

BELLADONNA

The forecast for that weekend was such a promising one. Early mists were due to evaporate and leave perfectly still, blue-skyed days. I decided to change my plans and go to Charnwood Forest. It was the last weekend in October when the sun has dropped markedly and the clocks would go back to confirm that after a slow start the golden rule of autumn held absolute sway. Mrs Almey at Hilltop Cottage had one room left due to a cancellation and I eagerly booked myself in for Friday, Saturday and Sunday night.

If I walked gently in Swithland woods and in Bradgate Park I ought to be able to cope. The long anticipated deterioration in my condition was overdue and the prospect of this final visit, now the lolly-licking, doggie-walking multitudes from Leicester had dwindled, was irresistible. Do not misunderstand me – I am not a snob but I am no great fan of crowds. Maybe, in the crowdless tranquility of autumn, I would see a dipper plunge from a dark boulder into the fast, shallow waters and imagine him scuttle along the pebble floor looking for shrimps. Perhaps there would be buzzards slowly touring the high wooded slopes. Would the grebes still be diving for fish on Cropston Water? There might be a pleasant gentleman in the boarding house with whom I could strike up a conversation; or, failing him, a lively lady.

I was lonely, you see. Not that I am into self-pity – oh no! – years of coping with my mother had made up my mind never to wallow in that warm, shallow pool. Those who pity themselves forget or ignore just how depressing and, indeed, revolting that subtle form of blackmail is. To every suggestion – well meant – as to how to alleviate the cause and symptoms of despair (Get out more! Join this or that club! Phone so-and-so for a lunch date! Take up flower-arranging / bridge / water colouring, etc) there is an immediate, ready riposte, showing that the sufferer has actually spent time analysing what you might propose. No, self-pity is disgusting and has the very opposite effect to its intention, the arousal of pity in others. But I was lonely. Me, of all people! I had once day-dreamed of appearing on Desert Island Discs and telling the world how delightful seclusion and tranquility would be. I found company and chatter tedious and was sure I would be entirely happy with my sketch pad and Roget to hunt down exactly the right word to drop into the metre and texture of the verse I was writing. My luxuries would be my cello and the occasional flotsam crate of dry white wine. My husband had shared this desire for solitude and we used to joke that if we inhabited two neighbouring beaches linked by a shallow lagoon at low tide, we could take it in turns to wade around to each other when we felt the need for company.

I am at the window watching for things which others might be too busy to see. The lowering sun catches the swoop-down of a bronze wing and I imagine the brief squeak of terror from the victim before the sudden, quiet acceptance of the end. My eyes pick up the thread of a lane and follow it to the roofs of a village - Woodhouse?- roofs of houses which seem to defer to the church they huddle around. I imagine the apparent ease of their inhabitants as they toddle from room to room, or sit eating, watching television or reading. Further in, I plumb their discontentments, their resentments, their doubts, their irresolution. Their fears. The golden sunbeams go out and my eyes return to the growing reflection of my face in the window turning mirror against the greying world. I am half a ghost haunting myself. The curtains are red, gaudy and reassuring. I pull the right side across and my ghost disappears. My finger clicks on the table lamp and pushes the space-bar on my laptop for extra light.. The sachet-coffee Mrs Almey provides is decent and the friendly growl of the kettle is welcome. Anything is better than the utter silence of that grey world.

Did I miss Thomas? Rarely. He had his beach now and I had mine. In middle age, as the fires began to die down, I often caught myself wondering who the person opposite really was and

what secrets he had in his head (mine I dared not tell!). What kept us in the same house? The children? Long gone. And he did not take as much interest in them as he pretended. He was unaware of the impatience in his voice when they phoned. If they came to eat or visit he would become increasingly silent and miserable and only resume his la-la-la-ing (infuriating habit) when they were on their way out of the door. How transparent he had become! It slowly dawned on me – and at first it made me guilty – that as well as falling out of love with him (which I rationalised as the end of libido) I did not really like him any more, that man over there, my husband of thirty-odd years. As if he could no longer be bothered to tie them down, things kept bobbing to his surface the which I found irritating and even downright unpleasant. When I announced to him that my tests were positive I saw a gleam come on in his eye which I immediately recognised. A gleam of relief. I knew because I had seen it come on - (*I am now well beyond the time for pretence*) - in my own eye in the hall mirror as I took the phone call about my mother's stroke. I felt no anger therefore to see it. He was by no means a bad man; I was certainly no better a woman. It was best to call it a day, I reasoned, before the stress of trying to manufacture concern or grief in the last stages of my dire terminal illness became too excruciating. The pain, loss of dignity and discomfort would be enough for me without the stench of false emotion. So one morning I sat him down and made it easy for him. I told him I would like him to go. He protested of course but not as loud or as long as he could have done. As soon as I had convinced him that there was no other in my life I saw that gleam again. I missed him in the same way as I missed the old satin sofas (which the mean man had only finally agreed to have replaced by fashionable leather ones, when I had threatened to divide the joint account into two.) In a rarely visited compartment of my purse I had his phone number. My friend Cassandra thought she had seen him in Leicester – and had added after much cajoling from me, that he was with a woman. I interrogated my feelings and realised after the initial surprise had gone that I could not care less. He had made me promise to contact him when inevitably I needed help but my name was already pencilled in at a private hospice. I would be no trouble to anyone.

I open the curtain, turn off the lamp so that the mirror turns back to window and look at the crescent moon. Above the trees on the crest of the hill it is breaking free from a cocoon of mist. I hear other guests arriving in the corridor.

Part of me is stoical, even cynical. I had not always been that way. In my youth I had been a romantic. I played the cello professionally and nothing moved me more than Dvorak and – forget that flashy, drunken Sibelius – the last great Romantic, my favourite composer, Edward Elgar. I read Byron, the Brontës and Houseman. When I met the man whom I was to marry – he was the new oboist – I was utterly swept away. I had a reputation as an aloof beauty which I deserved, for I deliberately cultivated it – silly, conceited girl – extending my long limbs, tossing back my raven black hair and flashing my dark eyes. The new oboist was my immediate hero. Whenever our section was resting I would turn to admire him and his bronze, wavy hair in disarray as he let the music move him. I was elated to turn once when we were both resting to see him gazing at me with a look of unambiguous intensity. It was then that we both knew. After we had become lovers he said the grace of my movement fascinated him, as the music passing through me made me sway with the bow, like a sapling in the wind; it excited him to see my long legs parted and high, gripping the cello. He made love to me with the same passion as he played the oboe, as if he was playing me. He was so strong that, like the cello between my knees, I could hardly move in his hold. And how he used to make me sing out in the final line! Enough. That was in another lifetime. Now he was balding and getting fat. The lyricism in him had dried up. He was not that man at all. My piping God had gone for ever; and he consumed the contents of his nose when he thought no-one was watching.

In my late thirties my musical tastes had changed. I was no longer moved by the great sky-rockets of Tchaikovsky and the intensity of Elgar. Most of Mozart I found too frantic, sensing his burning desire for wealth, fame and acknowledgement of his genius – and often exasperation – in many a bar. Now I preferred the cool, serenely beautiful detachment of the Baroque; of Albinoni, Telemann, Vivaldi, Handel and Bach. That a music of such measure, tranquillity and exquisite harmony was possible in this violent universe, not only potential but - given that it had come to be - inevitable in the very instant of creation, was proof enough to me, no matter what those prosaic scientists might argue, of the existence of a benign, intelligent Creator. I have no belief in, nor inclination to enter some childish, cosy heaven, not being a social animal. For me the cool, distant love and regard of the Creator – like the music of his purest thought – was enough, and I would be more than content to blow as dust until reabsorbed into His divine earthy clay, material for a billion other things which His great hands might fashion. To that end my tearful elder daughter had agreed to scatter my ashes on my favourite stretch of water in Charnwood. My weaker younger daughter Clare – victim of mild schizophrenia – would learn of my demise only when it was imminent – or past. I had sworn her father to secrecy and his departure became a part of our conspiracy. Clare thought our separation was all simply a matter of irreconcilable differences.

The moon has risen into clear sky but the valley is filled with mist through which only the depleted tree tops are visible. I imagine myself within its delicate muslin and shudder.

“Why” had sobbed Karen, the elder, “How can you believe in God if he has visited this wicked curse on you...on you, such a wonderful, talented woman when murderers get away scot-free and wicked people prosper?”

I could have told her then that to live in such a turbulent, dynamic world made these things inevitable; of how exciting and dangerous it was; I could have stressed how it teemed with life of myriad kinds; how I considered the virus which had made me ill as remarkable a piece of work as the human being it despatches. God surely appreciated all his ingenious works. I viewed the suffering which they inflict upon each other, seen inside-out from His long perspective, as trivial. The universe could only work if it was imperfect.

