

“I shall look at my schedule when I get home, Tina. Maybe it might be possible for us to go... together.”

“Perfect!”

“Maybe. I do have to go to Lisbon – to Belém in fact – to take some high-quality photographs of the Jerónimos for the book. But it would only take half a day, so I would just stay for one night.”

“Geronimo, chief of Apaches? Woo woo woo!” She laughed, showing her teeth and glossy lips.

“No, Tina. Saint Jerome, Doctor of the Church!” He sighed and shook his head. “Don’t you ever read the Bible or go to church?”

“I have nothing to confess, Max.” We will have to do something about that won’t we?

He set off on what was becoming his usual stroll across Green Park to Victoria. His brain worked better when he was walking, and by heck did he need to do a bit of thinking before he got home.

Option 1: Tell Tina he was very sorry, but he couldn't go to Lisbon with her. Admitting that his suspicious wife wouldn't let him would do nothing for his image, but it was an answer any Italian would surely comprehend. Of course he would express it more subtly than that.

Option 2: Tell Ruthie about his long-dormant interest in art and architecture, but only as much as strictly necessary. She might already suspect that he was up to something, what with the new suit and brogues and brave Liberty shirts. Although it might help to explain his recent change of routine, it was hard to believe she would sanction a trip to Lisbon without her, and the jaunt with titillating Tina would never happen.

Option 3: Proceed in secret, which would require meticulous planning and arse-covering. Very, very risky, but he liked a flutter. Or he did when he won. He might get away with one night away from home but he would have to come up with a bloody good story.

She put down her knife and fork and took a good swig of Chardonnay.

“That was a bloody good roast chicken, if I say so myself. Expensive but well worth the money.”

“Absolutely... erm Ruthie dear?”

“Yeeeers?”

“I was thinking of visiting Chris in Hexham.”

“Chris, your old mate from school?” That's right: the one you've never met.

“I've only seen him once in the last 30 years and he's recovering from a stroke.”

“Good grief Min, not another one.”

“I know! And him a GP as well. We're doing anything the first week of May, are we? After the Bank Holiday I mean. I was thinking of staying over for a night, maybe two. It's a long haul up there.”

“I take it you mean midweek? Go ahead then.”

“Back Friday evening at the latest. I’ll put it on the calendar once it’s sorted. I’ll probably take the train; it’ll be quicker and nearly as cheap. His missus can pick me up at the station.”

SIX

The warm air hit him as soon as they opened the cabin doors. It had been over 30 years since he'd last been to Lisbon. A pity it was only going to be the one night, but all the same... Left to his own devices he would have taken the metro to a two-star *pensão* on the Avenida da Liberdade, but Tina held a generous budget. They took a taxi to the hotel near the Eduardo VII Park. They were shown two rooms on the second floor, each with a fine view. Cool, comfortable and quiet. Freshen up, then off for some sightseeing, followed by dinner in a picturesque restaurant. In the morning Max would accompany Tina to her meeting with Dr Fonseca in the Museu Coleçao Cardoso, in case they needed a translator (and he fervently hoped they would not). He would then peel off towards Belém. He didn't want her to tag along as she'd soon realise he was only going to take a few snaps of the Tower and the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, so he made it sound very boring. She would have more fun shopping in the Chiado.

He enjoyed a leisurely shower, put on his cream chinos and a generously cut red T-shirt bearing a LONDON logo, and checked out his minibar. He waited and waited for Tina. He checked his watch. He cracked, and opened a Sagres. She was taking a hell of a long time to get ready, though doubtless it would be worth it. Perhaps a splash of Antaeus? After another 15 minutes he opened a second bottle; they were only small. Finally there was a knock on the door. Tina had changed into a green-and-white backless dress. Her hair was piled up in a pineapple, sunglasses perched halfway up.

He had vague memories of the Cervejaria Trindade in the early '80s. The fact that he should be able to find it without a map would impress her. It would do as the dinner venue; if the food was not to her taste she could always admire the *azulejos* on the walls. He decided not to mention the F-word: *fado*. He couldn't abide it himself, and apart from the dreadful caterwauling they would be spending their only evening together in a sweaty tourist trap. Of course she might have found it romantic, but he had his mind set on a cosy little wine bar in Alfama, near the castle.

Before they left he remembered to send an *everything's fine here* text to Ruth. He prayed that she wouldn't have the skills to trace where the message was coming from. She was planning to knock off early for once, and go out with the girls from work. At her age too!

They ordered a taxi to Rossio from reception. He remembered to open the door for her. The square was hot, dirty, noisy and packed with people of all colours, classes and occupations – pickpockets included. Tina took his arm, giving him an unexpected *frisson*; he suggested a sundowner at the top of the Santa Justa elevator. The six-inch stilettos were an impediment to climbing the staircase so she took them off. She wasn't wearing much to start with and now that's half her outfit gone, thought Max. She raved about the views over the town and the Tagus.

“It is more beautiful than I imagine. *Bellissima!* Amazing!”

After a leisurely caipirinha they set off for the Trindade. It had not changed in 30 years – and probably not for a century, except that the prices had gone up. Tina claimed to be ravenous but was nervous about the seafood. A table of rough-looking working-class geezers were staring at her bare back and legs, grinning and making vulgar remarks to each other. She wasn't bothered, so Max tried to ignore them too. He didn't fancy giving them a ticking off. He turned back to see a waiter with his pencil at the ready. Tina had made her choice.

“*A senhora queria as febras de porco. Há centolho?*”

“*Centollo* is Spanish, *senhor*. You want spider crab?”

“*Sim. Disculpe-me. Santola, não é?*”

“So... pork steaks and a spider. With salad?”

“*Sim. Mista para dois.*”

“And to drink, *senhores*? Red, white, rosé?” Max and the waiter were locked in a linguistic battle. Suddenly, he lost the will to go on.

“A bottle of white *vinho verde*, *se faz favor.*”

“*Tá bem senhor. Obrigado.*”

Valentina was far from skinny, but she had the slender waist of youth. She easily put away a couple of pork steaks, a generous portion of chips, a mound of rice and half a mixed salad. A Pantagruelian portion of *crème caramel* followed it down the hatch. Nor did she hold back on the booze. She waved in the direction of the waiter and a second bottle appeared. This time he didn't bother with the wine-tasting rigmarole.

Max picked up the tab. It was manageable, but he held on to it, just in case there was a chance of getting his money back. Inevitably, she wanted to go a club to hear *fado*. Max was obliged to ask the waiter for a recommendation.

It was well gone midnight when they got back to the hotel. Although he'd tried to stay sober, it had been roasting hot in the club and he'd sunk three large *canecas*. Tina had discovered a taste for *sangria*. He was so tired he could hardly put one foot in front of the other and he needed to go directly to bed.

“D’you fanshy night-cap, Tina?”

“What is nightie cap?”

“*Digeshtivo*?”

“Hmm, but only little because the morning is for working, Max!” He mixed two killer G&Ts from his minibar. She took a mouthful, spluttered and stared blankly towards the window.

“Max... you, you are married?” He’d been expecting that for some time.

“Technically speaking... er yes.”

“And your lady know, knows we are here in Lisboa? In same hotel?”

“Er no. And don’t you go telling her either,” he grinned. They sipped in silence, sitting on his bouncy king-size bed, backs against the pillows and hands resting on their knees. She had bloody fantastic legs.

“You’ve got bloody great legs, Tina,” he slurred.

“I know,” she whispered – or something to that effect – and suddenly turned and kissed him full on the mouth. He caressed her ample left breast and sighed with pleasure, then grunted in pain as she collapsed on top of him.

She was out for the count. He enjoyed the sensation of her warm body against his for a few seconds, but necrophilia was not really his thing. Aside from which, he could hardly breathe. Once he’d wriggled free and prised the empty glass from her fingers he saw he was wearing half her G&T on his shirt. His first thought was to try to wake her. Then he realised he’d have to carry her back to her room. He wasn’t sure his back was up to it... and it would not be good if he dropped her and they both ended up in traction.

Think! Since their rooms were identical he could just abandon Tina and go and sleep in hers. If he carefully transferred her bags and anything else that was in her wardrobe or lying around in the bathroom, she’d probably not even notice that they’d swapped. Her room key was on the minibar. It didn’t take him long to shift her gear and it took even less time to move his. He acknowledged that he was pissed, so he had to think it all through methodically, again and again. Should he leave his key in his (her) room? Which key was which anyway? No, better to take both keys with him so he could check she was OK later. She was snoring worse than Ruth but it sounded more alluring in Italian. He shut the door on her and staggered to the room next door. Neither key would open the door. Bollocks. Eventually he realised it was because his new room was in the other direction.

It smelt strongly of her perfume. He nearly slipped and fell as he took a desultory shower; he brushed his teeth; he gulped down a big glass of chlorinated tap water, then another; he flopped into bed and tried to sleep. At around four he finally dozed off.

At eight he awoke with a throbbing head. He thought he had better check on Tina. He took a couple of paracetamol, put on his complimentary white dressing gown and knocked tentatively on her door. Of course she would still be

sleeping it off, but they had a meeting arranged in two hours. He couldn't leave it any later.

“*Avanti!*” She was as fresh as a daisy, sporting pink lipstick and dressed in a turquoise silk skirt and cap-sleeved blouse combo. The chunky jewellery was having another outing. Horn-rims halfway down her nose, she was relaxing on the bed, watching *Stanlio e Ollio* on RAI 3.

“And how are we this morning, Tina?” He wasn’t feeling too chipper himself.

“Hi Max! You wanna go to breakfast?” No reference to the previous night’s shenanigans.

“Just give me 10 minutes.” With a flash of inspiration he flourished a key and added, “I found this in the lock of your door.”

“Omigod, Max!”

“See you in 15 minutes,” he smirked. It was far too hot to wear the whistle. He reckoned that the crumpled chinos and flamboyant Liberty shirt would make him look like an arty-farty Englishman, which would do fine. After all, it wasn’t *his* business meeting. As he grabbed his bag and camera, he spotted a note in purple ink by the bedside phone. BE NICE TO MB. He put it in his wallet next to the restaurant bill.

“Doutor Dâmaso Fonseca Gouveia. *Está esperando-nos.*”

“I will let him know you are here... Take a seat; he is on his way, *senhores.*”

Dâmaso took them to the staff restaurant and ordered three *bicas*. Max looked around him; they obviously cared about their staff in this place. Dom Dâmaso was about 50, with straight very black hair (probably dyed), bushy eyebrows and a moustache, round rimless glasses. He wore a pink shirt with a white collar, and a red paisley cravat. Extrovert and tactile, he spoke excellent English in an accent reminiscent of someone half-remembered... Reggie Bosanquet? Max was wondering if his bold Liberty shirt was a wise choice; he didn’t want to give the wrong impression. Tina produced the drawing. It took

some time to unwrap. It was only about A4 in size, although the mount was more than twice that size. It was just a few charcoal scribbles, with a bit of purple and yellow watercolour sloshed here and there. Max was not impressed, but what did he know? Anglo-Manueline ecclesiastical sculpture was his field of expertise.

“So Dona Valentina: yes, it is in Gaetani’s style. But that proves nothing. You will entrust it to me?”

“Of course. I explain the arrangements and we discuss the fee.” Max took the hint and asked if he could take half an hour or so to look at the highlights of the museum.

“Naturally, Doctor Bennet. Do not miss this opportunity. Another time I will give you my private tour.” What a shame Max would not be able to stay and admire Dom Dâmaso’s own modest collection of etchings, medals, watercolours... his new friend was a lover of art in all its forms, but especially the nude. He winked.

“*Muito prazer. Adeus, amigo.*” He squeezed Max’s hand and proffered his *carte-de-visite*, which Max put in his wallet.

“*Ciao Valentina. I’ll see you at the hotel at four.*”

“Perfect. *Ciao Max!*”

He took the metro into town and walked here and there for a hour. He’d forgotten how tiring it was to climb those steep streets, and he had to use his inhaler. Max thought he recognised bars and restaurants but he wasn’t sure. He stopped for another *bica*, fragrant and strong, and read *A Bola* for old times’ sake. Porto had won the league again, which was no surprise. He soaked up the sun for 15 minutes. Then he rode the tram to Belém; it was such a beautiful day. He took lots of photos to show Tina. Wandering around the Jerónimos and the old town, he wished he had decided to study Portuguese architecture after all, despite the blandishments of management accountancy. He would have had a reason to come back here, again and again. Maybe even with Tina.

When Tina finally turned up at the hotel, predictably late, Max was already changed, packed and ready for the off. Dâmaso had invited her to lunch, after which he'd escorted her around the Casa do Fado, following it with coffee and cakes. He then offered to take her to see the Cathedral and the Castle, after which she'd politely told him to clear off and hailed a taxi.

They had a last G&T at the airport, toasting a very enjoyable and successful trip. Perfect. *Cincin!* Max taught her to say *saúde*. They both nodded off 15 minutes after the plane left the runway.

All that remained was to cover his tracks and get his story straight. His train was supposed to be coming into King's Cross, so he waited until he had pecked Tina goodbye at Paddington before texting Ruth to let her know he was "somewhere south of Stevenage". Which was no word of a lie. He was on the Tube back to Stockwell before he remembered to take the luggage tag off his suitcase.

SEVEN

He conjured up a cheese omelette for breakfast, using three fossilised cheese nuggets and the 1,000-year-old eggs. It stuck to the pan and turned into shambled eggs: not one of his better efforts.

“I’m going to the dry cleaner’s, Min. I’ll take your suit – OK?”

“Yes – just let me check in the pockets...” It was hanging up by the front door. It had struck him that he might have left his boarding pass in it.

“Why don’t I go? I need the exercise, as I am sure you’ll agree.” He felt in the jacket pocket and grabbed the boarding pass. He was about to throw it in the bin; then thought it would be wiser to shred it, so he put it in his wallet for now. You could not be too careful where Ruthie was concerned. She had eyes like a hawk. She could play a superhero called The Hawk. Or, rather, a supervillain-ess.

“And how was Chris?”

“Erm... he was fine – I mean, considering.”

“Can he walk properly? What’s his speech like?”

“Erm... not bad. Coming along quite well.”

“Is he married? What’s she like? Is she still working or having to look after him? Do they have children?”

“Erm... very nice – Carole. I didn’t see their family. They’re all grown up and moved away.” He was pretty sure Carole was her name.

“Big house?”

“Of course. He used to be the local GP after all. Earned a lot more money than me!”

“Who doesn’t, sweetie? Got any pictures? I see you took your camera.”

“In the end I didn’t. I sort of forgot. With all the catching-up we didn’t have time for much else.” Christ alive, the pictures of Lisbon! He’d have to download to his PC and delete them *pronto*. And *please*, can we talk about something else? He wasn’t braced for an *auto-da-fé*, to employ an old Portuguese expression. He’d never even been to Chris’s house. He was sure he had children, but that was about it. He’d have to harp on about the Good Old Days instead.

“We were great mates back in the ‘70s. Used to go to watch the Rovers together. Very warm, funny guy. Then he went off to Newcastle and never came back. We lost touch for some reason. I mean, Northumberland is beautiful but it’s freezing all year round.” He was about to add, “We could go together some time,” but his lying had made that unlikely... and, more to the point, highly undesirable. “What do you fancy doing this weekend?” he asked, desperately changing tack.

“Well... I thought we could go to the flicks this evening. We haven’t been to Picturehouse Central for a long time.” Preferably avoiding Hollywood rom-coms about midlife crisis and marital infidelity.

“And what about Sunday? Are we going to the pool as usual?” Ruth was a surprisingly strong swimmer. She would race through her 36 lengths while he swallowed and never managed more than 24. It was the same with her career. She seemed to gobble up qualifications. She had even more letters after her name than there were in it: Hildegard Ruth Hortense Featherstonhaugh O’Shaughnessy. She *needed* to win. It was in her genes.

“I said I’d go and see Mummy. You don’t have to come – in fact, please don’t.” He wouldn’t argue; he’d had too much excitement already for one week.

On the Sunday morning Ruth set off for Ely in the Beemer, leaving him to a day of quiet reflection – once he’d discharged his domestic duties. Yesterday’s leftovers would furnish the wherewithal for a nutritious chicken and vegetable soup, which they could share when she came back that evening. One of the congealed dog’s dinners would serve as his lunch, accompanied by pasta or boiled rice depending on what it turned out to be. He loaded the washing machine and unloaded the dishwasher. He looked out the kitchen window; it was a wet and miserable day for May – more like winter than spring. He made himself another mug of Nescafé and wiped down the outside of the fridge with a sponge. He really ought to consider de-frosting it, sometime. How he missed proper Portuguese coffee!

To be fair, they had a pretty good life in Stockwell. Those snooty bastards from North London who saw South of the River as *terra incognita* and referred to it as “dirty”... He suspected they meant that black people lived there, even if none of them had the guts to say so. Max knew lots of black people... though he was hard pressed to remember the last time one had actually crossed the threshold. (Did the man from Ocado count?) Anyway, Stockwell was in the ascendancy; there had been only nine stabbings this year so far. There was the delightful prospect of running into Joanna Lumley or Will Self. There was the iconic bus garage. And there were some very grand houses, if you knew where to look. They themselves would have had a fine prospect onto the “village green” – if it wasn’t for the affordable ‘ousing in between. And, now he thought of it, there were excellent opportunities to practise your Portuguese. It wasn’t that he was unhappy; it was just that life had stood still for two decades.

He flicked through his albums and alighted on *Mean Time* by Tonto’s Expanding Head Band. Ruth could not abide electronic music or prog-rock, and preferred Bananarama or Take That. His rickety old fingers nearly dropped the LP as it slipped out of its sleeve, then he nearly dropped the pickup arm. He hadn’t played it for 25 years; he could remember every note but not the names of the tracks. The white noise in his head merged with the Moogs and Arps and what-have-you. He twiddled the knobs on the receiver and sat down at the kitchen table for a think. He had risked everything for an affair – well, not even that, sadly – with some bimbo with whom he had nothing in common. It was exciting to lead a clandestine second life, but he didn’t feel good about pulling the wool over Ruth’s eyes. And you had be a world-class liar to fool her. Was it really worth it? Strolling around Lisbon in the Spring, accompanied by *una bella ragazza*, hobnobbing with art collectors... it was a laugh while it lasted. Such a shame he couldn’t boast about it to his mates. Not that he had too many left. *Carpe diem*.

He got the urge to re-read *Smiley’s People* but nodded off after one and a half chapters.

He awoke to an email from Galleria Materazzi.

Dear Max, its Valentina. My father wants to say thankyou. Maybe you come wedensday after noon. Ciao

EIGHT

The tall, thin black man with the dreadlocks was behind the desk.

“Maxwell Bennet to see Dr Materazzi.”

“He will be one minute sir. Please take a seat.”

“You must be Régis from Morocco. Tina told me.”

“Miss Valentina is on holidays.”

Materazzi suddenly appeared without Max noticing.

“Good morning Doctor. I can call you Max, yes? Let’s go down to my office.”

He was dressed in a pair of faded Armani jeans and an Internazionale football jersey with *Materazzi* on the back, such as a 10-year-old might wear. Marco Materazzi, the infamous World Cup winner, was six foot four, and hewn from granite. Was the irony conscious or unconscious? He hadn’t struck Max as a man with a great sense of humour. He followed his host down an open spiral staircase behind the counter. Materazzi placed his hand on a touchpad on the wall and a smoke-grey glass door slid open. Max found himself in a small room with three leather chairs and a hefty oak desk, on which sat a laptop, a gold Mont Blanc pen and a gold paperknife. Materazzi indicated a chair to Max and sat down behind his desk, leaning back. Max could hardly fail to notice a garish portrait of his host dressed as a judoka.

“After I won the silver medal in ’96. Reminds me every day of my failure, but it was a present from my wife so I cannot destroy it! Of course it is all fixed and corrupt. There is no fair-play today in sport. You interested in sport, eh Max? You know who is that man, maybe?” He nodded towards Max’s left. The wall was entirely covered by a black-and-white print of a goalkeeper diving to save a penalty.

