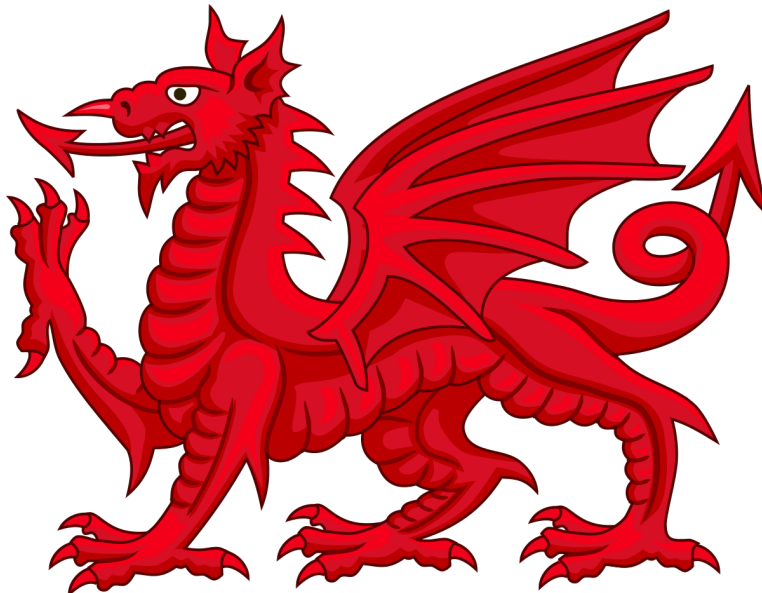


THE SCHOLAR

&



THE RED DRAGON

COLIN WIGHT

ONE

FA Cup third round it were. Or second round replay. No it were third. We was supposed to be playing shrews(?) in the league but it were postponed because of the cup like. So it were a replay under floodlights. Pissing down brilliant. We was drawn against effing spirites(?). We'd played bastards in the league and drawn nil nil. Fat Scotch bastard broke chalky's leg and it were still in plaster. Funny his name were chalky I mean he were called chalky before that cause he were black like. Black as the ace of spades. Good bloke mind you sound. I went right you fat jock I'm going to do you first bloody chance I get. In them days referees wasn't too bothered like. Just let us get on with it like. About 10 minutes in he nicks the ball and charges forward like he's Emlin(?) effing Hughes so I thought time I introduced meself you Scotch bastard. A dig in the ribs to let him know I'm there like and he goes down like a bag of spuds. I accidentally on purpose like stamp on his wedding tackle and he's squealing like a girl. After game me and him had a few bebies(?) mind you and a right good laugh no hard feelings like. A right hard bastard but a sound bloke once you got to know him. Johnson or Johnstone he were from Motherwell. Any road I got sent off and we lost 2-1 or 3-2 or summat like that.

Dai Fellmonger was no silver-tongued raconteur. Max scratched at his nose as he re-read, *sotto voce*, the transcription, vaguely reminiscent of *Finnegans Wake*, trying to impersonate a superannuated North Walian footballer with a Yorkshire accent and a smoker's cough. Whoever had typed it (presumably Lola?) was ill acquainted with the beautiful game in the 1970s. However the gist was clear enough; David Trevor Fellmonger, Welsh international (caps: 3, goals: 0, red cards: 2), didn't have a great deal to say for himself. He had only ever been an average player; he couldn't remember much about the games he'd played in; and he was foul-mouthed and inarticulate to boot. To boot, indeed. Once Max had redacted the obscenities and racist and sexist asides there would be next to nothing left. He'd not expected to get Ian Rush's or Ryan Giggs's memoirs to work

with but this was absolute dross. No matter how much turd-polishing he did, surely no-one was going to shell out hard-earned cash money to read this? It was so depressing, a waste of his time and abilities... but a job was a job was a job. And of course he was being paid, albeit a pittance. Hopefully – very, very hopefully – it would lead to better things. One day.