“Karen, if we live we are bound to suffer!” was all I could think to say at the time.

“NO!” she had screamed “It’s just a horrible accident! A bloody mess! Look at my sister!” Her fury made me wonder whether she having a bad episode with her gambler of a partner again.

“No” I insisted. “It is not an accident. It only looks like a chaos because we see it from the wrong angle.”

Take a brain. Your cleverest scientists could sit in committee around a block of lard, a jug of water and all the other necessary elements for three eternities and never even begin to make a brain – not even a primitive one. I am every second aware that the utterly Inconceivable is happening all around us and am angry that we are so distracted by and absorbed in the inconsequentials of our lives that we are blind to it. Of all creatures I fear we must be the biggest disappointment to God. Not only do we fail to appreciate the world, worse, we desecrate and despise it. And we are such lamenting infants. We stand by volcanoes or in the ocean and blame God if we are incinerated or swept away by a tsunami. Then there are those desperately dull people with clipboards trying to make the world a more suitable place to live. Given the chance, they would draw every sting from every wasp and bee, seal all the rivers and cut down every pine cone and chestnut. If they could redesign the world from scratch it would be thornless, saltless, fireless and glassless; there would be no lightning and every mountain

would have a safety net around its base. A child is killed by a falling branch and the parents want all trees cut down on every route a pupil might take to school; it drowns in a pond and they campaign for every stretch of water for miles around to be drained. What self-importance! How disgustingly stupid people are at their worst!

But I want to go out on a high note. Surely I can bump into one intelligent person. I dearly love my children but their sorrows are tedious.

In the mirror I straightened my hair. The one strand of grey which I did not care to hide, seemed to be growing broader, like a bell-rope. Still, I looked decent enough; decent enough for another decent human being to see I was decent. I was slim and still attractive and my chief assets, my dark eyes, retained most of their intensity. I did not wish to disguise my blemishes and lose time appealing to the wrong sort. The time for politeness, patience and tolerance was past. Was there one last experience of unexpected wonder and felicity to be had before my death?

I had decided to opt for a dinner at Mrs Almey's that first evening. It was cold out and I had no urge to do more with the night than stare at it through the window. I looked forward to the poached halibut with sweet baby Chantenay carrots and baby leeks I had ordered on my arrival. She was not quite in my class as a cook, Mrs Almey, but much better than average. (I have no time for false modesty either, another of the irksome vices we suffer from. What is the most important tool for a chef? Answer: imagination.) I prayed for good company but if there was none to be had, I would be content to go to bed early and read my favourite novel again.

Disappointingly there was only a staid, elderly couple in the dining room. And after a few routine, harmless exchanges about the chillier than usual October nights I was grateful to be left in relative peace. The room had six sombre elm tables with turned legs and the chair cushions had red and green patterns of fox hunting in woods. The large grate was filled with a log fire. The old-fashioned feel of the room was perfect for a dark evening, the equivalent to the eye of a rich mulled wine to the tongue. I loved its cosy warmth. On one wall a tall cabinet was filled with ticketed bottles of wine, each reflecting the flames. Before the crab starter came I selected by eye the bottle filled with the most startling colour, lime green with a rod of golden fire burning from top to bottom, a dancing genie craving release. Mrs Almey took one down to chill it. Free in the glass, it proved to be as beguiling to the taste as to the eye. There was no longer any need for moderation in my life. I would get slowly, deliciously tipsy and fall asleep with my book on my chest.

I became aware of a man's voice in the corridor – dark and pleasing to the ear – and heard the sound of shoes being wiped on a mat. His arrival admitted a chill billow of air which roused the sleepy fire into a sudden frenzy of sparks. I concluded that he must have been apologising for his late arrival because the clear, fluty tones of Mrs Almey were telling him not to worry and, yes, if he was quick she could still manage to cook him dinner. A figure came past the door and ran up the stairs. The old admiral's hat of a clock – walnut, with a white dial – showed it was just going up for nine. My fish came and I thought no more about him. Mrs Almey had excelled herself. When the old gentleman was looking away – he seemed to have been secretly observing me – I filled my glass again to the brim.

The late-comer entered the room, nodded breathlessly at me and the couple and sat down sideward on to me, to the right of the fire, where I could weigh him up unobtrusively. He was younger than me, perhaps in his late forties, had most of his hair - dark brown and wispy in his neck and around his ears - and wore obviously expensive frameless glasses. He wore a dark tweed jacket, a navy V-necked pullover and tie. He blew into his hands and I could see that his

fingertips were quite white, even one or two pale blue, This was a condition my mother had had, to do with poor circulation. His profile was good, noble even and he had a moustache. He held his head proudly; possibly for me to admire. He had probably felt my stare on his cheek for now he turned, looked at me and smiled. His eyes were young but stitched with worry lines, hinting maybe at some past or present misfortune. Reading faces was my hobby and I considered myself a perceptive student of the human condition; I imagined that he was in financial difficulty, perhaps due to a divorce settlement; perhaps he was seeking respite from some domestic upheaval. Perhaps I ought to mind my own business. I sipped my wine and smiled back.

Mrs Almey came in to take his order. He said he thought he would go straight to the main course – he was a pudding rather than a starter man, he told her. She told him she had lamb's liver, or halibut, or broccoli and Stilton quiche with homemade chutney. He clucked with his tongue; it was between the liver and the fish he murmured in his rich, fruity voice. I placed him as a Lancastrian. I had had a friend at university who said "purrs" for pears; this gentleman had, I recalled, told Mrs Almey in the corridor that he was just "popping" up the "stirs" for a minute. "The halibut is absolutely delicious" I was unable to prevent myself from saying. He turned to me again and said a thank you.

"I'll take this kind lady's advice!" he told her. If I thought he was going to ask if I minded him joining me, I was wrong. He reached into his far jacket pocket and drew out a rolled up copy of The Times. He began to study the crossword rather too intently. I instantly recalled an event years ago when as a teenager on holiday; flustered by the stare of a boy I had fallen in love with on the next table I had buried my face in my magazine and lost him for ever. Serve him right he he made the same mistake!

Was his determination not to be forward a clever strategy to win my approval for later? For what? I began to feel a little awkward. I had no room for pudding and therefore no obvious excuse to remain at table. I filled my glass to the brim again and corked the bottle for later. I could hardly walk out with it under my arm. I left it there, stood and smiled in his direction but he steadfastly refused to break his intensely puzzled trance. I shook my head ironically at the transparent guile of men and left the room.

I hesitated at the open lounge door. Did I prefer to take my book and wine upstairs? The merry fire drew me in. I seated myself under a standard lamp by the grate. The armchair was comfortable and old with side panels to catch my sleepy head, if need be. Diagonally opposite was an identical chair and along the left hand wall, opposite the drawn floral curtains, a matching settee. I put my glass on the side table, took up my novel and tried to re-enter the world of Anne Brontë. But the beauty of the room kept me in the present. As I said, I love old-fashioned rooms. This one too had rich, dark colours – earthy browns and deep burgundies. I love their mysteries at night by firelight when shadows are in constant flicker like ripples on a lake on a day of sun and storm. I love their dark corners and the reflections of fire in the diamonds of glass-fronted cabinets. Here I could imagine it was an old-fashioned Christmas day at my grandparents' house.

The main light was switched on and the mysteries of the room vanished.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realise there was anyone in here! My, you do look comfortable – as snug as a bug in a rug!"

It was the old gentleman. His white head was poking around the door and now his wife's was too, a foot further down, laughing helplessly at her husband's mistake and great wit. I smiled and she laughed again, even louder. I bit back the cliché on my lips and looked intently at my novel and held my breath. When I dared look again they had gone. I settled back to the page I had been trying to read. I needed to press on. There were other books I was determined to open

or revisit, like old friends. The doctor had said that reading would eventually become impractical for me. Curiously, that thought did not depress me that night. I felt mellow and snug. Then the fire crackled and distracted me again.

Here was a metaphor waiting for a poem if there ever was one! I saw the roaring fire like hastening time, our paradoxical medium, affording warmth and pleasure, yet consuming the very matter, the very stuff of life. Do we not spend our lives watching the fire, both delighted and disquieted, both willing and unwilling and, of course, unable to prevent its progress? In the flames I relished this irony of existing in an ageing universe, an irony which, of all God's creatures we alone have the intellect to appreciate. I realised then that I was tipsy.