“Isn’t that the great Lev Yashin?”

“Yashin, the Black Spider. It wasn’t his savings that made him such a great goalkeeper. It was his bravery, and also how he controlled from the back. He could see a situation before it happened and he dominated everybody and everything. One of a kind, as the English say.” Max nodded, waiting for the next mini-lecture.

“Listen to me, Max, I have to thank you for looking after my little girl so well. Valentina is a sweet young girl you know, but can be a little... erm... emotional.” Max signalled his assent, but not too enthusiastically.

“Now it would be ridiculous to imagine a liaison between you and her: completely and utterly absurd, but you know how some peoples talk. So I appreciate your... chivalry. I hear that you paid for a nice dinner and many other things. Also you gave to us two days of your time and I know you are busy so... I would like you to have this small present.” He plonked a bottle of Materazzi 20-year-old Ragno Nero on the leather table-top. “And this is something for your expenses.” He took a wad of €50 notes from a drawer and slid them into a manila envelope which he thrust towards Max as if he was going to stab him in the chest.

“No, Massimo — that is far, far too much!” It was a hell of a lot, that was for sure.

“Take it, take it! It is only money! Now, *amico*, I won’t pussyfinger around. Valentina must go away to be with her mother in Maroc for a little time. Mixing business with pleasure, you know how women are. And it is a great pity because I need someone to go to Lisboa to collect the Gaetani picture: someone I can trust. I feel I can trust you Max. I *know* it in my heart.” He tapped his chest.

“I see... sorry, but that could be a bit tricky just now because there is a little problem at home.”

“With your wife?” Massimo raised an eyebrow.

“No, it is her mother’s health.” Still rude, unfortunately.

“Of course, family is the most important thing. For me also. But it is only a small favour I am asking you. Fly to Lisboa and return the same day. Whenever you are helping my family I treat you well. Very well.”

A week later, casually attired in T-shirt, denim jeans and jacket, Max was back in Lisbon, enjoying an unchaperoned tour of Dr Fonseca’s collection. He’d caught an early flight, having told Ruth he was going to Heathrow to meet an old college friend who was flying in from Canada.

“So how do you find my gallery, my cabinet of curiosities, Max? Have I good taste or have I not?”

“Very good. Excellent.”

“All top quality – I know, because I made them myself. Ha ha ha! Not all – actually only about half. Can you say which are originals and which are copies?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know as much as you, Dâmaso. Hardly anything really.”

“And neither does anybody else, Max. I have plied my trade in Lisboa and Coimbra and London. Oh yes! I was at the Slade. I know my onions. Ah, how one misses London: such an open-minded city! I will come back this year, *deo volente*. England is not like this God-forsaken country. Or God-omnipresent, rather! That is the big problem. You are fortunate: you can be who you want... And how is my old friend Jeremy Bentham, by the way?”

“Still dead.”

“Ha ha ha, I like that, old man. I like it a lot.”

“Anyway, here is the so-called work of art.” Fonseca placed a white carrier bag on the table. “Piece of shit, no? Sorry I cannot discuss my report with you. That will be for Massimo’s eyes only. But you could torture me to make me tell. Ha ha ha! Well, we shall have a nibble and a drinkie-poo before you return to London? It is a pity you can’t stay tonight.” They went out to the staff car park, and Fonseca walked briskly towards an ancient, dent-spattered, nominally white, Volvo P1800. The doors creaked alarmingly when opened, and the red leather upholstery was in tatters.

“I had a Corgi car just like this when I was a boy,” said Max.

“So you remember *The Saint*! Roger Moore, so handsome and elegant. *Di–dadi–da–di–da–dah!* I brought this old girl back from England with me. Let’s go somewhere the bloody tourists haven’t found yet.” They roared off on a white-knuckle ride to the Bairro Alto. “We Portuguese drive right up each other’s arses, as you English put it.” Max kept his own counsel.

Although it was only half past two, O Glam Rock was already in full swing. Clearly the weekend started early in Lisbon. Alice Cooper’s *Killer* was blaring over the PA. Max noticed that he was one of very few customers who didn’t appear to

be a transvestite. Dâmaso approached the roly-poly barman, who was wearing a Donovan-style peaked cap, purple lipstick and glittery eye shadow.

“*Alguma coisa para beber, senhores?*” Dâmaso went for a Stardust, the house cocktail, while Max thought it more prudent to order a Super Bock.

“*Queria a carta de petiscos, Dom-Dam?*”

“Shall we have some snacks, Max? Snax-Max! I like the sound of it! And you hear what he calls me? Dom-Dam, like a bell? Ha ha ha! *My ding-a-ling, my ding-a-ling.* You know it, old chap? Chuck Berry.” Max did know it, and had been trying to forget it for more than 40 years.

“Maxwell, your research is fascinating – if something of an insult. Young Valentina told me: ‘The English influence on the Manueline’! You undermine our nation’s sole claim to architectonic originality! Strange I did not hear about it before. You are a man of mystery, old fruit. You must give a lecture in Lisboa. Anglo-Portuguese studies always gets funding. Maybe a grant from the Camões Foundation?” He chanted slowly, tapping the zinc: “*Camões Camões, Camões Camões, Camões Camões Camões...* Gary Glitter is not so popular these days, eh Max?”

“You could say.” Max munched a salt cod croquette; he took another.

“Now: continue please with the research and I will invite you here to give a lecture. Discover a team of medieval Lesbian architects! That will tick another box for the funding. Ha ha ha!”

“Very early days, Dâmaso. I mean, there is so much still to do and the teaching gets in the way. Much as I love it.”

“I know, but do not worry, squire. ‘Work in progress’ will be fine.” Dâmaso offered to drive him to the airport but Max insisted on the metro. It would be quicker and safer.

“So, *mon vieux: boa viagem.* Don’t forget to take Massimo’s ugly drawing and remember your lecture.” He grabbed Max and kissed him enthusiastically on both cheeks. “And now, I must return to my children.”

“I didn’t realise you had a family.”

“Just the four kiddiwinks so far, that I know of. Ha ha ha! My only daughter lives in London now, though she often returns to visit friends and family; then

comes Simāo, after the Saint *di-dadi-da-di-da-dah!*; Luis, after our national poet Camões; and little Vasco, after the great explorer and arch-imperialist da Gama.”

“My regards to your wife.”

“Oh but Mafalda left us three years ago.”

“I’m terribly sorry Dâmaso. When did she pass away?”

“She didn’t pass away, she ran away to join a Brazilian order of divorcee nuns. Least said, soonest mended, as the English say. Anyway, the next time you visit me, bring the sexy Italian *signorina*. Or maybe you didn’t pay her much attention, what with you being gay?”

He woke up during the descent. The majority of the passengers were Portuguese; he knew that without looking, because a burst of applause broke out as soon as the pilot plonked the Airbus down on the runway. Max sat still, letting everyone else leap from their seats and grab their luggage. He didn’t get involved in the post-landing scrum. It was so uncool, so ungentlemanly, so inexcusably foreign. Anyway, no-one was going anywhere yet; it was a long drop to the tarmac. He reached up for his case and carefully lifted it down with both hands; he didn’t have the strength he used to have. He felt around for the painting in its anonymous white plastic bag. He couldn’t find it. He hauled himself up by the headrest and looked again. It wasn’t there. Panic. Don’t panic. It had to be there. It *had* to be there... He stood on his seat. *It had to be there! It wasn’t there.* Panic! He looked inside the locker and felt around again. He felt sick. He looked down at the other seats. He was about to cry out in desperation “Has anyone seen...?” when a female voice behind him said: “Are you looking for this, sir? I am sorry, I put it in the other locker so I could fit my bag in. Sorry.”

Although her English was almost perfect she had an accent he recognised as Portuguese. I know that face! I know your face, Miss Teddy Bear.

“Thank you so much, I was getting very worried! Excuse me but I think I have seen you before.”

“Really – where?”

“Do you work in a *pâtisserie* in Marylebone? I’ve been there a couple of times.”

“I did, but I am a full-time student now. Studying Fine Art.”

“Congratulations. So you must know the Materazzi Gallery in Albemarle Street? I’m taking this package to them.”

“Everybody knows about Materazzi! Mafia family, or so I hear.”

“Well... there are always rumours where the super-rich are concerned. I wouldn’t be surprised if they cut a few corners here and there. Can I buy you a coffee to thank you?”

She was in no desperate rush to go home.

“It says Maria João on my passport, but I’m called Edi because my grandfather’s name was Edison. One of those silly Brazilian names. Maybe the lightbulbs were on when he was conceived!”

Edi! That was a near miss. Strangely, or maybe not that strangely, she lived in Stockwell too, and worked Saturday afternoons in O Castelo.

“It seems we are neighbours then. Can you tell me anything about Mr Materazzi? Because I don’t know much about him.”

“Neither do I really, but you have been in the gallery so you know the exhibitions. So where does all that money come from? Materazzi: you know what *matar* means, as in *matador*? Nobody trusts him. But don’t tell anyone I said so.”

Ruth had gone to bed by the time he got home. He slouched over the kitchen table, with the white carrier bag and a double shot of Materazzi’s grappa. He started sketching triangles on an old envelope: Zurich : Fez : London. Bank : Drugs : Art... dealing. He tried different combinations and swapped the labels. He made it into a circle and added Lisbon, then a lopsided pentangle with Milan in

the centre. As a work of art it was no worse than Gaetani's. Art forgery, drug-running, money laundering... what sort of racket was Materazzi into? Max was dog-tired and couldn't remember what he was trying to prove anyway. The diagrams were starting to spin. He gave up and climbed the stairs, hanging on to the bannister.

NINE

When 5 Live rudely awakened Ruth with a report of the nail-biting penalty shoot-out between Doncaster and Tranmere, he was already on his way upstairs with a pot of tea and two mugs on a tray.

“Morning.”

“Morning love.”

“And how was Clive?”

“On top form actually. We had a good natter. He was staying at a hotel in Hammersmith so we went for a kebab. Because you can’t get a proper English kebab in Vancouver.”

“He could have stayed here.”

“I suppose he could’ve, but he wanted to get off early. On his way to Hong Kong to see his ex-wife.” Was he trying just a bit too hard?

“Funny way to go, via London.”

“I didn’t think of that. Perhaps it was cheaper.” Another interrogation was under way. Perhaps she harboured (quite justifiable) suspicions. He kept having to invent, or re-model, mysterious and elusive old chums. As soon as Ruth had left for work he fired off an email to Materazzi.

The white dove has found her nest

After a few minutes he received a reply:

What do you mean?

I have the picture with me

So why not just say it?

By the time he arrived at the gallery Massimo had already left for a meeting, so he entrusted the package to Régis. Tina was still away.

Max decided to keep his head down for a while. From idle curiosity he started reading about the features of Manueline architecture: cables, anchors, barnacles, seaweed of stone. Anything nautical in fact. There were few extant examples, and the finest were in places he'd never been to, aside from Belém: Evora, Coimbra, Batalha, Tomar... And there was absolutely zero evidence of English influence.

He'd always thought he possessed the requisite intellectual rigour for post-graduate research. He had to confess a tendency to indolence but he could stick at a task if it were *really* important. His big problem was a lack of motivation. But what had put him off doing a Ph.D was the undisguised contempt in which the dons held each other. The groves of academe were not as idyllic as was commonly supposed. Pat O'Shaughnessy, his old tutor, would regularly refer to his colleagues as "dose feckin eejits". And – sadly – most research took place on the internet these days. Back in the '70s you could get a generous grant to spend six weeks poncing about in Barcelona or Paris or Lisbon, strolling into libraries and archives when the mood took you, conducting love affairs with fellow students and generally having a high old time at no expense to yourself.

"Maxell my friend, have you visited Maroc?" Materazzi was modelling an aubergine three-piece suit and an open-necked lemon-yellow shirt. Max couldn't get the theme song from *Saturday Night Fever* out of his head.

"I haven't, Massimo. Often thought about it, though. Wonderful medieval architecture."

"You will adore it. Régis must go to Fes to assist Valentina and Lorelei but I don't 100% trust in him. I will be candid with you: he is not a true gentleman, Max. Also there is a birthday present for my daughter. Please will you take it to her?"

It didn't seem as if he had much of a say in the matter; anyway, he was surprised at how much he was missing Tina. Who the hell was Lorelei?

“Ruth, listen: I had a text from Martin last night. He wants to meet up.”

“Who’s Martin – yet another of your old mates, Min?”

“From Cardiff. He’s been a bit low since Judy ran off with Fatbard the Albanian tree surgeon.”

“So you’re off to Wales now, is it? Wanderlust has struck again.”

“I did say when I retired that I was going to make an effort to see people I hadn’t seen for years. You never know when you get to our age.”

“Your age, you mean.”

“I’ll take the train. It’s very cheap mid-week.”

Max looked in the mirror. If he was going to see Tina again he had better try to get into shape; maybe even visit the gym for the first time in years. And with that wad from Massimo he could refresh his summer wardrobe. But first, he braced himself for another visit to *André Le Coiffeur Artisan*.

“Wossit to be, Max? Five and zfree?”

“I was going to say six and four, André. But whatever you think.”

“You keep ze beard?”

“Maybe. Better keep it very short eh?”

“Looking good, boss. You ave lost some kilos, I am sure.”

“*Vous êtes trop gentil.*”

“You see ze greengrocers ave gone.” *Sotto voce*, for dramatic effect. There was no-one else in the shop.

“Where to?”

“Dunno, zay piss off two days ago. Mafia like I tell you, zay employing illegal immigrants from Maroc. And selling drugs, like in Marseille. I see all from ere. Everyzing! Maybe ze Met get a tip-off? Who know?” André guffawed hysterically. “Straight across ze neck?”

“Great as ever, André.”

“Just £10 to you, my friend.” Max gave him £11.

“*Merci! Au revoir Max.*”

They cut an odd couple at Stansted. The dreadlocked African was dressed in his Paul Smith black suit and polo-neck with silver wrap-around shades. He towered over Max. He looked like a stretched bouncer. Max was wearing a baggy white linen suit by Hugo Boss over a sky-blue T-shirt. It was surprisingly uncomfortable, as he now realised. Of course he knew it would crease... but so badly, so soon?

“*Vous parlez bien le français, n'est-ce pas, Max?*”

“*Un petit pois,*” he replied, hoping Régis would get his weak joke and not think he was an English idiot.

“Eh don't you worry, Max, they speak good Arab in Fes.” He flashed a gold tooth. They headed towards Departures. Suddenly Régis stopped and handed Max a small package.

“They detain me every time. Always! They will interrogate me and cut my luggage to pieces. Just put this one in your bag. Don't you worry, Max, there's nothing bad in there. Relax. If they detain me, just continue to walk like you don't know me.” Whatever it was, was wrapped in shiny red paper. Max surmised that it was Massimo's present for Valentina and it suddenly dawned on him that he hadn't got her anything. He'd have to stop at the Duty Free.

Régis was duly apprehended by a sour-faced little woman in uniform; a large man in a peaked cap came to join her. Max strolled on to Duty Free, looking exceptionally innocent. He browsed the shelves, wondering if he was being observed; there must be cameras all over the place. What perfume would a 20-something Italian socialite choose? They were all called something like Venom or Shame. He stroked his chin to indicate to the CCTV that he was flummoxed. He recalled getting something at random for Ruthie and getting it badly wrong; he blanched at the memory. In the end he went for a bucket of Dime bars. Tina was no gourmet after all. Departure was delayed by 45 minutes: an unpropitious sign.

He hung back, but eventually had to board alone, heart pounding. This was going to end very, very badly, he could see it clearly. Massimo must have known what was going to happen. Régis was the decoy and he was the... foil?... patsy?... mule? He suddenly felt very thirsty. Tina's little birthday present probably consisted of €1 million in cash. Or worse! He banished incoming images from *Midnight Express*, the film that had done so much for Turkish tourism.

It was getting dark and raining hard when they landed. Max's taxi was waiting. “*Merhaba, monsieur*, I take you to Clock Café. Only relax now.”

The rain had more or less stopped when the Nissan parked up in a square next to a huge blue arch. Max went to pay the driver, but he just took his bag from the boot, saying “*plus tard, monsieur*”. They set off by foot down an ill-lit alleyway through the medieval town. Every figure they passed was an Arab wearing a skullcap and a hooded woollen robe. There was the occasional shady character leaning against a wall, smoking. Max spotted no other Europeans at all. His knees were trembling.

TEN

The driver melted into the shadows. Now it was clear where all the tourists had gone. A tall, athletic-looking woman with very short blonde hair, in a pink tracksuit, was shouting and waving to him from a rooftop terrace. Standing next to her was another woman, whom Max eventually recognised as Tina. She had gone native, and was clad in a close-fitting purple-and-gold caftan, her hair fluttering in the evening breeze. He entered the building and started to climb the three flights of steps. As he emerged panting into the open air he saw that she was tanned and more alluring than ever.

“Max! How amazing to see you, mwaah. I present to you Mamma. And Abdel.” The blonde woman looked about 35. Abdel, a leathery-faced man with a Hitler moustache, nodded and carried on smoking his fragrant cigarette. Seated next to him was an old man, wailing as he twangled his *oud*.

“I am Lorelei Furtwängler Materazzi.” She thrust out a bejewelled hand, pink fingernails shimmering in the moonlight. “Good evening Dr Bennet. Are you hungry? You will try the famous camelburger, no?” It wouldn’t have been Max’s first choice, but he was hungry and too physically and emotionally exhausted to ask for the menu. “When you are ready we will go to my riad. Régis will arrive tomorrow, for sure. Relax now.”

The party set off through an even narrower and gloomier alleyway. Max tried to remember the route: left, right, right, left, right – but quickly gave up. They traipsed along silently in Indian file until at last they came to a huge, anonymous wooden door. Lorelei’s riad was a vast, oil-lamp-lit palace of dazzling marble, polychrome wall tiles, gleaming brass ornaments and intricately carved cedar. In the central patio a party was in full swing; a dozen or so middle-aged folk were dancing, awkwardly, to Kool and the Gang. Above them, the upper-floor gallery was hung with large, gaudy canvasses.

“*Merhaba! Wilkommen!* Welcome! A small reception in honour of Valentina. Just a few old friends and some governmental gentlemen. What should you like to drink?” Max thought he recognised two or three faces from the Mayfair *vernissage*.

“I don’t know... Gin and tonic?”

“A very good choice, Dr Bennet. We keep an excellent Moroccan gin here.”
Abdel nodded, strolled away, and soon returned with a giant G&T whose aroma was unfamiliar but not unpleasant. Lorelei indicated a brass tray.

“Please help yourself to a cake or two. They are rather good, I believe. Local recipe. Of course you can’t buy them anywhere else. Listen, Dr Bennet, I want you to understand that Massimo and I are *very* grateful for all you have done for our dear Valentina. We do worry, because she is a sweet, naïve child.” Max nodded in sympathy.

“Hey Tina,” called Max, “*Tanti auguri a te!* I have a present from your father; so sorry, I almost forgot. And this silly little thing from me. I have a proper present in London for you but I forgot to bring it.”

“Oh Max, Dime bars all the way from England! Perfect. Amazing!” She plonked a big wet kiss on his cheek. “You wanna dance?” She kicked off her pointy yellow slippers and put down Babbo’s present, as if she wasn’t interested in unwrapping it. Exhausted and nervous as he was, the music was getting through to Max. He was a known sucker for ‘70s funk.

*You can feel it in the air you can feel it everywhere and they dance all night till
the early morning light, can ya feel it feel it feel it feel it feel it... can ya...
yeowh!! Let’s get on down!*

Much to his surprise, he was starting to enjoy himself; as he jinked around the dance floor to Kool and The Gang, waving his arms about like a lunatic, the tension began to ebb away. The useless Hugo Boss jacket was flung aside with a Travoltian flourish. His T-shirt acquired sweaty stains at the armpits. Soon he was overheating and had to sit down. He felt a little queer. What a party – just like

the good old days. He helped himself to another cake and washed it down with the remains of his exceedingly generous G&T.

