

## FOREWORD

I thought I would never see or hear from - or of - Steven Kloss again.

At school we had been desperate friends, both the victims of bullying; I, because I came from unfashionable, struggling parents and it showed; and he, because his dark complexion gave his tormentors all the reason their tiny brains required to label him a Paki. We looked out for each other and became very close. He was the odd product of Jewish father and a mother of Portuguese descent, which unusual combination forged a lively and imaginative mind. Steven was recognised as one of the cleverest boys in the school, a sprawling, unlovable comprehensive in Richmond.

Our English teacher Mr Swann-Price, a dowdy misfit who would surely have been more at home in a grammar school, took a special interest in us, but particularly in Steven, intrigued no doubt by the rarity of such an exotic fish in those unpromising waters, and was adamant that he should try for a scholarship to read English Literature at Oxbridge. At seventeen Steven had incurred his apoplectic wrath when he announced that his true ambition was to become a journalist, to which end he had made up his mind to take a vocational degree in a much less prestigious seat of learning. In spite of all exhortations to read English first and train for a profession later he could not be dissuaded.

Then the world as I knew it came to an end. My poor parents' catering business, always vulnerable to economic chills, went down spectacularly in the recession at the turn of the nineties. Finger buffets were priority Z in that cold climate. The family home was repossessed and I was evacuated with my younger sister from the war of words and recriminations to reluctant, ailing grandparents in Saint Albans until the dust settled. At first Steven and I exchanged letters almost weekly but inevitably the urge to correspond diminished and then vanished altogether.

In airport lounges and on motorway service stations I amuse myself playing a game with the faces. Many, of course, more or less resemble people I know and I imagine that those strangers are those very people, altered by the lives they chose to lead instead of the ones they actually did choose. It is an impossible experiment to run, of course, but I am convinced that a happier or sadder life, with more or less stress and a richer or poorer soil to grow in would, over time, shape the face and body differently. Thus, "Auntie Clare" over in the corner by the plastic palm, lighting a cigarette (Auntie Clare loathes smoking) did not after all become a music teacher but an air hostess. She is naturally now more shallow than she would have been, but the reduced stress has meant fewer lines on her face, and her down-turned mouth, formed by years of disgust at her pupils' conceits, never developed. She had traded in a reduced complexity of intellect for smoother, better looks. And the little comedy actor – David Something – never was discovered and became that disconsolate man in the paint-flecked overalls, him in the queue picking through the biscuits in the basket; he could not make anyone laugh now to save his life.

Then in walks Steven Kloss with an elfin blonde woman. They sit down three tables away and drink coffee. No, it really is him. That black shock of hair, those piercing eyes and nervous mouth are all him. He is a scaled-up model of the boy he was at seventeen, I smile to myself to have the advantage and wonder what trick to play. I have it. I stroll over and in a Scottish accent ask if I can borrow their sugar. He glances up, says "of course" and passes it to me. He

glances again and I grin. Perhaps my moustache and beard are the problem. "Thank you, Mr Kloss" I tell him, and this time he cottons on. He jumps up and we embrace. The girl is gorgeous. I am really surprised. Steven was always so afraid of girls. I compliment him on his conversion to good taste and she glows with pleasure. We have little time. I have a dental appointment to keep in less than an hour. I jot down my email address and he promises to get in touch. We swear we will get together before Christmas for a meal. We hug again and with a final wave I am gone.

That must have been seven or eight years ago. I heard nothing and he disappeared from my thoughts once more. Now here I am staring at this short message.

Hi Jack!

Better late than never. What I've been up to the attachment will explain. Be in touch.

Steve

Is this last sentence a promise or an instruction? I try cavala@btinternet.com several times but am told that my mail is undeliverable and the victim of a permanent error. As for the attachment, well. He always said he would write a novel before he was forty. But is this a novel or a diary? If it is an autobiography then perhaps, to mention my game again, he would have done far better to enter Academia and get down below the battlements of an ivory tower. Was he wondering, I mused, wherever and whatever he might be now, which version of Steven Kloss it would have been preferable to become? In the light of certain events which occurred after 2005 I find the "story" quite disturbing. The question I cannot answer though is what am I supposed to do with it?

## THE EXILES

My world had fallen in. I had been shipwrecked. We had just been chatting away in the kitchen, wondering where to go at the weekend as the forecast was so good. She fell unexpectedly silent and then told me to sit down and leave off cleaning the mussels I was so looking forward to devouring with shallots and parsley. "I have something to tell you," she had said solemnly with a sigh. It was already quite a surprise, shock even, to see an unsuspected aspect of gravity in this happy-go-lucky person I thought I thoroughly know. Did she have a terminal disease? Had she lost her job? Was she pregnant?? - Was the funereal expression of her face part of a ploy to make that surprise, tinged with my great relief, all the more pleasurable?

No.

I had imagined foolishly that I shared a life with her, like Brassens' young lovers, as unclouded as the blue wallpaper they had chosen for their bedroom. We had a lovely home in a select part of Kingston, good, well-paid jobs - me an up and coming young journalist, she in corporate insurance - a circle of close, adoring and adorable friends, a shared love of the theatre and the ballet, two expensive cars, brand new parquet floors throughout downstairs at her insistence, a Mediterranean garden the envy, we felt sure, of all our overlooking neighbours, and a rare, ugly, blue Persian cat.

After she went, and all her possessions have gone, down to the last postcard, trinket, CD and hairgrip - as well as the unprotesting, perfidious cat - as if she has never been there at all, and

after her expensive perfume had almost faded away, I could almost persuade myself that I had dreamt her up or imagined her.

“Did you ever bring the bastard back here?” I had shouted, throwing the mussels and bottle of white at the wall. That question would keep flying across my mind like an advertising banner attached to the back of an aeroplane. This was my father’s home, his bequest to me. She had shaken her head but not enough to convince me. I decided to put the defiled house on the market. There was not a corner of it where I could not imagine her urgent, primitive cries – only, of course, much louder than I could procure - ringing out. The thought of bumping into her, with or without her new lover, filled me with horror. All the places we frequented together - the local supermarket, the shops, the pubs, the bistros, the cinema, our friends, the streets, Kingston and finally London itself - became no-go areas and I knew I would have to get away. The house would sell quicker than a knock-down Picasso.

I recall sitting many a night debating with myself why I had not forgiven her, begged her to stay, stood in her way, promised her the earth, wept, threatened to do myself in, screamed, etc, etc, etc. I took the shaving mirror from the drawer and looked into my rugged face and slowly drank one bottle of red after another - I am not an habitual drinker - and noticed with great guffaws of bitterness that the dreadful torment I felt receded at the prospect and enjoyment of each glugging glassful. I studied myself for external evidence of my inner suffering - new lines or wrinkles - but found none. To my disgust the enjoyment of a Chinese takeaway - I had ceased cooking as well as washing, shaving and working – even relieved the symptoms. Grubby, financial considerations, spoken by a matter-of- fact voice, like a rap, interrupted my grieving; thank God she had no claim on the house; thank God we had not got a joint account; thank God we had nothing to divide up, not even that miserable cat.

Aspects of her I had found less appealing - the bump in her nose, the thinness of her legs, her sometimes less than pristine breath, her materialism and acquisitiveness - appeared to me from a dark nowhere, like slides, and tried to make me feel better.

One evening, after a much less patient Prestidge had phoned from the office, wondering when my return to work might be imminent, and I had told him to stick the bloody job, and as I uncorked a second bottle of wine, the answer came to me. Part of me had wanted her to go. Now, in spite of all the qualities which I loved so dearly in her, and in spite of my determination to sulk and despair for ever and to be the abandoned heroic martyr, my wound had begun to scab over. The healing process by its own automatic volition, without a care in the world or permission of the victim-owner of the wound, had begun. Having been gravely traumatised in my childhood, my body had, I think, developed the resources to throw off more readily that latest affliction. I threw the last bottle in the dustbin, shaved and showered.

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At the time I was twenty-eight. My name is Stephen Kloss. Specialist subject: the search for happiness. I had found little in my childhood and less in my teenage. My school years were memorable only for the bullying I endured. As well as being small I was very swarthy and I was often taken for an immigrant. On the maternal side I am descended from a Portuguese mariner who - so the family legend went – was so appalled by the smell and lamentations of the slaves below in the dark hold that he had jumped ship in London in the 1790s. My grandmother had been a small, passionate woman with burning, dark eyes - her special bequest to me - and when she married, the name Cavala had been lost because she had no brothers and, as far as we could tell, there were no other descendants legitimate or otherwise, on offshoots of the ancient mariner’s family tree. A terrible upheaval in my own family - more of which I shall tell later - meant that I lost contact with my kind, lovely, olive-skinned grandmother when I was twelve. I

had eventually limped home to my father, like a war-child back to London, only to find, to my greater grief, that gran had died.

In my mid-twenties I had managed to trace the family name only as far back as 1809. Cavala sounds swashbuckling but in fact means “mackerel.” In the telephone book the one Cavala I had found politely told me in passable English that he was a recent immigrant, proud owner of a Portuguese fish restaurant in New Malden. Would I care to give him a try?

That conversation had taken place a good three years ago and I wondered if his dream, like mine, had ended in ashes. I was on the point of moving out into a flat and had packed up my precious cooking utensils, some of the few possessions I had not auctioned off. I decided to try the number of A Caldeirada and somewhat to my surprise that same soft, melodic voice, instantly recognisable, came on the line. I reminded him of my former enquiry and he remembered me. I booked a table.

When I walked in it was quite obvious who Felipe Cavala was. I might have been looking at a long lost cousin. He was in the middle of uncorking a bottle but stopped as soon as he saw me and came over to shake my hand. He greeted me in Portuguese but broke into English as soon as he saw I had no idea what he was talking about. He showed me to my table and brought me a menu.

The Portuguese fish stew with mussels, crab and lobster, turned out to be intense and dark and utterly delicious. It was a Tuesday evening and I only counted eight other customers. When I eventually asked Felipe for the bill he brought me an almond liqueur on the house and sat himself down. We chatted. I had perhaps had one glass of wine too many and began to tell him - as I have heard people often do to strangers - of my disillusionment. He was so sympathetic and kind and appeared to know the story already. I almost suspected him.

“Ah, my friend,” he says, shaking his head with genuine sadness “I hear these stories so often. You British have no faith. Why?”

He meant fidelity, I think, but I did not correct him. I told him I was leaving London as soon as possible, as soon as I had tied up my affairs, as soon as I had called on one or two people. As soon as I had decided where to go. He told me he was from the Algarve, from a place called Praianova. He described the Atlantic and the beach and, with a tear, told me of the family he had left behind there.

“You know, Mr Kloss, if you wanted to trace that ancestor of yours it is more than possible that he originates there. In the church records his birth would be registered but, if he died in London, not his death.”

He smiled. An illumination must have swept over my face. His smile broadened. He told me I should go back to where I belonged.

The sombre streets around me felt like the façades of a film set with nothing behind them. I hurried home, unzipped my laptop and went on line. I found a property website for Portugal and clicked on LONG LET. A plethora of villas, apartments and studios came up. One caught my eye and I kept returning to it. It was between Praianova and Altameira. Perhaps it was a good photo, or perhaps it was the vibrant colours of the plants in the front garden and the sheer blueness of the backdrop sky. It was two bedroomed and the monthly rental was very high but well within my means. After the house sale I was virtually a millionaire. I went through the letting procedure and paid a £500 bond by credit card.

The next afternoon, after I had put my pans, my bed and my remaining sticks of furniture up for sale in the free paper, I received an email confirming the villa was mine for the last few days of August until the end of November, with an option to extend. On Saturday week I would be moving in. I had second thoughts. I reassured myself. The days dragged. I tied up all my loose

ends, sorted out my money, pared down my possessions to the absolute minimum, almost changed my mind and then finally packed my bags.

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At last I had arrived. "My" villa was one of a row of seven identical properties. Let me describe it. It had, to the front, a small block-paved area with a swirling Moorish motif. The tall bougainvillea bushes, blooming apricot, white and red, had been trained up the walls onto a high horizontal lattice, and were even more stunningly beautiful than the photograph had shown. They formed a dense, natural awning beneath which a small hire car could fit easily out of the scorching afternoon sun. In the front right corner a sky blue trumpet-flowered hibiscus, exotic and ostentatious, swayed like a dancer in the surprisingly lively breeze, which, I soon became aware, was a regular climactic feature of the Algarve coastline in the late afternoon and evening. To the rear was a patio area, perhaps ten metres by eight, surrounded by a fairly high wall, topped with a balustrade. The only embellishments here were three earthenware pots containing plants resigned, unwatered, to wilt away to a slow death. Beyond the end wall, far below, I could see, standing on tiptoe, crumbling rocks of crimson sandstone tumbling down to a long, golden beach and the sparkling, calm ocean.

The photograph had not lied but had not told the entire story: how isolated and bounded by ugliness the idyll was. Opposite, on the other side of the road, was a long chain-link fence (a very popular choice amongst local barbarians) beyond which there extended a vast wasteland of cactus, scrub, rubble and rubbish. The vivid red soil made me wonder if Mars had once looked this way. On closer examination I saw empty sardine tins and fresh scatters of cat biscuits but could see none of the feral cats whose kingdom this had to be. Above this eyesore was a celestial white hotel surrounded by lush verdure and high palm trees and I could hear the faint strains of pop music coming, no doubt, from the pool area. To each side of the hotel, a random assortment of smaller white blocks, some tall and thin but most squat, stepped backwards and upwards to a jagged rectangular skyline towards which the sun was by now decidedly falling. At the left end of the row of villas there was another sudden wasteland behind its compulsory fence, and at the right end a deep fenced-in pit, perhaps dug out for the foundations of the cellar of a long abandoned hotel project; or a red hell to complement those cool hotel precincts looking down serenely upon it.

The narrow road led, on the Altameira side, first passing a long flight of steps to the beach, to a parade of shops, property and car hire agencies, bars, restaurants and the noisy three storey blocks of apartments which they served. These were populated by Portuguese and, to my surprise, many French people, judging by the cars parked outside. The French, I had always believed, were blessed in their own native land by landscapes diverse enough to make their going abroad on holiday unnecessary. At the end of the road, around a right hand corner there began a steep hill, bordered on the left by a large hotel complex and on the right more businesses. Here there was a steady stream of cars making their way to a large car park for the beach. The hill seemed formidable, I was tired and hot, and so I left exploring there further till another day. I wondered back.

On the Praianova side, past a right hand turn towards a headland, the ribbon development soon faltered and finally gave way to the unremitting, dusty, red terrain which the holiday boom had not been vigorous enough to obliterate. I stopped.

My villa had a short central corridor on either side of which at the front were two identical bedrooms. Then on the right there was the bathroom and facing it a compact kitchen. The corridor opened out into a surprisingly spacious lounge which gave access, through glass doors, to the patio. An open hearth contained logs lying in readiness for the chillier season.

The place was cool and comfortable enough, the furniture decent and the kitchen pretty well, if basically, equipped. I would be cooking for one and not attempting anything very ambitious. I had unpacked my few things and looked at my watch. It was gone six o'clock. I decided to wait until the morning to get supplies from the supermarket I had found. I felt hungry and decidedly thirsty after my exertions and remembered what the taxi driver had said. I took the long flight of wooden steps, driven into the red bedrock on piles, and stepped onto the beach. To my left, past rows of sun beds and parasols which the holidaymakers were now deserting as the evening came on, perched on stilts in the sand was the Bar de Oura. My taxi driver had insisted I try its grilled sardines.

It was that in-between hour when people were getting ready for the pleasures of the evening and the bar was fairly empty. A slim girl who turned to show me, startlingly, an old face was carefully sweeping up sand from the wooden floor.

For a mere seven Euros I would be served six large sardines, a salad and fried potatoes. I had been studying my Portuguese phrase book on the plane and en route from Faro. The waiter listened with patience and politeness as I came out slowly with what I had been rehearsing. I also ordered a a caneca - (kaneka) – a large beer. He smiled and slowly repeated what I had said in a totally different tone to mine and added how difficult a language Portuguese was to pronounce. It had sounded like Serbo-Croat on his lips. But he seemed pleased I had made the effort. He disappeared into the kitchen by the bar. I looked again at the page where the various sounds were explained in brackets after the letters. I had done French to A Level and Spanish to GCSE. That would prove both a help and a hindrance. There are many similarities between Spanish and Portuguese but also radical differences in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (cerveza is – as even the average well-travelled English drunken yob knows - the Spanish for beer, and so too in Portuguese, but is said thervetha in the former and servesha in the latter.) The fishes were delicious - salty and lemony – and came off their bones with ease. I asked the friendly waiter, Nicolau - who proved to be, with his permanently absent twin brother, the co-owner of the Bar de Oura – where fresh fish could be bought locally. He laughed and shook his tiny head.

“Holidaymakers!” he said, waving his arms in the direction of the rocks, “Only supermarkets. No fish.”

I told him that I had a villa and would be staying for at least until December.

“I like to cook. I wish I'd been a chef.”

His eyes lit up. “You want a job?”

“No. No thank you.”

He took my arm and confidentially promised to sell me fresh fish from his kitchen if I came early enough in the morning. He said the season more or less ended in November. Then I would need a car to get to the large supermarket on the edge of town as most shops closed for the winter. I drank another couple of canecas, paid and left my new found friend to attend to his growing clientele.

When I returned breathless at seven thirty I found a note had been pushed under my door. It was on good quality blue paper, with a subtle perfume.

Dearest Newcomer,

Welcome. I would be only too delighted to receive you next door at number six at 8 p.m for drinks.

Yours etc,

Cally Brown.

Cally. It made my heart skip a beat, and yet I was puzzled. As far as I was aware Cally was a fairly modern name for young women belonging, shall we say, to the most recent caste of Britain, the Chavs. It did not fit at all with the image I had instantly construed from the style of the message.

My neighbour should surely be a lady of a certain age, a leathery-skinned divorcee or widow, frustrated, a cynical exile, one of those escapees from the high taxes, the decaying infrastructure and thickening multi-ethnicity of a Britain they were no longer proud to associate themselves with. She had probably been observing my comings and goings from the edge of a twitching curtain and had taken a shine to me. I laughed as I considered whether, and on what criteria - perhaps the hairiness of her chin or the wrinkliness of her face and bosom - I should fight off her advances or not. I showered and shaved carefully. I debated whether I should go or simply reply with a note of my own, thanking her profusely for her invitation but declining it on the grounds of travel weariness. The beer had made me slightly light-headed and reckless. I decided to take a chance.

There was a chorus of crickets serenading me as I stepped out at ten past eight into the golden, disappearing light. I knocked boldly on my neighbour's door and waited. The front yard was beautifully laid out with tubs, urns and hanging baskets giving a whole spectrum of vivid colours. Pretty ceramic tiles, scenes of the Algarve, were arranged tastefully by the sombre front door. She certainly had a flair for design, my neighbour. For some reason I thought of Wayne Sleep, the dancer. He had a low-caste name but was a high-caste performer. I began to see the figure, whose light footsteps were now approaching, as a younger woman after all, a Bohemian in a richly embroidered kaftan, dripping with earrings and jewels, her slender arms hoop-la-ed with large bracelets of wood, silver and gold, ending in slender, tapering, artistic hands finished with red fingernails. She had come out here to paint the impossibly blue sky and sea – and for romance. She was a fugitive, yes, but only from the dowdiness of Britain.

A long, ridiculously thin pole of a man opened the door. He was wearing white shorts, an open mauve shirt and little else. I gasped. I apologised – I had come to the wrong house. His long, gaunt face broke into a repulsive broad grin.

“Do not look so surprised, young man. Please, do come in. Cally Brown at your service.”

I gulped. I could not speak. At his service? Was he a passive homosexual?

I stalled. An uglier man I had never seen. His chin looked like the man in the moon's in my old story book. His head was a ruddy dome poking through a pointless fuzz of colourless hair, like a rounded mountain through clouds, and he had a ginger hitleresque moustache. He stood aside and made a courtly sweep of invitation with his long arm and smiled again.

“Please, do come in,” he repeated, without a hint of impatience. His voice was deep, like an echo in a cave. Did he sound vaguely Cornish? I followed him into his lounge and stopped to admire the décor – the white walls, the dark parquet floor, the oriental carpet as richly colourful as his front yard, the cream buffalo leather sofas, the coffee standard lamp and, along both long walls reaching to ceiling, dark bookcases containing his vast library. On the two short walls were four Lowry paintings, industrial scenes in filthy cream, brown and black but with few people, alongside whom, scaled right down, dressed in a long overcoat and bent double, my neighbour could easily have fallen in. In the corner to my right stood a baby grand piano.

“You like?” he enquired, seeing I had involuntarily stopped, as he must have expected. “Philip Lowry was a distant cousin of my late second wife's. She wrote and asked him for a couple and he was such a nice man. Lo and behold....”

I gasped again. I was looking at hundreds of thousands of pounds. But what impressed and gratified me more was the mention of a wife. Harpsichord music was playing quietly from no obvious source. I turned to look at the collections behind me in tooled leather of green, dark

blue and burgundy and ran my finger along the plays of William Shakespeare, until I reached and lightly touched *The Tempest*.

My eyes were drawn to his long, gnarled feet - reminiscent of a fabulous beast's - his long, bony legs and prominent ribs. He was brown, almost black in the faded light and his lamp-like eyes were searching me for clues.

"Ah! An intellectual I see."

I frowned in puzzlement.

"Most people study the carpet. You looked at the paintings and the books. Please come through."

He pushed open the doors and we went out onto his yard which faced south.. A white telescope in the left corner, pointing upwards and south-east, was the first thing I noticed; and then the alternating red and white bougainvilleas intertwining with the balustrades along both walls. The whispering growl of the ocean drew me to the back wall and I admired its twilight dark blue calm. The sky changed by imperceptible gradations from pale blue at the horizon, to stone above me, to dusk behind my left shoulder where stars were flickering into view or already shining steadily. The headland I had walked past on my initial exploration now lit up, golden red for a few moments in the slanting rays of the setting sun, and I noticed for the first time two villas, the first about a quarter of a mile away, and the second at the very edge of the cliff partially behind trees and set against the ever starrier sky. I had never seen a more enchanted seascape. The redness faded and turned charcoal, as if a fire had gone out.

My growing feelings of warmth towards the place, - increased by my alcoholic light-headedness - at that moment turned, in spite of - and due in part to the deep wounds it had been sustaining through human activity - to an unrequitable love.

"Drink?"

A cork popped. I nodded my head and finally turned back to face him.

"You are upset."

"No." I protested weakly.

"Most sensitive people fall in love with this place, imagining how it was in its pristine state before Man arrived, and pitying the mess it is becoming. I did. White wine? I only drink white wine. Do you have a name?"

He was bending over a low table, tiled in yellows and reds, filling large glasses with a pale green wine which splashed up against the sides. An empty bottle stood on a slab. Another full bottle stood in a cooler.

"Vinho verde. Come and sample it. Tell me what you think."

I told him my name and where I was from. The mention of London made him smile ruefully but he said nothing. As we seated ourselves his massive face, which had glowered and towered above me, came adjacent to mine. His spindly legs shot out in front of him and he crossed them over at his knotty ankles. He said cheers and we chinked glasses. The wine was cool, dry and fruity.

"You like?"

I nodded.

"Saturn will be up presently. Have you ever seen its rings, Steven?"

"No, never. But I'd like to."

"It is the most beautiful object in the night sky."

To say I felt overawed by my neighbour would be putting it mildly. I felt ridiculous and ashamed to recall the very shallow conversation I had imagined with Ms Cally Brown. I wondered whether I should delete or amend the curriculum vitae I had prepared in the shower.

"Are you here for just the usual two weeks? On your own?"

"I'm a journalist on the run. I needed to get away. Life was getting stale. I split up with my girlfriend, sold up the family home and, hey presto, here I am. For a while anyway. Looking for



interesting material for articles – maybe even a story. You can probably see I have Portuguese blood in me. I want to trace my ancestor – a Senhor Cavala? He might have come from near here? Praianova?”

He frowned as if he disapproved. Had I sounded so trite?

“You have that peculiar new intonation, Stephen. As if everything is a question?”

He smiled. I blushed.

“Mr Mackerel. Mmm. It’s a fair bet he was from here. I might be able to help. Drink up.”

He had already drained his glass. He asked me what my Portuguese was like and I told him with a laugh that it was not like anything.

“I could teach you. It makes a difference. The Portuguese are a proud race. Come on, drink up. Let me fill your glass.”

“I’ve already had three beers.”

“Oh, this is not so strong – no tem muito alcool – only ten percent – dez por cento.”

He topped me up and filled his glass to the brim, sucked at it, swilled it around his palate and let it go with a great aah! We had just begun the second bottle when he ceased interrogating me and started to talk about himself. The lanterns on the patio had come fully on and taken over from the sun which had slid down behind the flat roofs on the hill behind. It must have been on the very point of setting because the sky above it was bathed in a final flourish of rose.

“I came here in the late eighties after a vaca got re-elected by those stupid bastards, the Great British electorate.”

“A vaca?”

“The cow. Thatcher. Were you alive then? How old are you? Thirty?”

He leered, I thought, at my callowness.

“I’m twenty-eight – twenty-nine in January!”

“So...It’s 2004 now...No, idiot!....2005! You would be a one-year-old.”

“No. Minus one. I was born in 1986.”

“Innumerate fool! Maths not my strong suit. Here, hold your glass out.”

I drank a little to be polite and make room for another gush of wine.

“Yes, I reasoned that if she and that madman-cum-moron actor fellow were really going to be stupid enough to provoke a first strike from those proud, desperate Russians then the south-western corner of Europe was the safest place to be. Prevailing westerlies – not a lot of fallout. I tell you, we came closer than anyone would dare admit to a war. Well, I resigned my lectureship in English literature, left my third wife – she refused to come - thank God – she was planning to vote SDP, would you believe! – I ask you SDP! Sounds like a sexually transmitted disease now, does it not! There was Labour, bent over studying its own arse for Trotsky entryists, when all the time Owen and Rodgers and Blair and Brown were making themselves comfortable in the front porch! Treachery.”

I had to admit to him that I only had a faint idea of what he meant, but he sailed on as if I had not spoken, then stopped. What I had said now registered and he gave me a brief history lesson about the eighties and the demise of the true Labour Party.

“Shirley was the big surprise and disappointment, of course.”

I needed to sound interested and intelligent. “Was that her name? Shirley?”

“Who?”

“Your third wife?”

He barked out a laugh like a thunderclap.

“NO! Shirley Williams. Ex-Socialist. Bad hairdo-woman. What have you all been learning at school since I emigrated?”

“We only did as far as 1945” I explained lamely. Disgusted, he went into the villa and re-emerged with two more bottles. He did not exhibit one sign – not one slur, not one totter – of

inebriation. I never would see him get drunk because, despite all his efforts, I do not think he could.

It was dark. The sky glittered with stars. There was one fixed point of light, quite high. Was it Saturn? Should I remind him of his promise? While he was uncorking I went over and looked through the eyepiece. It was focused on a terrestrial light. I moved my head away from the telescope, looked up at the headland and saw that the light was the solitary one shining from the farther villa. What a strange astronomer, I remember thinking. I returned to my chair and he filled our tired glasses.

“And how far have you been?”

“How far have I been where?”

“Up to the main road? The dual carriageway?”

“No.”

“Up the hill?”

“No.”

“Cardiac Hill they call it. Cardiac Hill is good. It keeps the vulgarians up there because the lazy fatsos might get down but they cannot get back up.”

My head and ears were numb. I was sure he had said Bulgarians.

“I’m surprised that there are tourists from Bulgaria here. Are they so fat?”

He stared at me, opened his eyes wide, tipped back his head and roared with laughter. It was a hideous sight. The tendons and arteries in his throat tautened and bulged and his windpipe looked alien, like a spine. He showed me every black, yellow, stunted tooth in his head.

“No, vulgarians! The English working class. The most inbred, most tasteless, most tattooed, most corpulent, most drunken, most flabby, most obese.... most unhealthy, most stupid, most noisy, most pallid, most scruffy, most jingoistic, most ill-informed, most football-fixated, most materialistic collection of people on planet earth. Apart from that, they are alright. You haven’t been up to The Mile yet?”

“Is it a bar? A club?”

“No. It’s the Golden Mile of Altameira. Have a look tomorrow. If you are after bling, cheap booze, tasteless knick-knacks, bad paintings, televised football, all day breakfasts, stale fish, cheap Eurofizz, cod and chips, then that is your Mecca! You could write about the vulgarity of the English abroad. There are plenty of stories up there waiting to be penned. Most of their hairlines start a half-inch (a centimeter?) above the bridges of their noses. The English brain is, I’m afraid, slowly shrinking due to ferocious inbreeding and a poor diet, both intellectual and nutritional. We could do with a bloody good war.”

The lights had gone on next door and a scraping chair attracted Cally’s attention. He began to speak louder so that they could hear his every word.

“My neighbours this side – you will just love ‘em -” He stopped to howl again, “They own two chipperies up there – they even have one of those neon pie signs on the wall – does it read puker pies?”

“No. Pukka pies,” countered someone over the wall in a weary stage whisper, as if they had just heard the jest for the hundredth time.

“They sold up in Walsall - which town I am reliably informed has the worst body-mass-index statistics in the whole of the civilised world – oh, sorry, and a new art gallery – it is probably stuffed full of paintings of gypsy women, cute doggies and thatched cottages - sold up to escape (whisper it low) asylum-seekers and immigrants. They are Stan and Maureen Tranter. He’s as wide as he’s tall - wears his shirt – when he wears it – (disgustingly wobbly beer-dugs when he doesn’t!) – outside his trousers to hide his gut – one of those types. When I point out he is an asylum-seeker and immigrant himself, he does not like it. He is a man of property, a man of business, not a scrounger, he says. When I point out that his obstinate refusal to learn Portuguese equates precisely to the monoglotism of those shy ladies in saris he criticises for not

integrating in places like Blackburn and Birmingham he can only shrug. I just like to wind him up and look at his wife. She is slender and gorgeous. She has had so many face-lifts that her navel is half-way down her back and will probably end up on her arse.”

I felt my face grow hot. He fell silent to wait for a reaction.

“We can hear you, Cally,” said that faint sing-song voice again from beyond the wall. I saw to my consternation a large, red football face appear amongst the white bougainvillea between two pillars.

“What are you like, Cally Brown?”

A chair scraped again and next to that face appeared a far prettier one obviously belonging to Maureen.

“You’ll cut your mouth wide open on that tongue of yours one of these days,” she said, almost without moving her lips, in an alto version of her husband’s accent, which Cally now proceeded to mimic perfectly.

“Maureen has such tight cheeks nowadays that she is a ventriloquist,” he said, pretending not to notice them at all and turning confidentially to me. “She sounds as if her mouth has been pumped full of novocaine.”

I could not help but giggle and then felt very embarrassed.

“Who’s your young friend?” she asked.

“Bring yourselves round and I will do the honours. He is a neophyte. Bring a bottle.”

Stan was huge. His wife was so slim and petite I wondered how they managed it. Cally seemed to read my thoughts and laughed out loud, nodding vigorously. She was very pretty. I studied her for a sign but she seemed not to have the least interest in me. She had brought an ashtray around with her and was filling it steadily. Stan was an ironic name for her husband because he resembled somewhat the other half of that comedy duo, Oliver Hardy, minus the Hitler moustache - which Cally had adopted. My host clearly had a great deal of affection for his neighbours as they had for him. We had somehow got onto the subject of chips and Stan was in his element.

“It ain’t junk food!” he protested at Cally’s latest jibe. “Chips cooked in good oil are brilliant for you, and fresh fish in a light batter- well you can’t eat better. The English have been eating them for decades now, you can’t blame fish and chips for obesity. It’s sugar and burgers, innit?” He turned to me and breathed his hot beery breath on my face. “I’m telling you Steve, any time you want a bag, you’re welcome. I’ve got two shops – one on The Mile and one on the main road. I’ve made so much money I can afford to employ people to run them for us. Me, I was a nobody, wage-slave – I used to work in the engineering. So then I go and get made redundant, don’t I - so Maureen says, Stan I’ve allays wanted to run a fish and chip shop, there’s a premises vacant on the high street, why don’t you sink your redundancy into that? So we took our chance, didn’t we Maureen?”

She nodded and stubbed out another half-smoked cigarette under Cally’s loathing eye. “The Pakis can do curry but they can’t do chips for toffee,” she said.

“Chips for toffee!” roared Cally.

“Shurrup, grommet-gob! Don’t interrupt. Anyway, yes, they don’t get the oil hot enough.

Result: soggy chips. We made a point of frying a batch first till they were nearly done, letting them rest, then finishing them off in really hot oil. Well, we had them queuing out the frigging door.”

“So I says one day to her, I’m fed up of supporting all these bloody scroungers and claimants and asylum seekers – I started to feel as frustrated as a thalidomide victim with a ten inch erection – just bloody ignore what Mr Smartarse here says - why don’t we sell up lock, stock and barrel and open a business abroad? The rest is history.”

Stan sat back in his chair and drank his wine. Cally was chuckling but his eyes were mean.

“Cally’s English but says he hates the English,” said Maureen. “We can’t make the traitor out.” “Stephen, you just walk up there at dawn, as I used to do, and see them sweeping up all the rubbish those savages throw down. Mingle with the crowds, sneak onto the Vilamor complex – that enormous concrete dumb-fun-factory – and just look and listen. They are the scum of the earth.”

“No, Cally,” said Stan. “The salt of the earth. Come on, they’re not so bad. They come for a fortnight to forget all their cares and woes and get a bit of sunshine. There here today and gone tomorrow. They ain’t great brainboxes, true, but they’re alright. Cally hates people.”

“If I do then why am I sitting here talking to you?”

Maureen joined in. “What did you call yourself? A mis-an-what?”

“Misanthrope,” he replied. “Disillusioned ex-communist, the worst sort.”

Maureen gave him her sweetest smile and blew him a kiss.

“You know you’re all talk, Cally,” and looking at me again she said behind her hand “The milk of human kindness flows in his veins really.”

“Vinho verde you mean!” exclaimed Stan and roared at his great flash of wit. “He ought to have a liver like a barrel. You won’t believe this, Steve, but when we first came three years – no four years ago – we got talking about units. Was he doing much more than the recommended? And you know what? He thought I meant twenty-one units a day was the limit, not a frigging week!”

“I have told you Stan, I am an alcoholic, not an alcoholic. If you can have communists, tourists and all the other bloody pointless -ists then you can have alcoholists. Why not? I do not overeat. I am in good health. For breakfast I have fresh pineapple and melon, for lunch, grilled mackerel or sardines and for dinner more fruit, salad or a yoghurt. I never touch a drop until seven. I would rather be my size than your size! You did not get like that eating lettuce. How does he manage it Maureen? Drink?”

The bottle was empty and he went to get another. The ambiguous question appeared to amuse Maureen and she shook her head slowly. She looked at me again and in his absence whispered “Don’t believe half he says, Steven. He has a heart of gold really. Last year a little Portuguese girl from the flats went missing on the sands and he was out all night looking for her with the rest of us. She was found wedged in the rocks when the tide went out. He cried for days. I could hear him.”

I could not drink another mouthful of wine and when Cally returned I apologised, thanked him and said I was very tired after my long day. He made one attempt to dissuade me but I was soon on my way. As I was leaving I felt sure Maureen winked at me but later as I lay in bed reviewing my evening and my first encounter with Cally Brown I put her wink down to a tight muscle tic.