I concentrated. I held my book up in front of the fire to screen it. I was in the celebrated chapter where Huntingdon, the drunken, dissolute husband of the saintly Helen succumbs by agonised degrees to the injury caused by a riding accident. Anne ingeniously forces him to confront his spiritual rottenness as his internal wound, enflamed by yet more alcohol, turns gangrenous. In helpless terror he savours the stench of his body turning to corpse and imagines its imminent, full-blown corruption in his grave. Did any novelist ever invent a more horrific and apposite death for a villain? To read it again did not depress me. I had no fear of death, nor reason to fear it; and by fire I would bypass corruption. I only prayed for an easy exit.

As a child I had been genuinely afraid that the sun would consume itself, like a burning kite, in one great burst and go out. I could not understand why not; and still cannot. The fire had drawn me away from the page again. The logs seemed to be aware; they shifted and sent sparks and flames billowing up the chimney, lighting particles of black soot to become stars. It was difficult to imagine that tomorrow the grate would be icy cold. I thought of the chill mist outside and autumnal decay; I almost cried out to think that that would be my pale element, and not this generous red warmth, by next October. The several reflections of my wine glass in the cabinet drew my eye and I saw again with unease the several ghostly outlines of my face.

"Might I join you for a while?" The dark voice made me jump. Its owner apologised and sauntered in, without waiting for a reply, to sit in the chair opposite.

"Could I get you another drink before I toddle off?" asked Mrs Almey, now appearing. It was well past nine o'clock. She had brought in my bottle, just under a third full, from the dining room. My companion asked if he might try my wine. I misunderstood him and passed him my glass to sip from. I saw only then that he had drained his own in expectation of my bottle being passed to him. Gracefully he avoided the inherent embarrassment this posed and reached over for my glass. He sipped the wine and nodded.

"Mmm, you're a connoisseur I see," he was bound to say, with just enough pleasant irony in his voice. He knew I must contradict this and I wanted to do so as elegantly as I could.

"Not at all! I loved the glow of it in the firelight. A lucky guess. I don't even know what grape it is."

He tried it again and pondered, his eyes looking upwards. "A Chablis I reckon."

He took the bottle, looked at the label and smiled in self-congratulation. He asked our host for another one. She brought it in a cooler, plus two fresh glasses at his request, and withdrew. Was I impressed? He had probably cheated and looked at my bottle in the dining room.

"I mustn't have too much more," I said. "I'm just at that perfect place when I know I've had a drink and am just warm, on the edge of tipsiness."

He smiled and took the poker to stir the fire, letting me study his pleasant face. His smooth skin reflected the firelight evenly and easily. What was he? A teacher? A doctor? An angel sent to ease my transition? The idea amused me.

"What are you reading? The Tenant! You know, I've never read that one. The word "Wildfell" puts me off. I imagine it's full of melodramatic tosh, like Jane Eyre, and wild, breast-beating gestures."

I put him firmly straight. He raised his dark eyebrows in surprise.

“Prejudice,” he murmured. “It’s a very stupid thing, is it not?”

“Did you finish your crossword? It looked very difficult.....” and slyly I added “..if your face was anything to go by.”

He chuckled. He took the paper from his jacket.

“There’s just one clue I can’t get. Are you any good?”

He held the paper out but I raised my palm in refusal. Here was my chance to show off and trump his trick with the wine.

“I like to do clues in my head. It’s a good discipline. My husband used to read them out to me. Let’s see if I still have the knack. Try me.”

“Alright. It’s ten letters. I have the even letters; blank E, blank L, blank D, blank N, blank A....”

“Blank A? Something Italian or Spanish? What’s the clue?”

“Can’t make head or tale of it....“Poison is an eye-opener for a lovely lady....””

What a staggering piece of good fortune! “It’s belladonna,” I said as casually as I could. “It’s an irritant juice from a plant. Women used to dab it on their eyes to make their pupils dilate.”

I looked at him. His expression was one of awe and, I thought, apprehension. Men fear women of intellect. The display of superior wit and wittiness, so essential in masculine ploys of seduction, runs into serious danger of being compromised if the object of it is too clever. (However, I have never quite understood why some women are sexually attracted by humorous men.)

“Well, well, well,” he said quietly, as he wrote the word into the grid. “Belladonna. Beautiful lady. Well done you.”

Now he would he say something very cheesy, such as “it takes one to know one”. I waited. But he did not speak.

“What lengths vanity drives us to,” he said with a vehemence which surprised me.

“Self-absorption is as old as Eve” I replied. “And men are at least as bad.”

“Are you a widow?”

Startled, I said yes and asked him if it was so obvious.

“No. You said your husband *used* to read you clues.”

“Are you a detective?”

He laughed. This was such a good game I could not resist it. I made many other guesses about his line of business, many implausible, some absurd, drawing various exclamations of hilarity and mock-horror from him. I eventually gave up.

“I put windows in.”

“You’re a vandal?”

“Oh, oh, very sharp! No, I install windows.”

I blinked at him. He leant forward and topped up my glass. He was enjoying my surprise and, yes, my embarrassment. I could tell he thought he had regained the advantage he had lost.

“It’s OK. I’m not about to try and sell you any. You can’t work out why I’m not monosyllabic. Shouldn’t clever folk get their hands calloused and dirty too? The Chinese used to think so.”

But his hands were smooth.

“You see,” he continued “You are prejudiced as well. I should have my knuckles rubbing along on the floor; my head should be round, ear-ringed and tattooed. I should be doing the Sun crossword.”

“Even if that was the case, it wouldn’t mean you were unintelligent.”

“Very true. Well said, you.”

I saw a chance to confirm my superiority. I asked him what he thought I did. He studied me.

“You are an artist of some kind. Am I warm?”

“Warm-ish.”

“Can I see your palms?”

I hesitated. I held them out. He took my left in a very businesslike manner in his hand and turned it over and then back. I felt something akin to arousal in the pit of my stomach and a tell-tale catch in my breath which I felt sure he noticed. What a clever strategy! He pushed his palm against mine, ostensibly, for comparison.

“Look how stubby my fingers are against yours,” he said, never taking his eyes from my eyes. I could not help but beam at him, it was such a clever, devious compliment. “Are you a musician by any chance?” he added.

“Oh, well done!” I gasped. “And what might my instrument be?”

He deliberated. He looked into the fire. He told me to close my eyes, to concentrate and think about my instrument. He said he had a gift. I did as he had said and pictured my cello. To help him further I let the scherzo movement by Elgar play in my head. I squinted and saw he had his eyes shut tight and realised he had taken my hands into his again, and was patting them gently. What a devious man! Did I like him or not?

“Now then...I see a string instrument....I’m afraid I’m no expert...Couldn’t tell a viola from a fiddle to save my life....Wait. I can see you playing it, sitting down with your knees around it. Is it a double bass? No. I know. It’s a cello!”

I squealed like a girl! “How on earth?...That’s astonishing!”

“Do you still play?”

“No, not professionally.....” I hesitated. “I... I got tired of being away from home...hotels...one night stands...Oh!” I felt myself blush. “I mean... a performance here...a performance there.....Oh, you know what I mean.” I felt hot. I took a gulp of wine.

“I understand.” He looked pensive, saddened even. I wondered. If he really was psychic then perhaps he had just gazed inside me and seen the disease slowly taking me over. I felt my self-assurance began to waver with my tipsy head. I was struggling.

“And do you mind me asking you how long you’ve been widowed?”

Had I not been made aware of what he had referred to as his gift, I am sure I would have blithely carried on making it up as I went along. To confess now that, like a piece of loose skin hanging from a finger, I was, after all, just about maritally attached would be unbearably embarrassing and consign me to ignominious defeat. I needed to find a brilliant return.

“You’re a mind-reader. You tell me!” I blurted out. It was inelegant but it did the trick. He shrugged. He admitted that his nosiness was a fault. I saw the golden band on his wedding finger as he picked up his glass.

“And you have a wife I can see!”

“Yes indeed. I have a wife.” He stared at the fire and fell silent. I felt uneasy again.

“And are there still that many people requiring new windows? Surely not? Isn’t your market dwindling? Doesn’t your boss want to...What’s the word?...Di-.... what’s it called?...A horrid word.....”

“Diversify? Not really. I am the boss. We do a lot of conservatories...and old windows do turn grey.” He continued to stare at the embers. “We get by.”

“Turn grey? A good job for you they do. Built-in obsolescence. Nice one.”

“My wife is at home in Crompton Bishop. I needed to get away this particular weekend.”

“Oh? Alone? The whole weekend?”

His slow smile told me that now it was I who was being nosy.

“Till Sunday morning. Then I’ll see.”

“I’m here until Monday”

“The forecast is good. Are you a walker?”