Max closed his eyes and yawned. Kool and the Gang had been replaced by Juliette Gréco. The other guests had departed and Tina was belly dancing right in front of him. She smiled as she shimmied, spinning the golden tassels on her nipples. Round and round they went: left, then right, then in opposite directions, and then in reverse. He groaned.

He was dreaming of orgies in the Alhambra when he awoke in an unfamiliar room. Flies were buzzing back and forth in little figures of eight, making a terrible racket. Abdel was standing at his bedside with a pot of coffee and a glass. Lorelei was by the door.

“Good party, *ja*? You have slept well. I was going to make Abdel to show you the old town but there is very little *freizeit*. Your flight to London will depart in under three hours. I imagine you would prefer breakfast and a shower first? And would you mind taking this little package to Massimo? It’s a typical souvenir of Fes, already wrapped.”

Less than an hour later Max was back at Fez airport. He was about to get Ruth something from Duty Free when he remembered he wasn’t supposed to be there. He slept throughout the flight, snoring like a pneumatic drill.

Instead of ordering their usual Friday night takeaway, Max had decided he could do as good a job himself. Ruth played with her iPad and hummed to herself as he dished out the tandoori chicken, salad and trimmings. It was one of his better efforts.

“This is unexpectedly delish I must say. I *adore* the spiced rice with sultanas and chopped apricots and almonds and whatever. Did you learn to make it in Morocco?”

ELEVEN

Max stared at her, open-mouthed. Officially, neither of them had ever been to Morocco, although their friends all raved about it. No, he hadn't imagined it, she had found out. He shut his mouth. Was it even worth attempting to bluff his way through? You are supposed to find out what the enemy knows without giving too much away, *à la Smiley*. So he'd read – though it wasn't so simple in practice.

"Erm... you are quite right Ruth, I have just been to Morocco. But only for 24 hours." Less, actually.

"I bloody well know you have. What a shame your boyfriend got nicked at Stansted."

"I haven't got a boyfriend, Ruth."

"You know, I am inclined to believe that much. I just wanted to see the look on your face. He's Materazzi's boyfriend, or so one theory goes. I understand your proclivities are directed elsewhere. Such a sweet little thing. Well... young, but maybe not so little. I'm impressed – I really, really am."

"Christ, Ruthie, it was a just a little job I took on. I had a lot of time on my hands... and I got a bit carried away."

"There will be plenty of time for squirming and whimpering later." He felt his whole life pass before his eyes. It was very disappointing. Hardly worth watching. "Look, dearest, let's be frank: I know *exactly* what you've been up to. Visiting your old muckers, were you? I found some unusually interesting documents in your wallet when I was looking for £50 to pay the window cleaner. Exhibits A, B and C. I'm a criminal lawyer Maxwell, not a hopeless herbert like you. I know lots and lots of people – on both sides of the legal divide. And it's not hard to track a suspect's movements, now that everybody walks around with a smartphone." Please God no. Should he confess everything and throw himself on the mercy of Ruthless Ruth, as her colleagues admiringly called her?

"Right. Finish your grub because we have a visitor arriving in 10 minutes." Max wasn't terribly hungry, but he did pour himself a large glass of red... He took two sips, then the doorbell rang.

“Broadbent. I do apologise for this intrusion, Mr Featherstonhaugh, *pardonez-moi*, erm Bennet, but we need to have a little *tête-à-tête*.” There was a hint of a West Midlands accent, long suppressed. Broadbent was a big-boned, awkward-looking man in his 40s, with floppy brown hair and large, uneven teeth. Max thought he looked like the front half of a pantomime horse. He was dressed in an ill-fitting blue blazer, a pin-striped shirt and baggy grey trousers with brown Hush Puppies. Around his thick neck was a food-stained, dark-blue college tie. The entire ensemble could have come from the wardrobe of an octogenarian.

“Now Mr Bennet, it’s awfully embarrassing to have to tell you this but we have been watching you. Dreadful isn’t it? Once again I do apologise but needs must. You see HM Government is very interested in Signor Materazzi, and has been for some time. As have *nos amis* in Italy, Switzerland, Portugal etc. You will have noticed that he a *bon vivant* and that he and his family do like to swan about. Exactly what they are up to, we frankly don’t know as yet; do you have any information that might assist us, hmm?” Max didn’t; he was sorry; he hardly knew the man.

“*Bien sûr*, we will find out. The international art market is a sordid affair Mr Bennet: murkier than a badly-cleaned Expressionist canvas. What we would ask of you – and I am sure that as a responsible citizen you will be keen to help – is that you go along with him, maintain friendly relations and act at all times with *sang-froid*. You are aware of something called the Official Secret Act, I dare say. No need to sign anything just now, but you might want to read it. Let me put your mind at rest: you are in no imminent danger. *Au contraire*. The rumours that Materazzi is a double-murderer... probably an exaggeration, and anyway we’ll be watching over you at all times. Subject to availability of qualified personnel, *naturellement*.” Broadbent treated Max to a knuckle-crushing handshake and nodded to Ruth. “*Merci beaucoup* for your time. Once again, excuse me, and enjoy the rest of your evening. *Bon appétit. Au revoir.*” Max wondered how long

they had been spying on him. The whole of his weekend in Lisbon with Tina might have been filmed. Perhaps Ruth had already seen it.

“You have been a very naughty boy Maxwell. I knew you were a duplicitous little toe-rag of course, but not that you had such a fertile imagination. You know the Biblical admonition: ‘Your sin will find you out’? It already has.”

Silence fell.

“You did ask me to research our Portuguese holiday.”

“But not necessarily by taking some Italian bint on a dirty weekend.”

“That’s not what it was Ruthie.” Be fair now: it was midweek!

“Not for want of trying on your part I’m sure.” She was bang on as usual.

“It was only a job. I decided not to tell you as I thought you might get hold of the wrong end of the stick. Ms Materazzi had to take a drawing to a Portuguese geezer and I was to act as her chaperone.” Ruth treated him to a wry smile.

“I shall let that pass – but only because it’s too ludicrous for words. And didn’t you think there might be a catch?”

“Erm... no, to be honest. He did pay me, but then he’s a wealthy man it would seem. He owns a top-notch art gallery in Mayfair.”

“And the jaunt to Morocco?”

“More of the same, but without the chaperoning. To be honest,” – he realised his references to honesty were not appreciated – “I don’t remember a lot about it.”

Max pretended to be asleep when Ruth got up to go to work. He turned his back to her and prayed that she would not pour a pot of tea over his head. Half an hour after she’d left he received an email.

Maxell my friend thank you for helping last week. Can you come to me soon as your schedule will permit. I wish to share with you my big idea over luncheon. MM

TWELVE

“The Materazzi Foundation or La Fondazione Materazzi: which is better?” Max was finding it hard to concentrate because of the hubbub from the other tables and the fumes from Massimo’s eau de cologne. And fear.

“Both I suppose. You might as well have it in German and French too, as the headquarters will be in Zurich.”

“Ah yes. In time it will become very prestigious but this year it is only a modest programme. We will invest €1 million to start and launch in September with a prestigious lecture which we will ask Dr Maxell Bennet to give.’ He smiled and pointed to Max’s head. “Our friend Dr Fonseca will be more than happy to host it in Lisboa. There will be, naturally, an appropriate fee. I very much look forward to hear ‘English Influence on the Manueline Monastic Architecture of Portugal’.” Eventually Max found his tongue.

“Oh Massimo... that would be a tremendous honour but my research is really only at an early stage and I haven’t had time to make a lot of progress recently – apart from my very brief visit to Lisbon.” Materazzi waved his hand to indicate that he’d heard enough.

“Nevertheless, I am sure you will have new and interesting things to say and you will talk for 30 minutes only: the audience will be family, close friends and selected world-renowned doctors.” Max was stuck for a reply, but Massimo’s phone started to ring.

“Will you excuse me one moment?” He made his way through the restaurant to the street. Suddenly Broadbent loomed into view; shadowing him was a smaller man in a grey suit.

“Whatever *notre ami* desires, agree to it with alacrity, Mr Bennet; we are counting on you. Maintain your *sangfroid* and do not look directly at us.”

Materazzi returned to the table after a couple of minutes.

“You have had enough time to consider my proposition now, Max?”

“Yes, Massimo. I should be honoured and delighted of course... I am excited but a little nervous. It will be such a prestigious event.”

“It will all go perfectly, I know it in my heart. And also you will join our board, no? We already have a distinguished chairman.” He drew a letter from his jacket pocket and read carefully, “Emeritus Professor of Luso-Hispanic Literary and Cultural Studies at Flinders University Dr Patrick Thomas Aquinas O’Shaughnessy!” Materazzi leaned back and wiped his mouth with a napkin, his Dover sole reduced to a cartoon fishbone.

“Erm... an inspired choice.” Max raised his glass as if to a toast. Small world! So the old fraud was still chugging along? Fair play to Uncle Pat. But how the hell did those two know each other? Max abandoned the last third of his lasagna.

So let’s not panic. Yes, we need to deliver an academic lecture, but how hard can that be?

1. It is supposed to be *work in progress*, so we’ll keep it short and sweet.
2. It’s going to be given in Lisbon, so no-one important will be there.
3. There’s a reception first, so the audience will, with any luck, be pissed.

He knew from his working days that the secret to managing any project was to break it down into chunks. There would be a rambling prolegomenon (flattering the host, and thanking all and sundry for their invaluable assistance) which would help to put his audience to sleep; lots of pictures (everybody likes pictures); a couple of tentative, waffly ideas (maybe just the one); and an impressive list of what needs to be done next (by someone else). It couldn’t take more than a month, even from a standing start of utter ignorance.

“When are you off to see your dear mother again? I might want to come with you to visit Ely.”

“The week after next. Are you mad, Max? You know she’s not your biggest fan – and I am beginning to see her point.”

“I’ve never been in any doubt about that, Ruth. I’m just a rude mechanical who likes football and beer, and with appalling taste in music. “Maybe it’s because I’m a Northerner’...”

“Indeed. She does regard you as Northern scum. But that’s not the reason.”

“Put me out of her misery.”

“Since you ask, it’s because you are an idle, underachieving, frivolous, devious bastard.”

“Be that as it may, my love, I have an urge to visit the cathedral. You can drop me off and collect me a couple of hours later. If that’s acceptable.”

“You really are a man of mystery. Let’s hope that Broadbent and his mates really are watching your back, because you’re keeping interesting company these days.”

“You say that, but it all seems conjecture to me. There’s no proof that Materazzi’s done anything wrong and he hasn’t asked me to do anything illegal — or else I would have been picked up by the Old Bill weeks ago.”

“Time will tell, Min. So what’s this sudden fascination with cathedrals?”

“I appreciate that this will be hard for you to believe but I have been asked to give a talk on medieval monastic architecture.”

“I beg your pardon? What do you know about it?”

“Not a lot but there’s still time. I have until the beginning of September.”

“I thought we were going to the Algarve in September?”

“And so we will, straight after I deliver my lecture in Lisbon. All expenses paid.”

“Good grief, Min.”

Max wondered why he’d never bothered to go before. It was an astonishing place. He walked around the building, taking photographs of the West tower, porch and chapels, then went inside to examine the windows, tombs, memorials and unique, jaw-dropping octagon.

Like most cathedrals, it had been built and rebuilt many times over hundreds of years, and extensively restored in the Victorian period and since. The Victorians could not restrain themselves from fixing it, irrespective of whether it was or wasn't broken, and the same was true up and down the country. If it hadn't been for drawings made over the centuries, now buried in the Society of Antiquaries or obscure aristocrats' family papers, nobody would know what the interiors of our greatest ecclesiastical buildings had looked like when they were first built. This was even more the case with lesser-known churches, and there were a hell of a lot of churches in England. It was time to strip away those 19th-century travesties. Somewhere out there was the evidence – just waiting to be uncovered: evidence to support the theory of which he was the world's principal, not to say sole, advocate.

THIRTEEN

There was still no intelligence test for entry to the British Library. Most of the scholars were bearded and/or tattooed kids in thrall to YouTube and Instagram – although some of the girls were rather tasty.

Max wasn't sure he really needed to use the BL, but it would add a bit of gravitas to his research and he might chance upon something. Life was too short to learn how to use the catalogue; he'd put his trust in the library angel. From the shelves in Humanities One he took Pevsner's *The Buildings of England*, one volume after another. He was looking for small churches with 14th-century tombs in seaside counties such as Hampshire and Sussex. London would be too well known and documented. There must be some in Bristol? Or Chester or Spalding? Who would be buried there? Bishops, lords, merchants, seafarers, Wardens of the Cinque Ports, or whatever they were called? Those tombs that had been described and reproduced in Pevsner would not do. But he needed something that resembled them. He needed to find and research new names. Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces of famous people: names that sounded familiar but whom no-one knew anything about. To sound convincing, you needed to amass details. It could be specious nonsense from beginning to end, but there had to be lots of detail. Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas understood that. Commonly referred to as "blinding you with science". Ideally, Max would have a qualification in the history of art, or history of any sort, but it was too late now. He was already getting an idea about how he'd proceed.

He said he was just popping out to the shops, but instead he headed to O Castelo to track her down. But she wasn't there, so he ordered a *galão* and a carb-laden *pastel de nata* and sat with his back to the counter watching Portuguese telly. He could have asked if and when Edi was coming in, but he wanted to avoid slipping into his accustomed role as the stalker. He looked around him, but he doubted that he was under surveillance, even if MI6's HQ was

only a short walk away. Now he thought about it, this could easily be Broadbent's local caff. But Broadbent probably wasn't MI6. He was more likely MI5 or the Special Branch – or even HMRC, which didn't sound quite so glamorous. As he stirred a little sugar into his milky coffee he wondered if he had indeed measured out his life with coffee spoons.

At school he had been one of the brightest sparks. As he couldn't get into the first or second sports teams he had found other things at which to excel. He enjoyed acting and debating, and was usually top in Latin and French. Speaking a foreign language, he'd say in jest, was another form of acting. He was popular at school, and his parents made sure he took his studies seriously. His A-Level results put him in his year's top three. But when he arrived at Magdalene he discovered he wasn't as brilliant as he'd thought. He was good, but not *that* good. There weren't half some clever bastards at Cambridge.

At his summer drinks party, O'Shaughnessy introduced him to his bright-eyed niece, who was still at school but destined for greatness. Ruth was vivacious, petite and pretty. She had big green eyes, long auburn hair and pale, delicate skin. So pale, he could almost see the red wine disappearing down her throat. He was only her second proper boyfriend. To no-one's surprise she bagged a scholarship to King's to study Law. They spent most weekends in each other's company, studying alone during the week. He spent part of the summer vacs in Spain and Portugal but decided he'd miss her too much to spend a whole year abroad. He achieved a very creditable Second, then signed up to a PGCE course while waiting for Ruth to finish at Cambridge. But he hadn't enjoyed it – especially when, at last, he came into contact with real schoolchildren.

They rented a one-bedroom flat in Hackney, and he landed a job with KPMG to bring in the necessary while she was in slaving away in pupilage. After a couple of years they got married. Ruth worked all hours, and the harder she worked the higher she rose. But all that criminal casework seemed to change her. As she became more assertive and less patient, he backed off and stopped saying what he wanted, what he thought about this or that. His self-confidence ebbed away and she made all the decisions. He had to accept his diminished status or they were heading for divorce... and, with her being a lawyer, he'd have been left on

the streets! The expected babies failed to come along, so life proceeded with few milestones: no first words and nappy-changing, toddling and toppling, first days at school, camping holidays, moody teenagers and bright young things off to university. There was a residual affection on both sides but it did not reveal itself very often. The years shot by, each one much the same as the last. He'd nearly finished his cold coffee when he saw her emerge from the kitchen.

“Edi! Nice to see you again!”

“Oh hi.” Did she remember him or was she just being polite?

“I met you on the plane from Lisbon last month. How's the Slade?”

“Good. Really good.” Max blustered his way to the point.

“Actually I came here to look for you because actually I need someone to do some drawings for me and it also helps if they can read Portuguese as well. I'm writing a little article about religious architecture and I can't do the drawings myself. It's just a bit of fun but you would be well paid. It might take you three or four days, but I don't need it finished for a while. Would you be interested?”

“Erm... I suppose I might be. Can we talk later?”

The Treaty of Windsor is the diplomatic alliance signed between Portugal and England on 9 May 1386 at Windsor and sealed by the marriage of King John I of Portugal (House of Aviz) to Philippa of Lancaster, daughter of John of Gaunt, 1st Duke of Lancaster.^[1] With the victory at the Battle of Aljubarrota, assisted by English archers, John I was recognized as the undisputed King of Portugal, putting an end to the interregnum of the 1383-1385 Crisis.^[1] The Treaty of Windsor established a pact of mutual support between the countries.^[1]

Thank you Wikipedia. One could reasonably assume that the Portuguese Court would have been awash with English nobility. In their wake would have come, amongst others, painters, sculptors, woodcarvers etc. He would keep his artisans anonymous. It was the age of Chaucer, of pilgrimages, of shrines. Stone- and wood-carving would have been big business. England was a great seafaring nation, so why would they *not* have depicted ship's ropes and exotic fruits in

chapels and other monuments? Tragically, but very conveniently, so much had been lost over the centuries. He browsed the internet for pictures of finely-carved 14th-century tombs and printed them off. He altered the locations to very rarely visited — because non-existent — parish churches like St Andrew's Without (Flintshire) and St White's by the Wardrobe (West Cornwall).

Twice a week his new Portuguese friends came by. He paid his little helpers £75 each a day. As he had been promised €5,000 plus expenses from Materazzi to give the lecture, he could afford to be generous. It was Edi's task, assisted by her boyfriend Manoel, to trace the printouts and embellish them with those exotic elements so characteristic of the long-neglected but influential "English Pre-Manueline Style", as he had taken to calling it. Their drawings would have to look like they came from the 18th century, before the Victorian "restorers" got to work, or preferably earlier. He showed Edi sketches by William Stukeley so that she could study and copy his style. Bishop Joseph Brookfield's tomb (so sadly lost) was adorned with dolphins, seaweed, barnacles and coconuts, somewhat distressed by the importunate fingers of pious pilgrims. Then she moved on to the (irreparably damaged) catafalque of Captain Cedric Morton, nephew of Cardinal John Morton. Thank God for iconoclasts. More barnacles and coconuts. In an inspired moment he borrowed a Hermès scarf of Ruth's which was adorned with ropes and steering wheels, and showed it to Edi. They didn't have to seek out antique paper to forge their documents, because no-one would ever see them. The non-existent originals would remain safely undisturbed in private collections in mysterious places like Montgomeryshire. Max would only be showing his slides to a bored and tipsy audience. Or so he hoped. As he warmed to his task he almost began to believe in it himself. And why not? All that revisionist stuff was just a matter of collecting favourable evidence (while ignoring the rest) and building some improbable hypothesis around it; he might even have stumbled on the truth! And at least he wasn't staking his reputation on the Hitler Diaries. At the end of the day what did it bloody matter, and who cared?

The three of them sat around his dining room table. He kept his little Portuguese helpers topped up with coffee and sticky buns. While Edi scratched away with a goose quill, Max and Manoel — the most over-qualified brickie-cum-

barman in South London – cobbled together a letter from a Portuguese *fidalgo* complaining about the recent invasion of cheap English builders. (An ironic aside here would surely have his audience chuckling.) Young Manoel’s ability to translate “chisel”, “set-square” and “spoke-shave” was useful, though he had to use the dictionary for “armillary sphere”. Max hoped he could get the medieval Portuguese vocab and syntax approximately right; luckily he had hung on to a few books from his student days. Perhaps he could get away with just reading out the letter in English translation, but he wanted to show a convincing, if blurry, image of the original document from some decrepit country pile. By four o’clock the youngsters had gone, leaving him to tidy up the kitchen and knock up a refreshing *salade niçoise* before Ruth came home.