I had mentioned to Stan that I wanted to buy fresh fish and the next morning he came round at ten to suggest going to catch some. He had a spare rod.

“We can wade out a few yards and catch sea bass and mackerel – the stupid buggers almost jump out at you. You needn’t buy them from me or Nicolau.”

“And sardines?”

“No. They net them from trawlers in the bay. But fresh mackerel is a wonderful oily fish – it tastes totally different from supermarket ones.”

We walked down to the beach. For such a large man Stanley (as he preferred to be called) was surprisingly nimble and seemed to be puffing and panting less than me as we trudged through the heavy sand. He stopped to get a better grip of his rod and smiled at me.

“Whatever that Cally says, learn to take it with a massive pinch of salt. He’s had – from what I can gather – a very unhappy life. It’s written in his face. Been married three times.”

“So he said. What happened to number one?”

“Oo, he don’t want to talk about her. I asked him once and he clammed up for a good half-hour... Which is no bad thing really! He lost wife number two to cancer.”

“Oh dear.”

“She went behind his back.”

“He told you that?”

“To forget her he married number three.”

“And now he has nobody.”

He winked mysteriously and walked on.

“Didn’t he mention Merve?”

“No! His girlfriend?”

“Sort of, we reckon. She was there last night.”

“She was? Where?”

“In the house somewhere. She’s shy. Can’t speak English. Why the bloody hell should she? She’s his housekeeper-companion. She came over illegally via Italy from Turkey - so he says. He found her trying to sell herself - near the beach hotel – the big one on Cardiac Hill. He took her in. She’s only nineteen or twenty, poor kid.”

“Cally is a strange man. Ferociously intelligent.”

“Too bloody clever for his own good! He sees things I would never dream about. Things upset him. He’s been on his own too long. Lone people get things out of proportion, I reckon. My brother, God rest his soul, lived on his own when he divorced and he went dead weird. You need a missus to chamfer the corners and sharp edges off you, if you know what I mean. Right, here’ll do.”

The beach at this point near the black rocks was deserted. The tide was just beginning to turn and flow. Stanley baited our rods with something grisly and unspeakable and we waded out in our shorts with bare feet to the point where the waves were tamely breaking. The beach sloped gently and the retreating water sucked deliciously at the soles of my feet.

“We need to cast out to just past yonder rocks. The big fish congregate there. Watch me.”

He let his rod tilt back and whipped it forward, sending the reel into a spin and letting the line drop far out to sea. After one complete balls-up and a few half-hearted attempts I managed to place my hook not very far from his. The swell rose and fell but the sinker seemed to stay put with its weights. We waited. I realised that every muscle in my arms and legs was taut. I relaxed and watched. The sun-spangles in the water were so bright I began to lose sight of my float. Had it disappeared? I made a note to buy some shades. I squinted. All of a sudden I felt a tug.

“You’ve got one!” he shouted. “Pull up – that’s it! – Now, reel in nice and steady – turn the reel – good lad!”

I felt the weight and watched the rod bend until I was sure it would snap. Slowly I reeled in my fish until the fight began to go out of it. Its belly flashed in the sun amongst the diamonds. It was a beautiful silver sea bass! He grabbed the exhausted beast and clopped it with a small mallet. I carried it back to our bucket and proudly but rather sadly dropped it in. He would be the first of our catch of five bass and two mackerel, the rest, after my beginner’s luck ran out, down to Stanley. Each would be more than enough for a square meal.

It was past twelve when we decided we had caught enough. The sun was burning the little bald patch on the back of my head and Stanley was sweating. He offered to buy me a beer at the Bar de Oura which we had left far behind us on our way. I accepted. Nicolau was as pleased to see us as I was to see him. He looked in the bucket and clapped his hands.

“Steven here won’t need to buy his bloody fish from you, Nicolau! You should have told him the stupid buggers jump onto the rods here, you fraud! Bring us two pints – and fill them up proper, not half-way down with froth! You already serve it in those pathetic undersize jamjars!”

Nicolau put his fingers in his ears, screwed his eyes up and went off, leaning crazily first left then right. He flicked back the tap, half poured the beer and set the glasses aside to let the foam settle.

“You don’t speak the lingo then?” I asked as we waited for Nicolau’s return.

“I speak two languages, Steve – Black Country and Bad. The locals speak such good English and they like to show it off. Cally’s fluent but he’s been here ages. And he’s clever. I’ve got better things to do than listen to language tapes and sit studying phrase-books. Put it this way – I’ve never got in a mess yet. Maureen tried then gave up. Ah, here we go! Cheerio, down your neck!”

The lager was very welcome and I was soon signalling to the counter for a second to be poured for us. The bar was much less than half-full. It was still rather early and the bodies on the sun beds out front, which Nicolau also turned out to own – this part of the beach was his concession – were not yet rousing themselves for lunch. As we had walked past, the voices, the paper backs and newspapers, and the redness of the skins, showed this to be a mainly English area, with a scattering of Dutch. My companion waved in the direction of that sepulchral white building I mentioned, which stood above the wasteland and said they were probably from there, a time-share apart-hotel.

“The Portuguese go and set up on the free beach further down. They can’t afford thirteen Euros a day for two beds and a parasol. You see the thin guy going round collecting the money? He’s Nicolau’s nephew, Lucio. His English is brilliant and he’s really interesting to talk to. On his days off he goes out fishing and sells his catch to the bars and restaurants. These people work bloody hard, I tell you. They have to. Nicolau had to sell his soul to the bank to raise the money for this bit of sand. Thirty-odd years ago they were all fishermen or peasants, shitkickers.”

I watched an African, as thin as a feral cat, walking between the sun-beds with an array of watches in his hand, barely pausing to acknowledge the curt head-shakes from the holidaymakers. He came up into the bar, passed surprisingly quickly between the tables and left.

“You know Steven, I’ve never seen one of these guys sell a watch. They don’t really seem to try. Or sunglasses – that’s their other stock-in-trade. I think they live on fresh air, one or two apples and a crust a day. They come from Mozambique and a lot are illegals from other parts of Africa. The police and the locals just about tolerate them. And the gypsies and Romanians. There’ll be trouble though one day when it all goes tits-up.”

“Why should it?”

“Big recession brewing, our Steven. We’ve been having a big party for ten years, all on tick. It can’t go on for ever. Why do you think those poor people Cally despises are here in such numbers? It’s all courtesy of Visa. By the way, if your money’s in a building society back home then take it out and put it in a proper bank.”

I laughed. He shook his head.

“Don’t take me for a red-neck. I’m a businessman. It pays me to read the financial pages. Believe me, there’s been that much mortgage-lending going on of British money to the Yanks at low interest. They’ve remortgaged, spent it and will never be able to pay it back. The shit will hit the fan one day, it’s just a question of when. Watch Cally’s vulgarians try and borrow cheap money then! Places like this will be ghost towns. My money’s in energy shares. Ah, look! There’s a lad selling sunglasses! Do you still want a pair?”

He put his fingers in the sides of his mouth and whistled loud. The black man looked up and Stanley beckoned him over.

“Only offer him five Euros,” he whispered.

But I felt so sorry for him I paid him the twelve he wanted, leaving my friend shaking his head at my greenness. A distant voice, chanting the same mantra, over and over, became clearer. It sounded Liverpudlian.

“Agua gelado! – Ice cold water!”

I peered down the beach in my new shades and saw a tall, skinny figure walking almost at forty-five degrees, wearing a shoulder strap from which hung a huge plastic box. His cry sounded pained, almost despairing.

“Is he still around?” exclaimed Stanley, lighting up another cigarette. He coughed. “He worked for me in the chippy for a week or two, but wanted another two Euros an hour. I told him to piss off. And he did. I can’t believe this pays better. He must buy the tiny bottles from the supermarket.”

I pitied him as he walked past in the broiling sun until his cry gradually faded away.

“What a way to have to earn a living,” I murmured.

“He doesn’t have to. There are plenty of easier jobs on The Mile. Don’t feel so sorry for the world. It just about gets by and takes care of itself. You’re too kind....Which brings me to talk about why I really called round this morning. I’ve got a proposition to make. Wait until Nicolau brings the beer.”

Nicolau slammed down the foaming canecas, picked up the empties and scooted off to another table. It was fascinating to watch him move around so effortlessly, like a dancer knowing in advance every step he needed to make, swaying out of the way of people and obstacles and never putting a foot wrong.

Even though the nearest customers were four tables away and completely absorbed in the menus and their own company, Stanley dropped his voice to a whisper.

“Right, hear me out and don’t interrupt. Most afternoons I’m in Vilamoura or Faro even, in the van picking stuff up – spuds, oil, fish or pop, whatever.

You know what I mean?”

“Ye-es. And?”

Did he want to set me on, I wondered? To help him fetch and carry? He dropped his voice even lower.

“Well if the van’s gone, I’m gone, Mo won’t drive it. She sits in home or on the patio reading her magazines – she’ll have nothing to do now with the business. She’ll tell you it took months, when she finally packed it in, for the smell of fish and grease to go from her hair and pores and nose. She worked like a black back home in Walsall to build the business and I allays promised her, when we were rich, she could have what she wanted, fix herself up and do her face and figure. Trouble is now, Steven, look at me, I’m over the hill, 56. She’s 52 going on 45. She’s about given up nagging me to lose weight. She reckoned if I lost three or four stone I’d be more up for the old rumpy-pumpy. But, truth to tell, I like myself as I am – I eat what I like, drink what I like. I prefer to count me money and go fishing than have a bit-of-the-other, these days. In every other way me and Mo get on great – we’re big pals and love a laugh....Besides which, we’ve been married thirty-five year, and it’s a bit hard to keep the old fire burning.”

In spite of this third beer my mouth had gone dry and a strange chilliness was fluttering in my guts. Was he going where I thought he was going?

“.....I’m not a jealous man – and to be quite honest Mo has a bit of a chequered history, if I can put it like that - and I’ve told her that if she wanted somebody – just occasionally, nothing serious – somebody kind and considerate, who we both liked, to call on her, I wouldn’t really mind. Just to give her a bit of sparkle and keep her ticking over.....Oh, I’ve shocked you!” What my expression was like I could hardly imagine. Was he really offering to lend me his wife as easily as he had leant me a fishing rod?

On the way back he chatted and jested as if he had completely forgotten what he had said. I could not speak. In my kitchen I watched him fill my sink and let my two bass and a mackerel slide in.

“I’m off to Vilamoura at two, when I’m sober. I’ll be back about four.”

Then with a clap on the back and a huge wink he left me. When I turned I noticed there was a slip of paper on the table.

“Four knocks on the door and Mo will know the caller is in the picture and has my approval. It’s up to her when she looks through the spy-hole whether to open up or not. Your absolute discretion would be much appreciated.”

Stanley

When Stan had driven away I knocked only twice, very loudly on her door, and asked her if she wanted anything fetching from the supermarket. As she rolled her eyes round, like a pretty doll, and thought the offer over, I examined her face for signs of complicity, embarrassment or disappointment. She was as expressionless as the night previous.

“I could do with some washing up liquid. You’re very kind Steven.”

I asked her if I could borrow their Fiesta and she fetched the keys. She told me how to find the proper supermarket on the dual carriageway.

I bought a load of stuff and was back within the hour. The alcohol was still in my system and making me reckless again. I parked. Very deliberately I knocked four times and paused for five seconds before adding a fifth. This time she seemed a little flushed as she opened the door about five inches. I thrust the bottle of liquid forward and smiled as sweetly as I could manage. Her vacant eyes widened and then fell in modesty to contemplate my shoes.

“Let me pay you, Steven. Come in.”

I followed her into the kitchen. She opened a tiny purse and pressed a two Euro coin onto my palm.

“Stanley’s out.”

“Yes, I know he is. In Vilamoura.”

“You caught a few fish then?”

“A few.”

“You don’t have a lot to say for yourself, do you Steven? Coffee?”

“I’ve always been quiet, Mrs Tranter.”

“Oh call me Maureen.”

Did her hand tremble as she reached for the kettle? Her round pale eyes seemed a little dilated but she avoided my steady gaze just as soon as she sought it. Was she trying to read my intentions? I had not intended to make her nervous and I decided to lower my eyes. Her thin chicken legs and knotty feet in flip-flaps betrayed her true age and she seemed to become conscious that I was looking at them because she began to skip about almost as she fetched down the cups and opened the fridge door. I felt sorry for her in her desperation to postpone the inevitable encroachment of time. Stan was selfish to allow himself to become so gross and impotent. She deserved better. Should I take pity on her? The word pity brought me to my senses. I had a sentimental and romantic streak and was not the type able to perform at the drop of a hat – or rather the drop of dingy grey knickers. She pushed my mug of coffee towards me and sipped her own.

“So what did you and Stanley talk about besides fishing?”

There was a breathlessness, a tremor in her voice and I instantly recalled a fat, freckly girl I had known in the sixth form who had pulled me down onto a sofa at a party and frightened me to death.

“Besides fishing? Oh, this and that.”

I could see that she knew precisely what we had discussed. Did I sense her angling for me? I needed to be in deeper, colder waters.

“He mentioned Cally. What a sad life he had had. He mentioned his young housekeeper.”



“Oh, she’s lov-ely! Stanley thinks he and her are – you know – but I ain’t so sure. She could be his granddaughter. He’s in his early sixties you know.”

“But where does his name come from? Callie is a modern invention for...for ordinary young girls, isn’t it?”

“I asked him once and he told me it was a nickname his family had given him, short for some character in a play. I forget now. You’ll have to ask him yourself. Come round tonight for a drink. We’ll ask Cally. I’m sure he’d come. I’ll let you know, when Stanley’s back.”

I left her at the front door looking up at me. I bent down to peck her on the cheek, then went.

I had bought some rice and a tray of squid. I made myself a tasty risotto and sat on the patio to eat it. Cally’s back door was open and he was playing scales on his piano. A girl was singing them after him. Her voice was exquisite and I was unable to resist the temptation for long to look through the balustrade. Silently placing a chair as near as I dared I peeked through the red flowers straight into his lounge. The sun was shining directly in and onto a tall, slender girl with very dark brown hair. She had the most delightful face, oval and sallow, with a long, thin, intriguing nose giving it strength and character. She wore red shorts and a red top straining to retain her ample bosom. I could hear Cally encouraging and correcting her, making her repeat and then laughing and praising her loudly when she did her scales perfectly. She was not his concubine at all, but his ward and pupil.

The black pepper I had ground onto my rice and the sunlight made me sneeze very suddenly. I managed to stifle it but she stopped singing and saw me, as I jerked my head back. She gave a little cry of alarm and rattled a sentence to her mentor in a strange tongue. Was it Turkish? I sat as innocently as I could and pretended I had not seen the long face looking over the wall.

“Good afternoon Stephen!” it boomed. “Had your sleep out I see.”

I turned and smiled. He looked away and delivered a sentence like birdsong to her. He turned back and graciously invited me to come round and meet his young friend.

I wondered into his hall and saw her standing, in silhouette against the blazing light. Her hair was wispy at the edges and she was deeply tanned. Her dark eyes watched me approach and did not avert themselves as I leant forward to take her hand. She was not shy one bit! Her smile was truly radiant as she observed and relished the impression she made on me. I had a strange misgiving.

If she had been a child of the streets then Cally had done a marvellous job of restoration on her. I was suddenly reminded of my beloved grandmother rescuing an injured magpie and caring for it in her shed until it was fit again to fly. I had been frightened as a young child of her intense, dark eyes and I recalled this event as the earliest proof of her hidden kindness, for she too exhibited a severe and impatient air. Her kindnesses were always unfussy and unpredictable and all the more striking and welcome for it. I turned to face Cally and tried to express in my eyes my admiration of him rather than speak it. He presented me to his Merve in what I could tell was Portuguese and we sat down to an impromptu lesson. I learnt how to say my name and age and how to ask Merve for hers. She took delight in helping him to teach me the alphabet and numbers up to ten.

“No fala inglês” he said, pointing to her. “She does not speak English.”

“But you should teach her!” I could not help saying.

“Why? We’re in Portugal, not Richmond.”

“But it’s such an important language.”

He snorted and angrily shook his head. Merve’s smile became apprehensive. Did she recognise a storm brewing in him?

“First Portuguese, then Spanish, and then, maybe.....English.”

He spat the word out like a sour berry and I took the hint.

“How many languages do you speak, Cally?”

“Eight.”

“Were you speaking Turkish to Merve?”

He flinched. Why had I mentioned Turkish? Did I speak it?? Who had told me Merve was Turkish???

“Stanley.”

“Then he is a blabbermouth! I told him to tell no-one. The Portuguese want nothing to do with the Turks. She is an illegal. Breathe one word to anyone and I shall never speak to you more!”

“Cally, as if I would! Who do I know? I don’t gossip anyway.”

“Good!” He smiled and his anger ebbed. “And it is whom do I know, not who. Which school did you go to, for heaven’s sake??”

He turned to reassure her quietly in birdsong and she relaxed.

“Now listen to her sing properly!”

He led her to the piano and played an aria by Handel which she sang plangently and yet effortlessly, making tears start in my eyes. When she had finished he stood and kissed her chastely on her cheek.

“There! Not bad for a ragamuffin! I’m making discrete enquiries as to how best to get her back to Turkey to go to the School of Music in Istanbul. When she is twenty-one.”

He translated for her and she threw herself into his arms, forcing him back onto the piano stool, and sat down on his large lap, calling him avô, kissing him but stealing a strange look at me which inexplicably disconcerted me again.

“She thinks I’m her grandfather.”

All of a sudden I recalled Stanley’s tawdry suspicions. I remember feeling disgusted. Stan had gone even further down in my estimation.

Maureen’s promised invitation failed to materialise. At about five I was woken from a doze by raised voices coming from their direction. A woman was screaming something incomprehensible and I heard Stan continuously calling her name, as if to coax someone down out of a tree. All at once a door slammed, there were muffled shouts and then silence. As to what had caused such an eruption of fury in one I had taken to be fairly insipid I could only speculate.

The next few days were mainly spent on practical matters. I bought a car and a number of household things. If I was to entertain then I needed a cafetière, a large salad bowl and decent plates, cups, glasses and cutlery. I had some patio furniture delivered. I found time to do as Cally had suggested and paid my first visit to The Mile. It began higher up, just off the coast road between Altameira and Praianova with a large steakhouse on the right and a bar advertising all the coming football matches from the Premiership and Champion’s League on the left. It ended after about half a mile at the dual carriageway with Lineker’s Bar on one corner and yet another huge restaurant on two open storeys on the other. On the way up I think I must have past every football shirt in the football league. There were so many places to eat and drink that I wondered how anyone could make a living and, indeed, whether the size of many waddling around up there might be explained by their propensity to scoff several portions per day of that cheap food. Five or six injections of the full English would still leave a few coins change from a twenty Euro note. A steak cost less than six and the cheapest I saw Cod Portuguese Style was five Euros fifty. Whether it was any good or not, I could not say. Every few yards there were young men handing out leaflets advertising eateries just off the beaten track and I was almost dragged into a mock pagoda down a side road when I politely showed an interest in what a young Chinaman was trying to tell me about everything I could eat for seven Euros.

Although I took Cally's point about its vulgarity I found *The Mile* fascinating. It possessed a compelling vitality and cheerfulness. People were trying to make money in all kinds of ingenious ways. A street artiste dressed as Charlie Chaplin, doffed hat in one hand, cane in the other was confident that, for no other feat than standing absolutely motionless, the passing public would be happy to fill his cardboard box with coins. Another character in full clown garb – with no obvious financial incentive – was following people, tapping them on the shoulder and adopting ludicrous poses when they turned, or performing some pratfall or other to the delight of the crowds. On the terrace of a large bar a “bucking bronco” was eventually unseating every young man who was convinced that he was the one who had the poise to master it. There were mugs and wristbands for sale with names from A to Z. Cars could be hired, coach and boat trips booked, hair could be braided, tattoo dyes painted on or injected, faces could be caricatured, tee shirts printed with any name or any vulgar slogan and every sweet tooth amply indulged. A leaflet advertising some side-show which resembled a mini ghost train, promised the most unforgettable dinosaur experience (“as seen on BBC tv”) of a lifetime. I was impressed and encouraged to see said leaflets thrown down in a scattered profusion around the grey rubbery horny legs of the disconsolate distributor.

In spite of all the knock-down spirits and wine shops and bars selling “real pints” for as little as one Euro fifty, I did not see one drunk that afternoon. Many of the people were brash and noisy as well as everything else that Cally had meanly said about them. I recognised few voices from southern England and I have to admit that they were not, compared to the lithe and supple Portuguese down at the shoreline, a very lovely race. The girls were generally slim – though many did have early signs of double chins and love-handles - and had that pump-water straight blonde hair and contemptuous pout so popular back then in the first half-decade of the new millennium; their elders were an ill assortment of red limbs, heads, bellies and bottoms, as if their Maker had been forced to improvise with the bits and pieces which had been left over, once the prettier races of the world had had first refusal. I wondered whether it was the genetic whirlpool resulting from centuries of influxes of different tribes – Celts, Romans, Angles, Vikings and Normans – which had thrown out so many British freaks. I was short but pretty much in proportion – my genetic legacy was obviously straight and narrow. But Cally had no room to talk. He was the human equivalent of a heron-ostrich cross.

That year the summer back home had been a disaster, I recall, and the flabbiness of those folk was accentuated by their paleness. It was easy to tell how long many had been there; their normally milky skins indicated it like litmus paper, ranging from early pale pink to late geranium red. Why do so many English, in spite of warnings of skin cancer, throw off their clothes as soon as they arrive in hot sun? When I dared to practise my seven-brain-cell Portuguese on the man at the pool bar of the Vilamor apartments – *está muito calor* – informing him, in case he had failed to notice, that it was very hot – he told me with obvious delight that, when in early August temperatures had climbed past forty degrees, many visitors had refused to vacate their sun beds (which were not sheltered by parasols) and had finished up in hospital. One lady had almost died.

That huge complex was dire. On one wall someone had scrawled FUCK OF and I wondered if the missing F was due to the artist being disturbed or his dyslexia. A half-hearted attempt had been made to erase the slogan and had been given up when the offending word had been reduced to a pale shadow of itself.

I sat there sipping my beer and looking about me. Even some of the grandmas had tattoos, some even on their wrinkled flaps, formerly breasts. No-one seemed at all troubled by the stupid and patronising diversions provided by the young reps who, brainwashed by a cheap TV culture of endless talent shows, seemed to believe they had it in them too to be entertainers, having

possibly finally given all hope of becoming models due to physical factors largely beyond their control, such as their ungainliness.

The holidaymakers surrounding them were not queuing to complain about the fatuousness of their patter, about the volume, the repetitiveness nor even the awfulness of the pop songs which the team were determined that everyone far and wide needed to hear for the enjoyment of their holiday to be complete; no, they were there to enter skittles competitions, lilo races, quizzes and a range of inane activities symptomatic of the good, old English holiday camp week. There was no angry petition circling, no escape committee being formed, no counter-measures being planned involving the sabotage or submerging of that huge, throbbing speaker on wheels. Even if they were inwardly seething at this rotten, updated charabanc of a show, those nearby were determined to stay put by the pool and exhibit a classic English passiveness. Some, under the trees by the squat mini-villas, readers of the Daily Mail, magazines or of obese paperbacks - designed to last for exactly two weeks - had possibly been forced to retreat to the periphery in search of peace. Occasionally they might look up from their pages to glower as Elvis Presley sang Return To Sender yet again and survey with hatred the foolish antics in the swimming pool.

I went on a tour of the site and, counting about ten flip-flop flattened filter tips to the square metre, tried to work out how many thousands lay scattered in the sprinkler-sodden grass. The foulness of the place was mirrored by the rueful smiles of the workforce and reflected in the scowls of the occasional childless middle-aged couples at the farthest possible points from the pool- probably, I decided, teachers eager to snap up a last-minute bargain - and who had ended up marooned in their worst nightmare of din, hyperactive children and moronacy; a bit like school.

The journalist in me saw scope for a fly-on-the-wall documentary and much later I had an inspired idea for a holiday-swap programme where a sturdy-legged, mountain-hiking couple were forced to lie around, chained to a sun-bed and given nothing but The Sun to read, while their slothful counterparts were prodded along a cold Tyrolean mountain pass and made to eat sour grey cheese in oil with raw onions, drink whey or buttermilk and solve the Mephisto crossword before they were allowed down.

The Vilamor apartment-juggernaut was, I realised as I made my escape past a bored security guard, the main fountainhead of those crowds spilling and milling in and out of the shops and bars below. I decided that one visit would be enough for quite some time.

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It might have been the next morning that I was awoken by a frantic knocking at my front door. I squinted at my watch. It was not yet seven o' clock. A dark voice called out my name. It was him. As soon as I had opened the door he pushed his way in and went straight into my bedroom.

“Hey, you can't just -“

“Where is she, you bastard?”

“Who?”

He pulled back my quilt, looked down the side of my bed and stared around with wild eyes.

“Have you seen her?”

“Who? Merve?”

“She has gone!”

He rushed outside and stood in the road, rushed first one way, then the other and finally came back. He disappeared into his own house and I followed him. He walked around shouting her name and looked everywhere, as he had undoubtedly already done several times.

“Are her clothes gone?”

He sat down heavily and sank his head into his long hands. He asked me to leave him. I went out of his lounge and looked in her wardrobe. It was bare. In the kitchen I put the kettle on and found some tea. I recalled her unguarded, involuntary expression and understood.

“She must have been kidnapped!” he cried as I took him his mug. “Or perhaps she was afraid of being arrested. That fat oaf next door! She must have understood somehow that he had been shooting his mouth off that day you came round.”

“Don’t blame Stan.”

“I bet it was those bloody gypsies! They steal children to order, you know! There was a blonde boy went missing in Greece years ago! Do you remember?”

“Merve’s twenty, Cally, not a child. And how could she be kidnapped from your villa, from the bedroom next door, without you hearing her scream?”

“Perhaps they drugged her –“

“Did they drug you? Come on, you would have heard them.”

“Perhaps they crept in. SHUT UP!!”

We sat in silence for a good five minutes. I calculated that he was reaching – or had already reached - the same conclusion as me. That she had simply decided it was time to be gone. That was what I think I had seen in her eyes.

He picked up his tea, went to sip it, eyed it with utter disgust and flung it against the wall.

“Go and get me a bottle of wine!”

I went to stand and he began to make a ghastly, inhuman noise – his version of weeping. He loped past me and returned with two bottles and a corkscrew.

“Cally, it’s only five past seven. Leave the booze.”

“I cannot even contact the police to report her missing. She does not exist!”

“Go back to bed. She has just upped and gone – face it. Have you checked your money and credit cards?”

“You go straight to the devil!”

“Where do you keep them?”

He waved in the direction of the kitchen with distaste, as if it was a midden.

In a drawer I found a stack of notes and a scatter of coins. In a wallet I found his cards. I whispered “good girl” but wondered whether to take everything out and pretend it was empty and pay him back at a later date when he was over it. I shoved the drawer under his face. He looked hideous in his grief. He stirred the contents of the drawer around with his long fingers and, with a sigh of relief, waved it away. I had an idea.

“Go back to bed. Leave the wine. Till tonight. Then we’ll get rotten. I’ll go out and look for her, ask around. Do you have a photo?”

He shook his head, and again when I asked if she had ever gone off before.

“No,” he said slowly and calmly. “The bird has flown.”

I sat down opposite him. He looked up at the ceiling and formed an expression between a smile and a grimace, as if he was trying to contemplate a more noble level of existence. A while later he fell asleep and I left him.

I received no answer when I knocked that afternoon nor the next morning. I slipped a note part-way under the door and stood back. When I saw it disappear I was relieved. I had invited him to dinner that evening. I had planned to try the fish stew which I had devoured so avidly at Felipe’s restaurant in London. When I returned with my ingredients around midday he had pushed a reply through.

Dear Steven,

I thank you for your kind invitation. I am however at present not in a sociable frame of mind as you no doubt understand. Do not be concerned about me – this will soon pass as, alas, all other pleasure and pain must. Perhaps I might visit you to try your caldeirada on Saturday night?

Please accept an apology for my unpardonable bad manners the other day,

Caliban Brown

Caliban! Where on earth did his name come from?

The same day, in the late afternoon, I noticed him at his telescope. There was no hint of twilight in the east and I could tell from the angle of the tube that he must be looking again in the direction of the far villa. That evening Stan unexpectedly came round to apologise for not inviting me as Maureen had promised.

“You might have heard us having a bit of a set-to. Mo was a bit upset. She had never dreamt I would involve a neighbour in our.....little scheme. So I told her I hadn’t, that she was imagining things. Everybody knocks the door when they come, don’t they?”

“Well, you know I’ll say nothing to make her think otherwise.”

He dropped his voice again. “Why don’t you just call round in an hour and ask to borrow some milk or summat....and just act natural. Stay for a drink when I invite you and then I’m sure she’ll start to believe me then. I went round to ask Cally but he won’t answer. I think he’s still mad with me for shooting my big gob off about Merve being Turkish.”

“She’s gone, you know.”

“What?”

I told him about her running away.

His eyes lit up.

“Don’t tell me any more! Come round and tell Mo later – that’ll take her mind off you-know-what!”

After he had gone I debated whether I wanted to help him extract his chestnuts from the fire – or his fish from the frier. But for her sake I went round. As I thought they might be, they were tucking into fish and chips at half-past seven and they shared them with me. And they were not half bad. I could tell that poor Maureen felt very awkward, but as soon as I asked her if I could fetch her anything from the shops in the morning and gave her a decidedly neutral look she seemed to relax. I told them all about Merve in hushed tones in case he was listening. At a stroke Mo lost all inhibitions and labelled her an ungrateful little tyke. Stan was obviously delighted to be able to share her outrage. The ice which had built between them melted and they were soon on the same hearty double-act form as they had been at Cally’s. But I got fed up with his gaseous beer and conversation and the red wine he uncorked was unpleasant. As soon as I decently could after the sun had set I took my leave.

Maureen had wanted a particular brand of medicine only available from a pharmacy on the outskirts of Praianova, whence Felipe Cavala, possible distant relative of mine and descendant of my maritime ancestor, had set out for England, so I was delighted to have a reason to drive out there the next day. A large poster on the right caught my eye and a few yards past it I braked sharply, causing the numbskull driving in my boot to hoot furiously. I got out and smiled at him as he swerved around my car, shouting incomprehensible abuse at me. I walked back a few metres to have a look. The poster was on an empty shop window. It was for a night club in Faro. Buxom young women were covered with foam and the words BUBBLE PARTY! leapt out at me. I shook my head and smiled at its vulgarity. Intriguing though it was, this was not the reason for me stopping so suddenly. Below was another picture with the legend SEE

## THE ALGARVE'S HOTTEST POLE-DANCER! HEAR THE SEXY VOICE OF CECILIA!

In a blonde wig, wearing the flimsiest of outfits into which her breasts barely fit, pouting provocatively and looking utterly delicious was Merve.

As I drove around the outskirts to find the pharmacy she pouted at me a score of times from posters large and small until I was sick of seeing her. I debated whether and when I should tell Cally.

Stan had gone off on his errands. I knocked once on Mo's door and handed over the medicine. As formally and gravely as I could I took her money and my leave of her. I had been back in my kitchen warming soup for about five minutes when there was a knock at my door; or rather, it dawned on me as I was opening up, four knocks. Maureen walked straight past me into the bedroom.

The poor woman was as tight as a coil spring and I almost had to restrain her. Greedily and breathlessly she insisted I do this or that to her, exactly as she wished for as long as she wished, and when she finally came it was with a wild abandon. From eager start to noisy finish it had taken barely twenty minutes but I felt drained. What on earth was wrong with Stan? She was a wonderful woman - beneath her dolly exterior, a firebrand.

"Will you tell him?" I asked her as she went round picking up all the clothes she had almost torn off her body.

"No. He thinks I'm not interested either. I never wanted to do this, but he's given me no choice. I'm not a fucking pensioner."

"Indeed you're not! Will you come again?"

"If I'm in the mood. You're not bad."

She threw back her head and laughed rather sadly.

"He swore he had said nothing to you that morning, but as soon as you knocked and came in and stared at me I knew. And I couldn't make up my mind. I've only been unfaithful to him once, in my twenties with the pools collector. But he was so shit at it, and I felt so bad after, I never bothered again."

She took her purse and proffered a five Euro note.

"I don't want paying!"

"No you silly twat, it's for the medicine. I didn't give you enough! You reckon that's all you were worth? Twenty maybe!"

That week I noticed Cally three or four times at his telescope trained on the more distant villa, never, as far as I could tell on the nearer one. I began to wonder if he had a clue where Saturn was. Surely he was not a peeping Tom? It would be downright rude just to ask him outright what it was up there that so fascinated him. I decided to buy a pair of binoculars. He had confirmed that he would come round on the Saturday. A few glasses of wine and a subtle line of enquiry might get him to talk about whoever lived up there. All Thursday and Friday I drank nothing but water and fruit juices in anticipation of a long drinking session. I had dutifully asked Stan and Maureen along but they declined due to a prior engagement. She had not returned for more and part of me was pleased (another part of me less so.)

On Friday I agreed to go fishing with Stan again and we fetched up in the Bar de Oura afterwards. I drank orange juice. It occurred to me that he might be able satisfy my curiosity about our distant neighbours. The nearer villa was just visible.

"Stanley, what do you know about the people who live up there?"

He was in mid-gulp and the question or the beer made him choke. I was the nominated first-aid in the newspaper office and I told him to cough. When this did no good I sprang up and clapped him on the back. He managed to regurgitate the beer into a serviette. With tears in his

eyes he sat back and began to sneeze over and over again. It was full five minutes before he could bring himself to speak. He was very breathless and even redder than normal. I expected him to laugh it off but he remained very grave – not at all the happy-go-lucky man I knew. “Why do you want to know about them?” he asked quietly, on his guard, jerking in his head in the direction of the villa we could just see about a hundred yards above us, to the right of the bar.

“Tell me about the people who live right on the edge.”

He relaxed a little and wiped his nose on the serviette. He took a careful swig.

“I can’t.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because nobody knows a thing.”

“Nobody?”

“Nobody goes up there. Dodgy ground.”

“But Cally’s always got his scope trained on the place. Why?”

“Dunno. He’s never mentioned it to me. Look, best ask Nicolau or his nephew. There are rumours and superstition but only because nobody knows. He’s a recluse.”

“What’s his name? What rumours?”

“I don’t even know his name. Look, I mind my own business, Steve. I’m too busy to mind other people’s!”

“What about the first place then? The other night it was lit up like a Christmas tree.”

He flinched and looked at me suspiciously, as if seeing me for the first time.

“You’re a journalist, right? Is that why you’re really here? For a story? To do an under-cover job on them? Are you wearing a wire in them shorts?”

I laughed. “No! I told you, I packed my job in!”

“That’s what you told me. Retired at twenty-eight? Not bad. A young and healthy pensioner. Take my advice – stay that way!” He lowered his voice in that cloak-and-dagger manner again which I now found so crass and irritating. “Believe me Steven, these are not nice people. That’s all I’ll say. Keep well out of it!”

He drained his glass and held it up to Nicolau and nodded as if he were at an auction. Then he looked at me and scratched his head.

“What are you doing out here Steven? No, really?”

It was a good question. I thought it over. I could not think of a clear answer.

“Just to see if I feel at home, I think, back near my Portuguese roots. I am not wearing a wire in my shorts. Do you want to look?”