“Yes” I replied. “This is the best time to be here.....I love the autumn. I’m going into the woods tomorrow then to Swithland for lunch at the pub – I forget its name – and then I’ll walk down

to the reservoir by the steam line. In the afternoon I'll do my best to climb up to Old John...." I was gabbling. "And are you –"

"I'm sorry. Have made you uneasy in some way? That was the last thing –"

"Uneasy?"

I took a large gulp of wine. My hand trembled ever so slightly and he saw. He lowered his intensely clever gaze. He apologised again.

"Let me explain. I never did get to study and it makes me feel uncomfortable to be with well educated people sometimes. I'm as rich as Croesus but at a certain time of life I think money loses its charisma."

He looked at his glass and said he thought the alcohol was kicking in. He had not meant to sound maudlin and definitely did not want pitying.

"No please." I said too quickly. "Carry on. I'm listening."

I was relieved not to have to speak. The flames had begun to lick around the furthest log from the hot centre of the fire and I watched them leap, disconnected yellow sails, from the grate into the chimney breast. I half-closed my eyes and listened to the hypnotic timbre of his baritone voice.

He began to tell of his childhood near Ormskirk on the Lancashire plain. His father, he said, had combined a life as a market gardener with a job at the British Leyland factory. A large, bluff man, he had always poured scorn on the finer things in life, what he considered luxuries and extravagancies.

"He loved my mother but he pushed her around and I couldn't help but resent him for that. She was shy and gentle, and ailed a lot. My elder brother was very much like him and they got on like a house on fire. I can picture them now, out there together, bending, arses in the air, red-handed in the cold, picking spuds....I was rather weedy and no good at the things my dad thought admirable – rigger for example; my brother was a fine player and even had a spell with mighty Wigan, but didn't quite make it. I really wanted to make my dad see I was good at things too, different things....I passed my eleven plus (my brother failed) and I was clever at everything but he never came to one parents evening as I recollect, and when I played Claudio in Much Ado he said he'd come. But when I looked out into the stalls there was just an empty seat by my mam. It turned out, he'd got ready and had a shave but there'd been a last minute phone call. The darts team was a player short and he couldn't possibly disappoint The Kicking Donkey's darts team.... Oh no. He didn't take a lot of notice when I chose my O Levels at fourteen. I did French and Latin. The masters were saying I were good enough to do a scholarship and Mam were proper proud of me. Then one Sunday she just died. She were dead before she hit the floor, they reckoned. A massive brain haemorrhage....There she lay surrounded by his bloody dinner she'd been carrying to table. It's another of those awful memories that never fade. I've always thought it ironic that in a decaying world painful memories stay as fresh as wounds....but that's another story. Anyway, I didn't think my dad had it in him to cry, but he didn't stop for a week, and then some. After that, Oxford and Cambridge were out of the question. Dad were never quite the same again. It were as if he had become mechanical – shoving things in the ground and digging them up like a great red-faced robot. He put pressure on me to leave school and do his "brainwork" as he called it. Trevor couldn't do it. Dad got a pay-out from the insurance for Mam and finally persuaded the old codger in the next field to sell him a few acres. He wanted to be a proper market gardener and pack up making lorries for Leyland. What could I say? He'd set his heart on it and it seemed to take his mind off his sorrows. My maths were good and I agreed. So I missed out on my learning, as he called it."

He paused to drink his wine.

"And? Did the business go OK?"

“OK? It went champion! He’s still at it now; has a nursery as well; won’t quit, even though he’s made his million. When I was twenty-odd I told him I’d done my bit. He could afford to employ a manager and his new girlfriend had a head for figures. He paid me off and I went south to be with my childhood sweetheart in Nottingham. The thought of going home to that “flat country” as she called it, appalled her – mind you, Notts isn’t exactly mountainous! She were studying there and while she were training to be a teacher we got married. We had our family – two beautiful daughters... who...thank goodness....have been away this year, one studying Law in America and the other backpacking with her young man.....She’s a lovely lass, my wife. She’s never rubbed it in, even when we quarrel, about how well qualified she is, but I still feel it. And I see it, I think, in some of her friends’ eyes, and it makes me show off sometimes to prove I can outdo them if I have a mind to. Any road, one day Christine says I should show what I can do in a proper way. So two years or so ago I started an Open University degree. Can you guess what in?”

“Needlework?”

“Oh, very sharp! No, be serious,”

“Latin? Philosophy? Divinity? Not music?! Give in.”

“Starts with A.”

“Arithmetic? Armenian?”

“Let’s finish the bottle. It’s got to be drunk tonight. Like me.”

He poured us equal measures and sat back in his chair.

“Archeology. The professor reckons I’ll get a First. They want me to lecture when I finish and record programmes for the telly. They like my voice and say I look the part.”

“And will you?”

“I’m not sure. It’s tempting. Dad always says “horses for courses” and I’m not sure swapping mounts half-way through the race is such a good idea. I’ve already fallen on my backside once.”

“Have you come out here to think things over?” I tried to ask him this casually, trying not to stick my nose in too far, though I felt he had invited me to, having already dropped such huge hints about domestic trouble.

“Would you mind very much if I joined you tomorrow on your walk? Only I can tell you do like your solitude.....but not too much...”

“You can? Reading my mind again?”

“Sort of. But I can tell you’re lonely, if you don’t mind me saying. I felt welcome when I joined you.”

This was the second or third time he had been rather forward and personal – or “friendly” as northerners love to deem themselves. I found Yorkshire bluntness disgusting – “tek me as yer find me – that’s ‘ow I’m made” – Yes, a long-hand way of saying bloody rude. I was sure that my companion had no intention of offending me and I put his extra daring down to the wine.

“I do like my own company. But not all the time. You don’t have to have ESP to work that out. You’re welcome, as long as you don’t keep trying to guess what I’m thinking.”

We said good night on the landing. I was dreading he might make some gauche pass at me, thinking I expected it, and ruin everything. However, he bowed like an officer and, with a generous and friendly wink, made his way, swaying very slightly, to the last door on the left. The white head of the old gentleman briefly appeared at the door opposite and disappeared just as quickly under my steady gaze.

* * * * *

THE FIRE

Into the golden glow my stare is drawn
To watch the fire transform the riven wood,
Into essential dust what sturdy stood
And drew from earth all sinew, leaf and thorn;
Our lives the greedy flames of time consume.
Like fire, deprived of substance, time desists,
For substance demonstrates that time exists
And shows by slow degrees our ageing doom;
Am I mere fuel to power the great machine
Which God, the shrewd magician, caused to be?
What recollection will He have of me
And of the tiny fact that I have been?

Must I like other things share this cold fate
Swept out as these grey ashes from the grate?

INSIGNIFICANCE

A limpet, onto life I cling,
This rugged place is all I know;
I am what callous waters bring
In endless tides of ebb and flow.
What mite am I in God's great sea

I had awoken with my notebook on my chest. The window was black and reflected the bedside lamp. I did not need to look at my clock to see it was about four a.m. The utter silence confirmed it. I stared at the two pages I had been writing on. I decided that to draw the limpet analogy out much further would make the second poem ridiculous, but wanted to avoid mixing metaphors. I tore the page out and then had second thoughts, folded it and inserted it between the last page and the cover. It might come to something. I turned out the lamp. I imagined myself on a beach lapped by warmer, gentler waters.

The questions which had been on my mind as I had dropped off to sleep again were still there as I woke at about seven. I never draw curtains to at night. I sat up and watched the busy, wheeling rooks emerging from and re-entering the mists draping the copse nearby and listened in amusement to the squabbles passed down from one generation to another and never-resolved. My curiosity had been deliberately aroused by my companion and I wondered to what end. Was I being subtly seduced? He knew he was a charming and intriguing man and out of the ordinary. Why was he really here, alone, without his "lovely" wife, his childhood sweetheart? What had gone so wrong to make him grateful to God that his daughters had been away from home? He surely wanted me to ask and thence draw me into his web.

I showered and put on practical outdoor clothes. I went down for breakfast, resolved to keep a cool distance and let him make the running. To be on my guard seemed the proper strategy; for all I knew he was a practised conman, manufacturer, not of windows, but of packs of lies, concealing his real motive very cleverly. I would not be the first victim – a solitary, vulnerable lady in a hotel – of dastardly provincial unscrupulousness.

He was not there. I scanned the tables but there were only couples. They paused to look and nod at me and I felt self-conscious. One table, set for two, was empty by the grate, the table where he had sat last night.

“I hope you don’t mind” whispered Mrs Almey, entering with a two plates of fried breakfast for the next table, “Could I sit you with the gentleman you were talking to last night? Only we’re full, as you can see.”