He scrutinised Fellmonger's CV: Wrexham (his home town), Chester, Tranmere Rovers, Derby County, Doncaster Rovers, Scunthorpe United, Chester (lovelier the second time around), Airdrieonians, Queen of the South and, almost inevitably, Conwy United. A journeyman dinosaur, a midfield enforcer from a time when those with extravagant skills, like being able to slalom through an opposition defence or pass the ball with any accuracy more than 10 yards, were viewed with awe and not a little suspicion. The trajectory of his career told its own tale: one season in and out of a half-decent Derby side led to him being capped – in three friendlies. It was pretty thin stuff from a sporting perspective. Perhaps his extracurricular activities would turn up a nugget or two. He had once had a reputation in the Welsh tabloids as a ladies' man. Great Orme Publishers' working title was "Dai Hard" but Max called him "40 Watt Dave"... none too bright. Not to his face though. He'd never even met him, and didn't particularly wish to.

"Bye, Max!"

"*La redevere. Revedere. Multumesc mult!*" He heard the door shut with a click, then the rustling and clattering as Rodica picked up two bulky black bags and dumped them in the bins. Almost certainly the wrong bins. She had yet to master Lambeth's recondite recycling requirements; he'd better check when he'd finished his Lemsip. The kitchen floor was still wet as he tiptoed through from the conservatory. He grabbed the mop to erase his footprints.

He could picture Rodica turning to her husband, as she cooked a stodgy if nutritious dinner, "Nicu, the English are very rich but they live like pigs. *Like pigs!*" She had definitely mentioned a man, though his name might not have been Nicolae. Maybe it was Alex. Or Radu. When he was a bit more proficient he would ask her in Romanian about her family. Did she have brothers and sisters? What part of the country did she come from? How long had she been in London?

Although that would make him sound like a Securitate interrogator – not really the impression he wanted to make. But of course her Romania was not the one he remembered from that Interrail trip he'd made with Ruthie when they were students. Things had moved on.

Romanian was even harder than Portuguese and being old and knackered didn't help. Why did they need to hang onto the genitive when all the other Latins had dumped that nonsense? It was twisting his melon, man. He'd listened to modules 1, 2 and 3 half a dozen times and some of it was beginning to stick; but not a lot. When he tried it out on Rodica she struggled to grasp what he was on about – even when it was just “Would you like a coffee?” (*O cafea*, fem.) When he called her *domnișoară* she giggled. And on those rare occasions when she responded in kind, he couldn't understand a word; it was a jumble of diphthongs and consonants – nothing like that posh bird on the CD. “*Mai rar, vă rog!*” had become his catchphrase. Maybe she spoke some regional dialect, or even Hungarian; but more likely his Romanian was so painful to her ears that she was trying to dissuade him from persevering. But practice makes perfect, as his Portuguese tutor used to say, grinning.

She was the best cleaner they'd had in a long while – since the last Romanian lass, the one who'd gone to live in Seville despite the world-class attractions of Stockwell. But Rodica was much prettier: a honey blonde with a cheeky grin and long, slim legs. Still in her 20s? It was hard to tell. And she was not afraid of hard work! He pictured her poky little flat: spotlessly clean and neat, even with all those family photos and folksy knick-knacks to dust. Lucky old Nicolae or whatisname would never have to cook his own dinner – apart from the odd BBQ when he and his mates got a day off from building garden studios and loft rooms in Herne Hill.

He left the sludgy last half-inch of his Lemsip, where all the alleged goodness lay. The rain was still hammering down so he abandoned the idea of venturing outside to check the bins. Instead, he wheezed his way up two flights of stairs to admire and fondle the crisp, pristine white bedding. He gathered up the used sheets and pillowcases and nearly tripped on his way back down. He wasn't a well man.

He over-filled the washing machine, pressed the big, blue, idiot button, and repaired to the conservatory, flopping, *Guardian* in hand, into an armchair with its expertly plumped cushions. Two minutes later he put down the *Guardian*, got up and put on *Surrealistic Pillow* – as it was sitting conveniently on top of the CD player. “The ones that mother gives you don’t do anything at all”... it might have been written about Lemsip. Grace Slick was a proper singer – unlike today’s *idols* who made fortunes from shouting over other people’s songs. He didn’t get it, and he never, ever would... He awoke with an unattractive snort. Grace disappeared, leaving him staring at a bleak, rain-lashed garden, their expensively-laid Yorkstone terrace now camouflaged green and brown... it was cold and dark and it would stay that way, month after miserable month. The bloody cat wanted to come in but he thought he’d let it suffer a bit longer. He was in that sort of a mood.