“God, no! Leave the bugger where it is!” He paused and thought. “And on a related matter.....our little arrangement is officially cancelled. I wanted to thank you for your performance the other day. Mo believes me now and she’s changed her mind anyway. In the New Year my resolution is to lose four or five stone and go to see the doc about you-know-what. He might put me on Viagra or something. She has no idea I’m telling you all this. She’s convinced you knew nothing that afternoon after we went fishing. OK?”

“OK, Stan. If you’re happy to tell her white lies....”

“Well, what you don’t know about can’t do you any harm now, can it?”

He treated me to a filthy wink. He looked at his watch and said he had to go into town. He paid for our drinks and we walked back together. He said that he would clean my share of the catch – two bass – and bring them round that evening.

But Mo beat him to it and, all eagerness, came round at four with them. She would tell him later, she said, as she put her bikini back on, that she could not stand the sight or stink of them in the fridge.



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My version of a caldeirada was really delicious, even if I say so myself. I had fried some pink shallots and garlic gently in butter and made a good, thick roux with flour seasoned with herbes de Provence. With the trimmings from the hake and halibut and thinner legs of my crab simmered in white wine, I conjured up an intense stock which I stirred slowly into the roux. The rest was easy. I removed the grey dead man's fingers from the crab and chopped the beast into two, exposing all the white meat, then added it with the chunky fish and crayfish to the stew. The dark crab meat which I had scraped from the shell and a squish of tomato puree combined to thicken and intensify the colour and flavour. For the last few minutes I added thin slices of potato and carrot I had precooked and then it was ready to be served up with the best bread I could find.

The aroma was amazing. Cally hesitated it at first and then devoured it. I could tell that he had not eaten properly since the Sunday Merve had disappeared. The wine flowed (I had bought a case of his favourite green wine) and he became gradually more talkative. I hesitated then asked him about his name.

"It rings a bell, Caliban, but I can't think where I've heard it."

"Your ignorance surpasses all belief, Steven. Did you not study the Bard at any point during your English lessons?"

"The bard? Do you mean Shakespeare?"

He sighed in mock sorrow and covered his face with his hands and I took these histrionics for a yes. I told him we had read Macbeth for GCSE and Anthony and Cleopatra and Othello for A Level.

"And at university?"

"I did a creative writing course in journalism, with business studies."

"Barbarism!" he cried, but not in mock indignation. "Whatever happened to the pursuit of pure knowledge for its intrinsic beauty?" His rant put me in mind of my English teacher who had blown a gasket when I told him of my plans. Now Cally wound himself up into a fine lather.

"The universities used to be places of learning, not technical colleges - where you can now take, I suppose, a philosophy with plumbing degree! Why must every scrap of knowledge come with a price tag attached? That's the Cow's fault - and those wide-eyed calves' she bore - Blair and Brown, Messrs Tweedledum and Tweedledummer! Why should anyone read Plato's Republic now? Or Voltaire? Or Shakespeare? It won't make them a penny richer." He took a long drink of his wine and seemed to have an inspired thought. "Steven, I will lend you Hesse's Glass Pearl Game, which is an excellent metaphor for the pursuit of learning without any application. None! It is set in a mythic European land where, in return for training the country's administrators and educators, an elitist Order of academics is financially supported and tolerated by the state. The glass pearl game, the most extreme and most pure ideal of thought for thought's sake, is as utterly beautiful as it is utterly pointless, a mind-game to demonstrate hidden affinities between apparently divergent phenomena, for example the relative motions of the planets and the mathematical laws governing a sonata by Johann Sebastian Bach. As the threat of war increases however, the nation begins to question whether it can afford to "waste" money on the spiritual and the intellectual and so a new age of barbarism dawns where military spending is prime. The point is, Steven, that we are now living in such an age. The Philistines are in power! You should read it."

"You've lost me a little there, Cally. Are there many car chases in it?"

He tipped his head back and laughed.

"I think I'll wait till the film comes out." I added, half to my wine glass. He ignored me and sailed on.

“To an enquiring mind a fragment of knowledge is as delightful as the flavour of a good wine is to the palate“

“Who said that?”

“Me.” To emphasize his point he drained his glass again.

“Are you a writer, Cally?”

“No. Still a reader. I am waiting for the right time. Only a well cultivated and well enriched mind can bring forth works of originality and interest.”

I saw an opportunity to be clever.

“But surely, that cannot be true! Surely only a fresh pair of eyes, untainted by previous scenes can see what is new and original!”

He smiled and, ominously, shook his long head.

“Give me an example,” he said.

Of course this unsettled me. I thought I had scored a telling point. I told him that I could not, but added that my ignorance did not prove him right.

“True, Stephen, but consider this: to be an iconoclast, do you not have to know where the icons are to be found and which the most important ones are to smash?”

Icons? Iconoclast? Near panic. I knew something about Sartre from my A Level course and knew he had rejected received wisdom. Should I throw Jean-Paul at him? No. Something told me that this would be grist to his mill so I shut up and tried to change the subject. I looked up and his eyes were like two huge searchlights. I knew he could see into every corner of my brain. He gave a quick nod as if to confirm that my decision to be silent was wise and correct.

“Of course, the other aspect which is interesting in Hesse is what he has to say about music. He argues that a culture whose music is degenerate, having lost its serenity and what he calls Heiterkeit – a hard word to translate, somewhere between joy and merriness – I hesitate to say gaiety – I loathe how that beautiful word “gay” has been suborned by the sodomites – against whom, believe me I have, otherwise, no axe to grind - where was I? – ah, yes!- such a culture, Hesse argues, is ripe for destruction. If the noise we are subjected to today, that atonal rubbish, is anything to go by then we are already in the process of being destroyed, ears first. The church is in decline, there is no ideology, no moral authority, there are no agreed icons of culture; only Mammon. Only Mammon....And do you know why those half-people go wondering in and out of those trashy trinket shops up there?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”

“Because what they are looking for is never there! They subconsciously seek contentment but only find one more trashy possession to be discarded into a drawer already full of them when the novelty wears off, leaving only the desire for more -”

“Like a glass of wine,” I drawled as I filled his glass.

“Ah! No! Wine is an ephemeral substance – a fuel for the imagination. It is almost immaterial. Those materialists up there are in search of contentment and fulfilment - but do not know even that they are - never mind how to achieve them! Their lives are empty. They are bored.”

“And the solution? A return to a communist society? Brainwashing? Religion?”

“There is no solution in this era. It will have to wait until these walls have tumbled.”

“You sound like one of those doom and gloom merchants on the fundamentalist Right in America.”

He thought this over and then laughed again.

“I am sure I would get on wonderfully well with them – until they realised that the destruction I foretell will emerge from within, not carried here by the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

“How?”

“How? The “how” is not so clear as the “why” I’m not an economist - and only an amateur astronomer. My point is this: are we not becoming too selfish to share in the event of disaster? The economy and the population are growing like balloons, Steven. While there is plenty, the

non-familial, multiethnic and incoherent society – never at ease with itself – will totter along on its cheap high heels. While there are ten loaves of bread and five customers, no problem. Swap the numbers around and then imagine the scene. The Age of Plenty cannot last for ever.” These dire warnings reminded me of Stan’s pessimistic outlook. Did this gloominess characterise all émigrés? I did not air that thought – I was sure he would hate to be lumped together with all the other exiles from Britannia scattered around the Algarve and Mediterranean in their white plastered Shangri-las, grimly predicting over their Pimms that the homeland would shortly implode due to crime, high taxation, foreigners or excessive hand-outs. What he had been saying troubled me. I had always firmly believed, no doubt naively, that things were gradually getting better. The phrase “half-people” particularly stuck in my craw. “Why call those holidaymakers half-people, Cally? Do you really think they are semi-humans? You sound like an ideologue of the Third Reich! Surely you don’t hate people so much?” “I do not hate people per se. I hate what they have become - or rather how they have been moulded - into consumers, deskilled dependents, afraid to take risks; conformists; materialists....”

Now I had him! “But you just said, there is no authority! How can they be made to conform? To what? That presupposes an authority – and a pretty damn effective one at that!” He looked at me with surprise as if he, the master, had just been rounded on unexpectedly by the pupil he had been lecturing.

“But my dear boy, you miss the point. It is the authority of the Estate you work for which is the Authority, but not a moral one, as I said. The Media, the many-headed monster! Take one example – The Daily Mail – oh God, I almost retch to say the wretched phrase! What is its purpose, its role? Is it not to keep the Little Man, the Philistine in his bungalow, in a perpetual foment of outrage against the EU, comprehensive education, officialdom.....change and any progressive thought? And then there are the advertisers and television – they sell a package – just as Thompson’s sells an all-in holiday. What is in it? All that you need....to lead.....a happy life! – The right technology, PC, mobile phone; the right fashion and brands of food and drink; what you need to be driving; the sorts of things you should be saying and the correct pronunciation and intonation. Deviate markedly from the norm and you will invite ridicule and intimidation. We live in cosy but vile times, Steven. To escape them I came here to a simple environment – catch a mackerel, grill it, eat it. I have been followed! Now that stifling world is up there, on The Mile!”

The drink had emboldened me, so I drew a breath and said “You’re a snob, Cally. An intellectual snob. And, when it all boils down to it, removing all the big words, you are basically an Old Fart.”

He threw back his head again and laughed loud but this time I thought it was edged with bitterness.

“I know! But I cannot help it. I do not fit. I am in exile. Merve gave me a *raison d’être*. She came out of an alley one evening where she had been doing her trade. The only English she could say was “Twenty Euros, Sir.” I took her back home, told her to take her clothes off - so that I could wash them - and cooked her something. That was last August. Oh dear, oh dear.....She sent me a letter, did I say?”

“She did?”

“I could not read the postmark. She says she is working. She is fine...says she was sorry but she needed to work her life out herself. She might come in December to see me.”

“Did she say what she was doing?”

“No.”

Good.

A huge moon had risen. There was just the slightest chill in the air but Cally, with his shirt still open, did not appear to feel it. In the light of my new garden lanterns he looked very old and decidedly weary.

“Steven,” he whispered “I do not hate those poor people. I pity them. They are like Plato’s cave-dwellers – they see the world as flickering shadows on the wall. If they could only turn around and find the opening and clear their heads of all the junk. If junk-food doesn’t get them their junk-culture will. It troubles me that they will die without hearing...Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante for viola and violin...or his third violin concerto...like a child that dies before moon-rise and will never see such a breathtaking moon as this!”

“Or Saturn?”

He turned to look at me rather cryptically and then with a scowl, which I took for apprehension that I had guessed his little secret. I seized my chance.

“Cally, why do you keep looking at the far villa on the headland?”

I looked up. The solitary light had come on.

“I was going to tell you about my name, was I not?”

I sighed.

“No Steven. I am not changing the subject. You will see! Where shall I begin? I take it you have not read *The Tempest*? No? Mmm...Caliban is a monster, the slave of a usurped duke who has been stranded on an island with his daughter, Miranda.”

“But why were you christened after a monster?”

“I was not. I am really Richard Brown. My father was a professor of English whose sense of humour was only exceeded by his own appreciation of it. He is supposed to have taken one look at me in the cot and was so dismayed by my ugliness (he was no oil painting by the way) that he thought Caliban fitted the bill admirably. It fitted better than he thought because a few months later his wife – whom I cannot remember, of course, and never refer to as my mother – confessed I was the fruit of another’s loins she had been “seeing” - as they say so euphemistically these days – and promptly cleared off to join him sans moi - whom, I have always supposed, she found too revolting. So my father called her Sycorax from that point on. That was the name of the witch who mothered Caliban. I think Caliban is much more interesting and fitting than boring old Richard. Dad was left with me – son of a woman he loathed and a man he had no idea of. He could and should have farmed me out somewhere, but God bless him that he did not.”

I felt cold. I thought of my own poor father. It was time for honesty.

“Caliban, we have more in common than you might think. My own mother left my Dad but was considerate enough to take me with her. I wish she hadn’t. I was nine. We went to the Midlands somewhere. The only thing I remember about her man – he was a salesman of sorts – was that his feet stank. It didn’t seem to bother my mother much – she was a smoker. He turned out not to be what she thought he was.”

“What was he?”

“A cheat and a liar. He had women in every town. She took an overdose while he was away and tried to kill me. She put tablets in my horlicks. But not quite enough. When I woke up she was stone cold next to me.”

“Did you cry?”

“No. I just wanted to go home to Dad.”

I was drunk. I began for no other reason to tell him the truth about my girlfriend. As I did I recalled to myself only her loveable qualities and a tear started in my eye. He saw this, I suppose, for he reached over and patted my arm.

“Ah, how bitter is the stone at the heart of the peach! Young friend, I too have tasted of it.” He drank deeply of his wine and began to tell me of his second wife. “She was the only one I loved, bless her. She confessed to an affair she had had with a colleague I could not abide and it

nearly damn well killed me. He had moved to Edinburgh and I even bought a train ticket to go up there and murder him. But the train was late and I got fed up of waiting and went and got drunk instead.”

“You got drunk?”

“In my thirties I was not a drinking man. Anyway, the daily thought of her in his bed and other details I had forced her to tell me – the wheres, the whens, the hows and the wherefores – (you’d be amazed how often you hear or read the word “Scotland” in any day – that’s where the bastard came from) – nearly drove me mad. In the end do you know what I did? I imagined the year – it was 1977 - the Year of the Drought – written large on a stone locker drawer in a mausoleum. I swept all the vile bits and pieces into it and barred it, nailed it and sealed it. I pictured great ivy-clad gates in front of it, padlocked, and put myself in front of them.

Whenever the malicious brain cells responsible for tormenting me began to glow I would start to shake the gates which of course could not open. Then I would turn and see the sunrise, symbolic of a new beginning and imagine the scene behind me in utter darkness. It worked. Try it if you suffer.”

He fell silent and looked at the sky as if he was avoiding the gates he had conjured up. “And then, just as we were back on even keel, she died. From one week to the next she developed a cancer of the throat. The doctors had never seen such an aggressive one. It throttled her slowly to death in days. The pity was that when I saw her afterwards in my mind she was usually in bed with that bastard. After her confession her body had been both delightful and repugnant to me. After her death only the repugnance survived. So I had to open the vault and shove her in. She was thirty-four. Drink?”

What a strange man he was. I could detect no pity or self-pity in his face. The alcohol was, of course, loosening my tongue further.

“What happened to your first wife?”

“Ah, she was already a skeleton in my cupboard. There she will stay, Steven. By a strange coincidence the man who owns that villa is called Senhor Prosper. I found out a few months ago. I wanted to buy the place – it was built by an English estate agent in the nineties – to put some distance between me and The Mile. Just when I thought my offer had been accepted I was gazumped – by a huge margin – thousands of escudos. By that man who lives there now.”

“What strange coincidence?”

“You really will have to read the play! Prospero is the name of the usurped duke and his name up there is, I’m sure, Prosper - perhaps he even knows the play and calls himself that by design. You see there is a rumour – one of very many - that he keeps a very pretty girl with him who some say is his adopted daughter, and some say is his young concubine, him being a rich man. Wealth is a potent pheromone is it not for some young women? One rumour even says she is his captive, an abductee.”

“And you keep looking up there to see if you can spot her?”

“I do. But I think she must be a myth like most of what is said about him.”

“Stan told me the man was a recluse.”

“He is. If you want to know all the wild superstitions then ask Nicolau or his nephew. He puts the sun beds out and knows everybody’s business.”

“I asked Stan about the closer villa. It’s all lit up now, look! My curiosity really bothered him.”

“I am not surprised. They are the Ilford Mafia. Crooks. Remember a few years back? There was millions in currency taken from a warehouse at one of the big airports? That was them. The Powner clan. When the wind is in the right quarter you can hear their laughter and almost hear their conversations. Their company wax and wane like the moon but the hardcore is usually there - or in Faro where Daddy Powner owns an old fashioned courtyard house. One of the lads who knifed the black boy in Peckham is a nephew.”

“Really? How do you know all this?”

“Oh they make no secret of it! You’ll find them once at week at Nicolau’s around three or four tables. Big Daddy looks like a lion with his blonde mane.”

“But if they don’t worry you, why is Stan so bothered?”

“Because he – like Nicolau and most others on The Mile – pays them protection money.”

“You’re joking!”

“I am not. Five percent of Stan’s takings – not profit! – end up in their coffers. You know the shop that’s boarded up on the left as you go up Cardiac Hill? It used to be a vulgar English eatery – do they say greasy-spoon? The couple just would not cough up and called the police. The police told the Powners and they arranged for the windows to be smashed. By the very police they had complained to!”

“But if they stole millions, why do they need to extort more money?”

“Because they want to! They enjoy being crooks! It is what they do!”

An idea began to take shape in my head. I remembered what Stan had said about the wire. I poured us some more wine and took a large gulp. I swear Cally could read my mind.

“If you are thinking about an exposé and playing at Mr Under-Cover-Man, forget it. Scotland Yard tried to get their man close a couple of years ago. They smelt him out as soon as they clapped eyes on him. He turned up on the outskirts of Faro wondering about in his underpants reeking of whisky. They have the intelligence of ferrets. They are no doubt behind the campaign to buy up these villas so that they can demolish them and build their pet project, a casino.”

“A casino? Is that why numbers one and three along here are empty?”

“And very shortly number seven. The old lady who kept complaining that she could not afford to return to her beloved Cheltenham is suddenly all smiles. She told Stanley she was made an offer she could not refuse.”

“And you?”

“I will show you the leaflet I had through the door just before you arrived in August. You will probably get one soon.”

He disappeared and came back with this.

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“Rua de Oura is The Mile. Out of sheer curiosity I wandered up there and pretended I was interested. The woman in the office is originally South African, a naturalised Portuguese and married to a taxi driver. She was all smiles until I asked her who was behind Montblanc. She said she had no idea and shut up quicker than a clam! It’s obviously the Powners! They have no doubt exempted her from their protection scheme. Stan and Maureen are thinking about it and I would not be surprised if whoever owns your place now – it used to be a greasy, little ex-off licensee from Burnley, who would not shut up about his badly fitting false teeth and the Pakistanis – I would not be a bit surprised if he or she is weighing it up. You could be on your way sooner than you bargained for! I found out that the offer-price starts to drop by five percent every month in the New Year.”

“And you? What will you do?”

He shrugged. It was getting rather late. We were on the fifth bottle of the six I had bought. He looked up into the night sky and pointed at a static light and told me it was Saturn.

“Just imagine how dark the sky is from Senhor Prosper’s vantage point. I have not given up the idea of buying him out. If I could put the wind up him by finding out one of his murky secrets then I might be able to prize the rotten barnacle off the rock somehow. Anyway, come round and have a look at Saturn!”

I did as I was told. He sat on a stool and directed the viewfinder at the point of light and began to track it. He shifted over and invited me to look. I was astonished – not so much by how lovely the vision of the planet and its rings were – but by how quickly it sped across the black circle of sky. What appeared so serenely still, millions and millions of miles away above me, was as restlessly changing as any terrestrial scene nearby. With that thought in mind I looked at the dark, silent villa and wondered what nefarious activity might be, at that very moment, taking place behind its walls.

In spite of the wine I lay awake for a good hour inventing outlandish plans to steal the secrets of those two houses, and dreamed of a beautiful blonde girl holding out her hand to me as I climbed white steps toward her.

\*

It was mid September. The spate of people on the hill had thinned and slowed. There were fewer children and some of the hair-braiders, tattoo-painters and caricaturists had packed away. There were still some very hot days but the sun had mellowed. There was occasional rain and I noticed green shoots beneath the dry, tawdry grasses on the wastelands and approaches to the beach. Lucio had fewer customers to collect money from on sun beds and Nicolau could get round his tables at a more sedate pace. The beach vendors were fewer and I wondered what they might be turning their hands to. The tall young man selling ice-cold water had melted away. On the one or two completely wet and windy days the beach was empty and Lucio went fishing.

One drizzly morning I pulled on my shower-proof jacket and went walking way past the point where I had fished with Stan, clambered over the rocks and entered a wide bay, at the far end of which the tall buildings of Faro stood. I watched the planes coming and going. Wherever I stood, I could look back at Prosper’s villa, and from these new angles, without its protective screen of pines, I had an unimpeded view of the building through my binoculars.

There was a raised terrace built on grey rocks, around which ran a stylish balustrade. In the centre and on the two corners were Grecian urns in which grew enormous leafy plants with exotic red white and yellow flowers – gingers I thought (I had planted something very similar to the white one in my London garden). The top storey of the white villa was smaller than the ground floor and a balcony in dark wood ran, as far as I could tell, all the way around the perimeter. The roof was, unusually, a pitched one and covered in powder-blue slates. Six or seven of those strange blue pine trees - so symmetrical that they look manufactured - and three very tall coconut palms grew around the house. It was a beautiful property and I completely understood my weird neighbour coveting it.

Of life there was no sign. Had he too, and whoever his companion might be, slipped quietly away as the summer waned? But of course it was raining and cool. I resolved to return one sunny morning and stand there looking all day if necessary, until a human being came out to look at the view and take the air.

As I walked back the rain began to ease and through the breaking clouds, before long, the hot sun was staring down at the beach and sea. Nicolau was opening the bar and surveying the blue, clearing horizon with a blinking eye. Three or four couples and a trio of pretty girls were

tentatively setting up camp by the sun beds which the tall, bronzed Lucio, under the admiring gaze of one of the women, had been putting out in anticipation of a fine afternoon.

The narrow path, starting at the side of Nicolau's bar, threading its way up through the dense scrub towards the Powner villa, invited me to climb it. All I needed was a good reason ready, in case I was accosted and challenged. Perhaps I could pretend that I was merely exploring. Then I thought of the Scotland Yard man exploring Faro in his underpants and my innocent idea lost its appeal.

I sat on the end of a sun bed. Lucio duly came over. We had exchanged perhaps a hundred words in the three weeks I had been there, chiefly about the weather. He had encouraged my Portuguese and corrected me. His English was pretty good, considering his lack of academic background. He was friendly and keen to engage in conversation, like most of his compatriots I had so far met. I wanted to hear the folklore about Senhor Prosper. I paid him five Euros for the bed and asked him to sit down for a while on the plastic table. He finished his chores, collected the other money and then came back. I asked him straight out.

"Lucio, what do you know about the far villa?"

"This villa? Of the Senhor Powner?"

"No, the other. The one at the very edge of the cliff."

"Ah! O espectro! How do you say? Spirit?"

"Spectre? Ghost?"

"Yes! Ghost!"

"Is his name Prosper?"

He shook his head. He had never heard this and a suspicion entered my head that Cally had made this up only to season his tale and exaggerate the link with the Tempest. I asked Lucio just to tell me all he knew. At this point the true shallowness of his English, on matters not related to the beach, was rather exposed and here I offer a résumé of what I am sure – with some coaxing from me and the help of the pocket dictionary I carried with me at all times – he was trying to say.

(Prosper) had arrived in 1992 and immediately fenced off the top of the headland surrounding his villa. He had an agent - in Vilamoura, so Lucio thought - who took care of any business with the world. A guard who lived in a small caravan patrolled the grounds. No-one knew what the Ghost looked like and where he was from. There were many theories. At various times he had been labelled a gun-runner, a monk, an escaped prisoner, an eccentric millionaire, a fugitive English aristocratic with a criminal past and even an alien. Lucio said that some locals had seen bright lights in the sky above the villa but these, he added with a smile, were the aeroplanes landing at Faro.

There was one story which fuelled and, much embellished, refuelled the fearful superstitions of the locals, keeping them well away from the headland. It was said that early on during his residence two policemen from Lisbon, acting on a tip-off about a child who had disappeared long ago in Greece, had insisted on being admitted to see him. On their way home they had been burnt alive in a terrible motorway accident. In one variant of the tale the pregnant wife of one of the officers had subsequently given birth to a child with a huge head, a monster. He told me about a local peasant woman whose little girl had also gone missing, in 2001.

"Everyone say, it must be him. But later the woman say to the police that she kill the child and feed it to the pigs!"

I grimaced and told him that I had in fact heard of a girl staying up there with him.

"Ah! A loura!" he exclaimed.

"Is that her name? Laura?" I felt very excited, as this reminded me of something Cally had said, which I could not quite recall. "Laura is an English name!"



Lucio looked puzzled. He turned and pointed to a Dutch girl prostrate and gorgeous on a nearby bed.

“No, loura – hair like her. Like the beach – oura – like gold!”

“You mean blonde! Have you seen her? A blonde girl?”

“No. I don’t see her. People say he have many women there - but I never see - and nobody here ever see a women.” He laughed mischievously. “I think he is – you know – liking little boys!”

“A paedophile?”

He laughed again and shook his head. The truth was, he said, that no-one knew. I lay there in the sun thinking over what he had said when the sound of raucous laughter disturbed my reverie. It came from the slope. A tall, handsome man, middle aged, barrel-chested, wearing shorts and an open shirt, as sun-beaten as a sailor, with a blonde mass of hair - a mane – and a dark beard was leading a column of people – seven including him – down that narrow track to Nicolau’s. Powner. It had to be! Behind him trotted a very pale woman in a black bikini with a long, thin torso – his wife? – and dark shoulder-length hair. She was in her thirties, but in contrast to her good figure, amazingly plain, far too plain, surely, to be a gangster’s moll. A blonde teenage boy – her son? – followed. Then came a thin, balding man and, waddling like a great white goose, a very fat woman considerably dressed in a tent-like smock. Two young men in smart dark trousers and dressy white shirts without ties – his bodyguards? – ended the procession. I watched Nicolau start and almost leap to attention as soon as the large man entered. He rushed to shove together two tables as I approached. There were quite a number of other people in there, but these new arrivals clearly expected to be the stars of the show and accordingly behaved very badly, laughing ridiculously loud and calling out to each other and shouting at Nicolau as if he were their slave. I imagined what invective Cally would be able to muster about these especially vulgar people. They made no effort to take into account the sensitivities of other guests and peppered their discourse very liberally with expletives. Daddy Powner – Jake Powner, as I would later discover, but I shall call him Leo – oversaw proceedings like the chairman of a meeting, and most observations were directed his way or through him for approval or comment. The teenage boy – face entirely devoid of animation and intelligence - sat unaware of his surroundings with a black device in one ear and an electronic game in his hands, equally ignored by everyone else. The long woman I took to be his mother had turned around a chair and plonked her self down on it. She wore gold chains on both ankles and clasped in one hand was a packet of cigarettes in a leopard-skin sleeve and in the other a mobile phone, which she fiddled with constantly, so that her cigarette, without a hand to hold it, was forced to remain in the corner of her thin mouth, sending up a spiral of smoke, making her squint.

With the exception of the boy and the two sober young men sipping water and engrossed over a laptop– analysing data of Leo’s illegal protection racket? – the party drank beer. The scrawny, balding man, milky pale with liver spots, was gulping down canecas as fast as Nicolau could bring them, two to every one of Leo’s, no slouch himself. His fat wife was quite obviously Leo’s sister. She had a very mannish face and, with a beard, could have been his twin brother. She spent most of the time laughing absurdly loudly at the croaky comments of her skinny husband and the long woman next to her. They spoke with an appalling, loose-mouthed Essex accent and made no attempt to temper it.

I had sat down three tables away and had a clear view of Leo. He sat mostly silent, proud, occasionally chuckling low or showing his approval with a nod or a grunt. He looked around the room steadily as if to gauge the effect they were having on others. His eyes fell on me. I smiled. Almost imperceptibly he nodded and moved on.

Plates of chips and burgers were brought out. Leo’s wife reached hungrily for her bun and laid her cigarette in the ashtray. She tore into it and as she chewed she coughed. She threw her head

forward but did not choke. This made it immediately clear to me that she was in serious trouble because she quivered in silent agony. A piece of food had lodged itself deep in her windpipe. The party, and many others nearby, stopped what they were doing and stared at her. I sprang up and shouted at her to cough. She shook her head. I ran over, kicked a chair away and slapped her back several times but nothing happened. I lifted her from her seat, pushed her trunk forward, crossed my thumbs over and rammed them under her breast bone with as much force as I could muster, and kept ramming them until she retched and coughed up the food. I let her sink to the floor. Like a newly delivered child she writhed and cried out in agony. The teenage boy had risen to his feet and was preparing to assault me. Leo grabbed him and stared at me in horror. One of the young men sprang to his feet and began to help her up. I seized the glass of water and made her drink. She coughed and coughed until she began to vomit under the table. Everyone jumped backwards in disgust. Sitting in her mess and all the beer which had fallen on the floor she started to sneeze and I knew she would be alright. She was breathing faster than a marathon runner. She rubbed the red patch my thumbs had made which I knew would soon darken into a good bruise. Only then did she fix me with her shrewd eyes and attempt a smile through her tears.

“Obrigada, Senhor, para minha vida” she whispered hoarsely and reached for my hand. I looked to Nicolau for help.

“Senhora Grant try to say you save her life and thanks you!” he said.

I do not know who was more astonished, me or her. She was not Powner’s wife, she spoke Portuguese and I was not Portuguese.

“You English?” asked the thin man, who turned out to be her brother.

Without ever intending it, and I swear I have no idea what prompted me to do it, I answered in almost the same Essex drawl he had used.

“Me? Nah mate. From Landon!”

Leo’s face slowly broke into a huge grin. He let go of the boy and ruffled my hair, calling for beer all round. The party moved to a different table as the mess was mopped up and the whole restaurant relaxed and broke into animated conversation. Mrs Grant was helped by her fat sister-in-law to the toilets.

By this stroke of sheer good fortune I was in. Off the top of my head I cobbled together a much abridged and edited version of my reasons to be in the Algarve. I lied that I had been a futures trader in the City – (and felt safe because my best friend used to be one, and I knew chapter and verse on it, in case anybody probed further (though none of them ever did, not even the two yuppies)). I could not wait to tell Cally! Leo had spoken his gratitude to me slowly, gravely and with much less of a twang than his companions. He had pointed out to me, solemnly almost, where they all lived and later, at their villa, it occurred to me that in the bar they had exaggerated their earthy saltiness, as if to live up to the stereotype which had been created for their ilk. Leo’s bearing bordered on the dignified. I thought of him afterwards as an aristocrat of the underworld.

Mrs Grant and her sister returned from the toilet. She looked spick and span and was feeling her bruise. She beamed at me.

“What a piece of luck that you was here!” she said with great eyes after I told her I was a trained first-aider. “Troy, you was nearly an orphan, son!”

The boy looked up at her, then, directed by her, at me, shrugged, frowned and resumed his frantic twiddling. He was an elective mute, a damaged piece of work, dangerous even.

She spotted that my glass was nearly empty and held it up for Nicolau to see.

“No, Sharon,” growled Leo. “Leave it to me! NICOLAU!”

When he came he said “Please... Wha’ever this young man eats or drinks here from now on goes on my slate. You capiche?”

I saw a wonderful opportunity to make my gleaming halo glow.

“No, please. I don’t want any reward. Anybody with my training would do likewise. I don’t want any favours. If you want to send a cheque to the Red Cross however, I’m sure they would welcome it.”

He leant across to the nearest yuppie. “Sharpie! Did you hear that? Make sure you go on line and make them a donation...A couple of thou, say?”

I approved. He approved. I studied my watch and went to take my leave.

“At least come back wiv us and ‘ave a cuppa and a cake!” said the large lady and her husband vigorously seconded her.

“No, honestly, I really do have to go. I promised the old lady next door to get her shopping and I need to sober up a bit for an hour or two.”

Sharon was positively beaming. Is not a man’s kindness a good aphrodisiac?

I got up and left, gambling that Nicolau would tell them where I lived.

At about four o’clock there was a banging at the door. I prayed it was not Maureen. I saw a note slide onto the floor.

Dear Mr Kloss,

We would all be really pleased if you could join us for dinner at 7:30 for 8 p.m. tonight. Feel free to bring a friend if you wish,

Jake Powner

The handwriting was in proper black ink, very bold and elegant. He had spelt my name correctly. I was impressed. Bring a friend? I thought briefly of Cally and just as quickly dismissed him. Sharon had clearly lit a candle for me and – whatever she might be to Leo – any rapport with her would surely prove useful. To appear with Cally would raise her eyebrows and others’, and more than probably, given his bluntness, create mayhem. They might think me gay - and I could not imagine how homophobia would not be one of their vices. I also decided to keep my new friends a secret from Cally – at least for the present. I dialled the number on the note – Leo answered – and I said I would be along later – alone.

At seven I left home, having dressed quite smartly, and, in the fading light took the turn up the dusty road leading to the villa. The building shone like an orange beacon in the setting sun.

I was received with warmth and politeness. I had half-expected a décor of tribal shields, garish colours and tasteless knick-knacks, with not a book in sight, but found myself instead surrounded by a minimalist simplicity of cream, unobtrusively lifted out of blandness by occasional red and green porcelain and dark wicker-work. A narrow book case occupied one section of a wall. There was no drinks bar fronted with buttoned orange vinyl, no huge television with gigantic speakers to either side, and not a Grecian statuette in sight.

We sat at a glass-topped table on chromium tubular chairs with long, jet backs. The glasses were tulip-shaped and very stylish, the plates and cutlery heavy and expensive. Leo’s pretty brunette– if chill – wife Ellen had appeared, having spent the day lying down, recovering from a migraine. Troy and the accountants were elsewhere. I have to admit that the conversation was quite entertaining, if earthy; the food, shellfish to start and mackerel with a piquant tomato sauce to follow, excellent. The wine was expensive and plentiful. Leo was clearly a man of good taste. Sharon had taken the trouble to make herself up and she was much prettier now in the candle light. Long blue jewels dangled from her ears and she wore a yellow denim top embroidered with mythic red and blue circular flowers. She took great delight in telling Ellen her version of events at lunchtime. Sharon’s face contrasted markedly with Ellen’s oval, being rather square, flat and featureless. Its saving grace was her eyes, which were, as I said, quick

and intelligent. Curiously there was something about them, their catlike shape I decided, which reminded me of my ex-partner's.

I watched as Liz, the fattie, picked daintily and disinterestedly at her food, leaving it mostly – as if she was saying that her glands, not greed, had been the cause of her size. I returned to observe Sharon. She averted her eyes quickly. Beneath her estuary brazenness she was rather shy.

“You couldn't persuade your friend to come then Steve?” she said in a lull in the conversation. I could not help but picture Maureen clambering on top of me as she had, for variety, the previous day.

“I haven't really been here long enough to make a close friend, Sharon. Not yet.”

Her eyes opened wide and she smiled self-consciously to herself, as she had in the bar, when she had spotted me studying her just prior to the choking incident. Leo must have sensed what was in the atmosphere because he declared what a rotten time of it, Shaz had recently had. Her old man has just become a guest of Her Majesty.

“She can bladdy keep him, an' all! Sod-all use to may!” she exclaimed with apparent good humour, though I detected an undertone of bitterness. The company laughed. Of course, the natural thing for me to do, being the only one at the table not in the know, was to ask what crime he had committed. This might arouse suspicion but to sit there without curiosity might do so equally. Naivety and indirectness seemed to be good cards to play.

“A guest of the queen? How so?”

They looked at each other and laughed.

“He's in the nick!” shouted Liz. “Peddling stolen disability IDs!”

“Oh,” I said and looked as embarrassed as I could. I changed the subject.

“I was impressed you could speak the lingo, Sharon. I've been trying but it's a hard one to crack.”

She blushed, looked down and smiled to herself.

Liz's husband, Reg, who had eaten little and had been smoking and drinking almost non-stop, listening but with nothing much to say for himself, now announced that his sister was not as dim as she looked and sounded. This earned him a kick on the shins.