No, I did not mind at all. I was bursting to ask her about my gentleman to corroborate any details he had told me. I realised with a start I did not know his name. Had I told him mine? Mrs Almey took my order and hurried off out of the room. Within minutes she was back. My requirements were not complicated. I sipped my Earl Grey tea and ate my wholemeal toast, expecting him to arrive at any moment and impatient when he failed to. Five minutes became ten and after more than a quarter of an hour I had no reason to hang around. Should I just take off and leave him to entertain himself? No. I took out my notebook and read the sonnet I had written. It confirmed to me that I had no time to waste on silly games. Did I like him?

I remembered then that I had left my precious tablets on my dressing table. When I returned to the breakfast room, there he was sitting on the chair opposite mine, reading the page I had deliberately left open and upside-down. I stood unnoticed in the doorway and watched him slowly murmur to himself the verses. I saw to my intense delight and surprise that he was moved. And I felt ashamed of my unworthy suspicions. He put the book down in the precise position I had left it and stared at nothing. The folded paper I had forgotten completely about fluttered out as he did so. Would he see it? I tried to recall just how morbid it was. He saw it, reached for it, read it and put it in his pocket!

I made my entrance conspicuously and bade him good morning. There was definitely a broken tear in the rim of his eye. I asked him cheerfully if he had slept well. He hastened to his feet and drew back the other chair for me to sit on. I was about to tell him my name but he began to speak – or rather drone on about how sorry he was for talking so much about himself the previous evening. I reassured him that he had not been at all tedious, that his life-story had, on the contrary, been thought-provoking. He asked me, more out of politeness, I thought, than out of interest, to tell him mine, but I declined; how could I make my safe, predictable, middle-class upbringing in any way entertaining? A malicious sprite caused me to add “Anyway, you have your gift! You can probably see my life-pathway laid out, flag by boring grey flag!” I watched him close for a reaction. Instead of a smug smile as I had anticipated, he gave me a look of embarrassment – even shame – and looked away. In fact his mood that morning would be best described as glum.

“You’ve hardly touched your breakfast. Don’t you feel well?” I asked.

“A bit low. The wine I think, on top of the lager I had first. I have a poor head for alcohol. I’ll be fine in the fresh air.”

I looked out of the window. The mist was lifting and over the copse of trees juggling the precarious nests of the rooks, there hung a peachy disc of sun, as easy to gaze at in the misty air at this early hour as a full harvest moon, with which it could have easily been confused.

“It will be a lovely, lovely day” I remarked, picking up my notebook without fuss and taking my tablets with the tea I had kept. He watched. I knew he wanted to know what they were for and I already had an anodyne explanation ready. I wanted to eliminate any pity from the arrangement we might contrive. He decided to mind his own business and I was glad. I felt pleased to feel in control of the situation but as I stood up to leave the breakfast room, I realised with a shock that from his seat the brass plate hanging on the wall to the right of the fire beautifully reflected the open door where I had stood unseen – or apparently unseen – observing him affected – or apparently affected – by my poem.

He had offered to drive us to Swithland Woods and I had construed this – very meanly as it turned out – as a desire to show off his material wealth by way of some rare, exotic motor car. What he drove – and how he drove it – was as unostentatious as everything else about him; his clothes were plain, dull even; his background was ordinary and his manners apparently easy

and simple. Yet his sadness, his secrets, his secret motives, his designs on me and his tactics for achieving them were intriguing. I realised that I was growing - with reservations - to like him very much.

"I'm not really a morning person either," I said to break the dead silence.

"It's OK. I'll liven up presently. Forgive me."

Oddly, I felt flattered that he was making no special effort to put on a show for me, as if I was an old friend he felt comfortable with; then wondered if that was also a subtle tactic. I glanced at him as he stopped to look at a road sign. The creases around his eyes as he screwed them up against the low sun, brighter now, were deep. Of sorrow or joy? No doubt both. I knew somehow that with patience and the right strategy I would discover what the sorrows were. What might I have to offer in exchange to tempt him to tell? Would his secrets be his main ploy? All was not well in his marriage. What solace might he expect?

I had last visited Swithland in spring when the whole place was in a fervour of excitement; now the chattering finches and tits were either gone or had no cause to sing; like a great sleepy animal the autumn wood hardly breathed, just an occasional stir of breeze-ruffled things; the ear-stunning silence was funereal and interrupted only by the dull thud of an acorn falling and the disconsolate squawk of irresolute crows in the highest branches. Tiny gloves of oak leaves and whirligigs of sycamore seeds were spinning in a measured procession down a blue corridor of sky. As we walked, the sun flashed messages through the trees as it broke free from their spindly branches. Here was beauty in death, a richly sweet death, intensely earthy. The silence induced a contemplative silence in us, and if we spoke - to point out a squirrel or a jay to each other - we whispered.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked out of the blue, as we paused to rest on an oaken log, which had been planed flat and polished. I realised I was a little breathless.

"Wrong? Nothing!" I exclaimed. "A bit breathless. Out of condition."

I watched the ghostly mist rise before my face and vanish as I breathed in again.

"No. What's really wrong with you? Those tablets..."

Though surprised I still had my answer ready and I told him casually that it was a touch of arthritis; it ran on my mother's side. The slight wobble in my gait was not put on for his benefit and was adequate, I thought, to persuade him that my white lie was the truth. He gave me an earnest look and searched my face for corroboration of my words. I tried hard to smile but something inside felt broken and I could feel the effect was wrong, as when one tries to look natural for a photograph and the result is a taut distortion of the face. I raised my eyebrows to release the tension and looked away. The mismatch had surely shown that I was lying but he was obviously too gallant to pursue the matter. We walked on slowly. He offered me his arm and instinctively I took it, to my instant regret. To withdraw it would create an awkward distance between us; to leave it there would create more of an impression of affection than I intended. I allowed it to flop there in the crook of his arm like an appendage not belonging to me. Soon I invented a something in my shoe to break the impasse. He smiled and nodded as I emptied out the invisible stone and put my boot back on. I folded my arms around myself. We walked deeper into the wood which is renowned for its lack of signposts as well as its beauty. I realised I had not the faintest idea where the car-park by the pumping station lay. There were two car-parks, the south and the north. But I could not even remember - and nor could he - which was which. My mind had been completely on other issues when we arrived. It was getting on for eleven and we had already decided to drive into Swithland village for a light lunch.

"That way is east," I said. "We should take this path and go north, sort of."

But we soon arrived at a junction with a path leading, maddeningly, west - east. We turned right and the path curved away to the right. Half-an-hour later I felt sure we were back where

we had started. The dull ache I had feared was no longer so intermittent and I felt more breathless. The path to Old John, tower-folly and renowned local landmark, would be too steep for me that afternoon. We took a completely different path and eventually spied cars through the thinner trees and people with fog-breathing dogs. Naturally we had managed to find the wrong car-park. I was determined he would not see my irritation and my discomfort closely linked to it.

“Right!” I said as brightly as I could. “I seem destined to get to know men who are poor navigators. My husband was hopeless.”

“Hold on!” he protested. “Navigation is not the issue, but which end of the woods we parked!” Another path led straight through the woods south. It bordered a stream I had forgotten all about. It took my mind off my discomfort, for I love to hear streams in woods and love to close in on them gradually, until I am standing on a wooden bridge to watch the waters skim over the flat stones which remind me of rounds of water colours in a paint box. I look for tiny hatchlings of fish darting amongst them like the thinnest of brushes. And I can stand for ages watching the subtler shades of those colours swirling and eddying on the surface in constant change. And I love the quiet music of a stream, like a soft harpsichord continuo. This brook was carrying a flume of leaves and by a grassy bank we stopped to watch.

“Only God knows where this old matter will be transformed into new...” I murmured half to myself. “...And what it will be transformed into....”

“I read your poem about fire this morning,” he said simply. I thought he might tell me that he liked it or ask me what I intended to say. But he added nothing and I was definitely never going to ask for his opinion.

“Fire fascinates me,” I said, turning to lean on the bridge-rail. “All motion and change fascinates me; streams, waterfalls, ice-melts, fires, music, clouds....lives....”

“Deaths?”

I shook my head.

“Do you really believe in God, the “shrewd magician”?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so. And you?”

He shrugged and looked at the treetops. “Why “shrewd magician”? You make him sound like a conman almost.”

“A conman? That was never my intention. I don’t know of course, but I think he’s prepared to let us understand any number of his tricks but there are some which he will never explain. I imagine him having a good laugh at us – for example, when everyone believed the sun went around the earth – and now of course the greatest minds are confident that we are on the threshold of cosmic comprehension, but I ask you, what’s the point of a mathematical explanation that less than half of one percent of the populace could understand?”

“I’m not sure that that is the right way to look at it.”