Ruth’s new job kept her away for days at a time and who could tell when she’d deign to show up. Not that he had the energy to get up to anything naughty – not with that unshiftable cold and his own new job. It had crossed his mind though, no harm in admitting that to himself. A cat may look at a cleaner. Which it did, the cheeky little so-and-so. Well, the house was tidy enough to satisfy even Ruth if and when she did put in an appearance. He would just grab 40 winks to make up for another sleepless night.

TWO

Stiff and nauseous, he levered himself up on his elbow, peering over at his ancient mobile to see if it was recharging. God in heaven, there was a text from Ruth.

Back c7 -look forward to delish dinner ont table R

Shit. Shit. That only gave him half an hour. It was too late and too wet to go out and get something decent for tea. He could order a takeaway, but that would take ages on a Friday night – and now Ruth had gone vegetarian on him it barely seemed worth it. Not another bloody pizza from the freezer. He'd improvise. He used up half his prep time getting dressed, then emptied the washing machine. He hung Ruth's undies on the dryer over the bath and dumped the rest in the spare room to be dealt with at his leisure. Just as well Rodica had been in; what she managed to get done in a couple of hours was beyond human.

Ten to seven. He turned on the oven and took four eggs from the five in the fridge. He'd better make a start; otherwise Ruth would take charge, moaning about always having to do everything herself, etc. etc. There was a bag of *herbes de Provence* on the top shelf of the cupboard; he sniffed through his snot – the herbs, like him, had lost most of their oomph over the years, so he put a dessertspoonful in warm water to soften the rosemary spikes. He remembered the jar of ready-chopped garlic in the fridge, and found a generally edible tomato and a parmesan fragment in the salad drawer. When skilfully assembled it would make a supper fit for a queen, almost as if he'd planned it. He was cracking the eggs into a bowl when the doorbell went.

"Hi love! How did it go?" She was wearing her grey faux-fur hat and navy-blue raincoat. She looked like a toy soldier.

"You know I can't tell you, Max, even if I wanted to." She sighed and dropped her enormous canvas handbag on the floor with a fearful thump.

"Yes, of course."

"And what have you two been up to?"

“Pablos has been chirpy, as usual. Hopefully not killed anything. And my work, like yours, is of the utmost secrecy.”

“I am *so sorry*, I forgot. I see there’s a pile of cards all ready for me to sign. Dinner’s coming along, I trust? Not that I do trust.” She draped her coat and hat over a chair and sat on the radiator. Fortunately she didn’t weigh much. Max slung a tea-towel grandiloquently over his left shoulder and leaned forward, hands on the edge of the dining room table. He wiped his runny nose on his sleeve.

“*Omelette aux fines herbes, avec sa garniture.*”

“You are disgusting, get a tissue. Plain omelette and oven chips?”

“*Exacte, madame.*”

“*Et le dessert?*”

“*Specialité de la maison: sorbet parfum citron à la Russe.*”

“A *la Russe* signifying in this instance?”

“A generous measure of *vodka de Varrington, chérie.*”

“That bit I do like. Bring it on.” She slumped down at the table before the Christmas cards that awaited her indecipherable signature and perennial personalised addition: *We must get together in the New Year!*

“I really don’t know why you bother. We haven’t seen Jo and Andy this century. Why should next year be any different? I don’t understand why we even send cards any more. So very analogue; and do you have any idea what stamps cost these days?”

“Knock it off and don’t be so bloody mean, Min. We have our personal brand to manage. Well I do, anyway.” He plonked a large glass of generic Pinot Grigio on the table. He was about to retaliate with, “Talking of which, your roots are showing,” but thought better of it. She did not seem to be in a playful mood. She took a good swig.

“Brace yourself, Ruth, I have remarkable news: an invitation to a drinks party. Well, I assume it’s drinks not dinner. Or supper, or whatever you southerners call it.”

“From whom and when?” She pointed her sharp little beak in his direction.

“From Rodica, the new cleaner. I presented her with a slab of your Christmas cake today, and had to explain what it was. She looked a bit doubtful, but happier with the envelope containing 20 quid. That’s probably quite a lot to her. I bet the agency don’t give her half of what we pay them. I can’t imagine they have much money to spare, her and whatsisname. He’s probably washing cars or mixing cement all day just to pay the rent. Anyway, we’re invited to a soirée in Crystal Palace. I couldn’t think up an excuse on the spot. It’s next Friday at seven-thirty. Maybe we should take a decent bottle of wine or something?”