On sunny days he took to visiting parish churches in London and the Home Counties. Choir-stalls offered up the occasional useful detail. What a shame so much had gone up in the Great Fire! Then there was the Blitz. He even took a trip to Suffolk, treating them all to fish and chips at the seaside. Did they think this was all a harmless game? He tried to impart that impression, wondering if swearing them to secrecy would have a negative effect.

Max started to craft his conclusion: a blend of faux-apologetic, academic blithering and digital gobbledegook. It brought back memories of Cambridge.

What I have presented today is, of course, just a tentative first step towards a reappraisal of a key strand of Portugal’s illustrious architectonic heritage. We will soon, I have no doubt, be able to build a crowd-sourced database of XML-enabled objects which we can plot using an RSS feed onto a Google map to create a mash-up... etc.

Another couple of weeks and he’d have more than enough gibberish for his purpose.

FOURTEEN

Although it was a Saturday, Max woke early, as he invariably did these days. He'd grasped the redundancy offer to be liberated from the stress of work and now he found himself consorting with gangsters, under surveillance by spooks, and writing a lecture based on a pretty obvious untruth. Ruth would have abandoned him and gone to stay with her mother – if she had only trusted him in her absence. All things considered, there was quite a lot to worry about. Once he was awake, he could never get back to sleep because of Ruth's snorting and snoring. She was beginning to come round when he heard the postman slam the gate in his insouciant manner.

"I'll go down and make the coffee." She didn't respond. On the doormat was a letter with a stamp bearing a cute little koala. They only knew one person in the Antipodes: Ruth's Uncle Pat. But this letter was addressed to Max alone. He filled the kettle, then slit open the envelope.

Dear Maxwell

It appears that you and I are to be colleagues on the Board of the soon-to-be illustrious Materazzi Foundation. I met up with my old mucker Massimo while I was passing through London, and he told me of his plans. Read attached contract – we're to get an annual salary for the next five years! Who said academia doesn't pay?

Please sign one copy and return to the Chairman (i.e. me).

Hearty congrats on getting the Lisbon gig: a chalice that ought to be carefully sniffed before imbibing. I'd no idea you'd been doing all this ground-breaking research but you must have plenty of time on your hands now you've abandoned your calling as a bean counter. What took you so long? (If only you'd put as much energy into your degree.)

Be that as it may, Massimo obviously thinks you're up to it and he is sharp as a tack. Excuse me, but I have to ask: are you on intimate terms with his daughter? Holy Mother of God, but don't let our Ruthie find out or she'll have your nuts for earrings. You

can tell me all about it when we meet in the charming city of Lisbon on 2nd September. Venue will be Museu Coleçao Cardoso I imagine, but TBC.

Now then, as I shall be the MC you'd better let me have your presentation a good fortnight in advance. I shall need to see what you've written so I can pen a suitable introduction. Let's hope you've improved over the last 30 years. Only kidding you Max, I am expecting great things.

ps

Best not let HRH see this

Yours ever

Patrick

He could feel a headache building. He would have to send Professor Pat something soon. Something. O'Shaughnessy might be over 80, but he was no *eejit*. Max carried the breakfast tray laboriously and unsteadily upstairs, pausing on the landing to shred the letter. Examining the envelope again, it looked like it might have been already opened by persons unknown. Or perhaps not.

Max woke up wheezing, earlier than usual. An Airbus roared overhead, taking families on their overpriced holidays to overcrowded destinations. Soon he'd be joining the riff-raff in Portugal. Edi and Manoel had done a damn good job. He still had to finish scanning the drawings, sort his slides and polish his script, but it looked like he had it cracked.

On these warm mornings his routine was to take a brisk walk before breakfast. Only 10 minutes, but it set him up for the day: focussed and ready for action. Just as well, because by the end of the week he'd have to send his draft to Professor Pat. He also needed to make sure he had the flights and accommodation nailed down for Portugal. Régis was supposed to be in charge of

the Lisbon travel arrangements. Materazzi was said to be in Zurich. Tina was never at the gallery either, but he hoped to see her the following week.

He had taken to visiting O Castelo once or twice a week, even though Edi only worked Saturdays. The portions were abundant, tasty and cheap. Often Manoel was there, and he could mine his knowledge of Algarvian restaurants and beaches. For a man with a degree in Engineering, he seemed to have spent most of his working life as a waiter.

Max had started on his cabbage and potato soup when a fair-haired young man dressed in a grey suit and grey shirt came over to his table.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not, please do.”

“Mr Bennet, isn’t it?”

“Erm... yes it is. Do I know you at all?”

“I doubt it, although we have a mutual acquaintance in Willie Broadbent.” So Broadbent had a first name, did he? This did not sound like the start of a casual conversation.

“I’m Dick Remnant, Mr Broadbent’s colleague.”

“Right.” So you would be the back end of the pantomime horse. Max realised that they had met (or almost) before, when his lunch date with Materazzi had been so rudely interrupted. Whereas Broadbent’s features were... unusual – only an adoring and optically-challenged mother could love them – Remnant was neutral and anonymous; there was nothing about him that was memorable. He was neither ugly nor handsome, neither cheerful nor melancholy, tall nor short, fat nor thin. Max could not place his accent. He was like one of those actors who could pass for anyone, from a drunken Welsh poet to a Syrian saint.

“This won’t take long, Max. We just need the briefest of chats. Won’t take a minute.” Remnant rose, and ordered a cappuccino from the bar. “Now then...” he whispered, “our Italian friends are as elusive as ever, Max, but we are planning to greet the family and their associates soon. So, we need to be 100% certain that the Lisbon meeting is going ahead.”

“Oh yes, I’ve signed my contract.” For better or worse.

“Good. Excellent. And you’ll be giving your lecture in Lisbon on September the second?” Perhaps they had been steaming open his post after all. How very old-fashioned. Was he supposed to look surprised?

“That’s all in hand. Actually I’m just about to send my script to Professor...”

“O’Shaughnessy... Oh yes, we are interested in him too. Have been for a while. So just to be clear, Max: you should proceed as planned and deliver the lecture. Don’t be surprised if you see us on the plane. Don’t try to make contact with us unless we contact you first. And please, *purlease*, do not repeat anything I have said, or do anything to arouse suspicion.” That was easier said than done, given that Ruth was the most suspicious person in the world — especially where he was concerned.

“OK, got that. *Capito.*”

“I do hope so. Goodbye Max.”

“Goodbye...?”

“Dick.”

FIFTEEN

Presenting his draft holiday plans to Ruthie had been almost as nerve-wracking as writing the lecture but eventually he got the green light. He booked the hire car from Lisbon to Faro. He found a lovely apartment near Lagos. A fortnight in the sunny Algarve would be very relaxing, and they could both do with that. He'd booked their flight home to Gatwick. They'd break their journey at the *pousada* in Evora. Now he needed to pop along to the Materazzi Gallery. To his delight, Tina was there to open the door to him. The walls were no longer grey but lemon yellow. Régis was busily supervising the arrival of some large canvasses for their next exhibition. He and Tina were both wearing canary yellow onesies.

“Hi Max! So what you think? You remember this one maybe, hmm?” He didn’t. She inclined her head to one side, her long hair cascading over her bare throat.

“No remember at the riad? We make exposition of Maroc naïves. We open next month the day after the lecture. How I am impatient to hear it, Max! Everybody is excited, same as me.” He thought that might have been something of an exaggeration.

“Great. Yes... it is all going rather well... I can see you are tremendously busy but I was wondering if Régis had my tickets for Lisbon?” She smiled and reached under the counter.

“Yes, it is here for you. For you and your missus! I look forward to meet her, Max.” Hmm. “And for the hotel you will stay in, is the same as before. Perfect.” She handed him a manila envelope with DR & MRS M. BENNET: COLLECT on it. He opened it to find some vouchers and a wad of banknotes. He slipped it into his inside jacket pocket, to examine at his leisure. “Also, you have a letter from Lisboa!” The envelope bore the crest of the Museu Coleçao Cardoso. He collected another chaste kiss on the cheek, then set off for the Red Lion to count the cash and read his letter.

Salutations Dr Maxwell Bennet !

Do forgive my miserable English but I need to practice. Yesterday I saw my daughter Maria João and guess what she said ? She has been working for you ! A coincidence worthy of the late Arthur Koestler old bean. I am pleased to hear you pay well. What do you think of her forging skills ? Like father, like daughter. I must say it is very amusing and I hope you get a way with it. Very post-modern. Deconstructive even. But lets keep it our secret mon ami. I will not tell if you dont say I found you out. Lets all milk Materazzi's golden goose if you get my drift, and pray we dont end up in chokey. So I will see you on 2 September if not before deo volente.

With the venue for your long waited lecture there is a tiny problem. They were supposed to be painting the conference rooms at the museum in august when every body is away. But as this is bloody Portugal the painters went on strike and it will not finish in time. The lacy bastards ! But dont worry I will find some where. Lisbon is a great city. Dont tell Massimo untill all is arranged. I am too young and beautiful to die !

A warm hug from your friend ever

Dâmaso

It was all Dottie Hardacre's fault. It was a long and winding road, but it led back to her. He'd had no intention of taking Spanish at A-Level until they met at the tennis club disco. They were introduced by a girl he'd known since primary school. She was five foot two with long black hair, soft pale skin and rose-tinted specs: the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. He was smitten. Her dad was a naval engineer and her mother was from Tarragona. Her real name was Dolores, which she understandably hated. The following week he asked her out to the Essoldo; it was *The Jungle Book* or something – far from ideal, but he managed a snog and a tentative grope and she did not slap his face. One rare hot and sunny day they'd

gone with his mates to Hoylake swimming pool. The seawater was freezing as always, but it was an opportunity to admire her in a bikini. He could still picture her... Her parents had a holiday home in Lloret de Mar, so studying Spanish suddenly seemed to be more attractive than Latin, so he switched, to his form-master's disgust. But he was getting ahead of himself. It didn't last. After a couple of months they started to argue — for no reason, as far as he could rememeber. They'd kiss and make up for a few days, then there'd be another row, and so it went on. His sister was 12 years older than him and he had next to no experience of girls of his own age. He accepted now that he was possessive, self-centred and immature: a teenage boy, in fact. They quickly lost touch. A couple of years ago, in an idle moment, he'd googled her; and there she was, teaching Spanish at an FE college in Liverpool. She had straggly grey hair and half a dozen chins. Only the specs were the same.

He turned out to have a gift for Spanish, and he met other pretty girls at Cambridge. Then he'd chosen Portuguese as his second language — and now here he was, making up tall tales about medieval architecture. Funny how one thing leads to another.

He braced himself for a pre-holiday trim *Chez André*.

“Max! Where you ave been? I was getting worried about you. Five and zfree?”

“The usual six and four André, *merci*.”

“So ow are you? Looking a bit shagged out man. You are working too ard!” He guffawed. “You ave ad ze olidays already?”

“Actually I’m — we are — just about to go Portugal.” Oh no...

“Nice and ot, for sure, but why you wanna go zare? Everybody is taking drugs and the police is all corrupt. And ze food is... shit! Zay cannot cook fish. Also zare wine is orrible! I am telling you!” Max couldn’t be bothered to argue, so meekly replied that Ruth was dead set on it. André shrugged and snipped away. It didn’t take long. Finally he waved his razor in the air.

“Straight across ze neck? Good?”
“Brilliant as ever, André.”
“Just £10 to you, Max.” Max gave him £11.
“*Et bon voyage.*”
“*Bon voyage.* I mean *au revoir* André.”

Having got over the shock of seeing Max’s name, more or less, (Dr Maxell H. Bennett, MA) on the invitation to the launch party, Ruth’s competitive nature rose to the surface.

“Right, we are going to do this properly, aren’t we? I mean, that Hugo Boss suit was a complete waste of money and the woollen one’s too heavy for the heat of Portugal, so we’re off to Regent Street tomorrow. I shall have to take you in hand. And I’m going to need a new cocktail dress if I’m to compete with that Italian tart.” How? Four three-minute rounds?

“Fine, yes, OK. Let’s go into town tomorrow.”

“And I want to see *all* the arrangements to make sure you know what you’re doing, Min. For once!” she added unnecessarily.

Materazzi’s generosity did not extend to business class for two-hour flights, so they were obliged to sit with the riff-raff. There were a few business-suited gents on board. Max spotted Remnant as he and Ruth made their way down the aisle. He looked up but made no sign of recognition. He glanced quickly to right and left and didn’t think he knew anyone else on the plane; maybe one or two faces from the *vernissage* – he couldn’t be sure. The Materazzis were coming from Switzerland, leaving Régis to mind the gallery in Mayfair. O’Shaughnessy emailed to say he was already in Lisbon, having “a whale of a time”. Ruth was in unusually good humour. They had a couple of G&Ts and nodded off.

Dâmaso was waiting at Chegadas.

“Ruth darling, this is Dr Fonseca, the gentleman I told you about.”

“Dâmaso Anibal Fonseca Gouveia at your service, madame.” He bowed and kissed her hand as if she were Good Queen Bess. What on earth would she make of him? Max turned aside in nausea and trepidation, but she was lapping up his olde worlde charm. If Max had tried it, he would most certainly have had his face slapped.

“*Boa tarde, Dâmaso. Como vai você? Tudo vai bem?*”

“*Muito bem. Obrigado, Max.* Let me tell you, Dona Ruth, that your husband speaks excellent Portuguese. He is a great scholar and an English gentleman too. We are very fortunate to have him in Lisboa. Now, shall I accompany you to your hotel? It is a little late to paint the town red tonight. We can do that in style after tomorrow’s event. I know a quiet place for supper, just a few minutes from the Cardoso.”

SIXTEEN

It was an unusual choice of venue, but Dâmaso insisted that he had contacted every auditorium in Lisbon before settling reluctantly on O Glam Rock. Everywhere was either booked up or on strike or both, just like England in the good old days. But it did have a well-stocked bar and the dance floor boasted a sound system that actually worked.

“Better the devil you know, old chap!”

He had left it until the last minute to tell Materazzi. But Tina thought it was an inspired idea and she always got her way. Not a dry, dull and impersonal conference hall but a living, colourful (i.e. down-at-heel) night club. Somewhere they could have some fun; a night their guests would remember.

The lecture was due to start at eight, so Max and Dâmaso went over at six-thirty to make sure the DJ-cum-AV technician had shown up, and that the screen, normally used to show football matches, would connect to the laptop. Satisfied with the arrangements, Dâmaso headed home. He promised to collect Ruth in the P1800 once she’d done glamping up. Whatever she wore, she could not possibly overdo it in that venue.

Max had pictured himself giving a talk at a lectern on a proper stage; but he’d be delivering it from behind the DJ’s console, with twin turntables and flashing lights before him. He’d imagined an attentive audience in a raked auditorium, or in a purpose-built lecture room at least. But now he saw that they would be accommodated in cosy booths of ripped and sticky purple leatherette, and that some would actually have their backs to him. A couple of dozen gold-sprayed chairs, of the sort hired in for weddings, were stacked up in a corner, just in case. His wheeze had started up, whether from nerves or the filthiness of the venue, he wasn’t sure. And he still had a stabbing headache after last night’s quiet supper with the irrepressible Dâmaso.

All he could do was wait for the guests to arrive. Half would turn up too early and the other half too late, but he could not be blamed for that, at least. A bit of disruption might be to his advantage. He paced around the dance floor, glancing at his notes and silently rehearsing his ad-libs. He tried to focus on the

moment when it would all be over and he could run away to the seaside. He rehearsed the phrase: “It really wasn’t my fault”.

At seven-thirty, Afonso the DJ turned up and switched on the giant screen to watch the build-up to Sporting v Marítimo. A bleep informed Max he had received a text.

Damask had bad accent and arrested for dangerous driving. In taxi now. Chin up R

Well, that was one less to worry about. And he was going to bring Edi and maybe one of his boys with him. So maybe three less. Fewer. Afonso gave Marc Bolan a spin.

You slide so good with bones so fair, You've got the universe reclining in your hair

Oddly enough, he was thinking of Tina when he received an email from her.

Hi max. BIG problem! Regis is arrest by Englis police ! Babbo and Mamma must to return London. ciao

*The wild winds blow upon your frozen cheeks, The way you flip your hip it
always makes me weak*

He might as well have a Super Bock since the roly-poly barman was ready and waiting. As he hauled himself onto a stool, his phone rang.

“Maxwell? Listen, it’s Patrick. So sorry, but it looks like I may not be able to make it tonight. I seem to be under arrest for God knows what. Some English *eejit* called Broadbent has been noseying around my investments and I’m waiting for a lawyer so he can interrogate me. Mother of God! Materazzi will introduce you. Probably just as well as I never got round to reading your script. Apologies to Massimo and kisses to Ruthie. Sorry, have to go now.”

He was settling down to watch the football when Ruth showed up in a shimmering golden trouser-suit that reminded him of that bloke from Mud.

“Am I the first then?”

“And probably the last.”

“I hope you get a better turnout for your funeral.” Max wondered how long she’d have to wait.

“You might as well get me a drink then.” But wait, there was going to be an audience after all. A nun arrived and ordered a virgin mary. Manoel entered in a dark suit and tie, without Edi. Then Remnant, wearing a leopardskin catsuit and a big grin. Max decided to stay on his stool. Finally, at eight-thirty, accompanied by the doddery old couple from the *vernissage*, Valentina: squashed into a pink satin minidress, with no blouse or discernible undies and more make-up than Bowie on *Top of the Pops*. Max could hardly bear to look but did anyway. Remnant approached the DJ and shouted something in his ear. He turned down the music, leaving the football on (Sporting 1–0 up).

“*Senhoras e senhores*, ladies and gentlemen: I am very sorry to tell you that tonight’s lecture and the official launch of the Materazzi Foundation have had to be postponed.” The DJ translated as best as he could, for the benefit of the nun.

“Dr Materazzi and the Board of the Foundation sincerely apologise for the disappointment and the inconvenience caused. All your expenses will be reimbursed and Glam Rock will remain open until midnight, with a free bar.”

Loud cheers. Remnant went over to Tina, who put her arms around his neck and gave him a long and apparently passionate kiss. Eventually she looked up.

“Oh Max, I introduce you to...”

“Dick.”

“Oh wow, you already know?”

“Sort of... yes. Erm... so how did you two meet?”

“One day Dick visit our gallery, just like you Max, and we have now became friends. It happen so fast!” She had her arm around his waist. He looked as happy as Larry.

“And you love Dick don’t you?” said Ruth.

“Yes of course. I love Dick more than anything in the world!”

“Then by the power vested in me by The Law Society, I pronounce you man and wife.”

“I don’t think you are really authorised to do that, Ruthie.”

“Come on Min, we need a *deus ex machina* pronto, and I am the closest to a god I can see just at the moment. Party time!” Max raised his bottle.

“Here’s to the happy couple. Thanks for coming... those few who have. And to absent friends: may they soon all be out on bail.” While no-one could claim the evening was going to plan, at least the drinks were on the house. A piss-up in a pub was comfortably within Max’s skill set. He called over to Afonso, “Got any Funkadelic?” Ruth grabbed his sweaty hand.

“Are you dancing, you great northern diver?”



PART II

SEVENTEEN

He would have taken the bus home but for the guilt. Unlike Ruth he shunned the bathroom scales but it was obvious that he was piling on the pounds again. He was about to turn off Clapham Road when he saw the Merriman & Golightly Mourning Center across the road. Funny he had never noticed it before. He stopped in his tracks when he saw a young woman push open the door and go in. He couldn't see her face but the jaunty, confident stride was painfully familiar. He advanced cautiously. Behind the Victorian curved glass were headstones and urns: some, grandiloquent, top-of-the-range, "Churrigueresque", one might dare to venture; others, entry-level, tawdry and equally ugly. Or was it the very presence of Death *per se* that so disgusted him? Behind the hardware were photographs of expressionless, corvine figures alongside glossy black limos and hearses. On the door was a sticker that encouraged customers to *Like us on Facebook*. With some trepidation he went in and took a couple of small steps. A buzzer sounded in the back room.