“Well I think the answer is too easy to see – like an impossible crossword clue which, when you fill it in, seems so obvious.”

He looked down at the bank and pointed.

“Like belladonna?”

He was pointing at deadly nightshade. The fraud! He had known all along what his missing answer was! It must dawn on him now I knew his game. He had planned to allow me to impress him! Now his silence and patent lack of awareness of the discovery I had made were designed to confuse me further. What a strange man. I had no wish to accuse him of deceit in case I was meant to, and get snagged on a hook I could not see. But I wondered what line it might lead to. Why did I not feel irritated? I thought I ought to and certainly had just cause.

“It is a paradox,” I said quietly, as if to myself. “Belladonna. Beauty in death. A riddle of God’s.”

“Do you think so? Isn’t that fruit obviously dangerous?”

“Or inviting, like a black cherry, promising sweetness?”

“Don’t touch!” he exclaimed. Absent-mindedly I had reached down to the nearest fruit. It gleamed like a silver-flecked black sun in a corona of five dull sepals.

“What is the point of it?” he cried, nearly in anger, stressing the word point.

“It’s a fruit” I said. “Something must eat it. It must want to be eaten by something.”

“It wants?” he countered, with irritation and surprise at my foolishness in his voice. “How can a berry want?”

“This is where language begins to fail. The fruit contains a seed. But it also contains an impulse, a reason, a rationale; it is the gift of the plant, its bargaining device.”

“You can’t apply human logic to a berry! Imagine it, that thing there, in an unpeopled world. How can blackness be a deterrent if it is stripped of the negative charge we load onto it? If we’re not there? ”

I had him. “Ah! Certain colours – yellow and black, for instance – advertise to *animals* the presence of poison or unpallatability. They existed long before us.”

“But belladonna seeds will not flourish if they kill their host before he can excrete them in his dung. It is a paradoxical berry, you’re right! It needs to be eaten but advertises it would not be good to eat –“

“Just like the blackcurrant and the blackberry” I added slyly, before he could finish. “You see, there are so many riddles. God is playing games.”

I sensed more annoyance on my right.

“Hold on! Which animal *does* eat the belladonna?” he demanded.

“No idea. Which? Are you asking or telling me?”

“Do the fruits simply drop onto the floor? Why aren’t the plants all confined to one area of the world if that is so? Why isn’t it extinct? Something must spread the thing” He caught a whirling sycamore rotor and held it out for me to see. “Something must eat the fruit and feel no ill effect. There is no paradox after all. No riddle at all.”

We saw a berry fall into the stream and float away. He smiled in triumph.

“There, you see! It’s just gravity and water. No animal. No paradox. No riddle!” and he brought his left palm almost under my nose to emphasize the proof with the sycamore seed. This provocation changed my mind and I decided to tease him.

“You did French, you said. Je m’en étonne que vous n’avez pas trouvé la solution pour le mots-croisés! - belladonna” I said coolly. “Did you do French or did you tell a fib about that as well?”

He looked at me first with resentment then with triumph again.

“You want to know why I didn’t find the solution for the crossword? That’s because I had no idea that some women could be so foolish and vain to use a deadly poison as a cosmetic!”

He was angry! I instantly recalled our fireside chat. Why did the thought of vanity annoy him? I could not resist the temptation to score another point and stay on the subject.

“Foolish and vain? One could say it proves how vital the favour of a high-and-mighty man was – still is – with all the cosmetics and anti-ageing creams out there to confuse the inferior womanly intellect!”

“Well I could only do up to O Level, so if you want to demonstrate your superior womanly intellect, carry on spouting French.”

He bent down ostensibly to examine a fungus. I slipped a stem of belladonna into my jacket pocket and zipped it up. We walked on. After a while he offered me his arm again and I consciously accepted.

“Doesn’t your wife enjoy walking?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

“Yes. Normally.” He bit his lip and screwed up his eyes. “Today is a special anniversary.”

“Ah, I see! And you aren’t going? Is it her parents’ wedding anniversary? Don’t you get on with them?”

He laughed – bitterly, I thought. In my marriage the in-laws had regularly been a bone of contention. Perhaps he had had words with his wife. He had nothing to add and I did not press him. The path widened and we came in sight of the pumping station and his car.

“So you don’t believe in God?” I asked as we drove along.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you have faith in?”

The question seemed to discomfort him, for he did not reply and I inevitably supplied the silent answer myself. *Nothing*. I asked him if we could pull in by Cropston reservoir, a favourite spot of mine. We got out and crossed the road. The trees surrounding the water were blessed with an extraordinary beauty. The silver birches were at their finest, draped with a fine patchwork cloak of green and gold; their white branches, tinged with black, put me in mind of bones. The wider leaves of the beeches were a delicate yellow, each an exact copy of its neighbour. Some trees were yet to turn red or gold while others were almost bare. The water stretched, silver blue, into the far recesses of the landscape, sun-starred by the bank opposite, but to our far right, mysteriously, it was a rippled sheet – rippled by nothing, for there was no breeze. The rippling ended abruptly in a straight line, again for no apparent reason, and on the stretch nearest to us the water became uniformly taut and smooth.

I could not recall a more intensely colourful autumn and yet it occurred to me that in years previous I might not have been looking with such a keen eye.

“Utterly breathtaking,” he said.

“And yet there is no-one here to see it but us.” As if to emphasize the point, two cars, one in hot, blind pursuit of the other, came racing past, and then another.

“When I see a scene like this,” I said “I would gladly give up every talent I have for just one – the ability to paint.”

To my amazement the delight on his face vanished. He turned his head away from me and gripped a stone in the wall until his knuckles were quite white. Had my comment sounded so pretentious that he felt disgusted? I could not resist the temptation again to press him.

“Beauty in death. Has it ever occurred to you how different the existence of trees is to our own? We age linearly and progressively; the trees are rejuvenated each spring and undergo this strange metamorphosis a few months later, like a ritual almost.”

He did not comment so I continued, almost maliciously.

“And then there is an apparent death while all the time their new buds are taking shape through the winter. It is strange, don’t you think? There is an oak in the park which would have been a sapling as Lady Jane Grey passed it on her way to be crowned queen. Every spring those crippled branches experience renewal. If I have a spirit, after my death I would love to spend a thousand years just barely awake in a beautiful tree, like sap, on the brink of simmering – serene, compared to this seething of human life.”

“Is your God so kind?”

“I have no idea. I sense I am loved from a great distance. Perhaps he brings us home one day, once we have experienced all the amazing rides at his funfair; perhaps he takes us home like children by the hand.”

“What beautiful nonsense you talk!” he said and squeezed my forearm affectionately. “Please carry on....”

“I sense God’s sadness that He is not loved. His sadness is here in this landscape. I like to imagine he has retreated back to his secret place, a magician trying to find the exact formula to create a Perfection where his most noble being has free will, but also the virtue of obedience and the wisdom to choose to obey and love him. I imagine him collapsing and reforging his creation again and again in a fever of excitement when he thinks he has got it right or is closer.” I studied his face for a grimace but he was staring at me in bafflement. I smiled and asked him

if he was hungry. He nodded. I looked at my watch. I needed to take my medication soon for the pain was quite unpleasant. He continued to stare at me as I said a silent farewell to the lake. "You're in pain," he murmured.

"Just arthritis."

As he drove on to Swithland village I thought about beauty in death; my mind began to fill with phrases and rhymes and I savoured the delight of inspiration. I looked forward to a period of solitude later when I could put pen to paper. I felt a strange euphoria, intoxicating, which set me on the verge of wild laughter and I had to control myself in case he thought me quite mad. I looked out at the world with tears in my eyes; I was privileged to partake in this wonderful, vast drama on the most beautiful set imaginable. I flexed the muscles in my hands, my arms and my legs. I was in pain but I was alive!

In my fervour I did not need the glass of wine he offered to buy, and like him, I drank mineral water. When he went to order the food I quickly swallowed all the tablets I needed to take in the middle of the day.

The village of Swithland is enchanting and The Griffin Inn there, in no way pretentious or snooty, reflects its quiet dignity. It has a patio area which is an absolute delight in summer, with its pergolas and raised flowerbeds within low walls made of the unusual local stone, a blend of dark and light, of which the cottages are also built. The geraniums and daisies were still at their best; I rubbed the rosemary between my fingers and inhaled its pungent fragrance. The midday sun could generate just enough warmth to persuade us to sit outside on a picnic table. We had decided on a smoked salmon salad with gigantic prawns.

"How can your God," he said suddenly as if the question had been burning a hole in his mind and had just fallen through "Allow such misery in the world?"

His naïve question disappointed me.

"God doesn't. Man does."

"What? Earthquakes?"