“You always was good at languages, wasn't you Shaz? She just picks 'em up – like she used to do fellas at the Locarno of a Saturday night!”

She protested and the others laughed. The dessert plates were done with. Leo called the little maid over, who had been hovering about, and the table was cleared. The coffee came, Leo broke the cigars out and the brandy bottle was passed round. Everyone, except Ellen, filled their glass and took a smoke, including me.

“Sharon likes you, Mr Kloss,” said Leo as soon as he had clicked the door to. He had invited me into what he called his office for a quiet chat. He put on a languorous saxophone CD and directed me to a huge tan, thirties-style armchair.

“She always goes droopy like that when she takes to a bod. I take good care of her. She never had it easy. She's my cousin – on my dad's side. Her husband Jim – who you ain't met and probably never will – is my step-brother. Smoky Reg is a bit older than my half-sister Liz; he was the illegitimate son of the rotten shit my mother left a year before she married my dad and had me and my twin sisters, who will be coming out here in December with their men and kids for Christmas. My mum didn't have to, but she took Reg with her because her dad was an alcoholic. When my dad died my mum married a lorry driver called Jerry and she had Liz by him – Jim was Jerry's from a previous marriage. Now, Sharon's Jim is a bit slow – like Troy – and that's why he got caught. I tried to pull a few strings – somebody at CPS owes me – but he was well and truly in it. We're a very close and loving, if complicated family, Mr Kloss. Did you follow all that? No? I fucking didn't, either. But you seem a very nice person and I need

quality financial advice. How'd you like to be my occasional consultant? Pays well. Another cigar? Top your brandy up?"

"No thank you Mr Powner?"

"Which? All three?"

My heart was beating quite quickly but I was determined to play hard to get and I took a deep breath. I told him I had no financial worries and did not need a job. He blew out a cloud of smoke and studied me.

"You know something? You only have financial worries WHEN you're rich. If you have no money you're just plain poor. Take me for instance: I worry my cash is in the right funds and the right accounts. It might sound like an old sob-story but my mother never had two halfpennies to rub together. My dad was squashed flatter than a furry something on the M25 when a container fell on him in the East India dock. I was just fourteen. The accident happened on a Wednesday at twenty-four minutes past two. You know what? They not only wouldn't pay my mother Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning. They only paid her up till two thirty, Wednesday. They did let him off with the six minutes he couldn't work because he was dead though, generous bastards. He was a Labour voter all his life. Harold Wilson was in power. 1965 it happened. Do you like this music?"

"It's alright."

"I had you down as a jazz-lover. I hate it." He got up and switched it off. "Where was I? Yes, when I was older I swore I would make money, Mr Kloss, neither depend on nobody, nor believe nobody's promises. Being poor made an old woman of my mother. At forty-five she was dead. She never bothered making a will because she had no money to leave. Six hundred and eighty-one pounds twenty-two pence was all there was in her pass book. I was a clever lad, like my dad. He read Marx and Marcuse. I should have done A levels. I've got Latin O Level, grade 2, would you believe? Quis in hortu ambulat? – Who is walking in the garden? Well, who the fuck knows, or cares? The answer won't make me or thee a shilling richer."

He fell into a kind of reverie. I thought over what Leo had said and remembered Cally's sermon on the virtue of knowledge without a price or application. Then I had been impressed. Now that seemed hopelessly out of touch; even callous.

"So why didn't you do A Levels?" I dared to ask.

"Simple. Knitwear. (Don't laugh!) My friend, another Jake – Jake the Lad - always had an eye for turning a profit. A natural tradesman he was. His dad sold cars and his uncle had a market stall in Rochester. When we were fifteen he starts to bring samples and swatches into school. He'd just lost his dad to lung cancer and the women teachers felt sorry for him, like they did me – even fancied him cos he was a good-looking lad. Pretty soon he had quite a full order book. He was making 20% on each sale. Any I sold he gave me half of the profit. One day we were sitting in a boring history lesson and we looked at each other with the same thought on our faces: fuck this for a game of cricket. So we left as soon as we could and started a market stall. We did alright. Then one morning I had to go the doctor's. When I came back the stall was trashed and all the jumpers and cardies slung in puddles. Jake – a small guy – was terrified. Two big thugs had just turned up out of the blue and done it. Anyway, two days later we were forgetting about it when this thin geezer with a gold tooth in a sheepskin coat – he reminded me of Terry-Thomas – strolls up and buys a jumper for his missus. He had heard about our misfortune. Did we need protection? It wouldn't cost us much – a lot less than replacing ruined stock. Coincidence? I just tell him to piss off. I have a walk round the market and make discreet enquiries but nobody wants to talk about it. Save a Paki selling anoraks. He whispers a name to me – Hitchman. He's the one behind it all – sends his soldiers out to put the wind up people and then Terry-Thomas to collect his fees – forty quid a week, a lot of money in 1966. What should I do? I'm a law-abiding citizen. My mam and dad had brought me up like that. So I go to the local police station and tell this red-nosed CID man the whole sorry tale. That evening, late on,

every window at my mother's gets put in. I've just helped to put her to bed, her being not far from Death's door. The scales fall from my eyes. I'd given that red-nosed bastard copper my address. It had to be down to him. Now I was pretty useful in those days – schoolboy runner-up at boxing, under fifteens, – so when them yobbos turn up at the stall a couple of days later – three of them 'em this time – I'm ready and waiting for 'em. I knock seven bells out of 'em and as they pick themselves up and stagger off, I yell after them to tell their boss to fuck off. And you know what? We're left alone but I know it won't be long before they come up with another bright idea. The others on the market are still paying. Then – ding! – that's when I have the best idea I've ever had. I go round and whisper that if they're happy to pay me only £20 I'll get Hitchman off their backs, and keep him off. My mother was dying and I was pretty upset with my would-be benefactor, Mr Hitchman. I found out from one of those soldiers, what he looked like and where he did his drinking. So one dark night I wait in the shadows in the back yard until the fat cunt comes out for a piss. I follow him in and while he's getting his dick out, I get my arm round his neck and – clean as a whistle – break the fucker for him. Afterwards I'm a sick as a dog. So began my career as a villain. I learnt two essential lessons at seventeen, Mr Kloss. One – if you're in a jam, NEVER tell Plod; two – if you want to get on in this life you can't afford to be honest. If ever I get a guilty conscience – and I do – I'm not a psychopath – do you know how I cure it?"

I was too taken aback by his story to respond. He opened a drawer in his desk and waved a blue building society book at me.

"I look at my mother's pass book: six hundred and eighty-one pounds twenty-two pence. I only wish she could see where I live now. She'd be amazed. And then ashamed of me, as I am sometimes. I admit I've done a number of people a pretty bad turn – some entirely innocent ones. I try to put that right in various ways at a later time. I tell my mother in my imagination that life is a messy business and people do get hurt. I don't believe in the Almighty or the Last Judgment. I reckon people get punished down here for their sins if they're not clever enough to get away with them, like Shazzer's old man. If I'm wrong, you know what I'll say to God's face? Who let the fucking container fall on my dad? And who created Hitchman? You did! By the way, Sharon's meaning to ease Jim out of the picture. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Mmm...she's thirty-six.....I know from experience," he said, raising his eyebrows "How good she is at showing her gratitude. She's not such a great-looker but I've always found that women in that class have a knack for making up for it."

I smiled but said nothing. Part of me was tempted but I had no intention of letting him see. I changed the subject.

"Mr Powner, why have you told me all that?"

"Because I don't believe in pretending I'm anything else but what I am. I'm an honest villain, an accidental one. And I want to offer you a job, as I said."

"I told you, I've retired."

"Precisely. If you have retired – you're either brilliant at your job, bloody lucky or – and this is the conclusion I have reached – you've been working a flanker, making use of info to boost your own pile. I think they call it "insider-trading"? You see, you ain't quite as perfect as you want to make out. You see, you don't live next door to an old lady like you said you did, down on the beach – unless that freak of nature Cally Brown has had a sex-change."

For the first time I felt my muscles tense and I shuddered.

"I meant the lady next door to him!"

"Stan Tranter's wife? Would you call her old? I suppose you might if you're really as young as you say. I think she's eminently shaggable. But what do I know? I'm fifty-six." He looked much younger, I thought.

He got up and excused himself. I was worried. Had I told the Tranters what my job really was? I racked my brains. Cally knew but I was sure that he would not reveal my true past to such a man as Leo. How ironic would it be if I woke up in my underpants – or less - in Faro - or did not wake up at all! – now that I had just at that moment abandoned my stupid fantasy of collecting evidence to convict Leo of his crimes? Not only was I unsure whether hearsay evidence would stand up in a court of law but also, to be perfectly honest, I found him such a plausible, attractive character– not at all the archetypal ruffian which Cally had put me in mind of - that his dishonesty failed to rouse the Daily Mail reading, law-abiding citizen in me. It was only on the way back down that it occurred to me that, him being a crook, he might have been telling me a complete pack of lies. I therefore resolved, for future self-insurance purposes, to make a note of the name Hitchman, of whose demise there would have to be a record.

When he returned to the room, having been summoned by a “call of nature” he began to tell me about the two yuppies.

“Sharpie and his mate have come over to look at my finances, which are not as neat as they might be. Nor is Mr Sharpe as sharp as his name implies. Last week he urged me to sell a tranche of shares in a pub-chain because the summer back home has been so shit and they’ve been selling less booze. Sound reasonable?”

I smiled and shook my head vigorously in anticipation of the bad news which was surely coming. He smiled, winked and pointed at me.

“You see, that is precisely what I am missing! Advance warning! People like you would know what Sharpie clearly didn’t know - that they were going to be taken over and the share price would go to eighty-odd pence more than I sold them for! That lack of info cost me five or six thousand quid – which by coincidence was what I was going to pay Sharpie and Co. That’s why the boring little fucker – God, I never could understand why a good God would create accountants – and I shall tell him so to his face ! – that’s why he’s still here on the Algarve, trying to work out a way to pay me back and get himself and his boyfriend paid at the same time. I reckon you can be the man I’ve been looking for. Just pick up the phone and pass me your hot tips. You’d make five pence on every clear quid I made!”

“Mr Powner, I do not need the money. I’m a millionaire. One million is enough for me. I’ll just give you one or two pieces of advice for free...Get your money out of building societies and BS shares. They’ve lent billions to poor people in the US and the crap will hit the fan soon. Get into energy shares. There. No fee.”

He scribbled this down and beamed at me.

“I’m not a greedy man, Mr Kloss. Just prudent. You see, one day, if the wind around here starts blowing from another direction we might need to leave Portugal in a bit of a hurry. I need to be as careful as a squirrel and bury a few acorns here there and everywhere in case I’m not welcome in this or that neck of the woods.”

It was late and the brandy had made me tired. I did not want to run the risk of the alcohol making me incautious as it tended to do. I was ahead - whatever the reason was I needed to be ahead for. That might only become apparent later.

Gratefully I took my leave from the company, on whom the booze was now telling and bringing out the proper Essex in them. Ellen was just retiring and looked bored. Reg insisted I listen to a racist gag at which I thought it prudent to laugh. Sharon was not there. As Leo showed me out I noticed in the window sill a yellow leaflet, folded, just showing enough of its telephone number for me to recognise that it was identical to Cally’s.

The chilliness hit me like an Atlantic wave. The door closed behind me and I crunched across the pebbles, pausing to look at the brightly lit roofscape of Altameira and listen to the interwoven medley of music wafting up on the clear air. I smelt smoke and behind me heard a throat being cleared. I turned to see Sharon sitting in a fur coat on a garden seat.

“Reg was beginning to get me down a bit. And when Liz is pissed it ain’t nice. Here, have a perch.”

As soon as I sat down she planted a tobacco kiss on my lips. I felt a curious mixture of revulsion and desire.

“That’s to say thank you. You live in them grotty villas at the bottom, don’t yah?”

“Yes I do. But they’re not so grotty. I’m at number four.”

“And are you in tomorrow a’rtnoon?”

“I am.”

“Well, I fly out early on Sat’day. Troy’s already missed the first couple o’ weeks at school. And he’s got special needs. I’d like to come down and say a proper thank you for today. I’ve got special needs too.”

“Oh? How long has it been since your husband went inside?” I asked, trying to distract her.

She giggled, seeing the ruder meaning of this question and would not stop. She had drunk too much as well.

“Three months,” she gasped. “Not that him going down has made much difference to me.” She realised what she had said, opened her eyes as wide as they went and cried out, laughing raucously, to the night “Oh dear, what am I like?” Her coat fell open. She grabbed my hand and planted it on her long bare thigh. I was too cold, too weary and too drunk to feel much arousal and I was pleased to hear the door open and Liz shout her name.

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Compared to Sharon, Maureen was mild. I am not the rough sort and when I thought it over later I realised I had not enjoyed her that much. She was certainly keen to pay me back alright – but not for saving her life – more for the bruise which was now a gaudy purple under her milky breasts. As soon as she came into the hall she charged me over onto the floor. My head cracked against a tile and I felt for a moment as if I was going to pass out. She yanked off my shorts and almost battered me into the perpendicular. My dizziness and the faint smell of tobacco on her breath made me delay longer than normal – much to her vociferous delight. My body felt afterwards like clay thrown by a modeller. If her Jim was as ineffectual as she had implied, then perhaps he was glad of the penitential respite from her.

There were four knocks on the door.

“It’s OK.” I whispered. “That will be the old lady I go shopping for. Or it might be my neighbour Cally.”

“Cally Brown, isn’t he?” she whispered back, holder me tighter.

“Yeah. Quite a character. You know him?”

“I met him a couple of times at the villa. Bored me shitless. He used to be on Jake’s payroll, you know.”

I turned to look at her in astonishment.

“Yeah. There was a fall-out. I can’t quite remember what over. You’d have to ask Jake.”

“What did he do for Jake?”

“He used to square things with the local police – him being a fluent speaker of the lingo. And he collected the subs for Jake’s Christmas Club, just from the English businesses up and down.”

I examined her eyes for a twinkle of irony but there appeared none. I did not want to appear too nosy by pressing her and decided to change the subject.

“So what will you do back in Ilford? Sit and wait for your old man to come out?”

“Nah, we’re finished. Jake’s decided to put some distance between himself and Jim. He knows too much and Jake worries about how weak he is. If he’s done one stretch – it’s his first – he might do a deal with Plod to avoid another. To be honest, he’s not Jake’s favourite relative – he ain’t a blood-brother – so watch this space.”



Put some distance between them? Did she mean six feet of distance?

We made a vague arrangement to get together again when she came back out for Christmas, if I was still around. I did her one last favour and before five o' clock she was on her way.

The next day was bright and the wind which had pestered the trees after Sharon's departure, sending me early from my patio, had dropped. I went to the beach and found myself again at the exact spot where I had kept Prosper under observation the morning before. The previous evening I had only had that customary, maddening single light to train my eyes on until the chill wind had driven me in. Was he a retired energy conservationist, a miser?

I stood looking for an hour by the sea but nothing changed, as if the whole scene was on pause. I wondered how I could pass the Powner place – the tarmac became a dirt road just after the turn-off to their door - without being spotted. I could set out at dawn or even in the middle of the night. Perhaps. Or maybe the path beginning by Nicolau's bar might lead me past the villa and upwards. I just knew that there was a good story to be had here somewhere. I was beginning to uncover the secrets of the place and the nosy journalist in me was greedy for more. I walked back to the bar and began to climb that path through the tall dry grasses down which the Powners had descended. The villa above me grew slowly larger and the faint music I had heard from below became clearer. Frank Sinatra was telling the air about doing it his way. I did not doubt – a quick rotation of the villa's ground floor plan in my head confirmed it – that through that open window, coming ever closer to me, Leo would be visible, appreciating the sentiments of a singer to whom he doubtless thought he had a close affinity. I realised that there was absolutely no way to pass the window without running the risk of being exposed as the spy I had become. The path seemed to be veering to my right straight to the edge of the cliff.

As I turned to retrace my steps I heard a loud voice.

"Will you tell him Jake? He won't listen to me!" It was Sharon. "You ARE going back!" she screamed. I heard a door slam. Frank finished the song and now Bing was crooning about the folks who lived on the hill.

Who was not going back? Troy, I supposed. I imagined him breaking his truculent silence to mutter a few words in protest at his imminent return to Ilford and to school. I descended to the beach. In the distance at the edge of the rippling waves Stan was casting his line. I admired the grace with which he moved backwards and forwards to achieve the desired distance. I had not seen him for well over a week and asked him as he turned to greet me if he had lost weight.

"You noticed!" he exclaimed with pleasure. "A couple of pounds. I just cut out the lagers at home. Just sticking to wine now – with a meal.....And do you know what?" He winked. "The old mojo's started working again."

But clearly not well enough.

I looked in his bucket. A sea bass lay white side up. Its gill openings were beautiful in death. He asked me if I wanted a go and offered me the rod. His eyes were all kindness. I felt an instant pang of shame. How close he stood to a truth capable of destroying him! And how much closer he was to that truth, when he tried to make love to his dissembling wife.

"No thanks, Stanley. I'm not really in a mood for fishing."

I waited until I heard his van pull away at about two o' clock and furtively delivered the following note.

Dear Maureen,

I can no longer see you. It is not fair to Stanley. I know the whole thing was his misguided idea but that does not excuse our conduct. It makes me intensely miserable to think of this deceit. Before I left home I was the victim in such a situation – and it nearly drove me mad. You are a

very attractive and desirable woman. I know it is not my place, me being so young, to give a woman of your experience advice. But I urge you to give Stanley a chance to prove himself worthy of you again. I know he is making an effort.

Yours with much affection,

Steven.

About an hour later I heard my letterbox clatter and there were two knocks at the door. I found this reply on the doormat.

Dear Steven,

When I knocked your door yesterday it was going to be my last meeting with you. When I saw that vulgar woman from up the hill come out later on it made it a lot easier to call it a day. I feel guilty too. Stanley is a lovely guy in spite of his selfish faults. And he is trying harder! You are a decent man and I understand your motives. I am sorry about your heartache back home. Let me warn you about that woman. They are dangerous people up there. I hope you appreciate what you might be letting yourself in for, going with one of their wives.

Mo.

PS Please destroy this as I have your note. I think it's strange that what matters nothing at all to me might well mean the end of the world to Stanley. Quits?

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Cally asked me round that Friday evening but I declined. I had been thinking and doing some research. There was a flight to Gatwick early in the morning. Sharon would surely be on it. Would the whole family – if they were as close as Leo said – go along to wave her and her wordless son off? I could be up with the lark – if there were any in Altameira – and walk up to the Ghost's villa, pretty sure of going unobserved. So I told Cally I had a sore throat and went to bed early.

It was a good plan – but what did Burns say about good plans? Before sunrise, at six, I was outside. In my pockets I had stuffed my binoculars, a carrier bag, a knife and a pocket-book about mushrooms I had found at the local book exchange. I had a cover-story in case I ran into trouble at the top. But the trouble started further down. As soon as I turned the corner I saw the blue lamp of a patrol car flashing on Leo's drive. Had the wind he had mentioned changed direction? Was he facing extradition to account for his sins?

Waddling towards me with a purpose, in her long robe, was Liz. She came closer and halted, peering at me in the blue twilight.

“Steven? What brings you up here so early?”

I ignored the question and pointed to the police car. “Problem?”

“Big problem. Troy's gone missing. Not in his bed when Shaz goes in to get him up. They're s'posed to be on their way to the airport soon. I'm just going down to see if I can spot the little git.”

Now I could hear Sharon on the brittle air speaking an excited mixture of English with Portuguese and the policemen adding their dark comments as she paused. Then Leo shouted out at the top of his voice “Troy! If you're out there somewhere then you'd better get here NOW! Nothing will happen if you do. But if you DON'T my lad.....”

The sun was starting to rise but, hidden behind a belt of dark cloud, it was sending a fan of searchlights uselessly heavenwards. Here people were all still grey shapes, standing around irresolutely in the chilly gloom.

“What are you doing here?” asked Leo not very pleasantly, now spotting me as I came along with Liz. Sharon appeared not to register my arrival and shouted her son’s name in frustration and fury. Seeing it was pointless she turned and rushed cursing back into the house. The two policemen climbed into their car, reversed out of the drive and sped off downhill. Leo looked at me again. I had my story ready. “I was up having a pee when I saw the blue light come past and then turn up here. I wondered what was up.”

Lying is so much easier than the truth. No wonder we lie with such ease.

Sharon came out wearing a coat. I walked over and offered to go along The Mile to see if I could spot him. The offer was gratefully received by her and she said she would come. But Liz, to my relief, said that Sharon should stay - if Troy turned up then they could still just about make the flight. She agreed. Leo muttered that he would go and look on the beach. Liz began to follow the muttering Sharon in home. I took my leave of them and walked to the end of the drive. I made certain that their front door was closed and then, instead of turning downhill, I turned right and began the climb to the headland.

The dirt track narrowed as it steepened. The sun had risen through the clouds and now shone unchallenged. But it was still chilly. Over the crest of a short hill the road flattened out and through the copse the roof and wall of the far villa came gradually into view. The road ended after about a quarter of a mile at a broad red gate set in that familiar chain-link fencing. It was far too high to climb and the mesh too small to allow a foothold. I rattled the gate and, as I fully expected, found it locked. With no expectation of gaining access I walked around the fence to my right where I could see the blue horizon of the ocean stretching beyond the final pines. In the steady onshore breeze their waving branches made them look as if they were struggling for balance on the cliff edge. From time to time I raised my binoculars to my eyes to study the villa. The conviction was growing in me that the building was in truth as deserted as it appeared to be. My canvas shoes were damp with dew on the new grass. I looked around. The trees swayed slowly and silently and gave the morning a sleepy, enchanted air, as if it was under a spell. There were no birds singing and no insects chirruping. The headland felt eerie, sinister even. Reality had been put on hold and I was an intruder, impossibly entering a strange, frozen frame. The rugged blue fir trees I was passing seemed out of place in a hot climate. They were covered in cones. The click I heard might have been one dropping from a branch but it wasn’t. The shriek of a gull shocked me. I turned. It flew past, huge, a few centimetres from my cheek. I ducked instinctively, lost my balance and fell to the ground. The bird disappeared into the tree and I watched a tall shape emerge and drop from one of the lower branches. It landed just the other side of the fence from me on bent legs and stood up. It was a young man, brown-skinned, with tightly curled Negroid hair, but dark auburn. His eyes were remarkable and hypnotic; arrogant and fiercely intelligent, burning with contempt for me. I watched as he reached into one of the two deep, slanting pockets in a sleeveless red overall, and feared he would produce a weapon. But he held a device like a mobile phone only smaller. I heard that click again and now realised it was a button he had pressed. There was a short burst of crackled speech to which he replied in a language I did not recognise. I thought it might be Greek. The other voice answered – darker, richer. The guard looked directly at me and began to speak Portuguese. I recognised “get up” and he gestured “up” with his hand.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak much Portuguese. I’m English. Sou inglês.”

“Inglês” he repeated, without question intonation, as if it was a word he did not know. He clicked the device and spoke in that guttural language again. I listened hard for a word resembling all the foreign words I knew for “English” but heard nothing faintly familiar. I looked up at the far balcony and saw a figure with large black eyes, like the compound eyes of a monstrous insect. Instinctively I raised my binoculars to get a close-up and saw that the “eyes” were in fact the dark lenses of binoculars trained on me. The sight of me looking through my binoculars caused the figure above to lower his and I found myself looking at a weather-beaten, crinkly-haired old head with the same intensity of eyes as the guard. His expression was rapt and astonished, and there was something else there which later, upon reflection, I could only interpret as fear. I put my binoculars down so that he might see I meant no harm and he turned, as if distracted by something or someone behind him. He seemed to be ushering another person – did I detect or imagine it was a female? – back inside. I put my glasses back up quickly but, infuriatingly, he was alone again. Slowly, without taking his eyes from me, he backed away, mouthed something into his walkie-talkie, which crackled instantly and unpleasantly on his servant’s receiver, and he disappeared into the house.

We looked at each other.

“Who lives up there – sorry .....er ...ah!– qui vive en a casa? Senhor Qui? Senhor Prosper?? Qui vive con el senhor? Uma menina? Uma loura? Quantos anos tem a menina??” I did not seriously expect him to answer my questions about the girl who might be living with him, or her age, and I was not surprised by his determination to maintain his steady gaze of implacable hostility. He reminded me of a pitiless eagle owl I had once seen at Whipsnade zoo. Finally he said without a flicker of change in his expression.

“Porque esta aqui?”

“Why? Er, just – um momento!”

I took out my mushroom book, held it open against my chest and swept around the fields with my hand. I showed him my knife and made a sawing motion. “Está a chover...entaó...faz sol...e...” but I did not know the word for mushrooms so I tapped the page and pointed again all around me, smiling as engagingly and as innocently as I could.

“No” he said, shaking his head. Whether he meant there were no mushrooms (which there evidently were not), whether he disagreed with the wet-then-warm analysis I had just ingeniously given, or whether he thought I was lying was not immediately obvious. Then he pointed at my binoculars hanging still on my chest, angrily shook an imaginary pair hanging around his own neck and pointed at the balcony.

“Porque?” he asked with no alteration to his face. For a moment I was stuck for an explanation but then, ingeniously, I put them to my eyes and scanned the fields and the spaces below the trees before tapping the page again. My smugness was short-lived. I had hesitated just a second too long, I thought. He shook his head more vigorously this time and strode to a stretch of the fence a few metres to my right. There was a sign which read ENTRADA PROIBIDA. He pointed at it, then at me and finally in the direction I had come.

“Parte!” he said and repeatedly shook his finger at the road. I must admit I was getting rather tired of his uncouth manners by this time and I stood my ground.

“No e proibido aqui!” I declared and pointed to the public ground where I stood. I folded my arms. He had no jurisdiction or influence on my side! At least I thought he did not. He drew a torch-like tool from his other pocket and pressed a button. A searing hot pain entered my left knee. I collapsed and rolled down the slope. The bastard had taser-ed me! I struggled to my feet although my knee was still on fire. I yelled “bastardo” at him and he targeted my right knee. In agony and in fury I writhed around in the damp grass. Once in childhood I had fallen into a stand of nettles. This pain was several times worse. By the time I managed to get up again he had gone. I picked up my book and knife – fat lot of use they had been! – and with one last defiant gesture of my finger towards the villa, in case Prosper was still looking, I limped away.

I would get my own back. Somehow. Now I had to think of a speech to give to Powner in case I was spotted on my way down. Perhaps I would not have to. On my left a thin path left the dirt road about a hundred and fifty metres above the Powner villa and headed off towards the cliff. I followed it. To my surprise and relief it did not end abruptly at the edge in a sheer drop. The gradient was steep but safe and at the bottom where the path ended there were just some large boulders to scramble over and then there was sand. With some difficulty I managed it. I found myself in a narrow cove between two outcrops of rock which disappeared into the incoming sea. I was cut off from the point on the beach from where I had observed the villa before. I had no choice, as the waves came crashing in, but to scramble back the way I had come. Except that I could not, even with sturdy knees. The rocks I had slid and slithered down were either encrusted in barnacles or covered with green slime, making a handhold and foothold impossible. Barnacles and green slime meant that the water came all the way in. I looked up. They extended half a meter above my diminutive frame.

I surveyed the rocks to right and left for a cave or a ledge where I could sit it out in safety. The rocks were all covered in algae. There was nowhere. I was going to drown but I tried not to panic. If necessary, I reasoned, I could swim out. But could I? My knees were very weak and I was a mediocre swimmer. And anyway, would the flowing tide allow even a good swimmer an exit? Then I had an idea. I took off my jacket and stuffed the collar end into a crevice. I thought the jacket might give me some purchase over the rock, but I could get neither a handhold nor a foothold. How high would this tide be? Concentrated by the narrow cove opening, the waves were impressive and soon water would be lapping at my feet and sucking away the sand beneath them. I gripped the sleeve of my coat – as I had my blanket when as a small child – more for comfort than for practical help. The boat towing the paragliders came into view and then an aeroplane towing a banner advertising Martini; I waved frantically and uselessly. I looked behind me at the fateful path I had taken. How tantalisingly, unreachably near my escape to safety was. My heart ached. I knew I had no choice but to trust to good fortune in the water. Surely I would be able to float around, dog-paddle and tread water? But how chilly would the water in late September be? I cursed out loud my stupid, pointless nosiness! When a wave crashed against a more prominent boulder to my far left I realised that I would not drown. I would be battered to death. I had to wade out, there was no alternative. I made my move. The water was freezing. I gasped. Surely I would acclimatise myself to it and be able to make my way slowly, one way or another, to that right hand corner, now submerged. I imagined myself later, laughing at my own temerity and anxiety over a glass or two with Cally.

A breaking wave made me overbalance. I almost fell. The water welled up to my thighs and I cringed. This wave receded and the level fell to my ankles – treacherously – for now I stood horrified in front of a wall of water with no sign of a turning crest. If it caught me standing I would surely be swept along and hurled against the rocks. I threw myself down on the wet sand, took a huge breath and closed my eyes.

I had never experienced such a shock, not even at the seaside in childhood. It felt as if I was in a huge, icy-cold washing machine. I could see and hear nothing. Was this death? The impact and the cold sapped me of all strength. And then I was in air again. The water drew back leaving me winded and within a few centimetres of the rocks. The next huge sea would surely finish me off. The tide, after such a massive swell, retreated to gather its forces. The next waves were little more than ripples. Without another second's hesitation I plunged in running as fast as the soft sand would allow. I had to get as far away from the rocks as possible and fight with all my strength against the rollers before they broke.

If my past life had the quality of a rather unhappy dream then the last episode was sure to be a nightmare. As I bobbed up and down and then ran uselessly into the next wave, repeatedly

brought back like a dog's toy, I recalled the tragic story of a father and son trapped in the north of England by a remorseless tide. They had drowned. I had wondered at that time how the father might have tried to reassure the terrified boy, as well as his terrified self. With every return to my starting place or even a step behind it my optimism ebbed. I prayed for an easy death. Instead of becoming used to the cold I was getting more numb. And then my fear started to recede. In its stead there came a serene resignation and a desire to be finished. I had, at Cally's insistence, read *The Tempest* - it was remarkably short – and I recalled a beautiful couplet which now comforted me.

We are such stuff as dreams are made of  
And our life is rounded with a sleep.

In another interval between huge seas I sat down and waited. The water washing around my chin and ears died away again. I watched the ocean beyond rise into a mountain. I closed my eyes and, in the very instant of calm when I thought the tide had inexplicably turned, I was overwhelmed. After an age in a frenzy of boiling cold water my eyes opened. I was floating just beneath the surface, unable to move my limbs. I saw the sun breaking like the yolk of an egg, pulled apart by the reeling sky. It was a moment of absolute beauty and my dying thought was one of grief that it would go undescribed as every one else's last vision. In a few seconds I would have to release my final breath. Now above me, blotting out the broken sun, staring down at me with the same fixed regard was the face of my tormentor. How ironic, I remember thinking, that of all the remarkable scenes I had witnessed in my short life, that insignificant incident at the fence was to be the one I would see at my end! I blinked. He refused to go. All at once I was wrenched out of my watery grave and restored, panting and choking, to my proper element. I felt no kindness; only a power almost as strong as the tide which had seized me. I seemed to be airborne, in the grip of some bird of prey, as if paragliding, looking down at the water surging and leaping in a fury to have lost me, beating its fists against the rocks I had tried to climb.

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The sun had left the morning quarter of the sky. I discovered myself staring into an empty blueness. The sea was far off, a repentant whisper. My skin felt dry and warm. I ran my palms over myself and realised I was stark naked. I was lying on my back at a forward angle to the sea on a flat rock like a sacrifice. Rolling my eyes upwards and backwards, I just caught sight of a slim figure darting away through the haggard trees. The sun was partly in my eyes but I felt sure it was not the guard, but a girl. With blonde hair? Perhaps I had been conditioned to imagine it but the vision would not be diminished. How close had the figure come? How long had she been staring at me? I tried to shout out but only managed a whisper. I then remembered the staring, callous eyes of the guard and the whole terrible and strange episode in the sea flooded back into my recall. I groaned and sobbed. I had never felt so overjoyed to awaken and all the previous suffering I had borne seemed of no consequence. I raised myself onto my elbows, swivelled my neck and, like Frankenstein's creature, one by one tried my limbs. I was alive!

The path I had come down on was a few easy boulders away. I turned to think of more practical matters. How was I going to get back home? I was stark bollock naked. I was not even wearing a watch. I felt as if I had fallen out of the sky from another planet. From the position of the sun I guessed it was two or three o'clock. I had a few hours of daylight to endure before I could try to slip past the Powners in the dark and then run along the short lamplit road to my villa. Which

was locked. My key? Neptune had it in his pocket. I would have to go to the letting agency just down the hill from The Mile, once I had borrowed some clothes from Cally of course. (I did not wish to draw attention away from the Chaplin impersonator, the street buffoon or, if they were still there, the rubber dinosaurs, with an original show of my own.) I cast around for some flotsam I might clothe myself in, but there was nothing.

Not only were my muscles aching. I was weak from hunger, not having breakfasted that morning, which seemed to belong to another day entirely. It took me a good half an hour to retrace my foolish steps through the clumps of sea fennel, stirring up a reviving fragrance of lemon and lime. At the top of the cliff I saw, on the downward slope, a clump, almost a copse of trees where I could hide until sunset. I glanced at the villa. Only the roof and the right side top window were in view and I had a strong feeling I was being observed. What I would have given for those lost binoculars!

The chill of early evening woke me. The sun had sunk below the hillside beyond the town, leaving only a pale wash of blue light behind. Above me and at the eastern horizon great stars were emerging, ice blue and gold, like corals on a dark reef. There was no moon. The volume of noise from The Mile and its environs was muted, almost half-hearted. The summer season was coming to an end like a wild party where only the most ardent revellers could raise the energy to dance till dawn. With any luck my road would be deserted. And with any luck the Powners would be inside on such a chill evening. I shivered. Ten minutes should see me home. As I approached the villa I saw the headlamps of a car swing around the bend, threatening to light me up like a classical sculpture. I dropped flat to the ground. The car turned onto the front yard. It disgorged two officers of the law. I slithered up to the low wall and listened as the door opened. I could not make out what was being said until Sharon came out. She shouted her fury into the night. "Troy, if you're hearing this, I hope you're facking proud of yourself, my son!" There was more muttering before the three doors slammed in quick succession and the car left. I seized my chance. I hobbled past the villa and reached the corner of the road. I hid behind a telegraph pole until I had made sure there was no-one about and no car was approaching. I passed the two villas before Cally's and rapped his door. The windows were in darkness. I begged God to let him be in. On the verge of weeping despair I heard the door slowly opened. "Hello? Anyone there?" he ventured.

"Cally, it's me, Steven! I'm down here!"

He came out and peered into the dark corner where I was crouching. I leapt up and ran past him inside.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? Are you drunk?" he hissed.

"Please Cally. Get me some shorts, for fuck's sake!"

He went into his room and threw some at me, averting his gaze.

"For pity's sake, cover the bloody thing up. It is grotesque!"

I turned to the wall and stepped into them. I told him I had lost my key and asked if I could stay the night. "I need a drink, something warm, not that green wine... a brandy. And I'm starving!"