“Oh God, why don’t you just call her and say we can’t make it?”

“I suppose I could, but it seems a bit mean. Let’s just pop in for an hour then slope off to the pub. They probably really don’t want to have us round anyway – just being polite. After all she’s only been here three times.” Ruth sighed.

“Well alright. It would make a change to leave the house on a Friday night. As long as they don’t expect us to eat their disgusting East European food; I bet it’s tripe and lung and chitterlings in sour cream, washed down with some vile-tasting jungle juice.”

“In retaliation for your cake? I’d better do a bit of research on Romanian cuisine.”

THREE

“Blimey. Not so shabby, is it?”

“I think we should seriously consider moving to SE19.”

“It’s a long way from the Tube, my dear.”

“I believe there are such things as buses and trains, even out here in the sticks.” Through the half-drawn curtains they could see a couple of dozen people, holding glasses, chattering and laughing. A slim woman in a green dress, with shoulder-length, straight blonde hair was sitting at a white baby grand, with a tall fat man standing next to her, smoking a cigar. It all looked very glamorous and *fin-de-siècle*.

“Just checking we’ve got the right address... yep, this is it. I feel a bit underdressed in me jeans and trainers.” Max grinned at Ruth.

“Come on, we can’t gawp through the window like this. They’ll think we’re weird.” She rang the bell while he took off his woolly hat. They waited in silence, hands in coat pockets. Evidently no-one was coming. Max rang again, and immediately the door opened to reveal a powerfully-built man with a jet black ponytail and goatee, in purple velvet trousers and a matching waistcoat over a white polo-neck. The laughing and singing went up a couple of notches. Even Max could tell that whoever was playing the piano was pretty useful.

“Hello – you will be maybe guests of Rodica or Elena?” Max gave his blank look. “Come in from the cold, do please!”

“We’re Max and Ruth from Stockwell.” So terribly exotic. He didn’t add that Rodica was their cleaner, in case it sounded as if they considered themselves to be socially superior. Ponytail kissed Ruth’s hand and grabbed Max’s elbow.

“Now, what can I offer you people to drink? Is brut champagne to your taste? Or gin-tonic, vodka, tequila? Or red or white wine, punch? Or there’s beer, of course. Or Scotch – or Irish or Bourbon. Or *pălincă* Or perhaps a bloody...”

“Champagne would be lovely, thank you.” We’ll die of thirst if you go on any longer, mate. They advanced down the hall towards the kitchen, which had been converted into a buffet-bar, with mounds of tasty-looking vol-au-vents and something wrapped in cabbage leaves, silver salvers with two whole poached fish,

long, knobbly black sausages, roast hams, alongside shredded salads, pickled cucumbers, slaw and diced beetroot. And something resting on ice that might have been caviar. It was all untouched, so presumably to be brought in with much ceremony later. Perhaps they'd stay a bit longer. Max peered into the adjoining room, whence the bonhomie was emanating. Two flutes of fizz were thrust in front of him.

“*Poftim!*”

“*Mulțumesc, domnule,*” responded Max quietly, with little confidence.

“*Bravo, monsieur! Santé, noroc!* I’ve been trying to prise Rodica away from her piano for hours. *Eh, Eleno!*”

“Mmm. Thank you... So this is your place, is it? Very nice indeed. Lovely” Ruth examined the hall with its tall antique mirrors and vibrant little watercolours.

“I am the man of the house, yes, but of course it’s the ladies who bring the warmth and sparkle. Elena paints and Rodica plays. They have magic in their blood; they really can’t help it. Whereas my role is to provide the bare necessities of life. As you can see, this house is an art gallery – when it’s not a conservatoire of music. Ah, here she is.” Rodica, now in a red sleeveless, high-necked dress with a chunky amber necklace, held out a long slim hand. Max was wondering if he could risk kissing it when she spoke.

“Welcome, I am Elena.” Max looked confused. “You imagine I was Rodica?”

“Well actually, yes I did, to be honest. I didn’t know... So you must be...”

“I think she must have a sister, Max.”

“Thank you, Ruth, a twin. I had worked that out, all by myself.” Max smiled through gritted teeth. Elena’s blood red lips smiled back. Ponytail put his hairy hand on her slender waist.