A young woman appeared in a black cashmere trouser suit, a low-cut white blouse, stiletto heels, gold-rimmed, round "John Lennon" shades and a chunky jet necklace. She held a silk top hat in one hand and an order of service in the other.

"Maxell! How very amazing that I see you again! So sorry, but I must to go to work immediately." She turned her head back in the direction from which she had come. "Willie! William! Come! See you soon, Max, eh? Mmmwah."

He was struggling for words when Broadbent shuffled in. He wore a long, black Teddy Boy jacket, a shirt with a winged collar, and a black bootlace tie. He only lacked the DA.

"Look who is here, William! Eh, I go now."

"Have a wonderful time, Valentina. *A bientôt!*" She smiled, popped on the topper and flounced out, pigtails jiggling.

"Ah-ha, it's the Scholar of Stockwell. How can we help you, Mister Bennet? *Pardonez-moi*, Doctor Bennet?" enquired Broadbent, invading his personal space. "Mother-in-law?" He raised a bushy eyebrow. "Wife?"

“Good heavens no, I just saw your sign and thought I’d... troll in.”

“Ha ha. Yes. As a name it is arguably tasteless; some are deeply offended by the Americanism of ‘Center’. But on the whole, it is an effective brand. Our new venture must have come as something of a surprise. The old place was shedding staff, *tu vois*, and then Remnant and I found these premises. It was all his idea; credit where it is due. We all have to move on, sooner or later. A logical progression from our previous line of work: *les pompes funebres* or, as one of our competitors likes to put it, ‘Final Solutions’. Found our *métier*, so all for the best.”

“When did all this happen?”

“Ooh... about three months ago. Madame joined the team a few weeks later – the Materazzi Gallery having closed... quite suddenly. Very popular with the gentlemen mourners, she is too. They seem to forget the solemn nature of the... *rendez-vous*, when they see her. Jolly good for business.”

“I dare say. And... Mister Remnant? Out on a job, I take it?”

“*Le pauvre* Dickie, ironically, became his own first client. So young, and so unexpectedly. Passed away from exhaustion, according to the quack. He’s now just a sleeping partner, so to speak. But Madame... remains. Took to it like a duck to water. Not a dead duck, like Dickie. Ha-gnah-gnah gnah-gnah!” Max had never heard Broadbent laugh before, if that’s what it was. He cackled like a courting stork clacking its bill. He seemed terribly happy in his work.

The summer holiday in Portugal had been, to their mutual surprise, a success. Ruth found the Lisbon *debâcle* a hoot, and she seemed to find Max more interesting – almost lovable. He issued commands to waiters in incomprehensible Portuguese and, miraculously, they did his bidding. So he still had his uses, after all. She flopped down beside him on the beach at Praia da Rocha to digest her sardines and sip more white wine. Even her delicate Celtic skin started to take on colour. Life was so simple when you didn’t have to worry about work. She wanted to be cuddled, cherished and looked after. But when she returned to Zaeger &

Evans in September things turned ugly. Ruth was like an engine that runs perfectly... as long as it's never turned off. The penny had finally dropped: her colleagues were giving her all the dirty jobs. She tossed and turned in bed, she was tired and tearful – then, just before Christmas, the doctor signed her off work. She went to stay with mummy in Ely for a few days. Even though it was nothing to do with him, Ruth's mother would blame Max. It was always his fault. He knew it was really about the absence of grandchildren.

After New Year she seemed a bit less frazzled. She was talking about returning to work, part-time at first, but had got used to having her around and required her presence for half the week. The manipulative old hag... Sometimes he was happy to be an orphan. Max wondered how long it would be before Ruth's bosses stopped paying her. They were terribly supportive at the beginning... but he knew what lawyers were like. Sooner enough she'd be out on her ear. And if she wasn't ready to get another job, then *he* might be called to action! They still had a sizeable mortgage, and she did like her holidays and life's wee luxuries. A return to work at his time of life would be a cruel blow. Anyway, what could he reasonably be expected to do?

The obvious answer was accountancy, but that was too grim even to contemplate. A rat-race, a hell-hole. Wild horses wouldn't drag him back. Oh no. He dug out his CV, last updated over a decade before. He had typed it using some primitive word-processing program, but fortunately he had kept a print-out. It was embarrassingly up to date. There were his A-Levels, his MA (Cantab.), his mercifully brief teaching experience in Hackney and a couple of proper jobs. But all the best bits were missing! For instance, there was his TV work: an appearance on *Mastermind* ("The History of Tranmere Rovers Football Club" – he'd come a creditable fourth); his translations for a Radio 3 programme on the poetry of Lope "El Fénix" de Vega, with particular reference to *Tomé de Burguillos* (no-one would remember that – if anyone was listening in the first place); a youthful 100-word review of Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* for *City Limits*, a long-defunct magazine. And he was justifiably proud of his interview with a then unknown but now highly successful Spanish novelist, way back in the '80s. Such a pity they'd lost touch; he could have been a duke or a

count by now. That would be one in the eye for Deirdre Featherstonhaugh O'Shaughnessy...

He went on to consider the pros and cons of self-employment. Definitely nothing that involved manual labour: not at his age and in his lamentable shape. Translator? Too rusty and too slow, so there wouldn't be much money in that. Anyway, London was awash with native speakers of every known language. So... what about giving English lessons? Alas, the Portuguese and Spanish-speaking communities had become so huge and self-supporting that no-one really needed to learn English. Writing then? Well, his soon-to-be-revised CV would show that he was, above all, a writer. Perhaps not a great art historian but a creative writer nonetheless. He was well aware that thousands of deluded people were convinced that they had a novel in them – and soon found out that they didn't. All the same, a few did make it over the wall. Start by writing about what you know – that's what everyone said – and choose an established genre. People know what they like and like what they know. An eschatological trilogy would be a little ambitious at this stage of his career. He could try his luck at a *Bildungsroman* – once he'd reminded himself of exactly what that was. No, he would have to go a bit downmarket. A whodunnit? (And whocares indeed?) The same know-it-all amateur detective solving case after case, book after bloody book? Monsieur Poirot gathering everyone together and explaining the inexplicable? *Non merci*. SF/fantasy? Technology, specious or not, was hardly his forte. Likewise wizards and elves and all that twaddle – he wasn't going to waste his talents on overgrown schoolboys suffering from arrested development. Tolkien had done it to death. Sexual fantasy had its merits, but surely people would rather watch on the internet than read about it? He knew he would. Horror? One Stephen King was enough – and, anyway, you only had to watch the 10 o'clock news if horror was your thing. Why not everyday life in south London: the picaresque adventures of the narrator? *The struggle to become what one is*. He's call it something teasingly obscure, like *The Bricklayer and the Halibut*. Well... he had to start somewhere; he could always rip it up if it were complete tosh.

Max closed his eyes and pictured himself on the stage at Oxford or Cheltenham, sharing his tips on becoming a first-time novelist. "I'm no

Dostoevsky, or Sterne, or Eça de Queirós (that would get them googling). I've been lucky. Very fortunate, I must admit. But you have to have *something...* to mark you out from the crowd." He would subtly refer to Part Two of *Don Quixote*, where the deluded old clown encounters people who already know who he is, because they've read about him in Part One. Most of his audience would be ladies of a certain age (with the nubile few and far between). They wouldn't have the foggiest what he was on about, but they would hang on his every word, scribbling away in their filthy old Filofaxes, then queue up politely while he signed a great pile of books. *Lucinda – good luck with the play! Max. To Jocasta, with all best wishes MB.* MB... Melvyn Bragg, bless his socks, was getting on a bit. Max tuned in occasionally to *In Our Time* and *Front Row*. Podcasts. He was confident he could handle all that cross-cultural waffle. (If all else failed, there was always the World Service.) He'd have to mug up on Natural Selection and the Crab Nebula and Pulp Fiction... Yes, he did harbour a guilty admiration for Capt. W.E. Johns. You couldn't help but cringe when reading about some dirty, treacherous, one-eyed half-caste... somewhat unfashionable, to say the least, but the Captain had written 200 books and made a good living from churning out variations on a theme...

Max sighed and poured himself an over-generous shot of Ragno Nero. Just needed a *soupçon* of imagination.

EIGHTEEN

“And so... I finally have you in the crosshairs, you feathered cow bitch superannuated birdbrain!” The Black Widow licked her lips as she raised and aimed her golden crossbow.

Ruth Hildegard Hortense looked down at the toy cars speeding along Norwood Road, far below. Was this really The Hawk’s final flight? Three decades of crime-fighting had taken their toll. Not even she could make time run backwards, and there could be no escape. She fluttered her wings like a baby sparrow. Her younger, more powerful opponent had her caged in.

Valentina Voluptua Violetta Ariadne The Widow, her voluptuous muscular bosom body jiggling encased in skin-tight rubber armour, took another step forward. Hortense saw the glint of triumph in her nemesis’s eye as she squeezed the trigger...

It still needed a bit of tweaking, to be fair. For instance it wasn’t 100% clear who was squeezing the trigger. But maybe that would be a good way to finish an episode. Ambiguous. More of a concern was that he could not draw to save his life – though he knew someone who could.

With Ruth away so much of the time, Max’s supply of leftovers was dwindling. He had taken to eating out three or four times a week: Beyoğlu for a lamb kofta or Franco’s when he had the hots for a greasy breakfast. Not that he couldn’t cook for himself, but he wanted a bit of company from time to time: preferably a pretty Spanish or Polish waitress with whom to exchange a cheeky smile and a witticism. O Castelo was his favourite Saturday lunchtime destination. Normally he would not have left the house on such a wet and dreary morning, but he would brave it today. He grabbed his anorak and bag from the peg in the hall and hit the street. A perfectly-timed bus came along and saved him from a soaking.

“Hi Max, how’s it going?”

“Can’t complain, Edi. How’re things with you? I’ll have the special. Start with some hot soup. *Faz frio embora.*” She smiled.

The menu of the day invariably kicked off with cabbage and potato soup, followed by overcooked pork or chicken. And always, always, chips and rice.

“And a large glass of house red. Er... could we possibly have a word when you have a free moment?” The dining room was staring to empty out as he tucked into a sickly-sweet *pudim*.

“Remember that graphics job you helped me with last year?”

“How could I forget?”

“Well, if you are still interested in earning a few bob, I have some more work for you. Might be right up your street. But of course it’s up to you.” He brandished a sheaf of A4. She scanned the first couple of pages.

“Wow! The Black Widow?”

“That’s right.” He smiled and folded his arms.

“And I’d like you to do a few drawings to go with it. Just a couple for now. Could you do that? There’s no great rush.”

“Of course I could! What an opportunity! How clever you are! Thank you, Max, thank you! I’ll dig out the Rotrings and make a start tonight. Love the old technology, you know.” He had not expected such an enthusiastic reaction.

“Fantastic... so shall I see you here next week?

“Yes please, come about half-past three.”

Max sat at his formica-topped table, nursing a large glass of house red, biding his time while the diners slowly filed out. All around was the echoing clatter of cutlery, tempered by the TV news in Portuguese. He seemed to be the only customer who wasn’t a short dark man in overalls. For the first time he noticed the faded tourist office pictures of Portuguese cultural gems on the walls: Tomar, Coimbra, Batalha, Lisbon... “What do you think? It’s just a first go.” She gingerly slid across a couple of inked-in drawings. In one, an exaggerated

hourglass figure in black bore down on a tiny, terrified redhead. The other was a close-up of a pair of narrowing blue eyes and snarling, slavering lips.

“As you’ll have noticed, I was thinking of Scarlett Johansson. It’s hard not to, of course.” Yes, he nodded, sometimes it was.

“These are just great.” The skintight black costume over an absurdly curvaceous body was precisely what he’d had in mind.

“One little thing though. I don’t suppose you could add a top hat? It’s a fundamental part of her costume really. Sorry if that wasn’t clear.” Edi looked down at her sketches, then up at Max.

“I don’t have her in a top hat.”

“Ah, but that’s how I see her.”

“Scarlett Johansson never wears a top hat.”

“You are almost certainly right... excuse me, Edi, but what’s that got to do with it?” She looked like she was about to lose her temper, then slowly drew air through the gap in her incisors.

“I mean, I know these characters evolve over time – look at Batman – but I’m sure Marvel must keep a tight rein on the brand. I assume you’ve got their permission to tinker?”

“What brand? The Black Widow is my idea... and what’s it got to do with Batman?”

“Batman’s DC of course, but the Black Widow is Marvel.”

“Is she? It? How? When?”

“You know... ‘Avengers Assemble’ and all that... You *do* know?”

“Now you mention it I think Diana Rigg *was* a widow. Mrs Peel I mean. Unforgettable in black leather. Or was it PVC? Tall lass but a bit boyish. Mind you she doesn’t look like that now. Miss Johansson would be a worthy successor. They can all do an English accent these days.” Edi groaned.

“Max. You don’t have a clue what I’m on about, do you? And you haven’t got a contract with Marvel Comics, have you? And I’m not going to get one either, am I?”

“I suppose ‘no’ is the short answer to your questions, Edi. You’ll have to enlighten me.” It could have been a conversation with Ruth, with him always on

the back foot – but at least Edi wasn't a lawyer. He was entirely innocent, as usual, but he still seemed to have done something wrong. Even illegal. He really should have done a bit of googling first, as he soon discovered. A schoolboy error. Just as well he hadn't spent more than a couple of days on it.

NINETEEN

Her key was in her handbag but she rang the bell anyway. She preferred him to drop whatever he was doing and come to the door.

“Hello love. Wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow. How are things?”

“Things, Min? You mean ?”

“Mummykins. Dear Deirdre. And you?”

“Oh she’s right as rain. Fit as a fiddle. Sound as a pound. Sharp as a tack.”

“Strong as an ox?”

“That too.”

“And you, Ruthie?”

“Weak from starvation. Is there anything edible in the house?”

“My celebrated vegetable soup and the greater part of a ciabatta. Or there’s a pizza margherita I could pimp up with a couple of chillies and a tin of anchovies.”

“Bo-ring... but I suppose it’ll have to do.” Really, she was her own worst enemy. He was trying to be nice. He turned on the oven and looked high and low for the pizza stone.

“Any post?”

“Just a letter from your work.” She slit it open, like an executioner. Pause. “They want me to pop in for a chat. Well I knew that anyway. Evans rang yesterday, which is why I came back tonight.”

“They’ll be desperate to have you back. Just make sure it’s not too much too soon, like the quack said.”

It had been nearly a week since he and Ruth had shared a bed. He only realised he’d lost his chronic wheeze when it returned in the early hours. Maybe he was allergic to whatever she dyed her hair with. Or to Ruth in particular; or to redheads in general. Or was it rather that she was allergic to him? Did she snore when he wasn’t there, and how would he know if she did? Were all snores, from

whomsoever they emanated and whatever they sounded like, part of a class of “snores”. Was there a quintessential snore? He tried to recall what little he used to know about Plato and Berkeley and Descartes, by which time he was wide awake. The days of lolling in bed till 10 were at an end. He pulled on his trackie bottoms, wrapped himself in his none-too-clean dressing gown, and lumbered downstairs. He could see through the kitchen window that it was another cold and miserable morning. Yes, the radiators really were on. He’d have to get the bloody central heating looked at. One thing after the other. While the kettle was boiling he sketched out his programme for the day.

He needed to go to the shops. Now Ruth was back he ought to do some cooking; she might not feel up to it herself. And he really ought to go for a trim. He wasn’t strictly obliged to patronise André’s — there were other groomeries (some, also claiming to be “artisans”) — but if he went elsewhere and the dirty foreign swine spotted him in the street he would have to explain why he hadn’t been for such a long time. He’d have to concoct a tale about being away from home or sick, which would soon become a tangled web of bollocks. Life was complicated enough as it was. So he would brace himself for André’s.

By the time Ruth had left the rain had turned to sleet. He’d have his haircut tomorrow. It wasn’t much of an excuse as he had to pop out to Sainsbury’s at some point, come what may, but once he had a reason to postpone André he felt better.

He was back home by noon. He had two servings of lentil soup and a ham ’n’ pickle sarnie, read the *TLS* for half an hour, put *Amália no Olympia* on the turntable and nodded off. After what seemed like five minutes the doorbell went.

She did not look happy.

“I was getting worried about you. I thought it was going to be a short meeting with Evans.”

“It was supposed to be. I’d hoped to spend a bit of time with the others since I’ve hardly seen anyone but you or the doctor since Christmas. But it was

just half an hour in his office, then he took me out for a sandwich. Like he didn't want me infecting his team."

"So what did he say?"

"It was all about giving me 'less demanding work'. In other words, less responsibility and less money."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No, it bloody well isn't! I wanted a fairer division of the work. It's not as if my brain has shrivelled since I had the temerity to take a holiday."

"Absolutely! I mean, absolutely not!"

"Anyway I told him I'd had it up to here with being exploited and patronised. He clearly wasn't going to apologise so I said they could stuff their job. Their effing job actually. Then I went for a wander round the BM, and then I went for a drink. And now I'm having another." She marched towards the fridge. Oh dear. He should have foreseen that she would end up having a row and storming out. Not that he could have done anything about it. He could hardly have tagged along to hold her hand. He didn't know what to say.

"I'll join you in a G&T... I got us *magret de canard* for dinner." She was looking through the wall rather than at him. She talked tough, but he thought he saw tears in those big green eyes.

TWENTY

He'd been over to Albemarle Street in September, unsure of whether he wanted to see Tina or not. Galleria Materazzi was definitively shut. There were unopened letters strewn across the floor, in plain sight of passers-by. The walls were bare. There were no other clues. When he'd returned just before Christmas it was an upmarket Sichuan restaurant. He'd heard nothing more from Materazzi (not that he was keen to discuss the rescheduling of his lecture) – and Uncle Pat's Christmas card was as laconic as ever. Last year seemed a long time ago.

But now he was having trouble getting that last image of Tina out of his head. How long had that “affair” lasted: a couple of months? Remnant had looked hale and hearty in August. He didn't know whether to envy or pity him... perhaps he'd gone out with a bang. Boom boom. And *madame* hardly looked downcast – *au contraire*, she looked fabulous. “Fancy sharing a bottle of wine with me now your boyfriend's dead?” He'd have to work on that. But would he even get the opportunity to see her again? He didn't know where she lived. He couldn't troll into Merriman & Golightly a second time and claim he was “just passing”. A bit of internet research indicated that M&G were active at West Norwood Cemetery, a place he'd had cause to visit the year before, for the usual reason. Tina must sometimes be on duty there, so maybe he could manufacture a chance encounter? After that, who could say? But he couldn't mooch around a boneyard day after day – not unless he wanted to become a Goth, which he did not. He decided to go on a recce.

A feeble ray of sunlight sliced through the clouds without relieving the dank and depressing atmosphere. Although he'd strolled along the paths a few times over the years he had never properly examined the tombs: there were rows of mawkish Victorian headstones to little children gone to a better place, pompous neo-classical vaults for the remains of well-to-do merchants and men of the cloth, and grandiose pyramids to long-and-justly forgotten comics and song-and-dance men. Who did these self-important buggers think they were? Napoleon Bloody Bonaparte?

The Friends of the Cemetery office was unattended but they'd put out leaflets for visitors to pick up. He took one and examined it. Maybe he could volunteer as a guide; he might eventually run into Tina. On the other hand it would be cold, wet and dark for months yet; and he'd have to associate with other Friends (who might well be deranged); and finally, even if he did see her, she might not have time to talk. That would be a lot of work for no return.