"Oh, come on! You can't admire an ocean and then complain about the waves! Or the view from a mountain top and cry foul when you fall down."

"Rotten awful things happen."

"It's in the natural order of things. The planet is active, like a great lion! Would you really want it any other way – tame and dull? And I think of God as a provider of materials which we use to build our world. We can build whatever structures we want, as long as they obey the laws of physics."

"And when we decide to build huts at Auschwitz and ovens to burn the bodies, does your God shrug as if to say it's none of his business?"

"Oh look! What sort of a world would it be if he was continuously meddling with us, like toy soldiers, and putting us in our places? How could we ever grow in morality and maturity?"

"Oh, so you think we are getting better – or are designed to?"

"I don't know. And I don't much care, to be candid, whether we are or not."

"What is the point of prayer? Why should your God sometimes intervene and alter the run of events just because he is moved to pity by a particularly fervent or skilled pleader? Rather arbitrary isn't he, your God? I shall never forget when a man I employed fell from a roof. I had to watch him die on the lawn. He was a lovely guy with three kids. "Please God," he kept saying. But his liver was ruptured and he didn't stand a chance. Bled to death. Your God was obviously not inclined to bother with him."

"He isn't my God. And I don't pray."

He looked puzzled and seemed set to launch another salvo and then stopped. Perhaps he saw a danger signal in my eyes.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” I said warmly. “Why are you so bitter and angry?”

He did not reply.

The sun had crept down below the eaves of the pub. I suggested we drive on to the smaller reservoir beyond Swithland. He had never been there and readily agreed. There was water on both sides of the road behind iron railings. A family were busy feeding a gang of geese and mallards which had waddled onto the bank. Haughty swans were swimming indecisively at the rear. A railway line and bridge marked the end of the reservoir. We heard a whistle and stood to watch a steam locomotive, back to front, haul a train of ancient red carriages across.

To my delight a large heron was standing on a branch protruding from the water and for a second I thought he was a statue, he was so still. The scene was again enchanting and I made the cardinal error of pretending I was a painter, holding my hands square, as if to mark out the area I wanted to capture on canvas. To my astonishment my companion turned and walked back to the car. I was determined not to be coerced and stood for a good five minutes longer enjoying the scene on both sides of the road before sauntering back to him.

We drove on in silence and I was feeling ever crosser. His mood was affecting me now. I was about to tell him I needed to go back to Mrs Almey’s when he veered suddenly over into a lay-by. He switched off the engine and turned to look at me.

“My wife was unfaithful to me. There. Now you know.”

I waited a decent while before responding.

“I must admit, that possibility had sort of crossed my mind.”

“I had planned never to tell anyone.”

“So why tell me?”

“Because I’ve been fit to burst. I’m really sorry. You seem so wise. I need help. I can’t sort it myself.”

Any suspicion that this was a tactic was immediately dissipated. He wept.

“You need a drink. Let me drive.”

We swapped seats, I drove off and stopped at an inn in Newtown Linford. We found a dark, private corner and he began to tell me the whole wretched story.

“Vanity,” he began simply. “Her Achilles heel. She has an irrational fear of ageing. She thinks I will fall out of love with her when she is all wrinkles. I agreed to a face-lift and all those other cosmetic bits and pieces, but very much against the grain. It wasn’t the money! By agreeing I seemed to confirm her anxiety, the last thing I wanted to do. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I had gone off to dig a Roman site in the Cotswolds for the weekend. It happened on the Friday afternoon. She did a watercolour course and it was a fellow she knew from there. He flattered her, knew which buttons to press, asked her back for a cup of coffee...and that’s how it happened.”

“How did you find out?”

“A couple of weeks later. It was her birthday and as a total surprise I bought her an eternity ring. I thought she was choking for a minute...she couldn’t suppress it...it all came pouring out as soon as she saw it. I swear I have never felt so helpless and desperate in my whole life. I couldn’t get off my bed for three days; didn’t eat; hardly slept. Have you ever been there?”

“No never.” *Not as a victim, at any rate.* “But you forgave her?”

“Out of nowhere a voice told me to. That’s why I’ve kept on about God today. It was the nearest I’ve come to a religious experience. I got straight up, had a bath and a shave and went down to her. We made love.”

“Do you understand why it happened?”

“I’ve tried to. She said she felt neglected. If I hadn’t got my nose in business papers I was working on my course. As I said, she needs to be reassured – she always has. She needs attention and I forgot.”

As an independent, self-reliant woman I found this description of his wife intensely irritating and he must have read this in my face for now he said

“I’ve made her sound very shallow and self-centred, but she is not. She is clever, loving and giving. She had a very difficult childhood in a home which was emotionally deprived....I’m telling you things I never dreamed would pass my lips. I think that has been the problem. She can’t talk about it. She feels guilty and it upsets her to think about it. Of course, there are always new things I want to know. You can imagine...”

I thought of my own few trespasses and imagined telling my husband the gory details.

“Yes, I can imagine.”

“So every so often when the pressure mounts, I blow. Anything can set me off. I call her all the filthy names under the sun. If she could only answer my questions truthfully instead of shaking her head and slamming the door, I might get it out of my system. I don’t know.”

“And when did it happen?”

“A year ago today. That anniversary I mentioned. Well, the pressure’s been mounting and on Thursday I blew well and proper. I broke half the crockery in the kitchen and slashed the new sofa, bloody fool. She’s my childhood sweetheart. I never in my wildest dreams...I feel so betrayed...I’ll never get over it...”

“Drink your brandy. I’ll get you another.”

I was expected to give advice. I racked my brains.

“Does she not know where you are?” I asked, putting the new glass by his trembling hand. He nodded. He had sent her a text message, he said.

“I told her I needed a few days away to think. She knows I’m around here somewhere.”

“So you’re punishing her then?”

“I suppose I am. But I just couldn’t face today at home. She knows I’ll be back.”

“But might she be gone?”

He smiled ruefully. “I’ve told her many times she can go. I’d give her half of everything. I don’t want her to be depressed and guilty. I’ve told her she can make a fresh start. My life is finished – she can get over it...”

“Ridiculous! You’re how old? Let me tell you what you need to do. You need to find a really good counsellor who can coax you to talk to each other about it... maybe you could write your questions down and your wife could write the answers if she’s too ashamed to tell you to your face. You need to get this in proportion with all the wonderful things in your marriage. Couples come through much worse things than a one-off incident on a Friday afternoon. She made a mistake. Didn’t you ever...you know...?” He shook his head and I carried on. “She let herself be flattered. If she really doubted her attractiveness she probably wanted to see how well she could arouse him. She bitterly regrets it. You need to forgive her completely and remember that voice!”

“I really want to! I could if I knew the whole story. She won’t even tell me the name – says he’s moved away. Won’t tell me where to. That makes me more suspicious.”

“But if she’s too embarrassed and it causes her pain. Perhaps you should leave it be. Knowing things might make it worse.”

“No. I can’t hear half a tale. Imagine you were her and I told you I had had an affair. Now deny you have no questions to ask! What’s the first?”

“Who, I suppose...”

“Closely followed by why, when...how, where, how often...how long, how good, how intense, how meaningful, how passionate...It’s human nature to want to know.” He held his head in his

hands. "I feel possessed and I need some kind of exorcism. I build barriers against all these phantoms but they come in like mist under the door...."

"But that is all they are, phantoms, and that is the key! They no longer exist. But you need proper advice how to deal with it...not DIY efforts....and I have no training....I can only be that ear you've been needing...."

"They exist in her head and they exist in mine because I make them exist and I can't help it. I keep telling myself it's the present and the future which matter, that the past is gone. But it's not, it's there, in her head and in my poor bloody head. It's like a battle ground, day in, day out. To answer your question about faith, I once had faith in her."

On the way back to Mrs Almey's he began to rally. He begged my pardon for burdening me with his problems, he told me that once the afternoon had passed he would feel more his proper self, he asked me if I would dine with him. I hesitated but agreed. On our return we looked at her menu and ordered sea bass and the wine we had drunk the previous evening. I needed a lie-down and fell quickly asleep in my warm room as the light began to fade.

Over dinner he was a different person. He had a very witty side and kept me amused with many tales of disasters fitting window frames. He was charming and warm and the evening which I had half-dreaded in case I had to be his Agony Auntie again, was a very pleasant one. The food was plentiful and delicious and of course the wine was too. All the other couples in the house seemed to have opted for a meal out and the elderly couple had, according to Mrs Almey, been forced to curtail their break because a relative had been taken seriously ill. So we had the snug dining room and then subsequently the lounge to ourselves. Over our last glass of wine he began to tell me about his archaeology digs and the finds he had made.