“How unforgivably rude of me, I forgot to introduce myself!” He flipped his thumb into his waistcoat pocket and extracted a *carte-de-visite*.

Dragoș Lefebvre Álvarez

Jardinier - Philosophe

“*Comme Candide, n’est-ce pas?*”

“*Foarte bine, très bien, muy bien!* I find myself in the company of a cultured Englishman. Tell me, Max, whom you would rather spend an evening with: a *jardinier philosophe* or a *philosophe jardinier*? Would you prefer to enjoy their company consecutively or simultaneously?”

“*Depinde.*” Max laughed because Dragos was laughing. What on earth was he on about? Ruth followed Elena into the reception room. The piano had fallen silent.

“Well I thought I was a bit of a linguist, but you are in a different league,” said Max.

“A necessity in this Tower of Babel.” Was Dragos referring to his *ménage* or to Crystal Palace in general? “But Romanian’s just vulgar Latin with er... Slavic knobs on.”

“If you say so! I’ve tried to learn it, just out of interest, but I am not making much progress.”

“Of course everything is hard, even impossible, if you worry too much about it. But once you get your teeth into it... it is only practice, practice and more practice. The same as playing the piano or painting pictures.”

“You seem to have mastered our tongue, Dragos.”

“One does one’s best, my friend, one does one’s best. Now let’s see what Rodica is doing. She will introduce you to our other guests. We even have some other English people for when you get fed up of us bloody foreigners.”

“What did you think, then?”

“Nice house. Tasty grub and they did not stint on the booze.”

“I meant the people, Min.”

“The sisters were friendly, and obviously very talented.” And very attractive... with it.

“And what about my little pony?”

“I couldn’t work out if he was Elena’s other half or the landlord. Possibly both. Entertaining and hospitable. I did wonder how he made a living, but I suppose top-notch garden designers are well paid. But again, Rodica’s having to work as a cleaner. The occasional gig or piano lesson can’t bring in a lot. I suppose she doesn’t want to sponge off her sister. Says a lot about her.”

“Couldn’t stand the bloke myself. Big head. Show-off. Oleaginous. ‘Philosophical gardener’, my foot.”

“Yet another dreadful foreigner, Ruth?”

“I just speak as I find, Maxwell.”

FOUR

“Just as well we got tickets in advance. I thought people would just roll up and pay on the door but there don’t seem to be many left. Weekend before Christmas, I suppose.” They took their seats on the third pew from the back.

As Max had not forgotten from last year’s carol concert, the pews at All Saints were uncushioned and uncomfortable: carefully crafted so as to prevent the parishioners from nodding off during the sermon. Furthermore – and he didn’t mind admitting it – he didn’t much care for classical music. Not that he was a philistine or anything; he’d sung in the school choir and he knew his way around the Barbican. When he was at school he used to declare his passion for Borodin and Berlioz to wind up his classmates. But when it came down to it, he’d rather have been at home with his feet up, nursing a beer while listening to Barclay James Harvest. Or jazz. Or folk. Or watching the footy. And, oh dearie me, the religiously enforced silence of the concert auditorium! Not daring to applaud between movements, no matter how brilliant the playing, for fear of demonstrating your ignorance. Stifling a cough that was desperate to explode and add itself to the cacophony of hacking and spluttering and tube-clearing that broke out at each and any opportunity. Everything was designed to make the experience as tense and unenjoyable as possible. And anyway, what was the point in paying to hear something that had been played innumerable times by generation after generation of the most talented musicians the world had ever seen? What could some unknown amateur bring to the party?

Once upon a time Ludwig Van had been cutting-edge – shocking, even. But take a look around: not many revolutionaries here tonight. White, middle-class, doddering and seemingly rather pleased with themselves. Silver-haired old ladies and bald-headed old men. Average age: 69.5 years. A particularly doddering couple took their places on the second pew, yellow paperback in hand. Were they going to follow the score? Were they hoping the pianist would play a bum note so they could tut-tut and correct her? More likely they were just showing off. How pathetic. To his relief and pleasure Max spotted the arrival of an enthusiastic and considerably younger clique there to support Rodica. She must have lots of family

and friends – and, to be fair, maybe some genuine fans. Perhaps he was a philistine after all; and a bad-tempered, cynical one to boot. He ought to try harder to relax.