Furthermore, with Ruth's current employment all but terminated he might soon be expected to bring home the occasional rasher of bacon, and he wouldn't have time for voluntary work *and* gainful employment. He needed a job that paid a salary. He experienced a rare flash of inspiration: he would become a funeral celebrant. That would kill two birds with one stone, he said to himself, grinning at its appropriateness. He'd be sure to see Tina without making it look like he was trying, and get paid into the bargain.

Lots of people wanted a non-religious ceremony these days. No longer any need to be, or even pretend to be, a priest. Lucrative and maybe even satisfying, once you got the hang of it. But... he didn't actually know enough the first thing about it. He would call at M&G with a clear purpose. He wouldn't want to work for that weirdo Broadbent but he would have good contacts in the mourning industry. Naturally, Broadbent would be suspicious: "Why the sudden interest in this particular line of work?" Max would have to tread carefully to avoid giving the impression that he was stalking Tina. It was worth a try – although it would probably come to nothing. Obviously he wouldn't tell Ruth – although hardly on top form, she was ever-vigilant as far as he was concerned. Even casually mentioning that he was looking for part-time work would raise expectations – and wholly justified suspicions. Then he'd be hassled for daily progress reports – she might even find a job for him herself! He would have to nip that in the bud.

He left it for a week, then plucked up the courage to make a return visit to M&G. But he wanted to stake it out first. There was a greasy spoon right opposite, so he entered and took a window seat from where he could see what

was happening over the road. On this particular occasion he didn't want to run into Tina; it would definitely look like he was a stalker. But this surveillance malarkey wasn't as easy as it seemed. There was a limit to how long you could spend over a cup of coffee staring at a funeral director's door without drawing attention to yourself – especially when you were the sole customer. In the end he just went across the road and trotted out a story about how he'd been a bit bored, frankly, since he retired, and did Broadbent perchance have any tips on starting a business? Did he have any contacts he could talk to? He did not want to get into anything dodgy. He'd been asking around for a few weeks but no-one was much help. He was keen to widen his work experience, even at his age – anything considered. Being a funeral celebrant had struck him as being a satisfying rôle, helping people in their grief.

Broadbent was very helpful. It went surprisingly well.

“Enter!” Lt. Col. Graham Raper was about the same age as Max. He sported a wad of unruly snow-white hair over a lean and lined face and permanent whimsical grin. The blue blazer and green-checked Viyella shirt clashed violently with a pink silk tie and matching floppy handkerchief. It was so wrong that it worked. Behind him was an old school blackboard bearing the words Be Clear and Everything Else Will Follow in yellow chalk.

“Good morning Mister Raper, thank you for seeing me. I’m Maxwell Bennet.”

“Broadbent sent you along, eh? I’ve known him since we were cadets in the Mercian.”

“He said you might have some advice for someone looking to get back into work.”

“We *might* have a vacancy, an opening – if you really want to get your hands dirty... but I must say – and no offence intended – you are hardly in the first flush of youth. Not that we are ageist, sexist or anything like that. And you don’t necessarily want lovely young things prancing around at a funeral. Might

cheer you up; on the other hand, might make you feel even older and nearer to God yourself. Right, any questions?"

"Er... I was wondering if you could explain what it is you actually do?"

"Put simply, we give our clients whatever they want – as long as it's legal and doesn't frighten the horses. Actually, most are clearer about what they *don't* want than what they do. Some despise religious codswallop of any sort; others want to replace the traditional codswallop with their own brand of balderdash. You'll soon find out that nothing is sacred. Or the opposite, for that matter. Thrice a day I deliver a fictitious resumé of some poor chap's fascinating life, how handsome and clever and kind and talented he was, omitting to mention his failed marriages, pitiful career, criminal record etc. Then comes the music to accompany the keening. Could be 'Also Sprach Zarathustra', 'My Way' or 'When Father Papered the Parlour': nothing is off limits. Not a God-botherer yourself, are you?"

"Good God, no."

"After that comes the traditional piss-up. Slabs of pizza and chips to soak up the beer. We don't get involved in the catering side. But that's not good enough for some people. Just as folk are spending silly money on weddings these days, funeral obsequies are going the same way. The bereaved are usually open to our sensitive and expensive suggestions, and it's rather jolly to come up with something novel. We've built up quite a reputation for nocturnal pagan rites. Full moon comes extra! Got one coming up next week actually, so we'll need to recruit a few new chaps for that jaunt. Think you're up to it?"

"Well... I hadn't expected to do anything practical yet, not as such. Just fact-finding at this stage." It all sounded a bit more complicated than Max had imagined.

"You won't have to give a speech, if that's what's bothering you: a hundred quid a coffin plus a share of gratuities. Naturally one can go on to earn considerably more. Let's see how it suits you – and us. Pop next door and see the Don in the Porter's Office. He'll sign you up and give you the gen. And by the way, thanks for the CV. Most entertaining." Raper picked up the phone and said, "Raw recruit on his way over."

On the Porter's door was a well-polished brass plaque announcing *D. Iñigo de Frutos Ponce de León*. Not one but two genitives. It had clearly been transferred from a grander door and was roughly affixed with galvanised cross-head screws. Max knocked and entered; a thin and wrinkled septuagenarian in a pin-striped, double-breasted, three-piece suit looked up from his ledger. With his bulbous nose, thick, suspiciously jet-black, slicked-back hair and bushy white eyebrows, he resembled a Sherry magnate crossed with a praying mantis. Max was expecting a classic Spanish accent but Don Iñigo spoke the sort of English even the Queen had stopped using decades ago.

“*Buenos días Don Iñigo.*”

“Ah-ha, *usted habla* the old *español!*”

“Bit rusty these days, I’m afraid.”

“Practice makes *perfecto*. Come to join the team? I’ll just get the forms.”

Don Iñigo got up and went over to the corner of room and opened a drawer in a tall filing cabinet. Max’s eyes wandered to the wall on his right, on which was a series of four large black-and white photographs. Don Iñigo returned with a ream of forms.

“Looking at the pictures? What a day that was! The deceased was a distinguished scholar, and we were required to re-enact the myth of Actaeon and Diana. God knows why. Transforming Norwood into Mount Cithaeron took a bit of imagination, to say nothing of recruiting 50 chaps willing and fit enough to play a pack of hounds. We couldn’t actually have Actaeon torn to pieces – that would have been a bit much, even for south London! But we did come up a rather fine Diana – as you may have noticed.” He pointed to one of the photos. Max had indeed noticed. “All went tickety-boo in the end. Got into the *Sunday Express*. Our finest hour. I was all for devising a portfolio of Ovidian myths but the Colonel was dead against it. But of course he didn’t have the benefit of a Classical education. Pity.”

Five minutes later Max had signed on the line.

TWENTY-ONE

The silver bowl glinted in the moonlight as it passed anti-clockwise from one hooded figure to another. From yonder beneath the trees a baritone voice, accompanied by a flute and drum, was wailing.

*Help me in my search for knowledge, I must learn the secret art.
Who dares to help me raise the one whose very name near stills my heart?*

At last the chalice, full to the brim, reached Max. He drank as deeply as he dared, in a single draught. It was bitter-sweet, strong and delicious – like nothing he had tasted before. He sank to his knees in ecstasy. When he opened his eyes, tarantulas were crawling over his chest. Then over his head. More and more appeared. Finally one crept over his nose and into his mouth. Max stopped breathing. The hooded figure to his left turned its head towards him and stretched out its arms. He could make out two black holes where the eyes should have been. Its mouth was a weeping wound. Too late he saw the drooling fangs of the Grim Reaper bearing down on him. He cried out in terror: “Tina, for God’s sake!! Noooooo!!!”

He awoke with a snort. On the table stood a two-thirds empty bottle of Materazzi Ragno Nero. He rose to his feet, slowly and unsteadily. Time for bed.

Friday came around, and he knew he could put it off no longer...

“Max, my friend! Where you been so long? Five and zfree? You wanna trim ze beard?”

“Certainly. Keep it short.”

“*D'accord*. Orrible day but is the English spring! So, normal after all! What you zink about ze kebab ouse?”

“I don’t know. What about it, André?”

“Zay up to zomezing. I am telling you! People entering late at night but almost nobody is taking food away.”

“Hmmm.”

“Straight across the neck, *hein?*”

“Just the job.” André finished off with his razor and held up the mirror.

“Nice, eh Max? Just £11,” he whispered. Max gave him £11 and a stray euro. He went on his way humming the chorus from Steely Dan’s “Razor Boy”. He’d got it over with for another month or two. At least the dentist only meted out physical torture.

He calls in at St Ockwell’s for a cheeky half, chewed the fat with Basia the barmaid for an hour, then ambled cheerfully home. He could hear Ruth upstairs, packing.

“Off to your mother’s again?”

“I did promise to drop in on her but I’m going to stay with Felicity in Cambridge. She sounded a bit down-in-the-mouth on the phone. And spare us your unfunny witticisms!”

“She can’t help her name and depression is no laughing matter.” And how was the royal glamour-puss? He hadn’t see her since... the day he and Ruth got married. Even though she would now be on the wrong side of 50, he could only picture Fliss as a prim and proper bridesmaid. Dazzling smile, leggy, great figure. And the only brown face – apart from one of the waiters. His parents smiled at her every couple of minutes, a little more enthusiastically than necessary, to indicate how modern and open-minded they were. Fliss was used to it. She could have breezed through life with her money and connections, but she was better than that. Probably the cleverest girl he’d ever met. A lady of *un certain âge* now...

“And as well being an old friend – I have them too, you know – she specialises in employment law these days.”

“Righty-ho. Could be handy? Well... see you next week then.”

“I expect so. Unless I get a better offer.”

TWENTY-TWO

He sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a ginger nut, eyeing the cobwebs that the cleaners never quite managed to reach. He had to admit that their once tastefully decorated home was looking decidedly tatty. But 15 years on that was hardly surprising. He had decided to start on the spare room, long ago given over to accommodating her shoes, handbags and leather jackets, along with the unrepairable tape-recorders, warped guitars and almost-working cameras he could not bring himself to dispose of. His hand wasn't as steady as it used to be. The skirting board was going to be a challenge. But a little bit each day, and he'd eventually get there. He had the rollers, the brushes, the paint, the white spirit and the sandpaper. It was only the willpower that was lacking. But it was the warmest day of the year so far and he felt a little less torpid. He'd just finish his coffee and make a start while he was in the mood.

The doorbell rang. Max jumped as if he'd been stung by a wasp. Surely Ruth wasn't back so soon? He was ready to reel off a list of all the things he'd achieved.

“Jate-us?”

“Eh?”

“DO... YOU... ATE... US?”

“Is that you Ned? Er... come in, for God's sake. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Ta mate. Cordial welcome as ever. Brass monkeys out ere.” On the doorstep stood a tall, tanned and very hairy Northerner in an ancient parka and faded navy blue shorts, toting a large, filthy rucksack. He sported an unfashionable mullet. Although nearly Max's age, he looked annoyingly fit.

“Missus not in, is she?”

“Ruth's in Cambridge for a few days.”

“Probably just as well.”

“That was God knows how many years ago, Ned. She's most likely forgotten all about it.”

“Doubt it mate. Fancy a pint?”

“Bit early, isn’t it? Even for you.”

“Bus-lagged. Proper thirsty. Gaggin.”

“Can I just finish breakfast before we start on the ale?”

“Fair dos, I’ll ave a cuppa — drop o milk, no sugar. Surprised to find you here Maxy. Off sick?”

“I resigned my position some time ago owing to boredom and general malaise. And you?”

“Oho, they paid you off, did they? Lucky bugger! I shall reveal all — or nearly all — when we’re sittin comfortably.” He flopped down on the sofa before Max had a chance to slip a newspaper under his filthy arse.

“Last time we spoke you were a jobbing lecturer and you and Felicity were planning to tie the knot. As the cliché goes.”

“For reasons I can’t go into wi’out lawyer present, knot-tyin failed to appen. And if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. Even if it is broke. As for lecturin, very quickly got pissed off explainin Mandarin sentence particles to teenagers. So, igh-tailed it to Shanghai to teach English. Loved it — apart from certain local difficulties... After numerous air-raisin escapades, washed up in Cambodia or, as Frenchies so amusinly call it, Cambodge. Grand country, cheap booze, lovely folk wi inexhaustible cravin to acquire language o Shakespeare — if not necessarily wi Lancastrian accent. After a couple o years, opened Ye Olde Cambridge Academy of Business English at Siem Reap. Bloody coinin it mate. Rollin in it. Owever, major issue wi one o students, proper bobby-dazzler, niece o prez or summat. Ad to cut an run.”

“To...?”

“Kampot mate. Charmin if rottin colonial port. Ere comes Peter Lorre mincin round corner wi a slimy ‘we’ve been expectin you, Mr Kellie’. Popular wi backpackin fraternity. An Frenchie ex-pats. Bunch o twats. Set up me own pleasure palace: ‘Kellie’s Kampot Kantina’. Money for old rope mate. Owever, some folk seemed to think I were runnin front for Ku Klux Klan. Business thrivin but too many Yankee nutters for comfort. Ence urried name change to ‘Ned Kellie’s Billabong’. Now all we get are pissed-up Aussies.”

“And then?”

“Fit Italian lass strolls in. Straight out o college, dead posh, crackin pair o manchesters. Lookin for work, so I offer her bar job. As any bloke would even if there were no bloody job. Stayed for several interestin, if exhaustin, months.”

“Let’s have a drink after all.” Ned’s rambling tale was a trifle disconcerting; he was almost embarrassed to find he was thinking about Tina... but of course, the world was full of coincidences. “It’s gone 11.”

“Top man. Neat vod on rocks. Unless you’ve any proper grog like Jimador?”

“Bison vodka it’ll have to be. So when did all this happen?”

“Must be gettin on for... three years. Problem with *bella signorina* was, she would ardly do tap o work. Scarpers back to daddy while I carry on knockin out watered-down margaritas an cheesy nachos an jumbo steakwiches 16 hours a day. Novelty wore off, so back to dear ol Blighty. Currently poncin off mates. Shameful – if I ad any shame, which I don’t, as we both well know.”

“I can never tell how much of what you say is true, Ned.”

“Ow much truth can you be trusted wi, Max? Any road, nipped down to see our Fliss last week.” Ned produced a box of Sobranie Black Russians. “Mind if I smoke? Can pop outside?”

“It’s OK, I’ll open the windows later. As long as it’s just the one. Anyway, how was she?”

“Rear end’s gone an requires total rebuild. Baps dropped about a foot: two-ferrets-fightin-in-a-sack, like.”

“Ned, you pillock. I mean ‘how was she?’ – as in her state of mind.”

“I lied mate. African Queen’s gorgeous as ever. Bit miserable but I assume that were just effect o seein me.”

“That’s what Ruthie said. About Felicity being a bit low. Mind you, Ruth’s the same just now.”

“Would ave been funny if I’d run into Ruth when I were there. Fliss never mentioned she’d seen er. Women are always bloody moanin. Don’t take it personally mate. Can’t afford to.”

“So... were you thinking of stopping here... for a bit?” It seemed he was making himself at home.

“Just for a bit like. Need to find gainful employment – which means London in this alf-arsed country.”

“She’s not expected back till Monday so you might as well stay till then at any rate. Assuming we can clear enough space in the spare room. We can work on your hard-luck story over the weekend. And I might be able to get you some casual work. Just the odd day here and there. I’d have to make a phone call.”

“Top man. Good to see you! *Na zdrowie!* An fore I forget, name’s Fitzgerald. Doctor Fitzgerald. For a bit, any road. First name Vyvyan. Best not ask.”

“Did you say Vivian?”

“With two Y’s. Obviously.”

“2Ys UR, 2Ys UB.”

Ned eyed three sagging shelves of timeworn vinyl and began tugging at the battered sleeves. “Any o this lot mine? Not that I want em back, mind. Iron Butterfly... *Lecky Prunes...* Gong!... *In Search of Space...* Jeez, it gets worse... ubiquitous *Piper at Gates...* Genesis – Exodus for them, eh? – *Soft Machine 3...* Van Der Graaf bloody Generator. *Clear Spot...* OK, you can ang on to that. Is this your *Wishbone Ash* or mine? Phoe-nix, rye-aye-aye-ayes. Raise your ead to sky-aye-aye-aye-aye-aye-AYE!! Ow we used to lap it up, mate. An remember Beatles tribute band we started? Cockchafers. Christ on a bike, were we rubbish or what?”

“We weren’t that bad. It was a good laugh while it lasted.”

“Be honest: most o that ‘70s stuff’s crap – I’d rather ear Bessie Smith singin ‘Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out’ any old day. She knew what life were all about: bloody misery. Or Ramblin Sid Bechet. ‘Blues Me Naughtie Sweetie Gives to Me’: crackin name for an album – or a book, if you’re ever thinkin o writing one.” Kellie consulted his watch. “Right, laddie. Let’s pay your local a visit. You can tell us what you’ve been up to for last decade. Your shout, mate.”

Max had forgotten just what an irritating bugger Kellie was.

TWENTY-THREE

“Avellaneda?”

“Presente.”

“Bennet?”

“Yes.”

“Cadwaladr?”

“Here!”

“Fitzgerald?”

“Aye.”

“Islam?”

“Yessir.”

“Pigg?” Everyone but Raper looked around, to see a petite blonde woman raising her hand.

“Yes.”

“Söderlind?”

“That’s me.”

“Ladies and gentlemen: you are the magnificent seven for tonight’s show. Get to know each other and read your notes carefully. I shall be back in half an hour to test your understanding. In the meantime, see the Don and collect your costume. Don’t forget to pick up your horny helmets.” Söderlind rolled his eyes.

*We come from the land of the ice and snow,
From the midnight sun, where the hot springs flow*

Half a dozen hefty gentlemen heaved and hauled the ship to its final resting place, well away from the road and curious eyes. Lena Pigg, in the non-speaking role of *völv*, was spared the exertions. Robert Plant faded to zero as the Colonel raised his head to the sky, intoned something about Valhalla, lit the touchpaper

and retired. Two figures in high-visibility jackets stood at a respectful distance by the fire hydrant, hose in hands.

The cardboard effigy took the flame like a firefighter, quickly followed by the plywood boat. The deceased was already an urnful of ashes. The council would let you do almost anything these days but had to draw the line at open-air cremation. As the flames flickered in the breeze a murmur of approval broke out from the Great Heathen Army, the majority dressed as vikings or viqueens, with the occasional cowboy or female vicar. The inevitable *Ride of the Valkyries* blasted out. The heathens stepped tentatively forward to warm themselves at the bonfire. Kellie sidled over, rubbing his hands together.

“Odin’s knackers, that’s warmest I’ve felt since Cambodge. Is there booze after, and are we invited?”

“I believe so, if you can bear to stay in drag a little bit longer. You look the part anyway.”

“Right thug, like?”

“Basically.” A young woman in a black woollen overcoat and conical astrakhan hat and holding a clipboard strode briskly out of the gloom.

“Hey Max! I understand you are working here now. How you doing?” Max stepped forward to greet Tina with a hopeful peck. His plan was working! He didn’t hear Ned’s whisper.

“Evening Val love.”

How was he going to explain Ned’s presence to Ruth? Her first words would be “That yeti’s not staying here” – accompanied by an emphatic obscenity. As it transpired he didn’t need to. Ned got up early one morning and disappeared, leaving a singleton sock behind.

As he waited for the kettle to boil the phone rang, making him jump as it always did.

“Greetings Maxy lad. I’ve found a room somewhere so I won’t ave to bother you an Ruth.”

“Where’s that then?”

“Mount Street. Undred-an-summat. Don’t remember exactly ‘cos I’ve only been there once, in dark. But should do me fine. Toodle-pip.” Kellie hung up. The only Mount Street Max knew of was in Mayfair. His childhood hero, Major James Bigglesworth, resided there with his ol’ mucker the Hon. Algernon Lacey and that ever-youthful halfwit Ginger. Surely Ned couldn’t run to that?