"You are a silly boy, Steven" he said, as my ravenous rate of eating gradually slowed. "It is a mistake to leave the beaten track. Have you never read Theodor Fontane? No, silly question, of course you have not, you semi-literate. Not entirely your fault though. And you are young enough to make amends. Here, drink up."

I wiped my plate clean with the bread and sat back to look at him with an ironic eye.

"Now you've fed me and I'm in the warm, with your bottles at my mercy, I can afford to tell you what I really think of you, Caliban Brown!"

The brandy had gone to my head and I felt uninhibited.

"Tell me what, precisely?"

“You’re a hypocrite!”

“Oh” he said with mock relief. “Is that all? I thought you might have found out something really bad about me! Go on, do your worst.”

“Well, what I’ve not let on to is that I am current flavour of the month with an ex-colleague of yours and his cousin Sharon, for saving her life. In fact she came around yesterday to repay me for the favour.”

“Sharon? Powner’s moll? You want to be careful, young man.”

“She isn’t his moll!”

“She used to be.”

“Not any more. He virtually directed me to shag her.”

“Oh, charming. And did you?”

“No. She shagged me.”

“Really. I deny that he is my ex-colleague though.”

“You worked for Leo – I mean Jake Powner; you were his bag-man. Sharon said so. Deny it.”

He topped up my brandy and poured himself another glass of vinho verde.

“Cally, in spite of all your great eloquence and erudition, you are a crook.”

“Steven, I am many things. Do not be so self-righteous, Steven, it spoils you rather. Have you never fiddled your expenses and –“

“Oh, don’t come that one, Caliban! We’re-all-really-as-bad-as-each-other and all that original sin jazz! I might have overstayed on a parking meter but you used to collect protection money! And you probably still do. That’s of a different order compared to my misdemeanours!!”

“No, I did do. But my conscience – sickle-moon that it is – is clear. Most of the people up there on the Rua de Oura are scoundrels – they employ illegals and pay them next to nothing; no insurance, no rights. There are few saints around here, Steven, with the exception of you of course. And you seem to be losing your halo, I have noticed. I have already told you. I *am* a monster, a misanthrope.”

“So what made you stop collecting?”

“Simple. Our Stan. I told Powner to let him get himself established first but the greedy cunt would not. I liked Stan. He was funny, and basically a decent man and a fair employer. I told Powner to go straight to the devil.”

“Very brave of you.”

“Not really. I did not lie when I said he was not an ex-colleague, you see. He needs me. I speak the lingo. I am his go-between with the authorities. He is tolerated here as long as he pays his dues. You see the poor man dare not set foot in Blighty again and he pays for his protection like every other Greasy Joe up and down the golden mile. It is all about fleas and their little fleas. And I am just as much a parasite as he is. I make no bones about it. Drink up.”

Why should I believe him? Was there anyone here I could really trust?

“Cally, I do not believe I can believe you any more. What happened to your first wife?”

“Mind your own business.”

“I thought you said you had no conscience. What are you afraid of?”

“Alright, I strangled her.”

“Really??”

“Really. She is underneath a patio in Oxford. A waste of good humus, the fat slob. She told me when drunk that she wanted a divorce, you see, but I could not be arsed to go through all that palaver.”

“Honestly?”

“No. She ran off with a one-legged acrobat from a circus. I am a bigamist.”

“Are you?”

“Probably; but the truth is I came back home one day and all the furniture was covered in green slime and I had to conclude that she had been abducted by a deranged gang of aliens. I moved



out sharpish in case the spiny creatures decided to bring her back. They would do, you see, as soon as they removed her gag. Drink?"

"I'll have some of that green wine now."

"Anyway, as I was saying, that halo of yours is looking a little tarnished, you deceitful fellow. I know that you and Mo have been going behind Stanley's chip back. And I know that you could not possibly have climbed out of that cove. It is renowned. The locals call it a Cozhina do Diablo – the Devil's Kitchen. One high tide and you are done for. How did you get out?"

"Why isn't it fenced off? Why aren't there signs up?"

He shrugged. "The Health and Safety mafia have not come this far south yet. Still busy cutting down horse chestnuts in leafy, deathless Surrey, as far as I am aware. Here you watch out for yourself - you must have seen how lethal the shiny cobbles are on Cardiac Hill. If Stanley's chips and a heart attack does not do for the fatties, a severe head injury will. Anyhow. Do not change the subject. How did you get out?"

I had not wanted to tell him about the guard at all. I could hardly believe the manner of my rescue myself.

"An alien pulled me out on a tractor beam and dropped me on a flat rock."

"Oh for goodness sake! Do not steal my lines. I can think of nothing more disgusting!"

"Alright. I was extremely lucky. I was on a swell so huge that it lifted me way up and left me safe on a ledge."

"After undressing you. I see."

"I took them off to dry out. When I woke up they were gone. Another wave must have taken them."

"But left you where you were. No doubt the sea was going to wash them in Daz and bring them back. A miracle indeed. You see, you tell one lie and other whoppers are bound to follow, unless you are as practised a liar as me. Go on. What were you really doing up there anyway? Please do not mention mushrooms again."

"No, it's true. Nicolua happened to say there were ceps and morels up there."

"Nicolau's English is good but ceps and morels are not part of his active or passive vocabulary. There you go again. Liar."

"No, I showed him my book and he pointed them out. I was going to fry me and you up an omelette to die for. I nearly did."

"Stop feeding me bullshit, Steven. I am not a mushroom. You are quite a nice fellow but a poor liar. Leave it to the experts."

"But I am one. I'm a journalist, don't forget. That reminds me. If Powner asks you, I'm not one. I'm a stockbroker. OK?"

"Not OK. I told him you were a journalist. He phoned me yesterday."

"Oh SHIT! Thanks a bundle. Now, I'll be walking round Faro in my birthday suit! Did you really tell him or are you having me on?"

"Did you see her?"

"See who?"

"Who, he says. The second most disgusting thing about you tonight is your disingenuousness or rather your attempt to have some in front of a withering intellect. And I have told you, it is *whom*, accusative case.....Come on. Did you see my Miranda?"

His Miranda? I thought for a second he was even drunk. I laughed and told him I thought it was rather cheesy of him to keep pushing The Tempest analogy.

"Oh no it is not, young man. It intrigues me. That is only my nickname for her, of course, if she exists. Did you see her?"

"No. Have *you* seen her?"

"I cannot be sure. It might have just been a servant. Steven, if you were up there poking your nose around, then be warned. He is a powerful man. I know from previous experience. Powner

is small potatoes in comparison. Not even the local police want to talk about him. Inspector Limao admitted to me that Lisbon deals with him.”

“Who is he really? And don’t tell me a fairy story.”

“I honestly do not know for sure, but he must have some powerful friends, the most powerful. Limao mentioned the name Prosper. Like you, I did a bit of amateur sleuthing, when he first came. As I told you I wanted that villa and I was pretty sour when he gazumped me. Through the ‘scope I spotted a delivery van driving up there, took the registration number and my insider at the police station ran it for me. I rang the delivery man up and he gave me his contact and so on.....I got as far as an agent in Faro. He would tell me nothing. The next morning I found a dead cat on my front yard. That did it.”

“A dead pussy? You don’t strike me as the superstitious sort, Mr Brown.”

“Nor am I. But have you read of the Viking practice of opening up their victim’s rib cages while they are still alive and spread-eagling the lungs? Of course you have not, you ill-read, guttersnipe oik! Well, that is precisely how the cat had met his end. I got the message. Now I confine my curiosity to the telescope. So should you.”

To consume so much alcohol after my trying day was not very clever. I had been dreaming of my ordeal but it was not seawater which I had in my mouth when I woke up, but a vile, sour concoction of brandy, wine and tinned stew. It finished up like a mini supernova on the bedroom floor. As I wiped it up, the thought of Cally’s cat tormented me. I had the most vicious attack of indigestion from the return of throat-burning brandy. I resolved to stop drinking altogether.

But the most startling thought I had – and in tandem with the heartburn it kept me awake for a long time - was this: if the Ghost had really gone to such elaborate extremes to frighten Cally away, why had I not been left to drown?

Young Troy had not turned up. Sharon was beside herself when I bumped into her on the beach that morning.

“He’s only fourteen,” she snivelled. “He don’t know nothing, nor nobody and can hardly say a word, even in English. I know he’s dead. He must be. He can’t fend for himself.”

I was struggling to find something comforting to say. I thought Troy would fit in rather well with the culture of The Mile, washing dishes in some restaurant kitchen and dossing in one those grim flatlets above the shop-line. He “did not need no education” apart from the hard lessons The Mile had to offer. Should I tell her what I thought? Would it make her feel better?

“He’s probably having a lie-in in somebody’s flat as we speak, Sharon. He’s not far away. Somebody will realise whose he is and bring him back safe and sound, you’ll see. Surely the police and Jake have put the word out?”

“But what if he’s on drugs, or something? And what if a bloody paedophile’s got him? There’s a ring of ‘em in the Algarve you know. Jake reckons the police have been trying to break into it for ages. Jake hates the bastards. He’s offered a reward of a thousand for Troy and another thou for info on them fucking nonces.”

The thought of anyone interfering with and gaining gratification via her vile, lanky son was as nauseating as my digestive mixture the previous night, and I almost retched again. I thought of Cally’s aliens and felt sure that, like his wife, Troy would soon be returned by any abductor.

“No, Shaz. Troy’s far too old. Those fucking perverts are only interested in little kids.”

“The gypsies kidnap ‘em, you know and sell ‘em off to rich Arabs and such. Dirty bastards!”

“All rumour. I bet he’ll be back tomorrow, playing with his computer game, right as rain. Does he have any money?”

“I reckon I’m a fifty light, and Jake’s always subbing him.”

“As soon as he’s spent up, he’ll be back, you’ll see.”

I planted an affectionate kiss on her cheek and wondered further along to the rocks at the entrance to the Devil’s Kitchen. I did not stay long. I felt as if I was a spirit surveying the place of my death.

I bought a new pair of binoculars and spent many hours on many a day training them on Prospero’s villa. In an idle moment I thought I would flick through Cally’s copy of *The Tempest* again. To my mounting fury I could not find it. It was part of his precious collection and irreplaceable – not that there was the remote possibility of unearthing another copy of any edition at the local book exchange. I removed every drawer and emptied every cupboard. There was no sign of it. Furthermore, I could not find the handwritten sheets of the story I had begun. And I felt sure that my passport had been in the kitchen drawer, not where I found it, on the lounge coffee table. As I was dropping off to sleep one night, it occurred to me that my key might not be as far away as with Neptune after all.

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My old French teacher had once come out with something very memorable in response to one of those idle boys on the back row who regularly challenged and tormented him. It was a rainy, windy day and I had been dreaming of warmer climes as he droned on about the use of the imperfect tense to describe the weather – *il faisait du vent, il pleuvait, il faisait de l’orage.....* He had been interrupted yet again by one demanding to know the point of knowing the word for a storm in French.

“I cannot tell you,” he exclaimed, thrusting forward his purple face “What the point is of learning any particular word, Sperry! The most important word in any language is precisely the very one you need to understand or use next!”

On his usual route to Faro, Stanley had managed to pull over to the left-hand side and get his window down. He had been drinking beer and the passer-by to whom he had whimpered thought he was drunk. He was an old man and could not speak one word of English. *Coração* was a crucial word for such an obese man to know; with practice he could have mastered its nasal ending and it might, with a telling gesture at his rib-cage, have saved his life. Thus fate proved Stanley’s confirmed monoglotism to be misguided. His heart attack proved severe and final.

Maureen insisted that I came to the wake, in spite of our private shame.

“You went fishing with him, Steven. He liked you.”

These two reasons were conclusive and unanswerable and I duly turned up. Maureen’s daughter and son-in-law had flown out from Birmingham and there was quite a crowd of friends and fellow-traders from *The Mile*. Cally was uncharacteristically subdued but Mo was voluble and drunk, announcing her plans to everyone. She was determined to sell the business and fly back with her daughter to the Black Country.

In a moment of guilty weakness, as the liquids in assembled bottles went south, (I was not drinking) I offered to buy her out. She named a number off the top of her head, four hundred thousand Euros, for the villa and the two shops. She introduced me to Ricardo, a young, confident man whom they had trained in the art of frying crispy, golden chips and who ran one of the shops single-handedly. Mo assured me that he knew the business inside out. A few days later, I would offer him twenty thousand Euros per annum and a 2% share of the profit to manage the business for me. He would accept. And I made a silent resolution that Powner would not suck any of its life blood.

I remained near to Mo and her corpulent daughter, who had also had a few. Her silent husband, a total roundhead with an ear stud, had sloped off after a while and later I glimpsed him in the lounge watching a televised football match. Her name was Colette and she was all sniffles. "If Dad hadn't started to lose weight, it wouldn't have happened. He must have upset his metabolism. It's more delicate than we think, you know. Oi read an article in The Star." Neither Mo nor I had anything to say to this tipsy logic, although I did manage to nod sympathetically.

"She's her dad's daughter all over that one," Mo had sighed as Colette had returned again to the buffet to pile up her plate and pour more wine. "Full of excuses – and bullshit. You know, a few months ago I dreamt that this would happen. That's why I'm taking it so well. I've mourned him already."

What could I say? She was forced to greet a late-comer and I saw my chance to move over to Cally, who was staring out at the headland. He was drinking fruit juice.

"You on the wagon, Caliban?"

"Do not call me that. I told you, young man, never before seven."

"Not even for Stan?"

He fell silent again.

"Still obsessed with your Prospero?"

He gave me an ironic look.

"Only marginally more than you are. I do need to speak to you."

I waited.

"No, not now, not here. A little bird has told me that things are warming up quite nicely over yonder. You should stay well away. Come round at seven."

A cry from the doorway, almost a scream, brought all hushed conversation to an end and we all turned to stare at Mo. She was holding a card which she had evidently just taken out of its envelope.

"The cheeky BASTARD!"

She threw the card to the floor and made a rapid, tearful exit. I bent down to pick it up and read the message to the staring company.

"With deepest sympathy from the Powner family."

A few people tutted but most turned away in silence. I made my escape as soon as I decently could. At Mo's insistence the reception had turned into a piss-up and I felt uncomfortable with the fake bonhomie and sentimentality imposed by the growing army of empty bottles.

Cally admitted me from the dark and offered me a glass of green wine, which I declined

"I'm going straight, Cally."

He raised an eyebrow. "Your near-death experience seems to have made a new man of you," he drawled sardonically. "A kind of rebirth, a baptism, if you will..."

"Not really, Cally. It was much more the mixture of brandy, wine and tinned goulash. I can still taste it."

"Sit over there and listen."

He told me he had bumped into a man who was an occasional visitor at the Powners'.

"A rare visitor to these shores. He did not see me in the shop. He was buying walnuts. He has a weakness for them. Probably his only one. His name is Gentleman. No, honestly.....I did not recognise him at first. Of course his nickname is the Gent. Quite ironic."

"How ironic?"

"This ironic. He is about the nastiest piece of work you are ever likely to encounter. He is Powner's enforcer and hit-man."

I felt a chill run down my spine. "Did you really tell Leo – I mean Jake – that I was a journalist?"

“Powner? Why would I? I never gossip with him.”

“You work for him!”

“On an ad-hoc basis, when it suits me.”

“Did you fucking tell him?”

“Why? ...Oh, I see!” He laughed and refilled his glass. I asked him what was so funny.

“You are! What a monstrous ego! You think that Jake has flown in Mr Gentleman at great expense to dispose of you? He could ask *me* to do that! One little push and over you would go!”

“DID YOU TELL HIM OR NOT?”

“No. I was pulling your short leg.”

“Bastard.”

He laughed for a while and then composed himself to be stern.

“My advice to you, Steven Kloss, is to stay down here. If you must pick mushrooms then do so at the supermarket. And if you really are dreaming of some sort of scoop then forget it. And stay away from the Powners, all varieties.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“Well, I doubt if Mr Gentleman is here to sunbathe. The last time he came, a minor crook in Faro went coincidentally missing and is, I do not doubt, still bumping along the bottom out there somewhere, picked clean by the little fishes, probably still in his Sunday suit.”

“And who is he targeting now?”

He stood up and looked steadily at the bleak light at the edge of our little world.

“You’re joking!”

I felt great alarm. In spite of my less than hospitable reception I realised then I felt a sort of affinity for that strange man with the staring eyes, not least due to the part he had obviously played in the sparing of my life. Why on earth, I asked Callie, would Powner want this inoffensive man dead, who only desired his privacy? How had he offended him?

“I am not saying he wants him dead, Steven. Do not leap to such melodramatic conclusions.”

He got up and fetched the leaflet he had already shown me. I had also received one. I told him he had already showed it to me.

“Is Powner trying to get Prospero out as well? Is he after the villa like you were?”

“No, dear boy. I was wrong for once. Prospero wants him out, besides all of us. The leaflets are Prospero’s doing.”

I immediately recalled the folded one I had seen on the table by the door at Powner’s. I asked him if he was sure.

“Positive. Nicolau told me that Jake asked him if he had had a leaflet. Why would he ask that if he was the one sending them out?”

“But that is no proof that Prospero is responsible. It might be some property company....in Faro....”

“No. I phoned Powner to tell him Stanley had died, and to lay off Mo. He mentioned the leaflets to me and told me the culprit was not a million miles away behind his security fence.

When I said “The Nowhere Man” – that’s his pet name for him – he did not demur...”

“Demur?”

“Oh for goodness sake, Steven! Did not dissent, contradict. When is your birthday? I will buy you a decent dictionary and a thesaurus! Anyway, there is something else.....something very nasty, and it is going to get a lot nastier....”

“Now it’s you being melodramatic!”

“Just listen!” he hissed. “Of course, you know about Sharon’s boy going missing. Is he called Troy?”

“Yes. He’s been gone a week now. And?”

“Well, Powner Esquire has it in his head – a bee in his bonnet you might almost say – that our mysterious friend yonder is the spider at the centre of a web of very nasty perverts hereabouts.

He has it in his head that Troy is up there with all the other children from Hamelin. Off course it's nonsense. The police were not prepared, in spite of all Jake's huffing and puffing, to go up and have a sniff-around. On Wednesday or Thursday your friend Sharon had a red mist descend and she went marching up there without telling Jake."

"She did? And what happened?"

"She came back half-zombified and had to take to her bed."

"How do you know all this if you and Jake are not on gossiping terms? How can I believe anything you tell me?"

"I have it on good authority, but that is not the point...."

I sensed his irritation growing.

"Why do you doubt my word on this? I have no reason to lie. Who told me? Why do you not use your imagination?"

I thought it over. I asked him if it was Inspector Limao. He raised his glass to toast my deductive powers. The journalist in me awoke. This would make a great story.

"Do you believe Prospero's a paedophile?"

"No. Powner is a bloody fool."

"Do you think this paedophile ring exists?"

"Use your imagination."

"Oh, stop playing bloody games with me!"

"Alright. You were once a teenager. Where did you go to meet girls?"

"I didn't. I was shy. I did my homework and stayed in. My classmates went to the youth club, or parties and discos."

"There, you see. They would never have thought about going to an ironmonger's or a chess club. Where did you meet your young lady? On a blind date?"

"No. on the London underground, if you must know..."

"Not at an ironmonger's?"

"What?? What on earth are you driving at?"

"Is it not obvious? If your bent is, shall we say, towards children, then where could you see lots of them – all ages, all shapes and sizes – every day – virtually naked – and be able to look at them – and even take sly photographs – without arousing suspicion; when their parents are more relaxed and less anxious about their safety and will even let them out of their sight for a time? Where better than a beach or a swimming pool? Paedophile paradise!"

"Oh my God! You're right! So they are here?"

"Oh, they are here alright."

"But kids don't go missing. It would make the news."

"Oh, but they do, every day...just for a half-hour perhaps."

"But surely if they had been abused they would scream blue murder!"

"But those are just the extreme cases, Steven. For the vast majority of paedophiles it is enough to look at them and be near them, in the pool or in the sea, to exchange a smile or a word or two, to brush against them...then look at their favourite photos later or run the action back in their minds while they masturbate...."

"Oh God, stop, it's vile...."

"The more adventurous ones might take them for a little walk, buy them a lolly and maybe promise them another if they do not tell their little secret. Maybe they take them by the hand and pretend they are lost and go looking for their parents...Most of them are harmless, pathetic, lonely middle-aged men who could never have a proper relationship with a woman – or a man. They would never harm a child, because they love them too much, you see."

"But how can this relate to Prosper? He is remote and aloof. How can anyone think he has a captive group of children up there?"

“Exactly! That is my whole point! I do admit that in my grief it did cross my mind that Merve might have gone there, willingly or otherwise. But you are right for once. Your insight does you credit! His is the absolute converse of the lifestyle of a paedophile.”

“Unless he watches them on the beach. Perhaps by living like that he consciously makes himself the unlikeliest of suspects?”

Cally turned and gazed at me in undisguised admiration.

“Well, well, well. You begin to impress me, Mr Kloss! It takes a devious mind to recognise another one. You may have a point.....Paedophilia is so utterly obnoxious to society, these days at least, that its adherents have to be the most devious of people. “Lying with their eyes while their hands are busy working overtime...” ”

“Who said that?”

He sighed and shook his head.

“Never heard of John Lennon?”

“Of course. Did he say that?”

“No, sang it.”

And that might have been the end of our discussion had not the word “technology” leapt into my head. I reminded him of my painful experience at the fence.

“Technology? That thought has never crossed my mind, Steven, I must admit. Technology..... No. it is too fantastic. Are you implying that he has certain areas under observation..... surveillance?”

“The beach?.....pools?....hotel rooms?.....showers?”

“That is utterly monstrous!”

“Yes, it is. But you said he had powerful allies, well placed....”

“Yes, in Lisbon.”

“Well, maybe he peddles his material there. Then there’s the Internet.”

“Wild speculation! Mail on Sunday stuff! No. He is just a wealthy recluse, like Howard Hughes, who, no doubt, you have also never heard of.”

I *had* heard of Hughes but I could not be bothered to correct him. I detected that my speculations had struck a chord. After a moment or two’s reflection, he came and sat back down next to me on the cream leather sofa. He patted my knee. I froze. His great hand closed like an enormous bony crab around my thigh. His other claw closed tighter around the goblet of his glass.

“We need to warn Prospero somehow about Gentleman,” I said.

He released his grip. “I would not give him a second thought. He must know Gentleman is here. He knows everything. My motive for speaking about this was concern for your welfare, young beaver. Keep well clear until the dust settles. Then you can go and pick non-existent fungi to your heart’s content.”

He patted my knee again. I stood up as if to go. My eye was arrested by the gap in his bookcase where *The Tempest* had been. I had half-hoped that it would be back there, that he had picked it up while visiting me and had neglected to tell me.

“Caliban, I have a confession to make.... “

“Caliban! You remind me of my Latin master. He called me Caliban if he had a woe to wreak upon me. What is it?.....Do you know something about Merve, which you have kept from me?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not what I wanted to say...”

He sprang up and went to grab me around the throat with his claws. I took a step back.

“Tell me!” he snarled.

“Alright, alright, but don’t blame me! Are you sure?”

His eyes beamed like fog lamps.

“OK! She’s a singer in a nightclub.”

He relaxed a little and laughed, but nervously. "I thought you were going to say a brothel! Where is she?"

"Somewhere in Faro. I could find it again."

"Will you take her a message?"

"Take it yourself!"

He laughed again. "Have you not noticed yet?"

"What?"

"How close to being a recluse I am? Would I look the part, at a nightclub? Do you think I would be let in? If you agreed to take a message, I would tell you one of my secrets."

How could I resist? And the prospect of seeing beautiful Merve again – who had been more in my thoughts than I care to admit – was alluring. I agreed. He went to his cabinet, took out a piece of paper and scribbled away for a few moments. He sealed his letter in an envelope and, with a significant look handed it over.

"Don't worry, Cally. I'm not into steaming envelopes open and my Turkish is not so clever."

Then I told him that I had mislaid his copy of *The Tempest*.

"Mislaid? A weasely word for "lost". "Please, Sir, my homework has been mislaid." Ah well, if it is only "mislaid" it will no doubt turn up, unless you took it to the beach. A new set of that ancient edition is only going to cost you ten or so thousand pounds. Might that help to bring it to the light?"

I lay in bed and something the Tranters had said would not stop doing the rounds in my head. About the little Portuguese who had gone missing - how Cally had helped to search for her and how he had cried when she was found. Cried for love? My mind crossed to the village in East Anglia where a school caretaker had helped to search for two girls he had murdered. Then I thought of Prospero. I could not help but give him and all these other disturbing images many more than a second thought, and by two o' clock I was up making tea. How much could I rely on what Cally said? What if Prospero was totally unaware of Mr Gentleman? I found some paper and wrote the following.

Dear Prospero,

I assume you read English. My Portuguese is not yet quite good enough for such an important letter. You are in danger.

I apologize for addressing you as Prospero, the name which Caliban Brown and I have given you. I am sure you are a well educated man and know *The Tempest*. I hope you will take the name as a generous compliment.

Before I tell you what danger you are in please allow me to express my gratitude to you, and through you to your "Aeriel" (!), for saving my life. I admit I was snooping around. My mushroom story was untrue.

You cannot be unaware that the aura of mystery you deliberately create arouses curiosity. Are you also aware that you are said to have a lovely young companion? Did I glimpse her as I woke on my rock?

Here is my warning. As you know, your neighbour, Powner, thinks that you are holding his cousin's child, Troy. He suspects you are a paedophile. What you might not know is that a certain Mr Gentleman has arrived at Powner's behest. He is dangerous. Be on your guard.



Steven Kloss

It was three a.m. I dressed and stole out into pitch darkness. There was no moon and the sky was overcast. Only the dull light of the town below and the one light of the far villa served to guide me. My eyes adjusted themselves to the murk and I found the going easy. At the fence, on a high pole a red light was blinking like a bloodshot eye. As I came closer it switched to a steady amber. I wished my intention to be observed or recorded. I theatrically bowled my package over the fence and retreated. Moving now in the direction of what light there was, I soon jogged back down safely. By four a.m. my lamp was out and I slept until ten. I awoke and immediately thought of Cally's mutilated cat. On regaining my bed I had felt elated. My mention of paedophilia in the letter had appealed in the night to the journalist in me – it might prove to be the catalyst necessary to bring the simmering row on the headland to boiling. Now in the bright morning I instantly regretted it. I kept thinking of that poor cat and shuddered.

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That same Saturday evening I went to Faro. I dined there pretty well. A few enquiries led me eventually to the nite-spot where Merve was appearing. I could have left the letter with the receptionist but I wanted to ensure she got it, as well as see her perform. I bribed the usher to put me at a table at the front. The room was quite large and quite full. From the tone and imagery of the poster I had assumed there would be young couples and groups present, but the audience was mainly men - middle-aged, fat and ugly men. Some were Hispanic, but most were northern Europeans and there was a table of seven eager Japanese men in suits. The room was dark and smoky. It smelt of stale booze. The table top was unpleasant to the touch and I imagined taking a knife to it and scraping off a good millimetre of grease. The thin curtain displayed large pictures of three girls in a tight clinch wearing dark wigs but little else. One was Merve. The curtain presently rose to reveal three white poles. Disco music began to blare and they came on in startlingly little, leaving almost nothing to the imagination. The other two were very pretty but I could take my eyes off Merve. She twirled and twisted around the pole and leapt upside down. There were no boorish cheers or shouts as I had expected. In fact there was intense silence. A glance at my neighbours showed me what my expression was like – one of wide-eyed, open-mouthed rapture. It was erotic in the extreme but it was not vulgar. Merve, upside down, seemed to be looking directly at me but with no sign of recognition.

The music stopped and her two colleagues left their poles to parade around the room. Merve came down and began to sing a ballad to karaoke. Her voice rang like a pure bell – she had a true talent. As she sang alluringly the other two visited laps and stroked various heads and chins. The Japanese took turns to pose for photographs with them. It was all harmless fun, I suppose. If I pretended to have a feminist axe to grind, you would smell the hypocrisy. I dare say one or two sloped off to the men's to masturbate.

A Portuguese waitress wearing a tutu and an artificial fixed smile brought the drinks round. Her shortness contrasted with and emphasized the slender legginess of the dancers. I dared to give Merve a tiny wave as she sang in my direction and to my intense pleasure she winked. I made a gesture with my head which I intended to mean "later" and "elsewhere," and she appeared to understand.

There was more pole-dancing in a bewildering variety of postures, until after about half-an-hour it was time for them to rest. In their stead on traipsed a very buxom blonde, obviously a Saxon, from somewhere like Halifax. She had been advertised entirely appropriately as Miss Muscles. To the music of "Wheels Go Round", she flexed her biceps, triceps and calves for a token few moment, and then removed her top and allowed her huge tits to almost hit the floor, bringing a chorus of disbelieving gasps from the Japanese table. Drink was finally playing a part in

proceedings. To hoots she gathered up great handfuls of suds which were blowing on stage and applied them to her bare chest. She stepped off the stage to invite the audience to have a feel. This was decidedly vulgar, though amusing. An elderly gentleman near me had his glasses covered with suds and his bald head wiped by her nipples which appeared like two great suns from behind white clouds. She posed with the Japanese, their faces all eyes; they honourably resisted the temptation to touch. To rhythmic clapping she leapt back onto the stage, shook herself like a woolly dog and made her breasts revolve first clockwise then anticlockwise. But her piece de resistance was even more astonishing. She took great handfuls of suds to her crotch, somehow released her bikini bottom and slung it to catching hands into the crowd. She turned, bent over, spread back her buttocks with her hands and gawped at us all between her thighs through two apertures, one of which was not her mouth. On her buttocks were painted two great eyes above an anus like a pursed mouth and her triangular pubic beard, making a monstrous face as astonished as ours. The whole effect was utterly surreal. Then she was gone through the backcloth to wild and lasting applause and shouts of encore. I turned to look at the gentleman who was vigorously de-sudding his glasses. A cap of soap was settling on his scalp. He smiled at me.

“Did you enjoy that?” I asked.

“I did indeed! I come here every night.”

“I bet you do.”

In the interval I felt a light tap on my shoulder. It was the smiling waitress. I placed my palm over my near-empty glass of lemonade and shook my head. But she had a note for me.

Follow my friend.

M.

I walked through a curtain in a corner and found myself in a shabby, cold corridor, lit by a bare bulb. My guide, minus her smile, knocked on a brown door and left me. Merve opened up. She was exquisite. In passable English she bade me enter.

“Merve? You speak English?” I had been prepared to give it a shot in Portuguese.

“Yes, of course!” She pouted and lit a cigarette.

“But why did you lie to Cally?”

“Lie? I did not lie! He speak to me in the street in Portuguese. How can I know he is English?

Then you come, you tell him to say me English and I know.”

“But you must have heard him speak English to his neighbours!”

“Yes, I did. So? Am I to know which place he comes from? He looks to me like...how you say.....a spaceman?”

“An alien?”

“Yes, alien!” She laughed but I could not. How much ingratitude was I staring at, how much ugliness behind that beguiling face? She had known alright that Cally was English, but I allowed her to maintain this fiction in view of its present harmlessness. Cally was a liar. She was a liar. Did I know one truthful person here? Or anywhere. I gave her his letter and she read it, even wiping away a tear. She jotted a message on the back and handed me the paper back.

“Say him I am well, tell I sing in a piano bar. You understand?”

“Will you come to see him at Christmas .... Natal?”

She looked doubtful. She asked me not to tell Cally she spoke English. She asked me to say she thought of him often.

“But how can I tell him such a lie, Merve? I can’t understand you, remember?” I could not help myself. She was irresistibly pretty and I stooped to kiss her long on the lips. She did not resist

but gave me nothing in return. What I said next sounded so corny afterwards that I cringe and almost dare not write it.

“Merve, you are far too good for this dump. I am a rich man. Let me find you a room somewhere – find you a worthwhile place for you to use your talent....”

“And be your woman? No!”

“No! I didn’t mean that.”

“What then? Just sit on my arse all day and do fucking embroidery or samm’ing?”

She laughed to see me recoil and almost stumble. The little minx was as English as I was! I could say nothing and do nothing but stare at her in amazement.

“My mother’s Turkish. My dad’s from Fulham.”

“You fucking liar, Merve!”

“*Sophie*. I did no harm, did I? I enjoy being a somebody else from time to time. When he kept going on about fucking Istanbul, I knew it was time to blow. Istanbul? I’d rather go Peckham!”

“But what were you really doing here?”

She looked at her watch and told me it was a long story. Did I really want to hear it? I nodded. She told me how she had always dreamt of being a ballerina but had been turned down on account of her height; that she had landed a job as a dancer on a cruise ship; how she had gotten stranded in Lisbon after being drugged in a bar and raped by a Portuguese policeman.

“After a week shouting myself hoarse I managed to get out of his flat while he was sleeping it off. I stole two hundred Euros. I was still pretty woozy and really weak but as luck would have it, he lived near the railway station. I just got on the first train and ended up here, just in the clothes I stood up in. Cally found me. I had a lung infection and I was feverish. For some reason I kept speaking Turkish. It was only two days later I realised he was English. I just decided to carry on. There. I did fuck-all wrong. I didn’t take his cards or money when I went....Well. only a hundred Euros..... It was my only way out. I’m sorry. He was a father to me.....Anyway, I suddenly remembered this poster I’d seen when I walked down The Mile the first time, poster for this place. I walked and hitched here. They took me in and took me on. That’s it.”

“And while you were at Cally’s ..did he ever.....you know....?”

“What? Shag me? No way! Perfect gentleman. Dirty mind you’ve got there.”

I felt ashamed but I had had to ask. I asked her how old she was.

“Twenty. Look, you’d better go in a minute. I’m back on again soon. But just take my advice. Cally was great for me but don’t trust him. He’s a crook. I overheard loads of stuff when he was on the phone.”

“What stuff?”

There came a knock on the door. She told me she would write and tell me.

“Just watch your step, Steven.” She kissed me on the cheek like a sister and smiled like an angel.

“Don’t get the wrong impression. I do quite fancy you but I’m staying put. I would be no good for you. I can’t settle. My girlfriends are great and I really like it here. Max, my bloke, says I’m his fortune. He’s the boss. He’s building a new club in Praianova. I know it won’t last for ever but it’ll do for now.”

I did not stay for the second half.

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The next day was Saturday. I had made no plans. I lay long in bed and reviewed my meeting with Sophie. It seemed so fantastical and improbable that I could have taken it for a dream.

Later I took the letter round to Cally and told him, dissembling as naturally I could, looking out to sea, that Merve had managed to make me understand she was well.

“She looked well content, Cally. She’s accompanying a pianist in a piano bar. Nice place. Nice people. Sophisticated.”

“Really? And how would you know about sophisticated? And her repertoire?”

“ – Er....some jazz, ballads.....some opera stuff...what she sang with you...you know....”

“Opera stuff? I take it you were not your newspaper’s music critic?”

I was pleased to make my escape. He seemed too interested in her scribbled note to search my mind for the truth with those withering eyes.

When I got back someone had called. There was a card on the hall floor.

Dear Steven Kloss,

Please come for dinner tonight. 7:30. A car will collect you.

J. Powner

The tone offered no option to refuse.

I went to Nicolau’s for lunch. It was well into November and his clientele had dwindled. A couple more weeks would see him close, he said, until the spring. Casually I showed him my leaflet.

“Señor Powner show me already,” he whispered. He rolled his eyes upwards in the direction of the far villa and added “He is very, very angry with this man.”