He glanced down at his watch and opened the programme: a single sheet of pink A4, photocopied and folded in two.

Rodica Fintineanu

Pianoforte

Four Transylvanian Folk Songs: arr. Fintineanu (b.1999)

Ludwig van Beethoven: Sonata No. 8, Op. 13 (“Pathétique”)

Frédéric Chopin: Nocturnes, Op. 9

Born 1999? Good grief. There was a brief introduction to tonight’s music, with a couple of sentences on the richness and diversity of Romanian folk culture, probably copied from Wikipedia, but little about tonight’s performer. Born Iași, star pupil of the local prof, debut aged 13 at the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, moved to London a couple of years ago. Specialising in the Romantics (how unusual!).

At precisely eight o’clock a smiling Rodica strode briskly forward in a black trouser suit, slim and neat, shoulder-length hair in loose curls. Was that confidence or nerves? He couldn’t tell. She bowed, accepted the applause and a few raucous and inappropriate cheers and sat down at the piano, shuffling the stool back and forth. Her pert arse might be nice and comfortable but Max’s was killing him already. Well, it should all be done and dusted in an hour or so.

The first song conjured up pictures of an inebriated galumph – probably more fun to take part in than to listen to. A lugubrious tune followed – more like a funeral march than a folk song. Had somebody’s pet goat been kidnapped? Song three, in 3/4 time, had a bit of sparkle to it... but did it work as a solo piano piece? And since when had he been a music critic anyway? The finale was cornily wistful and melodic. Rodica sat bolt upright and motionless with her hands resting on the keys as the final chord faded away, then stood up and bowed low to her audience – polite and restrained towards the back and wildly enthusiastic at the

front. The Romanian posse had commandeered the best pews in the house. Rodica went over to a side table and took a sip of water.

Now for the sonata. Max recognised the tune immediately. He'd forgotten that it was from the *Pathétique*. Rodica's slender fingers began to hammer at the keyboard. Her left hand was going like the clappers, rings a-sparkle under the candlelight. He was almost convinced that she couldn't really be playing and that he was listening to a recording. She was bloody good, and no mistake. Some people, probably Romanians who did not understand the etiquette, started to applaud as the first movement finished but were promptly shamed into silence. She waited, steadied herself, and began the slow movement. The melody had been ripped off so many times that only the tone-deaf could have failed to recognise it; someone behind him was humming along but Max didn't care. He'd forgotten about his arse, his arthritis, his tinnitus, his bad back, his catarrh, his ingrowing toenail, his dodgy prostate, his varicose veins, his self-loathing, his less-than-satisfactory personal relationships, his *ennui*, *angst* and *malaise*: everything that made life barely bearable. He just wanted the music to go on forever. Forever and ever and ever and ever, amen. Nothing else mattered. Long before the piano ceased playing, big fat tears were rolling down his big fat, bristly cheeks... but he didn't care. He did not give one miserable hoot.

Rodica's Chopin was astonishing, but he was no longer listening. He had been transported to a place of ineffable beauty and joy and light and celestial music, flowing from an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving Father, whose outstretched arms beckoned him to His bosom...

"Max, can you hear me? Max?"

"He's going to be OK, I can feel his pulse." Max could make out a pair of dark eyes, a goatee beard and two rows of white sharp teeth. "Hey, he's coming round."

"Someone call an ambulance, *please!*" It was Ruth. He tried to say, "I never knew you cared," but the words would not come out. Just a croaky cough.

“They’re already on their way.” He groaned, coughed again and turned onto his side as a prelude to getting back on his feet. He must have slipped and fallen over. How long had he been on the deck? Someone put a hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“I know you’re only doing it to get out of spending Christmas with Mother.”

“As if,” he croaked. He was suddenly aware that he’d banged his head. It bloody hurt. And some bugger must have puked over his shirt.

FIVE

One gentle hand touched the side of his head while the other held his hand. He thought he might throw up again, but the feeling passed.

“Ruth?” he croaked.

“Hello Max, my name’s Jude. I’m a paramedic. We’re on our way to hospital. Your wife’s following in a taxi. Can you hear me? How are you feeling?”

“Bit woozy. OK. Not been sleeping well,” whispered Max. “For pity’s sake, don’t take me to St George’s.”