His heart leaped again when he heard a key jiggling in the lock. He stopped humming “A Horse with No Name” and gently laid down his ukulele.

“Were you fiddling while burning the cakes or do we have to resort to yet another takeaway?”

“Good to have you back, my love. Everything OK?” She dropped her bag in the hall and hung up her duffle coat and scarf. It was hard to gauge what sort of mood she was in. Foul, probably. “Oh, you’ve got a package at the sorting office.”

“Perhaps you could take my passport as proof of identity and pick it up for me. I’d rather hang on to my driving licence.” He was tempted to reply, “You could always go yourself. Honestly! How lazy can you be?” But he thought better of it and started searching the fridge for viable ingredients.

She had gone off to some meeting somewhere. He was getting used to her vague explanations. He had better get to the sorting office before the idle buggers shut up shop for the day.

He had expected to join an interminable queue but soon there was just one grey-haired old biddy in front of him. Then he realised she was about his age. She was fumbling in her purse for something that the black man behind the counter would accept as identification. Max waited, arms folded. Satisfied at last, the black man behind the counter handed over a large box that seemed to be as light as a feather. The old biddy set about cramming it into her shopping trolley. It would not fit – so she started to rip it open, tearing off chunks of cardboard, like a frenzied shark. The black man, glassy-eyed, leant on his counter. Max took a big

step to his left, hoping she would acknowledge him, get the message and piss off out of the way. The black man examined his fingernails. After a couple of hours she extracted the contents: a second cardboard box about the size of a packet of spaghetti. The old biddy shuffled away. Max stepped over the debris and presented his “sorry we missed you” card.

“ID,” said the robot. Max handed him Ruth’s passport. It was returned to him, barely glanced at. Max put it back in his shoulder bag. The black man, having uttered his two syllables, handed over a bulky padded envelope which Max tucked under his arm. Job done, he headed back to the street. Not many customers. What was the betting it’d be closed down within the year? A cyclist mounted the pavement and brushed against him, rousing him from his reverie. It took a second before he realised his bag was gone. Luckily he still had the parcel. He shouted but no-one noticed, or cared. He strode home in a mounting panic, heart thumping and occasionally breaking into an ungainly canter. He cancelled his bank cards and ordered a new phone. When Ruth came back he handed over her package, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell her he’d lost her passport. He passed a sleepless night.

Three days later the phone rang, making him jump.

“Morning tubby, igh time we ad a chinwag. Assume you’re doin nowt important? Ow about luncheon, Friday at one? I’ll meet you outside Connaught. Know it? Don’t fret, I’ll pick up tab.” He half-expected Kellie to explain that he meant some boozer in Camden Town.

“The hotel? Of course I know it.” Not that he had ever been inside. Ruth had, of course, on work-related bunfights. There was no way lunch was going to come in at under a ton; knowing Ned’s appetite, it might be considerably more. Perhaps he’d better leave his wallet at home to ensure he didn’t end up paying after all... not that he had a wallet.

TWENTY-FOUR

“Sorry to bring you in at such short notice Bennet, but that is very much the nature of the game. A prestigious Merriman & Golightly commission. Frog who’s just croaked his last, ha ha; atheist and card-carrying Bolshie with it.”

“No problem, Colonel Raper. I’m usually free mid-week.”

“Smashing. Just pop in and see Don Iñigo to get measured for your togs. Then join me and the others at the portico for a briefing and kit inspection.”

Max knocked and entered.

“Mr Bennet, isn’t it? So glad you could make it in today. We need a few more chaps to join the guard of honour. We don’t actually have to sing the jolly old Marseillaise, but since you’re something of a linguist you should at least be able to mime it properly. Wonderful tune but rather beastly about the Austrians. We’re not expecting many guests but he must’ve had some well-heeled *amigos*. All paid for anonymously. Finally, if you’ll forgive me for mentioning it, the Colonel has asked us to avoid those excruciating puns: ‘cut tragically short,’ ‘had a few close shaves’ etc. Best get it out of your system now. One never knows who might show up.”

Ruth had phoned to say that she was still at her mother’s but would be back later tonight. Max decided not to mention that he was off to the Connaught for a slap-up lunch with Ned. He put on a suit and tie; a bit embarrassing to be refused entry. He took a detour so that he’d pass by André’s. The shop looked the same as ever, apart from the minor detail that one of the windows was boarded up. He could see two men inside, engaged in conversation. The sign said *Closed / Fermé*, but then it always did. Curiosity got the better of him and he rattled the door. A tall, bald man in a green anorak opened it.

“Good morning. And you would be...?”

“Just a customer. I was wondering what had happened.”

“To the hairdresser, you mean? Passed away, I’m afraid, and made a hell of a mess on his way out. We’re discussing a new tenancy now, so I shall have to ask you to leave so we can continue our negotiations.” The tall man consulted his watch.

“Of course – sorry to have disturbed you.”

“That’s OK. Bye.”

Not particularly friendly but that was London for you. Death by defenestration was an unusual way to go, deserving of a piece in the *South London Press*. Max stopped for a packet of mints before disappearing down the Tube. He was going to arrive very early but he wanted to pop into Fortnum’s, then reacquaint himself with Mount Street. He walked its length, then scanned an estate agent’s window: a modest apartment was available at six million quid. Across the road a tall, well-groomed man in a pin-striped, three-piece suit, holding a mobile phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other, was pacing up and down outside the Connaught. The man in the suit recognised Max and waved him over.

“Blimey Ned, you scrub up well.”

“Cheers Max. I’ve come into a few bob thanks to Auntie Vi. Worth sendin all them bloody Christmas cards. Besides which I’ve landed an actual job.”

“Doing what, if I may ask?”

“Absurdly lucrative work for Asian market. Look mate, grub in ere is decent enough but decor’s not to my taste. Shall we go to Alfie’s instead?” Alfie’s sounded more like Ned’s sort of establishment, but where would he find a cheap caff in Mayfair? They set off towards the Tube station but after a few minutes arrived at a large 18th-century house that bore the name of Alfred Dunhill. Ned strolled in like he owned the place, Max following faithfully behind. It was a boutique, stocked with artistically displayed shirts, jackets and ties. Price tags were nowhere in evidence. Three thin young men stood around smiling, apparently with no work to do.

“Café open is it?”

“Certainly it is sir.” A discreet staircase descended to the basement. Kellie led Max to a bijou restaurant.

“Good afternoon gentlemen. How lovely to see you again, Dr Fitzgerald.”

“You too Eva. Squeeze us in, I ope? Shame it’s not warm enough to sit outside. I fancied a Cohiba Robusto after lunch.” Kellie turned to Max. “I usually go for yellow fin niçoise. Spag bol’s OK. But I’m tempted by special, Salmon wi Ollandaise sauce. But you ave whatever you like.”

“That’ll do me, Ned.” They took their seats at a tiny table.

“We’re all goin for a... Salmon Ollandaise,” warbled Kellie, cheerfully. Eva and Carlos grinned from behind the bar.

“What’s going on Ned?”

“Fair enough matey, I owe you explanation. Some sort o explanation any road. Thing is, I know some powerful folk. Big shots. Some are sound blokes; others are plain bloody dangerous. That’s what appens when you duck an dive like me. Never a dull moment like. Only come back to Blighty when necessary, and only then for as long as it takes to get job done. This’s one o those occasions. Ad to lay low for a couple o days, so thought o you. Not that I didn’t want to see you anyway like.”

“At the risk of repeating myself, what the hell’s going on Ned? This is sounding a bit scary. Couldn’t you lay low in a hotel? As you don’t seem to be on your uppers.”

“Otels have CCTV mate. Tryin to stay off telly just for now. You know me Maxy lad. We went through the ell that is Cambridge together. Still bear scars. I’ll tell you what I can when you need to know. Sit back an enjoy yourself. I’ll get bill and you can buy me pint later. Some crackin pubs round ere.”

Was it in the King’s Arms or the Market Tavern or in the other place or the other other place where Ned turned to him and said, “Beware kiss o the Spiderwoman, Max”? And why did he grin when Max told him that some little git had nicked Ruth’s passport? What was so bloody funny about that?

Max had sobered up by the time Ruth came home. He had a glass of wine ready for her.

“Thanks Min. Now listen up, I’ve just had some news about Uncle Pat.”

“Good, bad or indifferent? Fell off his surf board?”

“As bad as it gets from his point of view. Drowned in the bath. They believe he had a massive stroke.”

“I’m so sorry, Ruthie. I suppose we can forget about that trip to Australia now.”

“Good grief Min.”

Blimey, but a lot of folk seemed to be shuffling off their coils these days. But life was full of coincidences, and they had nothing in common. Did they?

TWENTY-FIVE

Gina knocked lightly and entered his sitting-room. Taller and even more beautiful than he remembered, she was a bronze goddess with curly, shoulder-length hair and a haughty, youthful face. Though she was modestly dressed in a blouse and skirt, he was impressed by her hourglass figure. Somehow he managed to unbutton her blouse, revealing a blue-and-black striped football shirt underneath.

“Please stay, Gina. Come to bed with me now!” But she was unmoved by his entreaties.

“It is good to see you again Max, but I must go to work now. They are expecting me.” If Gina still felt anything for him, she did not show it. She turned to leave. He ran after her, too late. In despair he ran back to his rooms to find the door sealed off with a notice that said “Closed for security reasons. Report to the Office”. The College would fine him for leaving his door wide open. He’d have to go and pay up immediately, and he had a tutorial in 15 minutes. If he were even a minute late he’d be sent down.

There was a slow-moving queue in the Office and he glanced at his watch and started to sweat. Then he saw that he had picked up *Crime and Punishment* by mistake. He had left vol. 2 of the *Obras completas de Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra* in his room and he needed it for his tutorial! He looked at his watch again. A hippopotamus broke wind. Without daring to open his eyes, Max slowly regained consciousness. He lay for a few minutes, breathing deeply and noisily through his mouth. That was the last of the Ragno Nero, thank the Lord. From now on he’d stick to beer and/or wine. Or G&Ts. Ruth was still fast asleep.

He presented her with a slightly charred slice of buttered sourdough and a second cup of coffee. Neither of them had bothered to get dressed for work because neither of them was going to work. It was probably Tuesday, but he wouldn’t have put money on it.

“Any plans for the rest of the day, Min?” Was she was being sarcastic? It certainly felt like it.

“I should contact Nightingale’s about the central heating, or maybe have a go at balancing the radiators myself. There’s bound to be a video on YouTube.”

“Not got any little jobs on at West Norwood?” Had he left any clues lying about or was he still officially under surveillance? Broadbent, of course, might have passed that titbit on. Not that there seemed to be a compelling reason to keep it secret. He fiddled with his glasses and tried not to look surprised.

“Not this week, as it happens. Actually... I was about to tell you but I didn’t want to mislead you into thinking it was a big deal. Only done a couple of half days so far.”

“Got paid, did you?”

“A few hundred quid. It’s in the bank.”

“I trust you implicitly. Well done for getting off your arse anyway. I can see you in a Crematorium, one way or another. Every little helps, as they say. Felicity and I have also been busy. We’re probably going to take Evans and his cronies to the cleaners for constructive dismissal.” It was the first he’d heard that she’d been sacked or whatever.

“Oh right. When is that likely to happen?”

“In two or three weeks. I’ll be in Cambridge, off and on, preparing my case. So behave yourself. Speaking of which, when you next see your mate the Professional Northerner you can return his expertly washed and ironed Y-fronts.”

Amongst the morning’s junk mail was an old-fashioned flimsy air mail envelope with a Portuguese stamp. It could only be from one source. He slit it open, sat down at the kitchen table with his mug of tea and groaned out loud.

Salutations old boy !

I thought I would sent a wee note to say I shall soon see your beautifull city of London again. Hoary ! I arrive on April 13 deo volente.

Do you hear the latest news about Dottore Materazzi and his beneficent fondation? I have some secrets to tel. Also we must discuss your postponed lecture. I have faund an English lady scholar who is working on same lines ! I am certain we can find the cash to publish in Lisboa after all.

PD

Maria João tells me shes been doing more accidental forging for you. You are a very noughty boy !

A big hug from your friend and college

Até logo

Dâmaso

He could quite easily manage without seeing Dâmaso ever again. All he wanted was to be left alone. Perhaps if he closed his eyes it would all go away ... The following day he received another letter – he was single-handedly saving the sorting office from closure. It was headed *Centre for Early Modern Iberian Iconography, Department of Southern European Studies, Faculty of Culture, University of South Lincolnshire.*

Dear Dr Bennett (or may I call you Max?)

Please excuse my contacting you "de la nada" as it were. I got your address from our mutual friend in Lisbon. So last century with the snail mail but I did not have an email for you. Can I say straight off how incredibly excited I am by your research! So delighted that we will soon be working in tandem – thanks to the wonderful Damaso. So we have both

been beavering away in splendid isolation unaware of what the other has been doing! That's nothing new in our game of course. For an "amateur" (I realise this may sound awfully disrespectful but I just mean somebody not plugged into the university system) to have achieved so much so quickly is incredibly impressive. I am so in awe.

It is inspiring to know one is not ploughing a lonely furrow. I sometimes feared I was barking up the wrong tree. I am sure you can imagine what these places are like. Viciously competitive not to say "bitchy". (Am I allowed to use that word? Probably not.) A rat race doesn't bring out the best in anyone. Unless you're a rat of course. But I digress!

So when would it be possible for us to meet? I can come to London at your convenience but you are most welcome to visit Spalding. I can show you some wonderful churches. If you haven't already have seen them all that is! Shall we wait until Dâmaso is in London so the three of us can get together to plot the next steps of our voyage of discovery? With my Materazzi grant and a subvention from Dâmaso's people we should see it to press by the end of the year. If you are agreeable of course.

I won't burden you with my own modest discoveries until we meet but I so look forward to hearing your comments in due course.

Hope you are as excited as I am! Please excuse the dreadful scrawl.

Yours ever

(Dr) Lola Loveridge

Well, he had one fan at least: some dotty old bat who plied her trade in some academic backwater – a fen, in fact. He chuckled at his own wit before the gloom descended again. He had to reverse out of whatever it was that Dâmaso had got him into asap. He would write to the old bat and say it was all just an

elaborate charade. Pack of lies. Perhaps “novelisation” would sound better. Better still, wait for that clown Dâmaso to arrive so he could sort it out himself.

He couldn’t resist googling “Lola Loveridge”. There were just two. One was a spotty teenager from Des Moines. The other, judging by her mugshot, was not much older and drop-dead gorgeous. That was her, no question about it, on the University of South Lincolnshire website. She reminded him of someone. Perhaps an initial meeting – without Dâmaso – would be the best thing.

TWENTY-SIX

His train was just leaving Peterborough for Spalding when a text arrived from Edi.

Hi Max. Dads coming 2 London and wants 2 CU again. Party Sun @Castelo 1900hr. Will U come?
Bring Ruth if 3. MaJoão

He decided that, on balance, it would be better to accept. He would have to weigh up the pros and cons of inviting Ruthie. Dâmaso had taken a shine to her, and that might come in handy. But just now he was more preoccupied about what to say when he met Lola at the station. He read his undelivered lecture notes once more. It was pretty thin stuff.

“You must be Max?” She was as young and pretty as he’d hoped, if ever so slightly chubby. Her glossy brown hair rested on her lily-white shoulders. She was wearing a pair of yellow linen trousers and a sleeveless green-and-white blouse, with a long, green silk scarf. There was a tattoo of a cute little flower on her shoulder.

“Well spotted, Lola. Very kind of you to come and meet me.”

“Not at all. The car’s just over there. I thought we could have a pub lunch since it’s such a nice day. If you like, of course.” She wasn’t a bad driver. He relaxed and enjoyed the views of the tulips and cabbages.

“I wondered if you were Spanish and if Loveridge was your married name?”

“No, just an ordinary English girl I’m afraid. And I’m not married. Who’d have me anyway?” Max treated her to his neutral smile. “I was called Lola after my Spanish granny. Mum is technically a Dolores too. But known to all and sundry as Lottie.” Max swallowed hard. “We used to go to the Costa Brava every summer when I was a little girl. Used to get my Spanish all mixed up with Catalan until I started school. And now here I am, a junior research fellow.” She was quite a chatterbox. “And you Max: do you have a long-term partner?” Max was a little distracted.

“Technically... yes,” he said with a grin, trying not to give the impression that he was gay.

He returned from the bar with two more foaming pints. She certainly liked her beer.

“So that’s why I was so excited to hear that you and I were on the same track as it were. Look, here’s a paper that’s about to go up on the faculty website. It may even get printed one day! What a awful shame you couldn’t present your findings in Lisbon. You must have been *devastated*. If you wouldn’t mind sending me the text, that would be *wonderful*. Sort of mutually assured destruction! I promise to keep it confidential. Maybe I should hold off publishing my piece and we should co-author something. Whatever you think Max... Oh well, we never got round to visiting any churches, but it’s been super.”

“It certainly has, Lola. I really ought to get out more.” He smiled, being careful not to show her too much of his uneven teeth and receding gums. She smiled back. She had lovely brown eyes with long lashes and, as far as he could see, flawless skin. Just like her mother but without the pink specs. He coughed as he was taking a swig and nearly puked over the table. He stifled the choking before it turned into an embarrassing incident.

“You OK?”

“Yep. Not used to strong drink.”

“I bet! Well I hate to ask, but what train are you getting back to London?” Good question! He suddenly realised it was gone three and it might take him two hours to get home.

“Gosh, *tempus fugit*. I ought to hurry back to the station.” Not that he had anything to do except be home when – if – Ruth turned up.

“We’d better sup up and go then.” He prayed she would not crash the Micra or get pulled over by the rustic plod.

“*Até a próxima*, eh Max. Perhaps in London?”

“Why not?” Well, for one thing because there was a substantially greater risk of getting caught. He put his arm around her waist and gave her a naughty squeeze and a kiss on both cheeks, pulling her squashy, warm body to him. He noticed that the cute flower was actually a blue-black spider. They both reeked of hoppy ale. He got into a half-empty carriage, smiled and waved goodbye. He flopped down with an involuntary grunt and closed his eyes, the better to savour the warm glow. The combination of shepherd’s pie, beer and sunshine soon had him nodding and he nearly forgot to change at Peterborough. He didn’t have very long to wait for the King’s Cross train. Now he could lie back and snooze for an hour. Bugger the sudoku... Max silently mouthed the words to “Crazy Little Thing” but soon gave up trying to remember them.

He was roused by a loud and barely comprehensible reminder to take all his belongings with him. London hustled and bustled like there were no tomorrow. Max flexed his shoulder muscles then slalomed down the platform, dodging the fast-moving students and the dawdling Chinese tourists with their killer luggage. The usual saddos were seeking directions to Platform 9¾. Northbound trains were delayed and the entrance hall was packed. He headed for the Tube; it was just half past four, so he might make it home by five. As he passed Pret he happened to glance in and spot Broadbent and, with her back to him, Ruth. He could recognise Ruth from any angle. But neither of them noticed him because they were staring deep into each other’s eyes. Broadbent was nodding in agreement. Max stopped and wondered if he should go and join them. What would their innocent excuse be for meeting in a sandwich bar in King’s Cross? But then he realised he could offer no plausible explanation for being at King’s Cross either. Ruth could turn defence into attack in seconds. Better to nip straight back to Stockwell rather than risk being seen. He hurried on to the Victoria Line.

He was at home with a glass of wine by five-fifteen. No need to rustle up a supper because Ruth hadn’t informed him that she was coming back tonight. And indeed she might not. He/they could always have fish and chips as behoves a

Friday. He considered the unwelcome possibility that Ruth was enjoying a love tryst/dirty weekend with Wild Willie Broadbent. In York? Edinburgh? Probably not Stevenage, Newark or Peterborough. When he'd turned up at the house last year he and Ruth obviously already knew each other from somewhere. But surely she could do better for herself than that? Broadbent was no oil painting and a most unlikely ladies' man but all the same... Each to his own – or, as in this case, someone's else's. He took Lola's wad from his new canvas bag, glanced at his phone to see if Ruth had left a message, and saw that he had an email from Tina.