After my mackerel lunch I set out across the empty beach. I had my jacket hood pulled up against the light misty drizzle but I soon took it off as I came closer to the end of the headland. I skirted the bottom of the cliffs half-looking for something unusual which might be a concealed camera. As I fully expected, there was nothing.

I came to the Devil’s Kitchen where the tide was well out. I calculated. I ought to be able to get across and back before it turned. I wanted to observe the very front of the villa which looked out to sea. I trudged through the soft sand and came into the long bay at whose very farthest end stood the tall, pale buildings of Faro. I went on until the villa was directly above me and walked backwards to the very edge of the sea. I raised my new powerful binoculars and studied the balustrade and the window behind it. Empty. A voice behind me above the murmur of the sea made me turn. A rowing boat. An arm waved frantically. It belonged to Lucio. The waves were gentle. Rolling up my trousers above my knees I waded out as he rowed inland. We met and I rolled over the side and in. At one end in a large container he had a catch of bass and mackerel. He would kill them at the last moment to ensure absolute freshness. As he rowed back out he looked up at the villa and smiled knowingly at me. A few hundred metres from the shore he shipped his oars and cast his line. I turned to sit looking back to land and rested my elbows on my knees. With the heave of the sea first the balcony then the leaden sky appeared, rising and falling in turn. I attempted to fix on the former but the effort was tedious and I quickly allowed the sea to have its way, hoping it would bring a surprise catch like the sea bass I had caught with Stan. After a while the effect was soporific, particularly in view of another night disturbed by one dream after another. Up and down went the balcony until I could fancy it was the railing of a boat itself on a grey sea of clouds, and the window behind a porthole. And then, as I felt my lids flutter, I saw a vague face appear at the window, a young head, blonde like Troy, and his name leapt to mind. I managed to keep the face in view. It had a page-boy hair cut and instantly I knew it was not Troy, but a lovely girl of about seventeen. I searched with my right

index finger for the lever to zoom in. I saw a cheek of delicate, simple beauty and then pale eyes, which were surely grey or blue, looking dreamily and earnestly out to sea. A sudden swell made me lose the vision altogether and I actually shouted, as if to Neptune, to steady on. When the window returned she was gone again.

But I had seen enough to fall insanely in love with her, my beautiful Miranda. The spray of the ocean camouflaged the tears I could not help but shed. I need not have worried. Lucio was busy pulling mackerel off his line. Neither he nor anyone else on earth was privy to the wonderful secret I had just unearthed and I swore to myself that no-one ever would be.

At seven o' clock a car horn roused me from my reverie. I rose and went to fetch the flowers I had bought for Leo's wife. I had to look for my house key. The horn sounded again, longer, less patient. I shut my door. It was raining steadily. The rear passenger door my side swung open and I saw there was a tall figure in the back. It was Cally. His eyes shot me a warning even though he was in darkness. We drove off. The driver's profile was that of a black man and the name Gentleman came to me. It reminded me of an ebony sculpture I had seen in an ethnic museum somewhere - shiny, inanimate and cold. He had neither looked at me nor greeted me. As soon as I had slammed the door he let in the clutch like an automaton. I felt the grip of Cally's hand on my thigh. I sensed he was telling me he had not known I would be a fellow dinner guest and that it would be for business and not pleasure we were summoned. And I sensed something else: alarm. Was his heart beating as quickly as mine, I wondered, as I asked myself what Leo could possibly require of me? Then, remembering my rash and foolish cover-story, I winced and almost gasped.

"I need your help, gentlemen," Leo growled as soon as we entered his sanctum. At table we had been five. I had felt foolish to thrust the soggy flowers on Ellen Powner and she had looked on them with ill-disguised contempt. After the main course she withdrew with would have been a scowl, had she not had a face-lift, complaining of a headache. Leo had made no attempt to dissuade her. He introduced John Mann (here I felt the toe of Cally's shoe on my ankle) as his special security advisor. Mr Mann was huge, athletic, calm, utterly self-possessed and of few words, all of which were delivered in a polite, whispering monotone. I knew he had been paying rapt attention to what was being said even though he kept his eyes in his own close vicinity. He toyed with his food as if he ate, like a robot, only for cosmetic reasons. I kept as quiet as I could but when a question was directed by Leo at me about the state of the British economy and I bluffed my way through as best I could, I caught him staring at me for a split second. His eyes reminded me of those belonging to the dead sea bass which Lucio had sold me. Sensing, I thought, that he needed to steer that man's attention away from me, Cally had done most of the talking, now about the excellence of the food, now about the parlous state of affairs on The Mile and what he termed the prostitution of the Portuguese culture and cuisine. At one point Powner had yawned, which Cally, in his flight of rhetoric failed to notice. It was my turn to kick him. I raised an eyebrow and he fell silent. Gentleman, I felt sure, had spotted my signal too for I caught him staring at me again. This was a most uncomfortable three-quarters-of-an-hour.

Leo needed our help. Gentleman sat on the corner of his table cracking walnuts. This for some reason made me feel even more uneasy. Leo lit a cigar and disappeared behind a cloud.

"Mr Mann is here, in the capacity of my security advisor, to listen to what I have to say to you and to consider your responses. To be brief, I have come to the end of my patience with a certain person who shares – or rather intrudes upon my headland. To be brief, I have now given up trying to make friendly overtures towards him, having seen one after another rebuffed –

boxes of exclusive cigars returned, jeroboams of champagne sent back down, invitations to dinner, finest wines etc, etc, etc – without even the most curt word of thanks. To be equally brief, what has put the fucking cap on it and the cat amongst the fucking proverbial pigeons is what he has done to my beloved cousin Sharon. My personal physician says he has never seen nothing like it – something between a coma and a concussion. What stone would a mother not turn over in the search for her son? What would a desperate mother not do to make sure every possibility has been looked into? Her crime? In brief, to go up and fucking ask to talk to this cant as she thinks her stupid Troy might be on his property – perhaps in hiding from her because he don't want to go home to school – and this is his reply, to zap her with something or other. Well, two can play at that game! If it comes to a zapping war that fucker will lose! How long have we been here, Mr Brown? Getting on for twenty years! And him? Twelve years, no thirteen....unlucky for some...unlucky for Sunny Jim up there, that fucking Johnny-Come-Lately. And what has he ever done in the community, the snob? Sits on his arse and looks out to sea. Here's me, protecting honest businessmen – you know what I mean? – against petty crooks and minor bent officials, here's me helping out when somebody needs advising, lending, looking after or burying – and what does he do? Fuck-all, that's what!" He reached into his drawer and threw the leaflet into the air. "And then the cant has the cheek to tell me – me, Jake Powner! – to sling my hook? It's time, gentlemen, that he sees he can't piss me about any longer, patient man that I am. He's insulted Sharon, the family, but worst of all he has insulted me."

He had worked himself red and breathless with fury.

"What hold does this man have on people? I ask my contacts in the police to go up and have a word with him, but they're shit-scared he'll cast some spell on them. They don't say so but I can tell they think it. So I need the help of unsuperstitious people, who don't scare easy. Mr Brown, I know we have not seen eye to eye on a number of matters but it's time to bury the hatchet. You was right about the Tranters and I was wrong – and whatshisname who owned the greasy spoon, er, Smedley, no Smalley..."

"Smedley. It is rather late in the day, Mr Powner, to express your sorrow now about one who is under the ground and about another back home sulking in his high-rise slum having lost his life-savings..."

Cally had seen the thunder gather in Leo's face and knew enough had been said. Gentleman took a last drag on his cigar and stubbed it out meaningfully in the ashtray, never taking his frigid eyes from Cally's face, as if he was stubbing it out on his long chin.

"How can I be of assistance?" Cally asked more meekly.

"I am prepared to try one last act of diplomacy, on Mr Mann's advice. You speak languages. If he doesn't speak English you will surely find one between you in common. He is reckoned to be Greek. Do you speak Greek?"

"A little. I could get by."

"Mr Mann will drive you up there, you will request an interview and you will tell him that if he can't put up with his brother's breath then he must leave this headland and find some desert island where he can be on his own to his heart's content. Or words to that effect. I leave the exact phrasing to you, as you're so bloody well educated....Second, you will request that a team of people, my people, be allowed to search his property and land to ascertain that Troy is not there. A little bird has told me he is not the innocent hermit he pretends to be. My little bird reckons he has a liking for children. If he does turn out to be a nonce, then I'm going to get him off here, no matter what it takes, even if he does have influential friends in high places. He might come out on top but I'm going down all guns blazing, and this is where you come in, Mr Kloss."

I had so much expected to hear him say "Mr Mann" after he said "all guns blazing" that to hear my own name was shocking. I sat up straight and stiff.

“Me? How can I help you?”

He looked at Cally and I had the impression he was thinking of asking him to leave us.

“Shall I leave you to it?” Cally asked. Leo shook his head and replied that I would no doubt tell him later anyway what my role was to be. I refused his offer of a brandy but Cally allowed him to replenish his wine glass.

“I told you on your first visit, Mr Kloss that I need reliable financial advice, should I have to leave in a hurry. The course of action I might be forced to take, should our lonely friend refuse to co-operate, is risky. I need to know into what schemes I should transfer my considerable local assets, schemes which are both safe and lucrative. I am under no illusions about my banking arrangements here. They are about as secret as the location of Big Ben.....And furthermore, as you well know, I was mighty disappointed in Mr Sharpe, and still am. He couldn’t advise a man with a limp which side to hold his stick.”

All eyes were on me. The Negro was looking at me with the faintest of smiles. He made every so often a sniffing sound down his nose like a whale blowing air. He surely knew I was a bull-shitter. Should I confess all and say I was really a male nurse from Luton who had had a good win on the lottery? And that was when I had the most inspired idea which has ever popped into my head. I thought it through carefully for a few minutes while they continued to wait on me. I sniffed. I looked steadily at Gentleman and raised my eyebrows.

“Mr Powner, you can have total confidence in me. You have shown me considerable hospitality and friendship and I am touched. I have no idea in what respect you had dealings with the deceased Mr Tranter and that is no business of mine. However, I have agreed to buy the business from his wife, lock, stock and barrel. I am prepared to sell you shares in that business, Mr Powner. The price is of each will be one thousand Euros. I shall sell you up to thirty percent of those shares. There will be as many thousand of those shares available to you as you wish to purchase. I think the phrase I’m looking for here is “money-laundering”. You could get your lawyer to draw up the documents. I shall of course pay a yearly dividend on profits. These you can take as further shares or cash. You can be sure of your assets, Mr Powner. The fish shops are going nowhere. I am going nowhere. Your money will go nowhere.”

Cally was staring at me. Powner was beaming and pointing at me in that peculiar way he had when he wished to show approval. Gentleman’s sarcastic smile had vanished.

“And if Mr Powner has to leave and never return? How does he get his money?”

He spoke incredibly softly for a murderer. I decided to ignore him and direct the answer to his boss.

“As soon as you have a bank account open, you tell me the number of shares you wish to sell and I will transfer to your account the monies you are owed.”

Powner looked at his hit-man and they conferred in a low whisper we were not permitted to understand. We were asked to leave them alone for a short while.

“You rise and rise in my estimation, Mr Kloss,” said Cally, once we were outside. “But you do see your days of new-found innocence are at an end ere they begin? You might as well have a drink.”

He had picked up a decanter but I wished to keep my wits about me and declined,

“Assume nothing, Mr Brown. Will you do as he asks?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Well here is your chance to get to the heart of the mystery of your Prospero.”

“Indeed. That is why I have no choice. I have a pretext at last. Curiosity and the cat. It has nothing to do with Powner. He is almost finished here, and he knows it. He does not usually use such profane language as freely as that. He is afraid. He is a plucky Tommy Atkins up against a mightier adversary, no matter how many Mister Men he puts in the field.”

“You’re guessing!”

He treated me to the hideous effect of his finger pulling down a lower eye-lid in a gesture which said “I know more than I’m telling”. He lowered his voice. “Inspector Limao will retire soon. Jake has enemies on the force. His time here is drawing to a close and that is why he needs you to help him get his money out. His enemies would freeze his accounts as soon as look at him.” We waited and waited. Cally took a gulp of wine and paused as a thought seemed to occur to him. A sly smile spread over his face. I sensed I was about to have my leg pulled. I asked him rather wearily what was amusing him.

“Your name, Kloss. Was your father Jewish by any chance?”

“How on earth did you work that one out? Or did I say he was, when I was drunk?”

“No.”

“His grandparents were Jews. After that the genes were diluted – polluted even – by Anglo-Saxons. Do I look Jewish? What’s the name Kloss to do with anything, anyway?”

“ETA Hoffmann! Heard of him? No! Ridiculous question! He was a writer in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century, an alcoholic and dope-fiend. He admired Mozart – hence the A for Amadeus which he adopted into his name. You have surely heard of the Nutcracker? By Tchaikovsky?”

I was bewildered. I told him I had heard of it but couldn’t quite work out what it had to do with Kloss. This made him laugh out loud. He told me how drôle I was without realising it. He would share the joke later, he said, when he had come to the point.

“The Nutcracker,” he continued in a kind of breathless euphoria (I almost took for him drunk)

“The Nutcracker is based on one of Hoffmann’s tales. The Tales of Hoffmann! You must have heard of it, surely? No? How appalling! Anyhow, the Nutcracker is about the erotic fantasies of an adolescent girl on Christmas Eve. A century before its time. Giant rats with gigantic, long tails – all that sort of penile imagery...”

“Really.”

“No, listen...Hoffmann belonged with the brothers Grimm to a genre we would call fantasy-horror today. He must have seen all his monsters in his stupors. Forget Stephen King and that crashing bore, Tolkein.....Hoffmann really is terrifying. His best novel is The Devil’s Elixir – not to be read in the dead of night! A monk drinks a forbidden potion, renounces his vows and has a series of erotic adventures whilst being pursued by the devil. He keeps thinking he has escaped and has found contentment but the characters he loves are revealed to be automata who more often than not are dashed or fall into pieces. I defy you to read it and sleep with the light off! He is the literary equivalent of Peter Breugel –“

“Cally, please stop trying to educate me...Not now....I’m grateful off course but...”

“Look, I am coming to the point. Kloss. Do you know what it means in German? No? I am willing to bet that you have ETA Hoffmann to thank for it. He worked in his sober moments as a civil servant in an office responsible for compulsorily germanifying the names of the Jews. You’ve heard of Grünbaum – green tree – and Grünberg – green mountain – of course and similar names, well, that’s how they came about. Zuckermann – sugar man – is another. Well, Hoffmann let his crazy imagination run riot. His best effort was Hosenduft, which means trouser smell!”

“Delightful. So what does Kloss mean? I dread to think.”

“No! It is quite cute really. Thanks to ETA you are Mr Steven Dumpling! Mackerel and dumpling! What a disgusting combination!”

“Oh for God’s sake. Be serious for a moment, Cally. What are the chances of us getting out of this mess unscathed?”

He stood up and went over to the bookcase.

“About the same as the chance of finding a copy of Hoffmann amongst these.”

He took a book down, snorted in a kind of disgust and put it back. The door opened very suddenly and I was summoned to come back in by Gentleman. Leo had obviously left the room



by another door. His advisor seated himself on the edge of his table and studied me for a while. I was not going to lose a staring contest to him and eventually he looked down at his shoes as if to admire them. Addressing them he began his well prepared speech.

“Mr Powner is of a mind to accept your proposal against my advice. Off the record, I know you aren't quite as honest and straightforward as he thinks. You saved his cousin's life. You couldn't fake that. Well done. Whatever. Mr Powner has instructed me to draw a number of matters to your attention, so please listen carefully. One, Mr Powner has a close relationship of long standing with many important officials, both public and commercial, here and in this region. From this day onwards, it would be extremely difficult, not to say impossible, for you to move five metres unobserved, let alone, shall we say, disappear with Mr Powner's assets. Two, anyone can meet with an unfortunate accident. That would be extremely inconvenient to Mr Powner, as well as sad and disappointing. Mr Powner will insist that his cash is put into a new bank account or accounts, to which he as well as you have password access to, via the internet, once the bank has done a background check on you and declared you clean. He will change passwords as soon as possible and have sole access. Three, tomorrow a Senhor Castelo will call on you to present documentation. You will sign a share certificate over to Mr Powner, the face value of which will be indicated by Senhor Castelo when Mr Powner has made up his mind how much. What will you call your company?”

I did not need to think long. “Cavala Enterprise, that's c-a-v-a-l-a....It means mackerel. I have no idea what cod or haddock are in Portuguese!”

“Tomorrow you will receive a cheque for the amount Mr Powner decides, post-dated, allowing you time to set up an internet deposit account at a bank – or banks which will be identified subsequently to you. As soon as said account or accounts are active you will supply Mr Powner with the numbers. The password for access will be cavala. A password to transfer money will be required and there is no way for you not to know it. It will be Powner. On his say-so you will pay his cheque into your own private account here and then transfer the money to the new one. When all is done Mr Powner will change both passwords and you will, of course, cease to access the account. Senhor Castelo will give you all these instructions in writing tomorrow. Any share certificates will merely be there for show, should any nosy Parker require proof of Mr Powner's recent financial history, which you will of course corroborate by referring to plans you have made to grow your business, which required a significant investment by him. You will discuss these arrangements with no-one, least of all Mr Brown.”

All the time he had been speaking he had been cracking walnuts between the heels of his hands. He leant forward and offered me one. I took it. It tasted bitter. He lowered his voice to almost an inaudible whisper. I had to lean forward to hear him.

“Mr Kloss, again off the record, Mr Powner is more than an employer to me. When my father was killed in a road accident he took care of my mother, my sister and me. In spite of his reputation and the fearsome impression he sometimes enjoys creating, he has a heart of gold. He has been a father to us.” He broke another shell and placed the fruit, a brain in miniature on the table.

“Mr Kloss, you are not all you seem, but you are intelligent. Only a person with a small brain and a poor imagination would attempt to cheat Mr Powner. We both know that in an electronic world where money – or rather numbers – can come and go at the press of a button there do exist ways and means – and therefore the temptation – to take advantage. Be assured, Mr Kloss, that I would never rest until such a person was brought to book. An imaginative person such as yourself could only envisage a nervy lifetime then of sweating and waiting; waiting for me to knock on their door, as I surely would do one day.” He lifted his enormous black hand to reveal the crushed walnut. I almost laughed as now I understood Cally's silly joke about the nutcracker and the dumpling. But then I thought of that skeleton in its best suit studying the ocean floor. I nodded slowly and as gravely as I could.

“Mr Powner.....” As he said this he turned and I saw to my surprise Leo rise from an armchair which had been facing away from me. He smiled broadly and made that peculiar pointing gesture at me as if I had just unravelled the secret at the heart of creation.

It was a night of a billion stars and we insisted on walking back. Cally had been admitted for a private audience and afterwards we had sat for an hour, without Gentleman present, listening to Leo reminiscing about London in the good old days before all the foreigners took over. I did not, as we walked back, attempt to pry into Cally’s private discussion with our host and he seemed uninterested in mine. I thought of the letter I had sent and regretted even more keenly my stupid reference to paedophilia. But surely Cally would be in no danger of a backlash from Prospero? If he knew as much as Cally said he did – and I had begun to concur with his view – then he would know that Cally was merely Leo’s messenger. And surely he was wise enough not to shoot the messenger?

“When are you going up there?”

“Some time tomorrow. The Gent is picking me up. Will you come in for a moment?”

We had reached his front door. Inside he gave me his spare key and told me that if anything happened to him, the house and all its contents were mine.

“I have no close relatives, a distant cousin in Totnes. No-one has an interest in my living or dying. My banking details are in the drawer.”

I could not help but think of the cat but I laughed and told him not to be so melodramatic. I promised to cook for him the following evening and have a glass or two of wine with him.

I had left Cally with the request that he phone me as soon as the car arrived to pick him up. I had assured him that I would keep him under observation and this seemed to comfort him. Senhor Castelo arrived at about ten. He did not stay long. He left with his beautifully crafted certificate for four thousand shares in CAVALO ENTERPRISE at one thousand Euros each which I had signed, and left me with a cheque for four million Euros post-dated for just over two weeks later on the eleventh dezembro, and a page of detailed instructions. The following day, a Monday, I was to apply to open an online account at the bank Leo specified. Senhor Castelo would be present to oversee my effort, he assured me with a treacly smile, and to help me to fill in the forms.

The morning wore on into afternoon. I kept looking up at the far villa. At just gone one o’ clock the phone made me jump. It rang twice, as prearranged with Cally, and then stopped. I got up from the sofa and went onto the yard with my glasses. I watched for the car to appear and after an age it finally did, crawling up the hill like a black slug until it stopped at the hated security fence.

I watched anxiously as my mentor got out and approached the gate, waving an envelope high for the security cameras to see. I switched my focus onto the balcony. Nothing was happening. I watched Cally backtrack and confer with the unseen driver. A stirring in the trees beyond the fence drew my eye. It was as if an isolated wind was blowing there and nowhere else, for the day was still. I saw “Ariel” drop down from a branch and walk purposefully to the fence. He began to gesticulate. His face was stern. I saw him speak into his walkie-talkie and I knew that Prospero would soon venture out, and even maybe his Miranda! She did not, but that strange, wrinkled face with the dark eyes duly appeared and then disappeared behind those ridiculously huge binoculars. I saw Cally hold the envelope as high as he could and Ariel speak again to his master. He came forward, leapt impossibly high and took the letter, before pointing meaningfully downhill. Cally replied with a placatory gesture of outstretched palms, but his driver - Gentleman - made the mistake of getting out and standing his ground, arms folded, in a posture of evident defiance. A narrow streak of light hit his right knee and he fell down clutching it in obvious agony. His assailant disappeared back into his copse. Cally helped

Gentleman into the back seat, got into the front, reversed, turned and drove away. This took place in the space of two or three minutes. I looked again at the balcony, and when I found it empty I tried to locate the guard on his way up to the villa. But it was a motionless picture, as if nothing at all had happened there, or ever did. Of course I knew now that if Prospero failed to respond to the invitation or demands sealed in that envelope then there could be no peaceful solution to the matter. And I knew that his adversary had an advantage over Powner which he did not suspect. He knew what his ultimate sanction would be because I had let him know. Gentleman.

Cally had called around at seven for his meal. Curiously he seemed at first reluctant to speak. I debated with myself whether now to tell him my secrets, minus Miranda. But could I trust him not to tell Powner? If he did, then the game would be up for me. We ate a sea bass each and I drank a glass or two of wine to his five or six.

“The security guard did to Gentleman exactly what he did to me. We should have warned him.”

“How could we know he would be so openly foolhardy? Served him right, the arrogant black arse. Might take him down a peg or four! I cannot abide such cloak-and-dagger people!”

“He frightens me, Cally. He has that way of looking.”

“Well, stay down here, well out of it. If Prospero does not reply or tells Jake to take a running jump then -”

“What was in the letter, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I have no objection. It was merely an invitation to Prospero, in Portuguese to talk to our mutual friend. No ultimatum, no demands, no threats. Not yet anyway.”

On Monday morning Castelo returned and looked even smarmier. He helped me to complete the application. I had to give my English bank as a reference and state how long I had been with them. There would, Castelo assured me, be no problem. He had, he whispered with last night’s garlic on his breath, a “trustful” contact in the bank’s administration, and “an incentive” would ensure she dealt with the matter “prompt”. Within seven working days the account would be live and he would join me at the precise time it became so, in order that the key transactions went smoothly and to plan.

Despite my Leo’s utter faith in me nothing was being left to chance.

On Monday afternoon Cally had been phoned by Leo, who had worked himself into a state of near apoplexy, he told me.

“He means to send me up there again this afternoon. I have to translate this.”

He smoothed a piece of paper out for me to read in longhand.

“I have given you every chance to co-operate with me. You have chosen to ignore me and injure my employee. You will now allow six of my staff to effect a thorough search of your property and grounds for my missing second cousin, Troy Grant. Agree to vacate your villa at the end of January. You have until six p.m. today to send me word that you agree to these terms.”

It turned out that Cally need not have bothered to sit and translate it. The letter was never intended for delivery. If it had dawned on him that the whole thing was a smokescreen, he would not have allowed himself to be used as live bait, and Leo’s stupid plan would never have gotten off the ground. Towards evening, after my phone had rung twice again I went outside with my binoculars. It was lucky for Prospero that the low sun had roused itself from its couch of cloud and shone so brightly. I watched Cally again approach the red gate with his hand held

high. As he did so the car slowly reversed. Did he realise he was on his own? It appeared to me that Reg was driving. I had too much to watch at once. The car was about fifty metres down the track; the balcony was empty; Aerial was emerging from his thicket, clearly in no mood for a pow-wow; Cally was waving the letter. I scanned the ground below him for the car I had lost track of, and that is when something extraordinary and appalling made me stop. Sitting on a branch like a great crow was Gentleman, leaning forward and pointing at the villa with what I took at first to be a fishing rod. It gleamed in the sun like Aerial's laser beam. An indistinct movement in the balcony window told me that a person was about to come outside. The rifle gleamed again and showed me what to do. I rushed into my bathroom and fetched my shaving mirror. I caught the sun in it and directed it as best I could at the villa. I saw a patch of bright light flash in the window. I kept signalling with my left hand and looking with my right. Prospero had come out and seemed to be looking directly at me in bewilderment. I shouted as loud as I could but it would have been lost in the squeals of the seagulls. I saw Prospero raise his binoculars, looking in my direction. With both frantic arms I signalled "down", "down", "down". A shot tore through the air. I looked and saw a great hole in the window and below, behind the balustrade, crouching down, was a shocked Prospero. I heard and saw a second shot hit a pillar and raise plaster dust. Prospero scampered inside. A third shot had me scanning the field again. Cally was running – or rather lurching like a toppling derrick down the slope. On the floor, spread-eagled, lay the guard. Behind his head, like a red scarf, stretched a slick of blood.

"Hello there! Doing a spot of bird-watching are we?"

I turned to look to my right.

"We're taking a late, late break from Blighty. I'm Jim. My wife's Sheila. From Chester."

I stared at the stupid round face in the wall and went in.

\*

Cally swore to me that night that he knew nothing about Powner's plan and I took little convincing. He had gone back to the villa for a blazing row with him and then had stormed out. "That bastard used me! And as for Mr Gentleman, well! How incompetent! Shooting Powner's enemies is all he does! I thought that the only people who got more incompetent at their jobs, the longer they did them, were cabinet ministers! Powner could hardly bring himself to speak to him. He insists of course that the guard warned Mr Prosper and that is why he shot him – in anger as well as revenge. I really thought I was done for. Pass me the bottle. It is only a matter of time now until tit follows tat. He wants to see you, he said. Powner."

"What about?"

"A change of plan with the money, I think. He told me to tell you he would send a car tomorrow evening."

The third glass of wine was making me feel light-headed.

"Caliban. Tell me about your first wife."

"What?? Why on earth....? Why is she so important to you?"

"You promised me a secret in return for a secret. I told you about Merve."

"But you did not. You lied. You told me she is singing in a piano bar. There is no such thing here! Piano bar! Is this New York?"

"She's a pole-dancer. She does karaoke. She swears like a trooper and is as Turkish as I am Portuguese. She's called Sophie and comes from Fulham. She got drugged and raped in Lisbon and washed up here. She stole a hundred Euros from you. There. The truth. Like it?"

"The truth?"

"So help me God!"

He stared at the floor and took it in.

“But she loves you Cally and she really appreciated -”

“Bollocks! Bollocks! All bollocks! Nobody cares for anybody! We all use each other! We are hard-wired to lie and deceive! To survive.”

He put his great head in his hands and groaned.

“I lied about my wives,” he whispered. “It was the first one and not the second I tried to put into mental purdah. The second, I kicked her fat arse out for cuckolding me with that fucking lecturer. She begged me to forgive her and I did. A week later, when she thought I was in the garden, I overheard her all lovey-dovey on the phone. When she came home the next afternoon I had changed all the locks and left her suitcases on the lawn.” He paused to sob and then laughed. “She gave up banging after two hours.....Steven, I have tried to be a pleasant, outgoing person but I suffer a major drawback. I am seriously ugly. Yes, everyone knows how bloody clever I am, but no-one respects me. At school I was mercilessly bullied, by pupils and teachers alike. I am inside out. Other people are ugly on the inside and have the good fortune to conceal it with their fine features. Take Jake Powner, for instance. The ugliest human being I know! A good God would never create such paradoxes as Mr Powner – except, of course, that the Almighty has tried to warn us, as Jake Powner is a perfect anagram of “weapon jerk”! My first wife left me Steven. I loved her utterly and still do, in spite of everything. She was as beautiful as she was kind. She met a man in London on the top deck of a bus. She felt sick and woozy and he helped her downstairs. His flat was at hand and he took care of her. He reminded her of a good, kindly lion, she told me much, much later in a letter. She could not help herself, she said. You see Steven, when love has had its heyday, the warts begin to show and ugly people like me lose out more quickly, particularly when age wreaks its havoc too. Love blinds, does it not?”

I thought of my partner in Richmond, smelt her Brussels sprout breath again and saw her chicken legs.

“And of course the inner ugliness of fine-looking people oozes out eventually too, like a slime. But by then they are already in possession of all the major trophies. I detest the hero-worship of such people by the moronic masses, Steven! Can you not see my point? Can you not see why I am such a misanthrope? I never intended to be! I was a socialist.”

He wept in that same appalling manner I saw when Merve left, but only for a few seconds as if he recognised for himself how repulsive it was. He had the misfortune to be at his ugliest in his grief and would never evoke pity. I filled his glass and the sweet sound of pouring seemed to comfort him.

“We kept in touch and when she wrote that she was coming out here to live with her lion, like a little lamb, I followed. She was more grateful than she appeared yesterday for your kind gift of flowers. She was just surprised.”

I dropped the bottle.

“She is your first wife? Leo’s wife, I mean Jake’s wife, is your ex-wife?”

“No, she is my wife. We never divorced. I am a cuckold and a bigamist.”

I waited for him to laugh at my gullibility and naivety as usual. But he never did.

“The truth?”

“So help me God, Steven.”

“And does Jake know?”

“She never told him. I know that one day when her passion for him has waned she will return. I live for it. Part of her even wants to. She is addicted to him. She is the only one who knows how evil he really is. Forget all that honest- market-trader-who-drifted-unwillingly-into-crime nonsense. He is a villain because he wanted to be one. He fascinates her. Ellen and I are like two pieces of a jigsaw which do not quite fit. Sexually she fits him perfectly and cannot break free. You can tell how miserable she is, can you not? She is a willing prisoner of her own compulsion and his person. She knows he cheats on her, even with that ugly cousin, the one

you served, Sharon. My wife hates him and adores him. I would allow her total sexual freedom in return for her companionship. I am a blend of physiological paradoxes, Steven. What cruel ironies life prepares for us. If God exists he is laughing at us all. I need to go now, Steven. I feel rotten. I need to sleep.”

I was tempted to delve into what he meant by his “paradoxes” but I resisted. As he left me I could clearly see the tired, old man in him.

After he had gone an obvious thought hit me like a hammer. Of course! Cally must be helping Leo to his destruction, in order to free his Ellen from his clutches! If so, it was a dangerous gamble. I began to wonder what he had really put in that first letter on Powner’s behalf. Or had he just simply conned me again? Had wife number one really been abducted by aliens? I trusted no-one here, not really even myself, because I was not clear what I wanted to happen. I thought of Miranda and knew that there was nothing I could do to help her, and I felt depressed by all this stupid skulduggery.

I hated the whole of Tuesday. The thought of having to return to Jake’s villa disturbed me. I had no desire to hear him fulminate again in that macho gangster fashion and I was afraid he was bound to expose the shallow bottom of my financial pool of expertise, should he wish to alter radically the terms of our agreement and seek my opinion. And I had no desire to come under the loathing gaze of his disgraced bodyguard. And yet the thought of seeing Ellen and perhaps speaking to her intrigued me. Could I think of a clever way to confirm Cally’s story, which in the sober light of day seemed increasingly unlikely? She was obviously as clever as she was pretty. What on earth, if truly his spouse, had she ever seen in him? Had he been more presentable in his younger days? Had a proper head of hair mellowed his ugliness? Had his intellect distracted her for a while, until she had woken one morning, looked at his sleeping head on the pillow and realised that she had married, like an enchanted princess, a frog? The malevolent imp in me considered how to tease her with sly questions about Cally, without getting myself in hot water. (“Cally thought that you liked the flowers, but I wasn’t so sure.....Did you tell him so or was that just his impression?.....What do you think of my neighbour Cally Brown, Mrs Powner? Isn’t he an intriguing man!”)

Stupid. I could not possibly be so crass or so cruel.

I spent the whole day trying to divert myself and began again from scratch this whole account. I admit, Jack if you’re still reading this, that I have changed one or two things and invented a couple of minor people, but it is essentially the truth. You do believe me, don’t you? I saw the main problem as the ending. If the stand-off on the headland was going to fizzle out in a boring, uneasy stalemate then I would have to invent an ending where one or the other came out on top. The ending supplied *itself* however, and I could have sat for eternity like those mythical chimpanzees with typewriters, and never come close to finding such a weird one.

At about teatime I pondered on all the elements of the situation and another good reason not to go to Leo’s struck me rather forcibly. At that very moment an angry Prospero would very likely be plotting his revenge on my host. He had lost his bodyguard and had a lovely girl to protect. He had nearly been killed. His window had been smashed, his balcony shot up. Had he seen Cally’s second offensive letter? I couldn’t remember whether he had actually delivered it amidst all the excitement. I thought of the cat with its chest opened up, and the laser beam. Prospero was no pacifist. He would certainly strike back, but when? Perhaps it was time after all for me to disappear. I considered. I saw myself with a bag getting on the train. That scene did look very attractive.

I looked idly out of my bedroom window, fully expecting to discover the emptiness of Gentleman's guarantee to have my every movement observed. But there was the same blue car which had parked next to mine at the supermarket that morning! I was afraid and furious. I went out and looked at the slimy creature, the driver reading his newspaper for a good five minutes. He never once looked up. In my anger I resolved to tell Leo that if he did not trust me, the man who had saved his scraggy cousin - and who wanted no reward, save a donation to The Red Cross - then my offer to incriminate myself, for his benefit, would be withdrawn! What a good idea! That would surely pre-empt whatever changes he wished to make to our little scheme. I had not shown him indignation before and if Cally could get away with it, then so could I! I might even insist on his coming down to see me on my ground. I would feel safer. I searched for his phone number but had mislaid it. I went round to Cally's but he did not answer the door. I tried to relax. I put my cassoulet on to simmer. I would add the chunks of fresh tuna later just for five minutes, when I came back. I had a good bottle of red and a glorious meal, with home-made olive, tomato and garlic bread to look forward to; well, I hoped I did; I thought I did.

I showered and shaved at six. If the driver came now he would just have to sit and wait. As I looked at myself in the mirror I froze. Had Leo in fact found out about my trick with the sun? Where had he been during the fracas? And something else came to me. Had he secretly checked up on me at Gentleman's insistence and discovered I had been a reporter? He was giving me the bulk of his ill-gotten gains on the Algarve - he had surely done a background check! Was I being summoned to my doom? I decided to put my one and only suit on. It somehow made me feel more secure.