“You’re on your way to King’s, Max. For tests. You may have to stay overnight, if they can find you a bed. Better safe than sorry.”

He soon saw that not much goes on in a hospital of a Sunday night; not much of a medical nature, at any rate. After three hours of hanging about, Ruth had gone home, leaving him to the tender mercies of Khadijah and Grace. At last, he was able to slip under the crisp covers of a nice comfy bed and gently drift off. His three fellow inmates were all asleep or pretending to be asleep, which suited him just fine. He wanted to be left in peace.

But the peace did not last; he awoke in the middle of the night to find some idiot talking to his family in Jamaica. Max assumed he was using his mobile phone but perhaps he was just hoping that his ramblings would get across the Atlantic. Another was howling like a dog and seemed to be off his trolley. But Max was fast asleep at six in the morning, when Paloma made him sit up for a blood pressure test. *Do you want a cup of tea?* A team of nurses and auxiliaries was determined to ensure that he never got another opportunity to nod off, as they stuck a needle in his vein (what did they do with all that blood?), made him get up and wash, cleaned his bed and mopped the floor. *What do you want for breakfast?* He slipped on his shoes, girded up his nightie and wandered off to the toilet, very assiduously washing his hands with soap and hot water afterwards and trying to open the door with his elbow. A smiley old Indian gent brought his toast and marmite. Things were looking up. *Would you like another cup of tea?* He

decided he would like another cup of tea, thank you mister *chai wallah*, and settled down to observe the staff going about their duties. They didn't half get through a lot of blue rubber gloves.

A young woman in mufti, whom he could not help but notice was very attractive, was working her way anti-clockwise round the room. She smiled as she approached his bed.

"How do you feel, Mr Bennet?" Dreadful, since you ask, principally owing to lack of sleep, but he tempered his response.

"Not too bad, thank you, doctor. A bit woozy." Guess what? They'd be running more tests, so he'd be here for a second bloody night, but first she needed to go through his questionnaire. There was a long tick list of "pre-existing conditions", such as cancer or diabetes, none of which he had, as far as he was aware. Should he mention the tinnitus? What was the point? It was unlikely that they would offer to cure it for him. *Allergies?* Again, *nul points*. Apart from hay fever in the season of the year. Was he taking any medication? No. *Not even statins?* Should he be? *Did he wear dentures?* No, there were all his own gnashers, apart from the fillings, crowns etc. 60-65. White British. Married. Atheist. I prefer not to say.

All too soon, Dr Coelho Branco swayed on her way, like The Girl from Ipanema. There was a brief respite before a group of medical students, mostly girls, arrived for a chat and a prod. The pleasant old Asian geezer arrived with a retro dinner of savoury mince, boiled potatoes and peas, followed by jelly and cream, and he was settling down to what he hoped to God might be a siesta, when Khadijah reappeared to take his blood pressure. Then the afternoon's visitors began to roll up: Job's comforters, bored teenagers, snivelling wives. Not his, though. In any case, Ruth wasn't the snivelling kind. He turned onto his side, wishing he had his earplugs handy.

"Max, wake up, it's me, Ruth." She was shaking him by the shoulder.

"I've brought your toothbrush and pyjamas. And some fruit." Fantastic.

“Morning Ruth. Afternoon.”

“It’s 5pm, actually. How are they treating you?”

“OK.”

“Apparently there’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Well, as I understand it, the jury’s still out on that.”

“Well, that’s what the quack said to me.”

“Wonderful. I look forward to hearing as much from the er... duck’s mouth so I can go home.”

“But for form’s sake you’ll be staying another night.”

“If only as punishment.”

“Yes indeed, I specifically requested that.” Probably an attempt at humour but he wouldn’t put it past her. For the first time, Max noticed the Christmas decorations and cards. The green and pink balloons bobbing along the ceiling. How very cheery and festive.

“What day is it?”

“Christmas Eve, of course. Mummy’s still with me in Stockwell but she’s driving back to Ely tomorrow. She sends her love and best wishes.” Oh Ruthless Ruth, you are the queen of sarcasm. But she was on the money: by hook or by crook he had successfully dodged Christmas dinner with his mother-in-law – for a third consecutive year.

“Dr Dark says you can leave, Mr Bennet, but you will need to make an appointment with your GP as soon as possible to discuss your test results.”