Hi Maxel. Some thing very bad happen to Babbo and Mamma. I ned to talk. Per favore amico ! TM

That girl had a brass neck. After blanking him for months, his assistance was urgently required. She'd bloody well have to wait. He trudged upstairs, put Lola's script in a battered brown envelope and secreted it in his sock drawer to study at his leisure.

By seven-thirty he'd given up on the telly. It seemed that the more channels they added the worse it got. There were only so many times you could watch *Foyle's War*. He wasn't hungry; some cheese and a few crackers would do. Half an hour later he opened a second bottle of Rioja and munched some more cheese and crackers. He put on his warped and scratched copy of *John Prine*, although just looking at the sleeve made him feel depressed.

*There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes,
and Jesus Christ died for nothin I suppose*

No wonder he hadn't played it for 25 years. Come to think of it, he'd only bought it on Kellie's suggestion. Ned's *modus operandi* was to recommend albums he thought Max ought to have, so he didn't have to fork out for them himself. Hence Van Der Graaf Generator and suchlike.

He was home alone while his wife was having an affair with some gruesome ex-copper who lived off cadavers. She hardly ever spoke to him since she'd left

her job. And he'd lost her passport for Christ's sake! All his friends were making megabucks or lived hundreds of miles away or were dead. He'd stupidly chased after some Italian flibbertigibbet, with the result that he was under surveillance by the Secret Service on suspicion of being a smuggler for the mafia — which he might well be, for all he knew. None of it was in the slightest respect good. Oh, and he'd decided to reinvent himself as a scholar of medieval art and would now have to put his name to a load of cobblers in a respected academic journal. The fact that a wide-eyed and deluded girl believed in it/him only made it more painful.

He knocked off the second bottle and went to lock the front door. It was only a quarter to ten but he might as well go to bed. He'd got halfway to the landing when the doorbell rang.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Hi Min, it’s me. Sorry I’m a bit late.” He opened the door.

“I was on my way up to bed.”

“Phone went flat. I see you’ve had a sherbet or three. Anything left?”

“Couple of beers in the fridge.”

“That’ll do. So... guess who I ran into when I was coming back from Mummy’s?”

“Do tell.”

“Broadbent the spook. Or used to be. Now a funeral director in Clapham Road. Which is truly weird. He said you’d been in a couple of times, which is even weirder.”

“Er... the first time was by chance. I noticed the shop, glanced in and there he was behind the counter. Afterwards I thought, well, maybe he’d have some part-time work for me. Driving, coffin-bearing, sort of thing. Don’t know why that occurred to me.”

“Can’t see you excelling in either of those roles myself, but anyway. Nothing to do with the fact that Miss Maserati, or whatever her name is, was also working there?” Aha, a trick question. With his back to the wall and pissed as a rat, his only option was to go on the offensive.

“And what if she is? The woman’s lost her job at the gallery. I didn’t realise she was chummy with Broadbent. It’s got bugger all to do with me. She has to live by her wits now.”

“Don’t you mean her tits?” Max decided to ignore it and press on.

“Look. I’ve seen her for all of.. ooh, 30 seconds since August. Put a detective on me for all I bloody care. And what precisely are *you* up to? Meeting Broadbent at King’s Cross by accident. Course it bloody was.” She sighed.

“It *was* at King’s Cross actually. Well guessed. Well, it must be past your bedtime.”

“That’s where I was bloody well going when you finally showed up!”

“Off with you then. I’ve got my notes to write up.”

Max was asleep within a couple of minutes. When he eventually surfaced, he saw that Ruth had brought him a cup of tea. He must have slept for nearly 10 hours.

“Look Min, I’m off out in a couple of minutes. See you tonight, when you will – I hope – be in a more sociable mood, and we can start planning a holiday. I should have a little windfall soon.”

“Sorry I lost it last night. I’ve been a bit tense, spending all these evenings in on my own.”

“You poor old soul. Not to say pissed out of your head. Alright then, see you later. Behave.”

Max dozed for another hour or so then got up. Tina’s email was still awaiting a response but she could just wait a bit longer. He had a massive hangover and could barely see the screen without his glasses.

While the toast was burning he heard the plop of post on the doormat. On a pile of flyers advertising yet more pizzas and curries lay a small manila envelope hand-addressed to him. There was something bendy inside, like thick card. Not having the energy to find the letter-knife he tore it open with his thumb and forefinger. Inside was Ruth’s passport – with no accompanying note. He examined it carefully to be sure it there were no missing pages or other indications of damage. He turned it sideways and shook it – still no accompanying note. It looked fine. He put it back in a drawer with his own. It made no sense. Even if the thief hadn’t wanted a passport, why go to the bother of returning it? And why address it to him and not Ruth? Of course; she had written in his name and address as an emergency contact. That must be it. All the same it made no sense. But he was relieved – particularly with this new talk of holidays. He’d got away with something at long last. Perhaps his luck was turning.

He celebrated with half a pork pie and a can of Fursty Ferret, which made him feel considerably better. He’d just put his feet up when the phone went.

“Max lad. It’s me, obviously.”

“Hello Ned.”

“How do? Get owt interestin through letterbox today?”

“I did actually.”

“Grand. See you soon.”

“Why did you..? Ned had hung up.

He'd straightened himself out by the time Ruth returned with a pizza and a salad in a plastic bowl.

“Fancy a trip to Picturehouse Central this evening?”

“You mean going out together to the same place at the same time? I wouldn't mind but what's showing?”

“Don't worry, it's not Bridget Jones; London Festival of Palestinian Cinema.”

“Oh God no. Apart from anything else there's bound to be a demo. And a counter-demo. Possibly even a counter-counter-demo. So the Old Bill will be out in force. And then it'll be cancelled, mark my words.”

“Why are you always so negative, Min?”

“I'm not, I'm just telling you what's going to happen.”

But he was right, as even Ruth had to admit. There were two shouty middle-class demos and Shaftesbury Avenue was swarming with police. Apparently a few people had got into the foyer and caused a rumpus.

“OK I admit it, you were right. On this one occasion.” She almost smiled. “Let's go for a drink and talk about holidays.” They decided to make a virtue of necessity and made their way to a budget-busting bar in St James's.

He quite fancied Italy, insofar as he fancied going anywhere. He would have been just as happy to stay in Duke's bar. All that hanging about in airports and trying to remember where your wallet and plane tickets were, not to mention your wife's passport, made him more nervous with each passing year. But Ruth wanted to go back to Portugal.

“Boring, I know, going back to the same place, but maybe we can find a quiet little beach or somewhere in the mountains. Perhaps rent a villa.”

“Why not ask your devoted admirer Dâmaso? Actually I was about to tell you: he's coming over to London and we've been invited to a do in his honour. I mean at the Castelo not the Portuguese Embassy. Tomorrow evening in fact.”

“Thanks for the short notice. But yes, I think my packed diary might just accommodate it. *Otra margarita, mi amor?*” My goodness, but she was in a sunny mood.

They took the Tube back from Charing Cross. Ruth was staring at her phone so to pass the time Max picked up a grubby copy of *The Guardian* from the next seat. The story was on page 5.

Millionaire Art Dealers Lost at Sea

Italian multi-millionaire Masimilliano Matterazi, 57, and his wife Dr Lorelie Marie Fartwangler 50, were yesterday reported as missing, presumed drowned. The couple had been sailing their Luerssen superyacht, Principessa Valentina III, around Cape Formentor in Mallorca. A crew member raised the alarm when they failed to appear for breakfast. Materazzi, a self-made man raised in a slum quarter of Milan, was a noted benefactor and patron of the arts. He was reported to be in financial difficulties, although his daughter, Valentina, 26, denied this today from her London home. The Materazzi art gallery in Mayfair closed last year, although the company’s branches in Switzerland and Morocco remain open.

There was a picture of the millionaire couple relaxing on their gigantic yacht, and a blurry one of Tina, surreptitiously snapped outside a hotel.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Now he really had to call Tina. He practised a couple of excuses, which even he found far from convincing, before deciding that an email would be easier all round. Should he mention the newspaper report? If it was in the *Evening Standard* it was bound to be elsewhere too, so it would be silly to pretend that he didn't know. Just to be sure, he checked the BBC website. It was there, almost word for word, but with fewer typos. He'd no idea that Materazzi was such a big cheese.

Dear Tina, I've just seen your email. For some strange reason it went into my spam. Oh dear, I now know the terrible news from Mallorca. I am so sorry. Is there any chance they will be found?
Yours ever Max x

A bit weak, but the best he could come up with. Five minutes later he had a reply.

Dear Max. I really apprecciat this. It is very bad but I think is possible peoples can return to living after death. Has happened before. I pray to the Virgin. Your fiend ever Valentina

He had an ugly thought. Were the Materazzis so important that their disappearance merited this level of coverage – or were they keen for everyone to know that... maybe that was taking fake news theory a bit far.

Max and Ruth arrived at O Castelo at twenty to eight. Despite the invitation being for 7 pm, it was obvious that they were far from ready. Edi and Manoel were putting up streamers and balloons as if it were a three-year-old's birthday party. Waiters were laying starched white cloths on the formica tables. Guests were starting to show up. Some he recognised as regulars. He thought he spotted

the doddery old pair from the *vernissage* in the far corner, but he couldn't be sure. And one of Raper's little helpers from the Cemetery: "Avellano" or something like that. But South London was a small world. He went to the bar to order a couple of glasses of wine, to be told it was all on the house and to help himself from a side table. He turned round just in time to see Régis come through the door and wink in his direction as he greeted the doddery old couple. But before Max could make up his mind whether or not to introduce himself to them, Lola appeared from the Ladies. She was wearing a burgundy leather jacket over a short black dress that looked just a bit tight for comfort. She headed straight for Max and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hi Max, how nice to see you again! I was hoping you'd be here." Ruth was standing 10 feet away, looking in the opposite direction. Dâmaso had arrived, sporting a purple velvet jacket and salmon pink cravat – arm in arm with a soberly attired Tina.

"Great to see you too Lola. I'll introduce you to my wife when I get a chance." Best come clean now before any damage was done. To his disappointment Lola took it in her stride, smiled and made for the centre of the room where Dâmaso was now holding court, as well as both Ruth's hands. Max followed.

"My dear Ruth! What an exquisite pleasure to see your fair visage once more, in the incomparable city of Londinium. Really it has been *too* long. And Max as well, naturally. Have you been served a drinkie-poo? Jolly good. Now let me introduce you to everyone. Dona Valentina you know, *bien sûr*. You may have heard that her dear parents are missing but I feel sure they are both safe and sound. He moves in mysterious ways." He tapped the side of his nose. Tina looked away. "Now then, some of these wonderful people I am sure you will remember from Lisboa; my only daughter Maria João, aka Edi, and her *fiancé* Manoel the Extremely Bloody Fortunate! Ha ha ha! This handsome young chap is Carlos, who works at the distinguished House of Dunhill, don't you know; this lady is my dear friend Lia who studied art with me many, many years ago..." Dâmaso was on top of his blathering game and was obviously going to take hours over a few simple introductions. Max allowed his wine glass to be replenished. He was starving.

“You are not the only English folk here tonight, believe it or not. This clever young woman is a Luso-Hispanist of some distinction. Her name is *Lola*, *L-O-L-A Lola, lo lo lo lo Lola!* Believe me, her talents are only eclipsed by her charms. Or should it be the other way round?” He giggled as he put a protective arm around her shoulder. “Of course Max and Lola already know each other.” *Button it for pity’s sake, Dâmaso...* Max turned to Ruth.

“Dâmaso kindly told Dr Loveridge about my research and it turns out she’s working on a related subject. But she’s a proper academic, not a rank amateur like me.” He hoped he could somehow dispel the idea that they might already have met without Ruth’s knowledge. He hoped that Lola would get the message and not put her foot in it.

“Max and I may end up working together. I hope so anyway. He’s quite a star.”

“Who knows? Stranger things have happened.” He was desperate to change the subject – fortunately, an opportunity presented itself. “Excuse me, isn’t that the police? Has there been an accident or something?” Everyone turned towards the door. The policeman was followed by at least half a dozen more.

TWENTY-NINE

“Nobody move! Everyone put their hands up! *¡Arriba los manos!*” The silver-maned woman turned to Max. He restrained himself from correcting her Spanish. “Are you in charge of this establishment, sir?”

“Certainly not. I’m just a guest of this gentleman.” Max nodded to Dâmaso.

“So you are in charge, sir, is that correct?”

“Indeed I am not. I’m here on the invitation of my daughter.” Dâmaso looked at Edi.

“Are you in charge, miss?”

“Not as such, officer.”

“Detective Chief Inspector Britannia Hyde. Is anyone actually in charge here? Is there such a thing as a manager? At all?” Max’s arms were beginning to ache.

“I’m looking after tonight’s reunion,” said a tubby, swarthy, middle-aged man with exceptionally hairy arms, in a white shirt and black trousers, whom no-one seemed to have noticed before.

“Thank you, sir. Is there a private office we can use? We will need to question everybody here – yourself included.”

“Er yes, over there. Can you tell us what this is about?”

“Frankly, no. And yes, I do have a search warrant.” The police were starting to frisk the guests, none too gently. Régis was led away in handcuffs, while Dâmaso was the first to go for his interview. Max noticed that the doddery old couple seemed to have disappeared. Someone slapped him painfully on the back. He swivelled round to see Kellie in a leather biker jacket and jeans. Following him were Broadbent in a beige raincoat and trilby and the ghost of Remnant in his trademark grey suit.

“I don’t think we really need to interrogate Max – fun though that would be!” Kellie sauntered towards the manager’s office.

“Well, that’s pretty much done and dusted. It was tremendous fun being a funeral director, *mais c’est la vie.*” Broadbent sighed and helped himself to a second glass of wine and a croquette. “Shame to let all this go to waste.”

“What exactly is ‘done and dusted’?”

“Quite a complicated *dénouement*, as it turned out. Bit of a brain-teaser.”

“Have all these people been arrested?”

“*Oui et non* — some are working for our lot. Some for the Black Spider. Can’t tell you exactly who’s who, for reasons that I can’t exactly explain to you. But perhaps you could exercise your little grey cells and work it out for yourself. No? Your starter for 10: what does a corpse no longer need?”

“Well... that could be almost anything.”

“True enough. So here’s a clue: something you acquire through a strict legal process. With witnesses to sign for you. Something you take with you and guard carefully when travelling.”

“Your wife?”

“An answer that does you much credit... Ha-gnah. *Mais non.* I see I shall have to give you another hint: a document you should check you have with you before leaving for the airport.”

“Tickets? No, passport!”

“Bravo, Mr Bennet. The buying and selling of passports is big business nowadays, as you are doubtless aware. Likewise the cloning and forging of passports. Know any forgers, do you?”

“Of course not!”

“Not even from Lisbon? Nudge, nudge.”

“You mean Fonseca? I thought he just copied drawings and stuff. That’s what he said, though I thought he might have been joking.”

“Probably not brimming with *bonhomie* right now, Mr Bennet, unless he’s enjoying his chinwag with Remnant. It was rather tough on Dickie, having to go literally underground. *Quelle horreur!* Rather an awkward choice of *fiancée*, in my humble opinion. But all in the line of duty.”

“Having just seen him, can I assume he’s not dead after all?”

“*Exacte*. The once and future Dick... Do you realise how lucky you are, living in dear old Blighty? Don’t know you’re born. A winner in life’s lottery. Millions dream of coming here – from Africa, *par example*. *Sans-papiers* who don’t have the money or connections. Some of them are desperate enough to do very dodgy jobs to to acquire a British passport. I can understand it. That’s why we had to borrow Ruth’s: to see who wanted it, how much they paid for it, where it went to next. Of course it wasn’t actually hers that got stolen; that was a fake we could track electronically. Ruth handed over the original to us for safekeeping months ago. But we couldn’t let you go on for ever believing you’d lost it, so in our infinite mercy we sent it back. Are you still with me?”

“Possibly... well, probably not. Actually, no.”

“Anyway, back to the *sans-papiers*... ‘you don’t get nuffink for nuffink’, as you Londoners say. Passports, cash, hashish or heroin: it all has to be moved around from country to country by mules – folk who don’t understand what’s afoot. Useful idiots, as it were. No offence intended. Yes, there’s nearly always a drugs angle. That’s why we had to beg to get Commander Fitzgerald, erm Kellie, over from Cambodia *tout de suite*. Very much his area of expertise.”

“What? Ned?”

“Your old chum is a convincing liar, isn’t he? *Agent provocateur* would be a kinder way of putting it!”

“Are you telling me David Kellie is a British agent?”

“Let’s just say he is a senior Naval officer. His cover’s blown now, so there’s no point in being coy with you.” Broadbent lowered his voice. “I see DCI Hyde is enjoying a *tête-à-tête* with Ruth. *Entre nous*, your better half is a remarkable lady, Mr Bennet, managing to keep you in the dark for so long. For your own good, of course. And for the same reason we couldn’t tell her everything we knew either.”

“I thought she’d been... let go. She was really upset about it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t enlighten you about her previous situation but we had to lean rather hard on Evans to borrow her on sabbatical. Be assured that our lot has been most impressed – amazing brain she has, to be sure. In line for a senior position... if she’s interested, of course.”

“Can I sit down and have a think?”

“*Bien sûr.* Good luck.”

“Look Broadbent, I’ve been thinking about all these deaths. All these people that I just happen to know popping off at the same time.”

“*Par exemple?*”

“Well, my barber for one.”

“Hmm. That was unfortunate. Defenestration is not a classy way to end your days, and we did get some valuable information from Monsieur Petit. *D'autre part*, he was getting a touch boring... we did give him a fine send-off, as you’ll recall.”

“And what about Ruth’s uncle Pat in Australia?”

“Drowning in his bath is a nice way for a money launderer to go, *n'est-ce pas?*”

“Are you telling me you had him done away with?”

“Mister Bennet – *s'il vous plaît!* Her Majesty’s Government just doesn’t do that sort of thing. Only in the world of TV espionage. Professor O’Shaughnessy was getting on. We are none of us immortal. *Hélas.*”

“So what’s going to happen to Tina now?”

“Valentina Artemisia Lorelei Materazzi hasn’t done much wrong. Well, not criminal, as far as we know. More of an *ingénue* than a *femme fatale* I would say. And the mother – if we can find her – might get off too. The Americans call it ‘plea bargaining’. But we need to find Dr Materazzi – dead or alive – to be sure we’ve cut off the head of the snake – or spider in this case, although the metaphor doesn’t have the same impact. If he is the head of the spider, of course, which he might well not be. Only time will tell.” Broadbent inclined his head cutely to one side.

“So you don’t think he’s dead then?”

“We have reason to believe he’s not.”

“I won’t bother asking how, because you’re not going to say.”

“I see you are getting the hang of it. Ha-gnah!”

“Surely young Lola isn’t involved? Are you arresting her too?”

“Ah yes, I believe you know Dr Loveridge’s parents?”

“Not exactly – I used to be friends with her mother when we were both kids. But that’s all. Anyway, how the hell do you know that?”

“Oh please! Do you really think there is such a thing as a secret these days?”

“Want to know what I think? I can’t take you lot seriously. *Willie Broadbent, Dick Remnant... Tania Hyde*, for pity’s sake!”

“You surely don’t think we started out in life with comedy monickers do you, Mr Bennet? Any more than John le Carré’s name is really John le Carré? ‘Mr Square’ indeed! No, a ludic *nom de guerre* is one of the perks of the job. By the way, you’ve missed one – but I’ll leave you to work that out.”

“So.. what about me? Am I free to go?”

“You have been *un peu méchant*, Bennet, but we’re going to let you off with a slapped wrist. You can return to being an inconsequential nobody with our blessing. *Santé!*”

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