My anxiety turned to terror when the black limousine Powner had sent down for me was a bigger, older version of his other. It reminded me horribly of the car in which I had sat, weary with sorrow, beside my grim, silent father, all those years ago when we had buried my mother. These seats were of panelled squeaky red leather, amply upholstered, and there was even a sliding window between the saloon and the driver, affording the opportunity for familial grief to be enjoyed in privacy. Three more seats faced me. It was a funeral car! The glass was opaque. I stared at Gentleman's frizzy head as he slowly set off. I kept telling myself I was safe. I would not be fetched up there for despatch but despatched elsewhere. I would confess my foolishness if need be to Leo and rely on my life-saving act to save my bacon. I thought of Sharon, of her body and her distress all in a single second. I would ask how she was, perhaps ask to see her and re-establish my credentials as a nice person. I hoped the undercover policeman would follow, but there no lights shining through the back window. My fear that he car would drive me straight on to some dark wasteland beyond Altameira and to my demise was dispelled when we slowed and turned up the hill. I allowed myself a grin and almost giggled. Leo's villa grew larger on our right. One first floor window was lit, possibly Sharon's room. Downstairs was all in brightness.....but why were we not slowing down as the front yard came adjacent? Gentleman put his foot down and we hurtled past. I was going to be thrown into the Devil's Kitchen! I yelled and banged on the glass. I tried the doors. I banged on the glass again. The driver's light went on, he turned and with huge eyes glared at me. With Aeriell's eyes. Paralysed, I sat back. The light went out. We gathered speed. We shot through the open red gate and stopped dead by the portal of the upper villa.

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In the passageway I stopped. Here I finally came face to face with Prospero. A stranger man I had never seen. I must try my best to describe him. With his dark crinkly locks with a central

parting he reminded me of an ancient Assyrian soldier, only without the shovel beard. He was taller than I thought, taller than me, about six foot. He neither spoke nor smiled. He held out his hand and I took it. His grip was strong and dry. By his skin I judged him to be about sixty. He wore a three-quarter length kaftan-type garment in cream, embroidered in blue at the extremities, dark blue silken trousers and on his brown feet white sandals. From the green marbled hallway I followed him into a large room. A wide log fire burnt languidly in the far wall and the furniture was all antique, eighteenth century French, I guessed. A huge circular carpet, oriental, in a bewildering variety of shades of blue and green dominated the floor of white marble paving. There was violin music playing, slow, whimsical and very beautiful.

“Qual é a musica?” I asked breathlessly.

“Johannes Sebastian Bach”, he murmured. His tone was rich and mellow and as measured as the music. He poured us a glass of mango juice and gestured for me to sit down in a satin armchair of green and silver stripes by the fire. He sat opposite in its twin. Between us was a chaise long in the same motif. My eyes wondered around the room. There were large landscape pictures on the white walls depicting scenes from antiquity, of ancient Greece I thought, of mountains and pastures, and there in a far corner, hung a picture of a walled city which was surely Troy, besieged by a great army. An exquisite porcelain clock in cream and blue carefully measured the time and now chimed delicately the three-quarters of seven.

There was only one book. It lay on a round, claw-footed table near to me. It was Cally’s copy of *The Tempest*. On top of it was my key. I took it and opened the book. It was the scene where Caliban was persuading the drunken butler to join him in a plot to kill Prospero. I shivered to read it again. I put it down.

“It is a strange play,” he said almost inaudibly. “Unlikely any other he wrote, and very short, like a dream. He dreamt the story, I am sure, your Mr Shakespeare.”

He said Shack and not Shake. I told him truthfully that I had forgotten the ending.

“Forgotten it? Forgotten like the end of a dream, perhaps.....Well, Prospero forgives his enemies, regains his dukedom and divests himself of his magic as he no longer needs it.”

His English was also antique. It reminded me of a newsreel from the nineteen thirties we had once seen in a history lesson He pronounced magic as megic.

“I am sorry that I intruded into your privacy and took the book. You were trying to intrude into mine and I wanted to discover why. Can you now explain?”

“You must know your mystery creates many stories about you. I was curious. I wanted to get closer.”

“You are a newcomer, Steven, not a holidaymaker. Why have you come to Portugal?”

I took a deep breath and told him I was a reporter. He continued to stare relentlessly at me and I felt impelled by his silence to elaborate.

“I gave up my job after an emotional upset in London and decided to come out here to forget it, and to trace my family. That’s it. The truth.”

“I am very pleased you have admitted what I already knew, that you are a reporter. So you wanted to write a story about me? And still do, I am sure. Well, you must not. I wish to make a proposal to you, but first I must explain and show you that the mystery up here is not what you have come to suspect it to be. Will you please listen and not interrupt or ask me questions until I finish.”

I resisted the temptation to ask how he had found out what I was. I sat back and listened.

“The people here had a simple culture. It depended on the sea, the land and the generous climate. They had bread, fish, wine and fruit. From the wood of the trees they fashioned their instruments, their boats and their furniture and from their animals took their milk, their cheese, their meat and their clothes. The rocks built their houses and the places where they worshipped their deity. They loved and mourned their spouses and their children. Where I came from was ruined by greed and war, by hatred and suspicion.” He turned to look pointedly at the pictures.



“No matter where the seed of Adam settles, thistles grow too. God has endeavoured many times to perfect him but how can he be at the same time independent of God and obedient? This is the paradox of the universe and is insoluble. A particle once created is separated from God, and obeys its own volition; a universe of particles must be beyond the rule of God. He is omnipotent only in one respect: if He chooses, He can take back unto himself what He has breathed into being. We are exiles, self-exiles, from His love and his wisdom, in this world and in other worlds. By the exercise of our free will we can wander further away from his greater will, yet by the same exercise we can, if we choose, come closer. We will never reach perfection because of the paradox, but to choose evil - by which I mean a way of life which is selfish and greedy and beyond what natural laws will permit – will cause our own destruction. Heaven will turn out to be the planet where men learn to live wisely. There they will live for ever or for as long as God chooses the present eternity to last. Do you understand? Do you understand how dangerously close to oblivion the present course which men are steering here is taking them?”

Here were echos of Caliban with a dash of mystic nonsense. I must have shaken my head because he asked me again if I knew what he was trying to say.

“Do you really believe there other planets similar to this?” I asked with what I hoped was the right mixture of scepticism, wonder and respect.

“The answer will come to you. That was not really the main point I was trying to make. Your question disappoints me rather. Steven, I have decided to leave here. You have a chance to come too. That is my proposal. I have seen that you are by no means a bad man. You have the means within you, with a proper education, to become wise and virtuous and walk closer to that golden pathway of life. The people below will not rest until I am gone. They fear me in the same measure as they revolt me.”

“Do you mean the Powners?”

“These in particular and at present, but they are mere symbols. My self-exile from the brutish way of life below disturbs many, many more than them. How absorbed they all are in their worthless pursuit of vainglory! Do they ever see a starry sky or admire the astonishing beauty afforded by this planet? How absurd they are! What sleepwalkers they are in their self-obsession! They are granted life. The atoms which make them could have been blown at any time to a billion places where extremes of cold or heat or a vacuum make life impossible. They would then never have been. And it never dawns on them that if a single break in their life-chain - which began billions of years ago – had occurred, they would never have come about. They are miraculously granted tongues and ears and eyes and brains. But they do not wonder. I imagine sometimes the trees, which have life but no awareness, being freed for an instant from their fixed, living silence, to envy the freedom of men and to lament in fury their plant-like dull mentality! A lack of wonder and respect is a grievous sin, Steven.”

From another flask he poured water into a glass. “Take water. A magical substance concocted not from two liquids but from two gases. And what are they? In water the world thrives. In steam and ice it dies. How strange the universe is. What are gases?”

“Of water? Oxygen and hydrogen.”

The gleam in his eye told me I had fallen into a trap.

“Oh no. They are not oxygen and hydrogen. Those are merely their names. You are not Steven. Steven is a label. I might give any rock out there any name I care to. It does not explain it. When I ask “what are they?” I do not mean their names. Do you understand what I mean by strangeness? Even a void would be strange! Would you give it a name? Would that solve the problem?”

It occurred to me now that he was probably mad. I thought of what Stanley had said about his reclusive brother becoming more and more eccentric.

“That is sort of what my neighbour Cally thinks. But I think that education lets a lot of people down. Their wonder is stifled and - ”

“That man? He is a danger to me. And he plots with Powner.”

“No! He had no idea that the second letter was a trick. He was shocked. He had a furious row with Powner afterwards. You must believe me. Please, do nothing to harm him. He is my friend and has a very good reason to appear to be on Powner’s side.”

I swallowed hard and hardly dared say the next thing.

“And you must not judge Jake Powner too harshly. He is afraid of you, as I am. His history is a sad one. You must grant in your wisdom that circumstances force people into avenues they would never have chosen at the outset and from which they can later not easily escape. He tried to solve his problems lawfully but the law was corrupt. And you are trying to get him to leave. And he suspects you, as you know.”

His face betrayed neither anger nor sorrow. His stare remained fixed and unremitting.

“The French people have a proverb which says that to understand everything is to forgive everything.”

My heart swelled. Had I touched a nerve of compassion?

“You believe this? I see you do, Steven. Can you then convince me, perhaps the son of a mother killed at Auschwitz, to forgive the Nazis because you have explained perfectly well their mentality and persuaded me that they were innocent victims of a paranoia, of a delusion and of propaganda?”

“No. I cannot.”

“Good. Let me then ask you. Is it criminal to kill a criminal? Would you return to the past, if by magic you could, to kill a man like Adolf Hitler? If you erase evil, do you not erase its influence and the pain the tormentor creates? Does it not follow that to do so is noble and virtuous and that not to do so is both cowardly and vicious? The problem with the forgiving of evil, Steven, is that we have to keep doing it. I mean forgiving.” He leant forward. “How can we be sure that we are not meant to get rid of it? Perhaps that is the rationale of the universe, and we are missing the point. I mean to get rid of Powner before I leave. There are worse men but he is conveniently close. He had and has free will. He chose and chooses to exercise it for self and greed.”

“Are you not a Christian?”

“I am not. Christianity is, I am afraid, the greatest delusion in the history of this planet. It establishes Evil as a power to avoid or to struggle against, but not to eradicate.”

I felt alarm. A very thin line, a vertical line of golden light had appeared in the far corner of the room. Just as quickly it partially disappeared, leaving only a short golden wand hanging in the air. I realised a concealed door was ajar. Someone was observing us and blocking the light. My heart leapt. I tried to pretend I had not noticed. I wondered. Dared I now call him Prospero or Prospero?

“Why have you really brought me here, Senhor? Who are you really?”

“You will find out what I am, if and when you agree to my proposal in full. You are also here so that I can thank you for saving my life.”

“Your guard, with your full authority I assume, saved mine. So we are quits.”

“Quits?”

“We are even.....By the way, I thought your guard was killed by the bullet.”

“No, wounded. He seeks revenge but I have forbidden him to take it. Vengeance is mine. ”

The wand of light at the top of the door grew slightly wider. He saw me glance and without turning he spoke quietly in his strange tongue. The door grew wider still and from the shadows into the light of the fire emerged his daughter, the most exquisite creature I have ever seen. She

wore a long white robe with a crenellated pattern of blue embroidery on the bottom hem and on the edges of the sleeves. It concealed all but her ivory-white slender arms. She was of a tall, slim girl in her middle teens and her air was simple innocence and wonder. I sensed that she did not fully appreciate how lovely she was. The far gloom had made her eyes, which were sea-blue, not grey, swell impossibly large. Her short angelic hair and earnest expression put me in mind of an image I had once seen in Rouen of Joan of Arc. She approached her father, kissed him on the cheek and sat down with her legs perfectly still and close together on the chaise between us, opposite the fire. The shadows of the flames licked her like dragons' tongues. She spoke to her father quietly in that strange language and did not take her wondrous, staring eyes from me. Her dress had ridden up a little revealing her ankles and calves. The contours of her long thighs were plainly visible. Her slender feet were clad in a miniature version of his white sandals. She clasped her knees with her slight hands and almost smiled at me, seeing, I think, just how utterly beguiled I was by her presence. As if on cue, as she had seated herself, the music had slowed and a flute was playing a phrase of heart-rending beauty. That moment I shall never forget. When I die, I hope it will be my farewell memory of the world.

"Who are you?" I could not help saying under my breath, like a thought too loud.

"She understands you but she is forbidden to answer until you have agreed to my proposal. You are the first man she has seen close to. She stole out of the house and saw you asleep on the rock. Until then she had only seen the fishermen out at sea. The trees screen the beaches. I had forbidden her to look inland but I knew one day, as Eve did God, she must disobey me. As you see, she is practically a woman. I have given her everything she needs to be accomplished – intellectually. She plays three instruments and understands the laws of physics and mathematics. She reads your language – to understand your great authors and poets - but does not speak modern English well. She does not need to."

"But," I blurted out foolishly, "English is a lingua franca. Everyone –"

"The Anglo-Saxons will be a major force in the destruction which is to come."

As his guest I was too polite and too much in fear of him to argue with this monstrous assertion. I had been overawed by Cally at first, but he was of quite another dimension.

"They are a restless, provocative tribe like their ancient Nordic cousins. They unsettle the world. You are not really of them. She does not need a lingua franca."

"I have Jewish, Saxon and Portuguese blood. All those tribes have done much to unsettle the world as you put it. All nations began in a different place to where they actually find themselves now."

This time his eyes gleamed brighter but he did not have a rejoinder. I realised I was being tested and weighed. He beckoned her to him and spoke quietly to her. She studied me and left us alone.

"Where is she going?"

"On an errand. She will be back."

"Is her name Miranda?" I could not help saying. His eyes smiled more broadly now and shook his head, but would not tell.

"The Tempest is a play, Steven! A fiction."

"She looks nothing like you. I cannot believe she is your daughter."

"Then you believe correctly. I never said she was. She was christened Angela because of her hair. I adopted her. She is half-English, half-Greek, or, she might be all English. I will explain. Her mother was abandoned by her Greek lover. He was the wayward son of a taverna owner, she a starry-eyed young holidaymaker, barely yet a woman. She fell in love with him of course and when she discovered on her return to England that she was carrying his child, she returned. The taverna owner threatened to disinherit his son as this had happened before. He imagined however that he loved her and they moved into a flat. Of course, when the child was born with blue eyes and blonde hair, looking nothing like the Greek, he accused her of lying to him and

she was forced to confess that prior to her liaison with him she had lain in the first week of her holiday with a boy from England. The thought of his inheritance and his humiliation made him return home to the taverna and the mother became destitute. She left the child outside a chapel and simply disappeared. A fisherman said he thought he saw a young woman throw herself into the sea from a cliff but no body was ever found. One day the father of the girl-mother came out to look for her. But the whole village turned its back on him, blaming him for his daughter's loose morals. He offered money but still no-one would help him. He did discover she had had a baby daughter but could not discover where she was. In the end he flew home in frustration and despair. My doctor who had attended the child told me the whole story and how beautiful and intelligent the little girl was. He arranged for her to be brought to me from the poor nuns who were caring for her. I gave them money to repair their dwelling in return for the child. But soon the wicked tongues began to cluck about me. The following July an English boy also went missing on the island and I was suspected. I had no wife, I lived alone, I kept my own company. Except for a small girl. So one late summer night, we left. I brought her here. Now the same lies have started here too, fostered and spread by that evil individual below, as you know and as you warned me. I have tried to keep him and that wretched place beyond at bay. I would buy all the land, demolish everything and build a fence at the bottom. Would that not demonstrate that I have no wish to have any contact with that tainted place, or its visitors? The truth is I adore the view from this window at the back. This planet is beautiful. Believe me, I have nothing to hide or be ashamed of. When you first came I knew you were a reporter looking for a story. As for the Powner boy who went missing, the very thought of kidnapping or luring him here for some nefarious purpose fills me with an unspeakable disgust."

"But why not allow Powner to see that he is not here? Then he would leave you alone, you could remain."

"No. My reputation is ruined. He is responsible and he will pay."

Miranda returned with a tray of appetisers on olive oil bread using crab, mussels, prawns and something I did not recognise. They turned out to be sea urchins and were delicate and delicious. We drank more fruit juice and soon I felt full.

"My servant gathers these things in the coves and the bay. We have a sheltered garden to the side where we grow our tomatoes, fruits and vegetables. We eat no meat. We bake our own bread and press our own oil. Come, follow me."

I found myself walking by her side and close up she smelt of freshly cut lemons. My whole body shivered with delight and I felt myself swell when she brushed my hand with hers as we came closer on entering a doorway. We were in his library, a staggering collection of books, some of which seemed very ancient. He looked from floor to ceiling and stood on the second rung of a ladder to fetch a volume down to show me.

"Some of these are unique editions of the principles of mathematics and philosophy rescued from the fire at the ancient library of Alexandria. I have the first editions of many authors. Here we sit together for at least two hours a day to study and discuss ideas. Here too would you be welcome if you accepted my proposal. Think what an intellect you would have! Come!"

He took a glass object in his hand like a small cone and magically a white flame began to flicker inside. I could see no source of energy. He knew that it would fascinate me and held it in the palm of one hand and caressed it like a conjuror with the other.

"It never emits heat, only light. Feel for yourself."

He put it into my hand and to my amazement it was indeed cool, even cold.

"You may be our guide, Steven. Take this door on the left."

I opened it and immediately a narrow staircase was illuminated. The cone seemed to respond to the darkness and glowed even more brightly. The staircase opened out into an enormous cellar, or rather a network of rooms which led from one to another. There were at first more shelves of

books and then a room with artefacts from early civilisations. I recognised classical Greek vases and Egyptian cats. He pointed out brooches and decorative pins of the Etruscans and explained that they had been the dominant culture of ancient Italy before the rise of the Romans. There were too many collections to mention but I remember fabulous insects, fossils, aboriginal art, pottery, moccasins, wooden vessels and implements, and in a lit, moist room every shape and colour of orchid anyone could imagine. I began to wonder how on earth he had created so much space at this level and then only much later how he had managed to bring all these possessions from Greece “one late summer night.”

He told me that behind another door were stores of items enough to last them many years, items they could not procure for themselves, such as flour and fuel. From behind a wide green door there came a low hum. He described it enigmatically as his engine room. He showed me how to turn off the light by merely twisting the base slightly and he put it on a ledge. As I walked past it behind them, an impulse made me pick it up and slip it into the inside pocket of my jacket.

We had returned to the great sitting room. I sat down on the chaise opposite the sparking logs and to my delight, as I had hoped, his Miranda joined me, and came very close. I could hear her steady breathing which seemed after a few seconds to quicken. Her scent was almost unbearably delicious and I hoped the fire would hide the warmth of my blood in my face; he must have been aware what I state I was in and I was sure that at this point he might find a reason to separate us. But on the contrary, he seemed relaxed, and content even, to see us in such proximity.

“As I said, Steven, I have a proposal to make. My daughter is, you might say. in love with you, as you can tell. She saw you naked. I already explained to her all the details of human sexuality – although not from personal experience, as you will understand later - when she was a child, and I had hoped that her libido would have awoken a little later than is the case. The sight of you caused her great wonder. Her desires cannot of course be suppressed – that way would lie misery and despair. How old are you Steven?”

“Twenty.”

“That is a lie Steven, your first. A pity.”

Was he a mind-reader?

“It must be your last. Your passport was read. It says you are considerably older. You must always tell me the absolute truth, as I will to you. It is a condition of our bargain. Do you accept?”

“I accept. I am so sorry.”

“Good. As soon as you agree to what I propose I shall reveal our names and all our secrets. And my daughter shall speak to you. My proposal is simple. You will take my daughter as your life-long companion and live with us. You cannot take her from me. You must give up the world. In return for her. In return for my knowledge. And things you have never dreamt of.”

I gulped so hard it was audible. His candour had first embarrassed me and now, on top of that I was shocked.

“I do not require, in fact do not desire, your reply now. Take some time. It will be your most momentous decision. Take until tomorrow evening.”

Generous.

“Are - are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Possibly. Soon. If you are not at the gate by tomorrow at eight p.m., I will know you cannot come. Bring nothing with you. Do not come before that time.”

He *was* mad! His eyes were gleaming but his face was as motionless as before. How could I get this beautiful prisoner away from this jealous, possessive man? She had disobeyed him and left the house. She knew where the beach was where I had nearly drowned. Could I find an instant to be alone with her beyond his hearing? I watched his eyes narrow.

“There is no other choice on offer. It would be reckless to entertain an alternative.”

He had read my mind! I tried to bury my thoughts.

“But you must give me some inkling of where we are going. I like this place. Surely you could make your peace with Powner? Or he might be arrested.”

I thought of our financial scam and realised what a chance I had to betray him. I had witnessed his attempt to kill this man. I had his money in my laundry basket. I could put him behind bars – and free Cally’s Ellen from his spell! Should I tell Prospero? Would he believe me? He put the tips of his fingers together and considered his response.

“I can’t just up and go any-old-where!” I added.

I watched as the far curtains drew apart and the lights dimmed. He rose and walked to the window. There was no moon and only the stars showed where, in the dark blueness, the sky was stretching. A glow above the shadow trees to our left betrayed the presence of Faro. He lifted his finger and pointed straight across the ocean due south, possibly, I imagined, to some island off the West African coast. I felt her come close and brush my fingers. I took her hand gently and looked across. Her lips were parted and I saw her tongue. I kissed her chastely, like a sister. He turned back slowly. We still held hands.

“I will come!” I exclaimed. But he shook his head.

“Decide tomorrow. First I have a task for you. A letter to take to your Mr Powner.”

He said this so gently, tenderly almost, that it seemed probable he was seeking a reconciliation and I smiled. Was he prepared, like his counterpart in *The Tempest*, to forgive his enemies? A great elation filled me. I knew that Powner had a good side, no matter how Cally and this man might condemn him. Perhaps I could be a peacemaker between them. He handed me the letter from inside his long garment and gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. An idea which had been welling inside me but which I was loath to air in case it merited his derision could no longer be halted.

“You said that heaven on earth would be a place where men can live wisely.”

“Go on.”

“But then you spoke of eradicating Evil.”

“I did.”

“But the two ideas are counter to each other. If Evil is within Man then it follows that to eradicate it would destroy the whole man. What sort of peace would such a world have? It would be in continual turmoil, a battleground between ideologies, between your theory of the Good and quite another. Like this planet is now! And can Evil be defeated by evil means? Think of Gandhi. Was he not wise? Didn’t he win by peaceful means?”

His eyes lit up like the light he had shown me, and he and Miranda beamed at each other.

“That is the very sort of debate which we could have for hours together!”

Had I passed my examination? He told me his man was waiting to drive me and hastened me on my way.

And with a final, lingering look at my Miranda I was gone.

As I was driven back down the hill my earlier anxieties began to re-stir. My worries seemed groundless when we got to the Powner villa. Every light was on and a party was in full swing. The door was wide open. Above the hubbub of cries and conversation and the music I heard the unmistakable cawing and croaking of Sharon. At seven thirty, out of the blue, after an absence of nearly two weeks, who had walked back in, but Troy? He had, he admitted - as Sharon would tell me later on her pillow - been taken pity on by a Dutch couple with a flat in the old town, believing his story that he had come out looking for work. Their departure for Holland had given him little choice but to return.

The noise and the company had made me hesitate at the door as the car drove away, but fat, asthmatic Lizzie, driven by the smoke and heat into the hallway for air, had dragged me in and told me the good news. As soon as Sharon saw me she grabbed me and whirled me onto the parquet floor to twist with six or seven other couples to the music of Chubby Checker. When I spotted the clock on the shelf I could hardly believe that I had been nearly three hours at the other villa.

Jake and Ellen sat in two Chesterfield armchairs pushed together, holding hands, like a pensive royal couple, all aloofness. I thought I could read in their eyes what they thought of Troy, who was nowhere to be seen and, I assumed, had his head stuck in a video game somewhere. As soon as I could properly take my leave from his drunken cousin I went over, drawn almost, to pay my respects and try to explain my non-arrival earlier on. I patted the letter in my inside pocket and felt something else. The light cone. A tide of guilt swept over me when its shape reminded me of my theft.

“Well, don’t you look bloody smart?” growled Jake. “You should have told me you had a previous engagement tonight.” His eyes were devoid of all emotion. “Business?” he added with a snap and a hint of menace.

“Business. Diplomatic business.” I took out the envelope and handed it to him. He read the letter. His face betrayed neither anger nor pleasure. But this was not the nice, kindly lion who had seduced Cally’s wife or slapped me on the back for saving Sharon. He read the letter for a seeming age then folded it and tucked it into his shirt pocket. Ellen was looking at me intently too. Her eyes bade mine follow them to a nearby table where a tall white vase with my flowers stood. I looked at her with some pleasure and went to speak, but her expression discouraged me. She looked over again. What was she trying to tell me? In the corner, next to the table, stood Gentleman, cracking walnuts in his hands, watching me.

Sharon had just changed the CD and something by the Rolling Stones was blaring out. Legs and arms were jerking helplessly to the rhythm and Sharon was soon prizing me away from them to join in. She wrestled me out of my sweaty jacket and threw it onto a chair. I had no option but to dance, and, sensing I had offended Leo in some way, I thought the best idea was to feign nonchalance and celebrate with the same abandon as the rest. I let Sharon keep topping up my glass with wine, swigged it ostentatiously, and, later, while the dance floor was again in full swing, she grabbed my tie and led me unseen by her cousin to her room.

“Jake was mad with you tonight,” she said afterwards, pressing down on top of me, on the edge of sleep.

“Why?”

“Dunno for sure. Better ask him yourself.”

The bumping of the music which had accompanied our effort showed no sign of letting up. I eased her onto her back and told her the wine was making me feel a bit queasy.

“Is there another, quieter way out of here, Sharon.? I think if I go down through all that row and smoke I’m going to puke.”

“Down the balcony steps. Out here,” she said dreamily.

When I got back home I realised I had not got my keys. They were in the jacket I had left at the villa. Then I remembered the key which Prospero had returned to me. It was in my trouser pocket. I was about to turn it in the lock when the thought of the blue car made me turn. It was still there. But the driver was sitting staring through the windscreen. I opened the door and slurred something. He did not reply. I shook him but he was rigid. I went in and picked the phone up to dial the police but as I did I heard a car pull up. Within a minute both cars had gone.

I lay stiff in bed, waiting for a rap at the door. Jake had made his mind up, I concluded, that I was a traitor, a double agent. I began to wonder what peaceful message Prospero could possibly have written to a man who had turned his assassin onto him. And Jake would doubtlessly see me not as a diplomat, an honest go-between but as a messenger boy who had exceeded his brief. As I sobered up, I cringed to think how naive I had been to imagine that it would all end, despite Troy's return, with a handshake.

It must have been the booze which caused me to have so many dreams that night, culminating with a terrible nightmare. I found myself looking in at the final scene at Prospero's villa from the outside. I saw myself take Miranda's chin in my palm and kiss her full lips. I saw Prospero pointing not across the ocean but slightly upwards at the low sky. The scene receded until we were tiny, as figures in a tableau, as if in a nativity play. Then slowly the recession slowed and stopped before gradually reversing itself and I accelerated until I found myself behind the wheel of the funeral car driving at break-neck speed towards the window where now a hideous Prospero, with yellow eyes and a dark scaly skin stood pointing - at me. I woke and fell out of bed. I had been told that hitting the bottom in a falling dream resulted in death. I lay in the dark panting, in an agony of doubt about what I should do.

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The morning was fine and sunny but my mind would become more not less confused. I looked outside. There was no surveillance. Had I dreamt the episode with the second car? I could not decide. I felt foul. I tried to revive myself with some fresh pineapple and melon and drank a full flask of coffee. I recalled with a lurch of my stomach Ellen's meaningful glance at Gentleman, Sharon's drunken words of warning and Leo's sullen face. I looked out of the window again. I was still alone. There had to be a way to have the best of both worlds. I had a whole day to think. But not in my villa. I shut the door behind me and stood irresolute at the end of my drive. I was afraid. I had the option of going straight to Leo, confessing the whole truth and telling him he was in danger. Or I could go to the station and get on the first train out, like Sophie. I kept seeing myself tearing up the cheque in front of Leo's eyes, telling him over and over that the Nowhere Man was leaving. I kept insisting that I had been abducted by his guard and not gone there willingly. The word TRAITOR kept running through my head. I could hide at Cally's. Was Mo still around? She could hide me perhaps. I could walk into a police station and give myself in..... and be taken straight round to Leo's and dumped. I saw Gentleman crack a nut and Miranda fall, like one of ETA Hoffmann's dolls into string-linked pieces. I would hide in the woods until eight and escape with my mentor and tormentor. I saw myself cooped up, crying with boredom in his library and suddenly smelt that faint brussel sprout-like whiff of my ex-partner's on Miranda's breath too, and saw a bump on her nose I had failed to notice before. I saw my mother's dead face next to me on the pillow.

I turned left and left again and walked to the beach. The on-shore breeze seemed to clear my head a little. At The Bar de Oura the chairs were neatly stacked on tables and I envied them; roped together under a tarpaulin the sun-beds were also in hibernation. I pulled up my hood and walked to the Devil's Kitchen. I looked up. The balcony was empty. I stood looking until the futility of any attempt to kidnap Miranda persuaded me to turn. About a quarter of a mile away a solitary figure in a long blue coat stood watching me. I began to walk back the way I had come. The figure turned and walked ahead of me at exactly my speed. I stopped outside Nicolau's to do up my trainer. The figure paused on the wooden steps. When I walked on, so did it. At the top of the steps I found to my relief that it had disappeared. I turned right and right again and walked towards Powner's villa. I rang the bell and fat Liz answered. She told me that



everyone but her had gone to see Sharon and Troy off at the airport. She had had a blazing row with Sharon. Did I want to come in? I saw an unmistakable gleam in her tiny, elephantine eye but the words “fart and give us a clue” would not stop saying themselves in my head over and over. I told her to tell Jake I had called and that I had something really important to tell him. I left her at the open door and it was only when I was passing my place that I remembered the pretext for the visit; my jacket. But it could wait.

On the corner of Cardiac Hill the blue figure, a man in a long raincoat was staring into an estate agent’s window. I stood right next to him for five minutes and then walked on. He had not looked up once. I began to jog a little and then ran until I was out of breath and stopped outside a bling shop, about the only one not shuttered up on The Mile. There was a cafe across the road. I looked down the hill and made sure I was alone. I entered the cafe. Another man in blue was at the counter. Terrified, I came out and walked on until I reached the duel carriageway and turned left at Lineker’s Bar. In a gap in the traffic I rushed across and ran as hard as I could to the next left turn.

At two o’clock I asked the proprietor of the small restaurant I had found open, way off the beaten track, for directions back to The Mile and, on impulse, a sheet of paper. He obliged and I settled up with him. I wrote a letter to Prospero. I told him that Troy had come home and that therefore he was now above suspicion. I told him that Mr Powner was sorry for shooting at him. This sounded utterly ludicrous, but no matter what other form of words I tried I could not improve upon it. I crumpled up the paper angrily and threw it on my plate. When I left the two men in blue were sitting in the blue car across the road. I opened the back door and asked them, rather tipsily, if they would mind taking me back to my villa if they were going that way. It was raining. We drove off in silence and I left them in the road outside and lay down to sleep, but could not.

The light faded cruelly slowly. I was not hungry but I decided to open a tin of sardines and a jar of olives and slice up a tomato and a white onion as thinly as I could. I tried to do a Sodoku puzzle, thought I was going really well for a change, then got all in a mess with it after fifteen minutes and ripped it in a blind fury into shreds. How could I give them the slip? Did I really want to? At five I called on Cally. He came to the door but did not open it. He said he had a stomach upset and had been lying down. I told him I was being followed but he obviously failed to hear me as the next thing I heard was the toilet flush. Mo had obviously flown home because her villa was in darkness. I couldn’t remember what we had agreed about me taking possession. For five minutes it really mattered and bothered me. I banged on her door once in frustration and left. At half past five I ate half of my salad. At quarter to six I took my bag out of my wardrobe and packed a few tee shirts, shorts, underwear and a pair of decent shoes. I went into my bathroom but could not make up my mind whether to pack my toothbrush then or at the last minute. I put the toothpaste in my bag and then took it out again. I would need it to clean my teeth, of course, before leaving. I could not make up my mind whether to take two books or three books and in the end packed none. I found my passport and put it on the table next to my bag. I picked up the passport and automatically turned to the photo page to make sure it was mine and not my ex-partner’s whose passport had been kept in the same drawer with mine at my father’s house.....where she had betrayed me (how many times?) with her blue cat looking on uncomprehendingly and meowing, like her, to be fed. I stared at that smiling version of me from 1999, anticipating a holiday which this disappointed version of me had forgotten, even down to the location of it. I finished my salad. I moved the passport around until it was exactly square with the corner of the table. Five past six. I uncorked the half-full bottle of red and put the cork back in. I mashed a pot of tea which I forgot to pour. I picked up the phone to

call Leo, but half way through dialling I put it down. I tidied the kitchen and washed down the surfaces. I took the rubbish out. I saw my father's grim face in the funeral car and felt him put his arm around me at the grave. It was between quarter past and twenty past six. God, what was I going to do? I walked out onto the cold terrace. It was another still, starry night after a cloud-troubled day. The dim light from next-door's lounge was enough to show that their oranges were ripening. I had not noticed until then how far on they were. At the back wall on tip-toe I could see the red rocks had changed colour to grey, except for a splash of pink underneath two lamps on the far wooden steps. The single light at the front of Prospero's villa was on. The Powner villa was in darkness and I assumed that they were not yet back from Faro. I saw Miranda turn to kiss me and smelt lemons as she did. I thought of the oranges ripening. I saw myself climb down the rocks, climb up the track past Leo's and reach the red gate. It had only taken a few seconds. The gate was locked. The sea whispered. I opened my eyes. I loved this place in spite of its scars. I remembered my pot of tea. It was tepid and strong but I drank two cups. Just gone half-past six. I watched the second hand for a moment. What gave Caliban and Prospero the right to set themselves up as superior beings and sit in judgement on their fellow men and decree what was good for them? I came to the back door and wondered at what island he had been pointing beyond the horizon. I felt the pain which Ariel had inflicted on my knee and rubbed it. Chips for toffee. Mackerel and dumpling. A Caldeirada. Chips for toffee! This time I sniggered out loud as Caliban laughed again. I thought of the earthiness of Mo and then of Sharon and wondered if I would miss it, even if it did leave a taste in the mouth. I thought of the taste of vinho verde and of Cally's entertaining diatribes. I thought of those dusty books, those fossils, the sweltered hothouse orchids. I thought of the Devil's Kitchen. Agua gelado. Ice cold water. I thought of that little tongue and of those pure white teeth as Miranda's lips had parted, and I knew what to do. I would accept Prospero's proposal. If unbearable, I might even plot against him, later, from the inside. I took down a picture I had painted of the Thames at Richmond, removed it from its frame, rolled it up and tucked it into my bag.

It would take twenty minutes to walk and five to drive. I calculated when I should leave. Half past seven? I looked at the kitchen clock again. It was quarter to seven minus a whisker. A loud knocking made me start. I turned left into the hall and walked to the door. I asked who was there.

"Police. Open please."

The two men in blue, now without their overcoats, entered. They rested their hands on their pistols and one gestured to me to lead the way into the kitchen. I kept looking at my watch.

"Going away, Senhor?" said the one with the droopy moustache, eyeing up my bag.

"I'm not quite sure."

How lame and foolish that must have sounded!

"How can I help you? I am in rather a hurry."

The other raised an eyebrow. I was making little sense. The first one spoke.

"A policeman was found last night in his car outside your house. He was in secret – how do you say?"

"Under cover?"

"Yes."

"Dead?"

"No. In coma. In shock. Very bad. You see anything?"