“Fantastic news, thank you, Paloma. You’ve all been great, give my best wishes to Khadijah and Grace and the others. Merry Christmas and *Feliz Navidad* to you all.”

“*¡Muy bien, hombre! ¡Igualmente!*”

Once he’d got used to the needles and the nursery food, it hadn’t been too bad. He didn’t have to worry about the cooking or cleaning (not that he did much of that) and it was interesting watching other people at work. He gathered up his

pyjamas, personal belongings and an untouched, over-ripe banana that had been his faithful companion, and put them in an orange carrier bag. He draped his coat over his arm. Whilst it was roasting hot on the ward it would be bloody cold out there. He glanced out the window. Was it actually starting to snow? He consulted his watch: 14:30. They could get him a taxi but he'd have to pay for it. What the hell, he'd just get a bus.

Just as he was starting off down the corridor, feeling unaccountably pleased with himself, a blonde woman in a fawn-coloured coat and a blood-red bobble-hat approached from the lift, heels clacking on the linoleum.

"Hello Max. Oh, you are leaving the spital now? So you are OK? I am sorry I can not come yesterday. We were worried of you. I feel bad that it happen at my concert." It was Rodica... probably.

"No, it's me who must apologise for causing a scene... Rodica... erm, since you have come all this way I would like to take you for a glass of wine to thank you for visiting me and for that beautiful concert. And also because it is Christmas." And, last but not least, because I fancy you something cruel and I don't want to go home — not just yet. He knew a tapas bar in deepest Camberwell that never seemed to close.

SIX

“Well look who it is, at long last: Lazarus himself! Good afternoon, husband. Where in God’s name have you been? I rang the hospital but they said you’d left hours ago.”

“Merry Christmas, Ruth.”

“And the answer to my question is?”

“Well... they let me out a bit earlier than expected. So, rather than come straight home and interrupt your arrangements, I thought I’d do a bit of last-minute shopping. I hope you like it.” Max produced something that looked like a paperback wrapped in glossy red Xmas paper. He handed it to Ruth as tenderly and reverently as he could; he could see that her expectations were not sky high. She tore off the paper to reveal a black leather case, slightly worn at the corners, with a silver clasp.

“OMG... a jet necklace. How wonderful! I’ve always wanted one. I remember Granny had one but it disappeared way back. I think Auntie Nora must have nicked it from her coffin. Merry Christmas. Give us a kiss.”

“Just happy I got it right for once.”

“Normally I would ask how much it cost and can we afford it, but since it’s for me I don’t care. Help me put it on. Are you hungry? There are still some sprouts left from dinner. Only kidding. We’ve got smoked salmon and champagne for supper, if you’re feeling up to it. I’ve decided salmon is a vegetable at Christmas. Your hands feel very cold.”

“Go on then, I feel like living dangerously.” He didn’t say he’d been hanging around outside for nearly an hour until he saw Ruth’s mother drive off.

“Bye then. Look after Pablos properly.”

“Bye, and take care, love.” The driver courteously put Ruth’s bag in the boot of the Toyota and even held the door open for her. Where the hell was she off to on Boxing Day? OHMSS, could be anywhere... He scrubbed at the things that wouldn’t go into the dishwasher, then attempted a general tidy up, disposing of a

disgraceful number of bottles. Rodica wouldn't be back for another couple of days. He sat down with a cup of tea to read Lola's latest communication.

Hola, soy Lola!

Thank so so much for the latest batch of rewrites. You really have been beaver-ing away, haven't you? We make a great team. We'll wring a book out of this dross yet.

David's been recounting more of his foreign exploits. I'm afraid I don't know anything about football at all. I find it terribly boring, if truth be told. But I daren't say so to the boss! I need to hang onto this job until I can get something better sorted out. I know you feel just the same. Funny old world, is academia; one day you're a prof, and the next you're out on your ear (or worse!). It's all about the funding, and Medieval Iberian Sculpture just isn't sexy enough, I'm told. Who would have thought it?!

I can come to London in a couple of weeks to go through the new recordings with you. It would be easier, since you speak the language (footy, not Welsh!). Do let me know. It doesn't have to be pen on paper. I just enjoy being the company luddite.

Please excuse the scrawl. Q.B.S.M.

LLXX