"After we got back this afternoon an exquisite comb carved from antler suddenly came into my head. I found it amongst the grave goods, in almost mint condition. Yet the skeleton was crumbling away and it took us ages and a lot of patience to lift the bones out. It turned out to be a young female in her mid-twenties. I kept imagining her combing her lovely long hair and admiring her reflection in a pool or whatever. As I stood back from the pit I just wondered where all that hair had disappeared to. Archaeology gave me a fresh insight into the vanity of the world. I lay on my bed today and imagined all the anxieties she had suffered in her short life. I realised what phantoms they all were."

"Life is for living," I said simply.

"But if the woes vastly outweigh the joys, then what is the point?"

He was staring into the fire and I feared he would descend again into his dark thoughts. I needed to find a line to pull him back. It came to me.

"But it all depends how heavy we allow the woes to weigh. Can't you see?"

His face turned slowly from the fire and he looked at me as if I had just solved the clue which he been struggling with for months. Then I recalled something from I do not know where, from somewhere far back in my life, maybe even from childhood. It just welled up inside me.

"We forget the things we should remember and remember the things we should forget."

He looked with increased wonder at me, grasped my hand, sighed deeply and whispered something I could not catch. His eyes spoke his gratitude and then he remembered something. He took out the fragment of poetry which he had stolen from me.

"And is this how heavy you let your woes weigh?"

He read it a loud.

INSIGNIFICANCE

A limpet, onto life I cling,

This rugged place is all I know;

I am what callous waters bring
In endless tides of ebb and flow.
What mite am I in God's great sea

"How morbid," I declared, embarrassed. "I wrote it in the early hours. You can tell."
I asked him to pass the paper to me and let it be drawn into the fire from my hand and disappear up the chimney. He kept his large eyes on me.
"You know you have the most remarkable eyes," he whispered. "But I can tell how ill you are, you know. I can see it in them."

"Just arthritis" I said slowly, trying not to get upset.

"How lucky I am to have met you. You were a godsend."

He took my hand and stroked it very gently. I felt again that warm sensation in my stomach. Oh flattery and vanity! How well they are made for one another! The house was utterly quiet and there was only the murmur and crackle of the fire. On an impulse I undid first the top then the second button of my blouse. I studied his reaction. For a second or two his eyes widened but then he looked down and grimaced.

"Does my throat repulse you? Are you disgusted?" I asked, bewildered.

"Not in the least!" he almost cried out, holding my hand even tighter. "You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever met!"

"Then what is wrong?"

"I made vows."

"But she broke hers!"

Instantly I wished I could take the comment back. It sounded childish and peevish. But it could not be unsaid.

"I've thought about a situation like this. I almost phoned one of those numbers in the back pages of the Mercury. But not to get even and certainly not for gratification..."

"Then why?"

"It will sound stupid. I reasoned that if I had a guilty secret of my own – and even went as far as to confess it to her – then it would cancel out the obsession and pain of her betrayal of me in my own mind. All I wanted was to restore my own inner peace. More amateur psychiatry, I'm afraid..."

"That sounds eminently reasonable to me." I drew his palm to my breast and for a while he let it remain there. I stretched out my legs to touch his, but he suddenly sat back. I felt foolish.

"Please, please do not be offended! Let me explain!" he said. "In the first place it would be wrong to do anything to hurt her. In the second place it would reduce you to the role of an instrument....of retaliation – and you are much too good for that. To have sex outside the context of a proper relationship is just plain vulgar. I couldn't do it. Couldn't. ...physically...and it isn't the wine."

I buttoned my blouse. He was right, irritatingly right.

"You are an unusual man. You sure it's not because you don't fancy me? I was convinced that I was the target in your game from the word go."

"You don't need to fish for compliments. As far as my game is concerned, well yes, I can't deny it was in my thoughts. In another life I would definitely fall in love with you."

"But not in this one?"

At the top of the stairs we embraced and he kissed me on the brow. I left my door unlocked in case he had second thoughts. I realised I had fallen into a kind of love with him. All I wanted, I reasoned, was the warmth of a sensitive person. Other guests returned from their evening out, their laughter faded and soon the landing fell silent. At about one in the morning I heard a door open and I held my breath. Then it closed again and I turned my light out.

* * * * *

The breakfast room was again quite crowded. The table where we had sat on Saturday morning was empty. Mrs Almey was very busy carrying plates of eggs and bacon in and I was in no hurry. She came over to take my order and I told her I would wait. The clock ticked steadily towards nine and still he did not come in. Mrs Almey came back and whispered that she had a little confession to make.

“The gentleman you breakfasted with was very interested in what you did for a living on Friday night and I remembered you played the cello. I hope you don’t mind that I told him.”

Shock was followed quickly by annoyance at my gullibility and his cheek; then to my surprise, and Mrs Almey’s, I laughed out long and loud.

“No, I don’t mind. I’m just wondering whether to go and knock his door.”

“He’s not there. He checked out this morning as soon as I was up. He said he had some very important business to take care of.”

I felt my whole body go very chill. She reached into her pinafore and drew out a note.

My lovely Belladonna,

I had to go early this morning and you will understand why. I wish to thank you from the very bottom of my heart for your kindness, patience and wonderful advice. I will never forget you as long as I live,

James

PS If your God is so distant then perhaps you should take a few steps towards him.

I looked out of my bedroom window at the beautiful scene of the busy spinney and at the bracken beyond, like gold-leaf, in Bradgate Park by the great outcrop of granite; and at the pine forest, to which I knew I could no longer ascend. The day invited me out but I could only decline. I had seen everything I wanted to see. There was beauty in death but now it was tinged with a sharp irony. I turned on my laptop and went to knock on Mrs Almey’s private door.

“Mrs Almey, would you mind terribly if I remained here today? I have important work to do.”

“Aren’t you well? You do look rather pale.”

“It’s my arthritis playing up and it’s quite a lot colder today.”

“No, it’s not as pleasant as it looks. No, of course I don’t mind.”

I turned to go and then asked her if she could let me have the address of my gentleman. She blushed and looked very uncomfortable.

“I would love to oblige but I really can’t.”

“Why ever not?”

“Confidentiality, I’m afraid. It’s a sign of the times. Last year I let a guest have the address of a lady he met here. He said he had a glove of hers which he would post to her. I should have thought and offered to do it myself. It was all a lie. There was no glove. He knew she would not be at home until later that week and that she lived alone. He broke in. The police came here and gave me such a telling-off and I had to pay hundreds in compensation. I promised Mr Almey I would never ever give details about guests to other guests again – that’s why I felt so guilty about telling your gentleman about you. I hope you understand.”

“Don’t worry. Of course I do. I should never have asked.”

“Oh, I need to know. Will you be requiring dinner tonight?”

The question almost made me groan with misery.

“No, thank you. I don’t think so. I’d like to settle the bill now if that’s alright.”

I took out my purse and without looking gave her a number of notes.

“Oh that’s far too much!” she exclaimed and handed two or three back to me.

I began typing and did not stop until well after dusk had fallen.

Exhausted, I stood looking out of the dark window and pressed my nose to the glass until my reflection disappeared. I saw a world where I no longer felt welcome. There were cold stars, there was a dark hilltop with a rose margin, the glow of a valley settlement, there stood the sturdy soldiers of trees guarding the empty slopes, there was the nearby copse, flecked with rooks’ nests, and finally below me the hedged garden of the cottage, a deep pool of pitch dark. I retreated and saw my face reappear and, to my left, the lamp on my bedside table. The yellow light put me in mind again of the fire, and I longed for its warmth.

I saved this account onto a memory stick and left it on top of a note which I had written for Mrs Almey, asking if she might, after all, forward it to my gentleman. I put an apologetic pound coin by the shatterings of the cup I had dropped. I had forgotten completely about my pain which now took hold in earnest. I glanced again at the dark world. I thought of all the pain I was yet to face and felt the full weight of that woe for the first time. I took my painkillers and, searching in my jacket pocket, found the withered stalk and dull black fruit of belladonna. Finally, I wrote up this poem from my scribblings and saved it, before lying down to sleep.

BEAUTY IN DEATH

What other things gain beauty as they fade?
The ways stand ankle-deep in golden floods;
Next spring and summer sleep in autumn buds,
As winter’s heralds hail a fresh cascade.
A gnawing frost, by mellow days delayed,
Crept stealthily last night through silent woods;
Black rookeries in rival brotherhoods
By shocked, depleted sycamores are swayed.
The chiffchaffs and the chaffinches are flown,
Sweet piccolo and oboe notes are mute;
Like broken clarinets the crows lament,
The spirit of the Earth is overthrown
And driven deep in exile to the root
Until the tyrant’s icy claws relent.