Another rapping came at the door. The officers seemed to expect it. One told me to stay there. He went to the front door. There was a whispered conversation in the hall and I heard a hollow cracking sound I recognised. Lowering his head the newcomer entered the kitchen and quietly and politely thanked the officers, then asked them to go, all in confident Portuguese. He put a carrier bag down on the table and closed the door. He instructed me to sit down and offered me

a walnut in the pink palm of his hand. I declined. He closed his hand, made a black fist and threw the nut into his own mouth, never taking his eyes off me once. I had no chance of winning this staring contest so I looked at the lace holes of my trainers. With a loud snort down his nose he examined my bag like a Customs Officer and flicked through my passport.

“Off on holiday, are we, Mr Kloss? Anywhere exotic?”

“I haven’t stolen the money. Your boss can have his cheque back. I don’t want it. I’m a fucking millionaire! I don’t need it. I was only trying to oblige...”

“Be quiet.”

He opened a few drawers and cupboards and looked in the fridge. He kept saying NO quietly to himself. He felt inside the tumbler of the washing machine, rubbed his fingers together and shook his head.

“What are you looking for?” I finally could not help but ask.

“You’ll tell me in a minute where it is.”

“Tell you where what is?”

He removed the plinth from the base of the cupboards and swept his hand underneath. He examined the light fitting and inside the extraction hood above the cooker.

“Tell you where WHAT is?”

“Mr Castelo, our lawyer was quite adamant that you did business with him in the kitchen. So where is it?”

“WHAT?”

“Your bug.”

“My bug??”

“Why do you keep looking at your watch? You expecting a taxi?”

“No. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But your bag’s packed. What did I tell you at Mr Powner’s? Explain yourself.”

“I can’t”

“What a stupid lie.”

He slapped me so hard I flew off my chair and crashed against the wall.

“I was tempted to do that as soon as you came up with your big idea, Mr Kloss. Mr Smug. Get up.”

He picked up the plastic bag he had brought and took out my suit jacket. He threw it into my face as I got to my feet. He told me to feel inside the left hand pocket. But first I felt the inside pocket for the slight bulge of the light. It was not there. I drew out from the other pocket a lavender card with a frilly edge I had completely forgotten about, from another life.

LONDON PRESS AWARDS
GROSVENOR PALACE HOTEL
Formal Dinner
Saturday May 6th 2005
Admit two      Steven Kloss

“What I want first and foremost is the tape and then the bug.”

“The tape?”

He sighed, picked up my dirty tea plate and hurled it at me. It knocked me down again and shattered. I felt blood ooze down my smarting forehead.

“The tape you must have used to record conversations with my employer, and his lawyer.”  
“Oh God!” I exclaimed with a shrill laugh. “Now I see! No wonder you’re upset! You think I’m a fucking journalist! I can explain. You’ve got me all wrong! I was getting an award from the press.....for blowing the whistle on some insider trading.....”

He threw the bottle at me. It broke on the wall above my head, covering me with sour-smelling wine and shards of glass.

“A nice try, Mr Kloss. Do you really take me for some stupid nigger who’s only fit to pick cotton? Get up.”

It was nearly seven. The knife drawer was open. I had a wicked carver in there if I could get to it before he got to me. Or my heaviest copper saucepan hanging on a hook would be better. It would knock him out stone cold.

“Could you wet me a towel, please? Then I’ll tell you the whole story. I promise you, Mr Gentleman, there is no plot, I have no secret agenda, I am innocent. Please wet me a towel - please! I feel too faint to get up.”

As soon as he turned to the sink I leapt up and reached for the pan but his hand seized my wrist and threw me to the floor. He knelt down and brought his face close to mine. He dabbed at my wound gently with the dry towel, almost like a mother.

“Tell me where it is,” he murmured “And you might save your bacon.”

“There is no tape,” I whimpered “You’ve got to believe me.”

“Well that is not good news. Have you given it to that freak next door?”

“To Cally? No. He has nothing.....”

“Nothing to do with it? So it does exist. Get up. Go and get it.”

He lifted me to my feet. He pushed me into the hall. As I entered my bedroom I turned and closed the door on him and sat down at its base. He pushed but could not shift me. My mobile phone sat tantalisingly on the bed. I stretched but was a good metre short of reaching it. A chair came smashing through the window, repeatedly smashing it, until all the spars and glass were pushed inside and were lying mainly on my bed. Helplessly I watched him climb in.

“If you try one more trick, Mr Kloss I promise I’ll break your neck, torch your house and torch his next door with him inside it. One way or another I’ll burn that tape.”

He slapped me again and again, till my head was ringing, then gripped me under the arms and dragged me along the floor back into the kitchen. He sat me on a chair, filled a glass with water and made me drink. There came four slow, loud knocks on the door. Then again.

“That your taxi?” he hissed, with his hand over my mouth.

“No. It’s Mo.”

“Mo?”

“Mo Tranter.”

“If you shout I’ll kill you and then kill him.”

I laughed at his error. “It’s a she,” I said feebly. We waited. There was silence. Had she seen the window or had the drawn curtains concealed it? Would she be phoning the police? The police! They were probably still outside and had already ushered her away.

It was nearly ten past seven. I racked my singing brains for inspiration. He threw the bloody towel in the sink and cracked a walnut. He reminded me I had one life left and said I had better start telling him what he wanted to know.

“Did you really think I would let my employer give you four million Euros without a background check? I was getting nowhere fast until I started thinking about your password Cavala. Sharon mentioned you had said you were really Mr Mackerel. I had a hunch. I went on line and looked at the Kingston area telephone directory and lo and behold, there was a mackerel there, owner of a restaurant. And guess what, Mr Kloss he remembered you quite clearly. Oh no, he said, he thought you had told him you were a newspaperman not in finance at all. Of course, says he, he might be wrong. But he’s not wrong. You know about as much about

finance as the Pope knows about pole-dancing. Anyway, a search of your posh jacket confirms it.”

“What happened to the lamp. Like a light bulb?” I asked uselessly.

He shrugged and said he had no idea what I was talking about. I began now to tell him the whole truth and of how I had fleetingly toyed with the idea of gathering evidence against his boss but never seriously.

“Somebody told me your boss had raided a money depository and knew who had killed Stephen Lawrence. When I saved his cousin’s life and got in with him, I thought it was an opportunity too good to miss, but the truth of the matter is, I do quite like Leo – Jake I mean. I came up with the share idea because I needed to convince you that I was what I said I was. And I did want to help. But I just kept digging myself in deeper.”

“Indeed you did. That’s it? There’s no more?”

“No, I swear.”

By now it was seven thirty nearly. My hopes were rising that I had convinced him and that perhaps he would soon be on his way.

“The trouble is you know too much, Mr Kloss. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing but a lot can be fatal.”

“Oh come on! Who would believe me, even if I wanted to blab? I told you, I’m rich and going to be richer. I’ll cut you in on my deal, if you want.”

“What deal?”

“Fish and chips.”

For the first time he was genuinely amused and emitted a low, sinister chuckle. He shook his head as if in relish and anticipation, but not, it turned out, at fish and chips. He produced dramatically the letter which Leo had folded up and put into his top pocket. He held it in front of my face. My right eye was swelling up and I had a job to read it.

Mr Powner

I know that it was you who authorised the attempt on my life. Do you really expect me to accede to the absurd demands of such a corrupted man as you? You have tried my patience and now you must pay. I will extirpate you and your nest of vipers.

The young man who has been instrumental in this is not to blame. He could not help his curiosity, and took from me what he should not have.

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“Took what? What did you take from him?”

I went to answer but no words would come, as if I had been hypnotised.

“You warned the man, didn’t you? I saw him through the sights looking down this way as I fired. It had to be you. How did you do it? Do not lie. You have one life.”

“Will you promise to let me go to him if I tell you? I have to be up there by eight. By eight at the very latest.....otherwise.....It’s too late.”

“For dinner?”

“Yes”

He looked at the clock. “You’ll never get there. Besides you’re not a very presentable Cinderella.”

“I can drive.”

“No you can’t. I took the precaution of ramming a spud a few inches into your exhaust, in case you decided to do a bunk. It’ll start and then cut out. A little trick I learnt at school when I wanted to get my own back on a certain teacher.”

If I jogged, I told him, I could be there in time. I pleaded with him. He shook his head.

“You’re in no position to bargain. Or jog. Did you use a mirror?”

“Yes, a shaving mirror.”

He suddenly looked at the fragments of dirty plate and smiled.

“That was lie number three. About dinner. You already had your dinner. Look. No lives left.”

“No that was lunch.”

“Number four. You ate lunch at some crappy place off the main road.”

He cracked a walnut and popped the kernel into his mouth. On each syllable of “you are a very de-ceit-ful man” he chucked the pieces of shell at me.

“What am I going to do with you?”

“Please let me go.”

I began to weep; for my heartbroken father, for the bullying I had endured for years at school, for my throbbing pain, for my lovely grandmother, for my old, tainted house, for my betrayal, for all my misfortunes, for my life; for Miranda. He waited patiently for me to stop and then raised me up and carried me into the lounge over his shoulder like a fireman. He opened the French windows. The air was very welcome. I even thanked him. He carried me outside and leant me carefully against the back wall.

“You wouldn’t be safe up there tonight, Steven.” he said. “Bad things are going to happen later on. It’s going to get quite explosive. Your new friend is going to pay, not Mr Powner. It’s much better to stay down here.”

I raised my cracked watch to my good eye. It was nearly ten to eight. I looked at the far villa. One light was burning. At the lower villa three squares of light shone. They were back. I imagined them waving impatiently to Sharon at the airport, and Sharon making her revolting son acknowledge their farewells.

“Is everything alright out there?” asked the man from Chester, my neighbour.

“No,” I managed to moan.

“It’s alright, Sir” said Gentleman. “He’s had too much to drink. Leave him to me. He’s getting some fresh air.”

I tried to yell but I was hoarse and only a strangled noise came out.

“Now I shall have to say you were so depressed you threw yourself onto the rocks,” he whispered when he had persuaded the man to go inside. “But you only had a few at lunchtime. Hold on.”

He reached into his pocket and brought a half-bottle of brandy out. He took off the top and thrust it under my nose.

“Go on. You might as well drink. It’ll make you feel tons better. One for the road. Or for the rocks. Do you like your spirit on the rocks?”

I tipped the bottle back and let it pour. I coughed. He grabbed it, threw it over the wall and began to lift me up steadily with a friendly smile. I heard a dull thud, a muffled shot, and in the gloom saw something like oil spurt from Gentleman’s left temple. His eyes turned deader than the sea bass’s. His grip relaxed and we both fell in a heap, me on top.

I struggled to sit up. Above the wall loomed Cally holding a pistol.

“Are you alright, Steven?” he boomed.

“Cally. You killed him.”

“I did. I used to do it for a living. Good job for you I decided to come out of retirement. You see, dear boy, there are some people I really cannot abide and fail utterly to see the point of. I think of them as God’s devil-dolls, sent amongst us to cause mayhem.”

“Oh Cally, please drive me to Prospero’s! I have to be there at eight.”

We were in his old car. With a minute to go, we passed Leo's place and I urged him to put his foot down. The headlights raced ahead of us, searching the grass and the track but still the fence did not appear. Had that magician conjured it out of existence? The clock on the dashboard now said eight and I tried to fix it with my good eye and stop it. At last the gate came into view and I saw it was open. Cally slowed as we approached but I urged him to go straight through. I lent across and leant on the horn, causing Cally to veer to the right into bushes.

"You impetuous fool!" he shouted. "We are stuck!"

But I was already opening the passenger door and trying to run. My head was still spinning and I fell. I looked at the sky and saw the stars revolving like a spiral galaxy. I felt him pick me up.

I had already told him in the car that Prospero and Miranda were leaving and managed to make him believe I was not, as he first thought, delirious. He began to carry me, then stumbled and fell. We heard a great roar from the direction of the sea.

I looked down the slope. Now all the windows in the Powner residence were glowing. From every one of them light was emerging in shafts and reaching ever further out into the night at different angles like searchlights in the London Blitz. The light was at first pure white and then became pale blue until I could look at it no longer. The most enormous explosion flattened me to the ground and shook the hillside. For ten seconds we seemed to be in the grip of a massive earthquake. And then all was still. I sat up. Where the villa had been was just an uncluttered view of our row of houses.

But Cally was staring at the higher villa. The single light went out.

"Oh no," he moaned, getting to his feet, and swivelling his head first one way then the other, like a hideous Janus in grief. "She's gone...She's gone....She's gone."

He could not decide whether to stand still or to go left or right, starting out first downhill, then returning and going a few paces uphill. He finally stood and wailed like a wolf to the callous stars. I summoned up all my strength, gulped down a lungful of air and staggered past him. At the great portico I found the door open and behind it the long corridor in darkness. I felt my way into the great room where we had sat. In the negligible light I dreaded that it was empty. On the mantle piece I could just make out a narrow glass cone. I picked it up and turned the base clockwise and the flame lit itself. The room was empty.

I searched the cellar. Every display cabinet had gone. Every shelf in the great library was bare. I went back down the stairs and listened. The low thrum from Prospero's engine room had fallen silent. I pushed the wide green door open and shone the light inside. It was huge and empty. The lamp responded to the intense darkness and began to glow until, with mounting horror I saw it verging on pale blue. I hurled it onto the floor where it burst with a great bang. A fire began to spread. Stumbling and falling, colliding with many walls I eventually found my way back out into the chill night. Cally had already gone.

As I crawled down on my hands and knees, the rubble of the lower villa caused me to make several detours. I had to rest repeatedly. My hands and knees were sore and grazed. Curiously, although there were sirens sounding there were still no headlights and no evidence of emergency vehicles on the scene. There was a hot smell as of burning rubber but the building blocks, the splinters of wood and whatever else had been thrown clear were cold. The moon rose. I got to my feet and crouched on what I took through my one good eye to be a round piece of debris, one of those decorative concrete balls, I thought, on their front terrace wall. As I stood up, discomfited by its uneven surface I saw it was a shaggy lion's head. Leo's. I staggered backwards and fell onto the soft, wobbly torso of Liz, headless, with various pipes hanging out. My hand was cold and dark with someone's setting blood. I retched and reproduced my sardines. I moved far out to the right to avoid any more unwelcome finds. By a clump of black trees a crumpled white van lay on its side, obviously blown a hundred metres from the scene by the ferocity of the explosion. At last I was close to the junction with my road.

A fire engine, ambulances and police cars had arrived and their crews were looking in sheer incomprehension and futility at the impassable track and the wreckage strewn everywhere in their lights. I was looking down in the other direction and nobody else saw what I could see in the moonlight; two long figures in a fond embrace lying like great smashed dolls on the red rocks, forty metres below Cally's back wall, one issuing a black slick of blood from its head.

On my kitchen table I found his door key and a brief note.

Do take care, dear boy. Do improve yourself. Do try to look after Merve. Now they are gone I cannot see the point of hanging around. I am taking our Gentleman friend for a little trip,

Caliban

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In the daylight the great white van was found to be chock-a-block with fertiliser, enough to blow a very large house to smithereens. It could not, of course, be blamed for the disintegration of the Powner residence, nor could its presence be understood. The explosion and the explosive would remain a mystery, and, as I would never have been believed, I had no intention of explaining the former.

In the aftermath of the explosion, Cally's suicide and the disappearance of Miranda I fell into a deep depression for what seemed like months. I returned again and again to Prospero's villa looking for clues and then one day found the gate secure and topped with that barbed wire, another decoration so beloved by the Philistines on the Algarve. The lease on my villa expired and by early spring my gradual moving-into Cally's place was completed. I began to spend my empty days reading his books and on the Internet tracked down English translations of some of those German books he had recommended. ETA Hoffmann was as disturbing as he had said and I put him to one side. No-one claimed Powner's money. I went looking for Cally's Merve and my Sophie but the disconsolate manager/boyfriend told me she had run off with a customer. He accepted my offer to buy his club with some of Leo's millions and in the late summer I turned it into a hostel for asylum seekers, waifs and strays and young men and women with nothing to sell but their bodies and ice-cold water. Sophie turned up out of the blue yonder to spend a day with Cally, cried herself to a standstill when I told her what had happened, spent a pulsating night and three delicious weeks with me, swore undying love, got bored and went again, slipping out of my bed one early morning when she thought I was asleep. She left a note apologising and swore she would be back. I am still waiting and am not holding my breath. At the end of August my chip-manager came to see me with a balance-sheet and a huge greasy grin to claim his bonus. I could not help making money, even though I made no effort to. I had kept the far villa under observation and one day had seen a van with a name on I recognised trundling around up there doing some maintenance work. In Cally's letter rack I found the original leaflet he had shown me. The name of the agent matched with the name on the side of the van. I applied, offered a ridiculously small sum of money and to my utter delight acquired the villa and grounds that same day. I made repeated enquiries to discover the true identity and whereabouts of the vendor but met with a wall of silence as impenetrable as the fence. Gradually I transferred all of mine and Cally's belongings to my new home.

During my first year of solitude I arranged for Lucio to deliver all that I needed to sustain myself. I had contacted that garlicky lawyer as soon as possible, given him a hefty bribe for his



consideration and silence. It was through him that I managed later to acquire the rest of the headland. I arranged for every stick and stone of Powner's villa to be removed, even the foundations. I bought up all the few remaining villas at the bottom and thought about demolishing them all before realising how pointless that would be. They would, I realised, make even more money for me without effort and I have made up my mind to let them, rent free, in close seasons to a charity in Britain which arranges holidays for disadvantaged children. I soon dismantled the fence and had part of it erected at the bottom by the road. I turned my back on the town and looked out to sea. Soon after the explosion a rumour, begun by Lucio, spread around the town. He said he had been crabbing the night of the blast. Just before it, he had heard that roar and then something like ball lightning had shot just above the waves in front of him and had disappeared over the horizon, around where, it turned out - because Lucio showed me through the window - Prospero had pointed. Amongst Cally's books I had found an amazing atlas and a clever idea came to me. I bought a compass and pinpointed the direction of Prospero's finger to just a few degrees east of south. Using my laptop I established my exact longitude and latitude and in the atlas traced a line in the direction he had indicated. Disappointingly I ended up in Africa. Beyond the Cape of Good Hope the line did not cross one island in the deep ocean. I began to spend long nights at Cally's telescope looking at the constellations to the south. I soon knew their names and their shapes. The December view of Orion fascinated me to the south and its brightest star, Rigel. Once I sat out on the balcony gazing at it until two, drinking vinho verde, when from it, or apparently from it, a shooting star descended, and I saw the pearly white mouth of Miranda and in the sapphire of Rigel, her blue eye.

What had happened to Ellen Powner or Ellen Brown was a mystery. She had not been discovered amidst the debris of the explosion and it was assumed by the investigators that she must have been so close to the source of it that she had literally been turned to vapour. I had no reason to suppose otherwise, but what Cally had said about her state of mind, her lack of joy, and a half-implicit desire to escape, would not stop pestering me.

I must admit the more I thought about his claim to be her husband, and the further his words receded into the past, the more fantastical it all seemed, and the more my scepticism grew. A woebegone Sharon had returned to the dreadful scene a couple of days after the event and had given me her address in case of developments. I found it out and wrote to her. I did not beat about the bush. I asked her straight out whether Ellen had been Richard (Cally) Brown's husband and in what frame of mind she had been at the airport.

For a fortnight I heard nothing and feared that I had given her such offence that she would not reply. And then one early summer morning it arrived. I print below only the relevant part.

Dear Steven,

I can't believe what you said about Ellen and that fucking freak Cally Brown! She hated the sights of him! Gave her the creeps! As for that day at the airport. I had had a steaming row with Liz cos she kept on telling Troy to behave himself. In the end I gave her both barrels, the fat, sanctimonious cow (God rest her soul). Ellen was real upset and didn't want to come at first but Jake made her. She did not say one word all the way there and in the end I had a go at her cos I thought she was pissed off with me and was siding with Liz. The last I saw of her was in the cafe before we went into departures. She went to the toilet and didn't come to wave us off. Jake got mighty pissed off in the end waiting, but we had to get going. She could be a miserable cow Ellen, a bit stuck-up but a good friend to me. I think she knew me and Jake had had a thing going but she never let on.....

This resolved one issue, I thought, but not the other; far from it. Lucio, as I have implied, loved a tall story, both telling them and hearing them. A few weeks after the receipt of the letter he ran in all breathless. A “senhora loura”, a blonde woman, had been seen by Ellen’s former maid, Maria, standing crying at the turn in the road below, by my new red gate. The maid had been absolutely sure it was her mistress, even though Senhora Ellen had been a brunette, which I knew of course she was. Maria had gotten off the bus around the corner and run back, he said, but the lady had gone. When he had finished his tale, I smiled at Lucio and asked him what size whale he had caught that day.

“No, Steve, it is true!” he protested, almost grabbing me in his passion. “Maria is a good girl! Her grandfather was a priest and her sister is a nun! She never lies. She swears it!” In the end I could not bear it and sent for Maria myself. She persuaded me that she was sincere but I told her many English women were blonde these days and were as pretty as her mistress. Her looks were, I said, not uncommon. Perhaps the woman had had a row with her husband, perhaps she was drunk. But I could not shake Maria’s certainty. To put my mind at rest I contacted the main hotels but not one had, or had had, an Ellen on their books.

One morning Lucio turned up with a black eye and a swollen lip. He tried to laugh it off as he handed me a huge sea bass to examine. He had bumped against his mast in a swell, he said, but he was as poor a liar as me. Soon I got the truth out of him. A nine-year-old Praianova girl had gone missing. A burly fisherman on the quay had jerked his thumb in my direction and said he would not be a bit surprised if I knew where she was. Lucio had tackled him and had come off the worse for it. That evening his adversary had been forced to apologise when the girl turned up inland at her aunt’s, having walked ten miles after a scolding from her mother. I thanked Lucio for his loyalty and told him to ignore such tittle-tattle, a phrase he found very amusing. Men who lived alone, I reminded him, like my predecessor, would always be the subject – the object – of vile tongues.

Lucio was as loyal as he was intelligent and enterprising; and increasingly a good companion. He improved my Portuguese and I his English. I lent him Cally’s books and often we sat and discussed them. One Christmas, when he is ready, I intend to spring a big surprise on him and put him in overall financial control of my growing little empire. The Mile and its adjacent streets will slowly become my Monopoly board. One September I will sweep it clean, fold it up and return it to the old Algarve.

Until those traumatic events of December 2005 I had usually been a sound sleeper. No longer. I ought to have had nightmares about my experience with Gentleman, but curiously my dreams related to being followed. Underlying all that there was something else troubling me and, I came to realise, partly causing my depression. I had been concussed. The events on the hillside therefore were not entirely clear or in order, and details were missing. I knew there was something vital relating to Cally which I could not remember and it was very frustrating. I even thought about hypnosis to get at it.

Then one night as I was dropping off to sleep it came back to me. I sat bolt upright in bed and heard him shout again, unresolved as to which way to run, “She’s gone! She’s gone! She’s gone!” Of course! It had been his intonation which had struck me as so odd at the time! He had emphasized the word “she” three times. Why?

On the balcony with my vinho verde for company I thought very often about Prospero’s pessimistic philosophy and what he had called the paradox of obedience and freedom in the universe. The television news I found increasingly depressing, so much so that I stopped watching it. Everywhere, like the lava below the mantle, the affairs of competing men seemed to be in turmoil. Their violent streak, that fault Prospero had talked about, inherited from the

matter of which they were made, ran so deep, I now concluded, that it could not be removed or healed up without destroying them. I decided that Prospero had long ago given up his quest for a perfect land of peace to live in, and wanted only his privacy. Men had led themselves into exile from Eden. I abandoned my facile optimism that they were on an upward learning curve. They could not be dragooned, legislated, preached or educated into virtue. If such was beyond the power of God, the Son of God, and their own reason, then how? Out in the night sky was all the evidence of a violent struggle necessary to confirm what he had said. Those stationary points of light were illusory. All matter there was in a temporary unison by dint of gravity; coherence was ephemeral; the gravity of objects had sustained them in neat packages; their compulsion to occupy the same space, just as the bickering tribes of the world, would increase their gravity and destroy them. Those solid rocks, that placid ocean below were forced to endure a tedious inertia; but not for long. Eruption and tempest would inevitably liberate their energetic matter.

Then as I sat drinking far too much one autumn night peering at the stars, I recalled something which Cally had said in a rare moment of tender-heartedness. As I stared up, an idea began to take shape which startled me. I thought of the very beginning, that first incandescent spark; imagined the precursors of the hot gases in furious flight; saw the gases swirl into existence and stars emerge in galaxies; saw bodies collide in an endless rivalry for space and form; saw planets boil with lava in a ceaseless turmoil. But the ocean below me was calm. And that is when it hit me, the counter to Prospero's dismal argument. In that very first explosion and conflict there had been the potential for the greatest phenomenon of which God's universe was capable, greater than any star, blue, white, yellow or red, which had been or was yet to be. Transcending that crushing selfishness and primitive imperative to occupy a rival's space was a motive of ideal purity. That phenomenon was human love. I had glimpsed it. Like the sparkling red gem at the centre of a coarse boulder of volcanic rock, human love might be the point in all this chaos; of all this chaos: to achieve a love so intense, so beautiful and so selfless that the lover would willingly sacrifice the self for the beloved. Such a love had eluded me so far but in the depth of that night I thanked God, and toasted Him for the chance to achieve it.

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Finally I come to the event which I will never be able to bury in a dark corner of my mind, like Cally did one of his faithless wives, and which, I feel sure, is going to ruin my peace of mind for ever. I occasionally wish now, particularly when very low, that I had stayed in Kingston and seen that temporary misery out. People you can exclude from your headland, but not your thoughts, whatever Cally had said. Whatever I do, whatever I read, whatever music I listen to, whatever story I write, whatever constellation I stare at and whatever picture I paint of the ocean, it is never long before I find myself brooding over that puzzle, an impossible Sodoku, which I will never be allowed to discard in anger and never solve.

It is a dark, foul day in late 2006, the day before Christmas Eve. There is one chest in the library of Cally's books which I have not got round to unpacking. It has stood like an accusation in the far corner and I can finally ignore it no longer. I begin to unpack it. Almost at the very bottom I come across a book very different from the rest. It is square and thin and has a powder blue cover, roughly textured. I realise with a shiver of surprise that it is an album. A photo album. I carry it into the great room and lay it on the table. It is nearly five in the afternoon— a bit early to start – but I am excited, so I fetch in a glass and a bottle of vinho verde.

On the inside cover my first shock is to read what I think at first is a dedication, in the same scrawled, hurried hand, the same red ink, in which his final letter to me had been written.

“This, Steven, may well give you food for thought. I promised you secrets in exchange for Merve. Here they are, if you can find them. I hope you are well and not letting those brains go to waste, as mine are. Take good care.”

The first photo, in monochrome, shows a man in an armchair, with a child of about eight on his long lap, surrounded by friends and family. There are balloons and the child is wearing a paper crown. It has large, pointy, sticky-out ears, a long chin and is smiling appallingly. It is of course Cally, and the man in the chair in the crumpled old sports jacket with a pipe sticking out of the top pocket, a much larger replica, has to be his father. So here is secret number one. He had almost certainly not been the son of his wife’s lover. I study the many smiling faces, old and young, for another one of his secrets. I stop. To the left of the armchair there stands a younger boy of three or four who intrigues me. His face is the only one not smiling. He stands looking with defiance at the camera and is clutching jealously a piece of cake too large for his tiny hand. Everyone seems to be clad in drab, shapeless clothes and I estimate the year at 1953 or 54.

I carefully flick through more photos and watch Cally grow older in various settings, many at the seaside; in some grinning hideously, in others a little less displeasing to the eye. The father puts in an occasional appearance, often smoking that pipe, looking ever more bent and haggard, ever more like the Cally I had known. The old sports jacket finally disappears, smoked, no doubt, out of all decency. The photographs turn colourful. Cally’s orange hair and chin grow longer. With mounting reluctance and anxiety, having spotted no obvious secrets, I approach the final three pages. Now on the left-hand side appears a picture he must have been very proud of. He is wearing in a mortarboard and black gown, clutching a scroll in his left hand. And he looks, with his bushy beard and moustache and dark, intense eyes almost dashing; here is how then he had camouflaged his less appealing features! Next to him, in a wheelchair holding his long right hand sits a smiling but exhausted old man, reminding me of an image from Belsen. Of a mother there is no sign and I give Cally a mental tick for at least telling me one truth. The last-but-one snap I have clapped my hand over in order to save it and savour it in full, once I have studied properly the graduation picture. A quick glimpse at it had shown it to be a wedding photograph. Slowly I draw my palm across it and reveal the couple at the centre; him, tall and imposing in his top hat; her, smiling sweetly, lovely, blonde and gazing up at him in adoration. Ellen. He had told the truth. I look for the old man but he has gone. The mutton-chop side whiskers, the beards, droopy moustaches and long hair of the wedding party are telling me 1972. I calculate. Cally would be about twenty-six. She looks to be in her early twenties or even late teens. The age-gap might explain her infatuation and hero-worship. I study the other guests very carefully and suddenly freeze. There in the back row, features not very well defined, is a face with a shaggy mane and beard, all defiance and unlike everyone else, not smiling. I flick back to the first picture of the birthday party and keep comparing the two faces. Could they really be Jake Powner? And this is only one of the questions which I will never answer. It is – and will be – the final photo in the book to which I am eternally drawn. I finish looking at the wedding scene, and as soon as I turn over, I drop the album onto the table and knock over my bottle, spilling wine everywhere, but fortunately not on the photo.

Whenever I look at it I am struck first by how radiantly beautiful Ellen looks; she is not yet that sour, silent woman I had met thirty years later. And Cally looks so proud. But the beard has gone and his ugliness is revealed. She probably had not yet really become fully aware of it. No doubt she would wake one morning, look at the head on the pillow and realise what a monster she had married. And then I take my hand again away from the centre of the picture as I look at it for the very first time of many.

Cradled in his arms is a toddler, a blonde girl with a pageboy haircut, amazingly pretty, considering she possesses half of Cally's genes. (Or does she?) My Miranda. Yet how can she be Miranda? She would now be thirty-five or six.

I am uncorking another bottle when all at once I see Cally running first one way then the other, shouting "She's gone – She's gone – She's gone!" and those ill-fitting intervening years and three she-s snap into place. Now it all makes terrible arithmetical sense. I recall with horror what Prospero had said about an Englishman, a loving father come out looking in a hostile place for his missing daughter and discovering that he also has a missing granddaughter, aware that she had been taken, possibly knowing by whom, but forced to fly home without either, in utter despair, to an empty, deserted house.

And resolving to hate the world for it for ever.

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And that might have been the very end, had I not one last discovery to make. In his mellower moments Cally had occasionally become quite sentimental when the wine had dissolved his hard shell. I knew now, for example, that he must have dearly loved Merve like the granddaughter he had never had. And of course he dreamt of a reconciliation with his dear wife.

My find came about by total accident. I had become intrigued about what he had said about a book in German, an account of a mythical academic brotherhood, above the hurly-burly of a society which not only tolerated it, but, in return for a reliable supply of practical academics and administrators, supported it. When he had mentioned it soon after my arrival, I had dismissed it as far-fetched and as out-of-touch – snooty even – as snooty as he seemed to be. Now in my isolation and intellectual refinement it seemed far less outlandish. I remembered it involved a game with glass pearls. I surveyed each spine until I came across the title "Das Glasperlenspiel" by Hermann Hesse and knew that must be it. I took it down from its place on the shelf to see who had published it, in the hope I might contact someone who could point me in the right direction of a translation.

On the inside cover I read a dedication. I had had a couple of glasses of vinho verde and I had to sit down and cry. It was dated October 10th 1976 and read.

To my darling Richard on your 30th birthday

Ellen

x

As I thumbed through the incomprehensible book in frustration a fragment of paper fell out from the bottom of the dust jacket. Inside it there were very many others and they made a tantalising jigsaw puzzle that evening. As it all came together I sensed the fury which had caused him to tear the poems into pieces and I thought I understood the cause. What had restrained his hand from throwing them away I could only presume to be, what springs eternal in the human breast. Hope.

(I admit, Jack, that they did influence what I wrote a few pages earlier about love, in case you are wondering. But he was a kind of mentor, and I am sure he would not object to a little plagiarism.)  
Here they are.

## ON LOVE'S SUPREMACY

### THE VICTOR

In violence and rage do worlds begin  
In legions atoms battle for their space  
And wrestling in a volatile embrace  
In galaxies of gas do rivals spin  
In seething stars compulsively do blend  
And loathing pacts by gravity do make  
Colliding, false allegiances do break  
In jealous animosity contend;  
Then whence from such an evil springs the Good,  
The noble sacrifice, from self inclined,  
The holy motive of the higher mind,  
The brave communion of bread and blood?

We see great battlefields of stars above  
And in our eyes the triumph of God's love.

### THE METAMORPHOSIS OF LOVE (1)

My arms which cradle you so tenderly  
Were fashioned from the stuff in hardest stone.  
My eyes which say you mean the world to me  
Were taken from the seething sea on loan.  
Each cell wherein my ardent passion burns  
In steepest hell, the ancient earth, once span.  
My dreams of you, my thoughts and kind concerns  
Were lightning when that tempest first began.  
My blood, which pulses, when our limbs entwine,  
Ran once in torrents down a bleak ravine.  
Our urgent sighs, a breath of love divine,  
Was air to carry cries of beasts obscene.

From boulders broken, hurled from God's abyss.  
In us there shine the crystals of love's bliss

### THE METAMORPHOSIS OF LOVE (2)

These hands which clasp these others must decay,  
These lusty lips will have scant love to tell;  
Ah, dread the dawn of one, death's yawning day  
When one must bid the other, soft, farewell.  
What composes me, my utter being,

All dedicated to thy happiness,  
From substances uncaring and unseeing,  
To secret, silent places must regress,  
These atoms, which I lease, have journeyed far  
So long through time and space to fashion me,  
Unceasing on their way from star to star  
To utterly adore and worship thee.

And when the substance of all stars is spent  
Then who will say no love therein was meant?

Amen to that.

The chance discovery of these sonnets set me wondering if there were other writings, perhaps even a diary amongst his book collection. He had said, I remembered, that he was biding his time before putting pen to paper. A trawl through his books produced nothing and I went back to his villa to search cupboards and drawers. Again, I found nothing and the list of unanswerable questions grew.

I wondered on what basis Cally might have believed that the strange recluse on the headland had, for want of a better word, stolen his granddaughter. I could not be sure, of course, whether he had really been that Englishman who had flown out to find that forsaken girl. If so, had Cally become aware of the man he called Prospero, or of his dubious reputation, while searching for her? Had they once met? Which part of Greece had these events taken place in? There was no way of telling, I reflected gloomily, whether Prospero had invented the whole story. He might have come by the girl in a far less honourable way.

Perhaps Cally had only seen "Miranda" through his telescope and had been struck by her resemblance to his daughter. Maybe she had only been a whim. If not a whim, I speculated on whether he had told Ellen of his suspicions. Perhaps they had even begun to hatch a plan to "rescue" her. Had Leo's failed plot – and my foiling of it with the mirror - inadvertently scuppered theirs? What had he written in those two letters to Prospero which might have caused him to react so angrily at the mention of Cally's name? Had I missed something, forgotten something, misinterpreted something? Questions, questions, questions.

Questions whose answers are part of that vast unwritten history of the world.

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