

## THE POLISH GIRL

At last, hurrah, my favourite pub - or ex-pub - in Stratford was open again, having been taken over by one of those horrid chains - rebranded, extended at the back to sleep the tourists, refurbished, renamed and whitewashed. I strolled in along the canal, and thirsty and tired, entered The Old Swan Hotel, previously The Old Swan Tavern, in grim expectation of being appalled.

However, I was delighted. The ancient oak beams and the tapestries had been retained, enhanced even; the mediaeval mural of St Anthony's beatification had been restored and given pride of place; quotations from the Bard abounded in gold on black; the huge fireplace, fully opened up, was crackling with logs. The ambience was tastefully russet, producing a cosy gloom, which soft lighting, both natural and artificial, carefully directed, lifted just a little. Had a pipe-smoking Old Stratfordian in breeches and with a codpiece - maybe even the great man himself - sauntered in, he would not have looked or felt out of place.

I looked at the menu. The wordsmiths had devoured and regurgitated it.

*A trio of Belshingham pork and apple sausages in a pool of thick gravy made with Fortingbrass onions, locally sourced, accompanied by stuffy Mozart mash £11.99*

Alright. Maybe the few months which have elapsed since the beginning of this adventure have served to exaggerate that pretentious prose, but three sausages had definitely been elevated to a trio, and I sniggered at the image of them in bow ties and tuxes with cello and violins, inspired by the mention of that little Salzburg genius of the spuds. I hailed the foreign waitress - all rush and nervy smiles - and who probably, with a degree in Mechanical Engineering, was far better qualified than her superiors. The excellent Spitfire ale - second pint - was bringing out the naughty in me.

"Hello. Could you ask Chef if he'd do baked beans rather than the Fartingbrass gravy?"

"I'm sorry, Sir?"

"On the bangers."

"Bangers?"

"The sausages - with baked beans."

She was beautiful, even more so with an unselfconscious expression of bewilderment. What wonders baked beans could work! Her slightly open mouth revealed lovely white teeth. She had a peach of a face, with full cheeks; a kind, intelligent face, maybe slightly too long, but this fault - if fault it was - was softened by her unusually large grey eyes. Her name tag said Magdalena. She would have made a wonderful nun.

"Beans like the breakfast beans? Orange ones?"

"Spot on!"

"What spot? Sauce?"

I laughed. She smiled - what a generous smile! I explained "spot on" and her smile became laughter. Sheer radiance! Off she went to the kitchen, returning a few moments later with the good news regarding my gourmet preference.

A fellow of perhaps fifty-five sat adjacent to me. He clearly had a very good opinion of himself. Why not? He had a fine head of white hair and a good bronzed profile which he held up to be admired. The sleeves of a yellow jumper, tied around his neck were prettily arranged across his

chest in a show of nonchalance. Something, maybe his clothes or his tan, told me he was not English. He was perhaps not aware of it - even though it was clear that his pose was well rehearsed - but his expression had a hint of a scowl, scorn almost, as if someone had once farted under his beaky nose and he had never forgotten it. I sipped my ale, smiling to imagine that Fate had arranged for him to be there to create a contrast with the unconceited beauty of Magdalena. He appeared to have no interest in her - the most beguiling thing in the room - and was only bothered about the impression he might be making.

But the more glances I stole, the more I caught a hint of trouble in her eyes, finally guessing that the source of it lay behind the door to the kitchen. I began to feel very protective of her - and could have easily spoken out when a couple - determined to prove to the room they were American - pointedly ignored her when she brought out their food, as if she was some automaton.

When I had cleared my plate - not bad, not bad - I asked her if the staff got the tips. She hesitated a little too long before answering yes. She brought the credit card gismo over. The bill came to around twenty quid. I could make out a blonde woman at the back of the bar area casting glances our way. Magdalena had her back to her when I put a fiver into her trembling hand.

“It’s okay. She can’t see.”

She slipped it into her apron pocket and gave me a quick smile of gratitude. What a blessing! How lovely it felt to do just a little good.

She was out of the room when I strolled down to the Avon, past the Birthplace and along the main shopping street through a throng of underwhelmed schoolchildren who were looking for a shop where they could spend their pocket money - M&S and the Wool Shop did not quite do it.

Magdalena.....what a name. How it suited her. Does the name somehow influence the person the child becomes?

In the Ufizi in Florence I had once stood in front of Sandro Botticelli’s Birth Of Venus for a good hour, unable to tear myself away. Please do not think ill of me - I love to look at beautiful young women. It is not erotic. To be as old as I am - past sixty - means I can look without stirring the ugly head of suspicion, like a kindly grandfather. The generous gift of Beauty is, I assure you, reward enough.

By the river, such gifts were in short supply and I had to be content with the swans - scores of them - swimming aloof from the squabble of mallards and geese by the bank. When two or three of those graceful birds abandoned their dignity - so it seemed - to join in the scrum for bread, I felt rather sorry for them.

It was May 1<sup>st</sup> and, apart from a chill waft from the river now and then, there was a gentle warmth. Spring, well overdue, was bursting through in every bud and blossom spray, as if a firework display in slow motion. The swaying weeping willows opposite, by the boating club, lime green in the sun, were glorious.

The warmth, the long walk by the canal, the ale and the sausages, combined with my age, had made me drowsy, and the next I knew I was falling sideways against someone on the bench, checking myself at the last second. I babbled an apology and rubbed my eyes.

Was I still dreaming? The piano-playing sausage had turned into Magdalena! She apologized for waking me. She had a break between two thirty and five and needed fresh air.

“The smell of the food is not pleasant for me.”

I wondered whether to pry.

“Is that what was bothering you?”

Either she did not understand my Northern Irish drawl or preferred not to say. She told me she was from Gdansk, a graduate of German who wished to improve her English - which she had rather neglected - with the aim of getting a job in the Tyrol when the skiing season began.

“I also wish to earn money of course. My mother has been ill and might need an operation....and I have two younger sisters who...who.....”

Clenching her fist and whitening her sharp knuckles, she looked away towards the bridge and the wildfowl reserve beyond.

“I’m sorry. You must miss them.”

“I do. Please excuse me.”

The river breeze ruffled her golden hair and the light down on her arms. She had the kind of skin which would tan easily. Her bosom, held tight by a low-cut red top, heaved as she fought for control of her distress. She was exquisite. It appalled me then - more than usual - that there were people amongst us - ugly, unkind people, fatheads and lowbrows, devourers of the tabloids - who would have sent her and her kind packing without a qualm. But were not many pubs and shops in Stratford crying out for staff?

“How long will you be here? September?”

“Till October, I hope.....but the manageress, she bulls me.”

“Bullies you?”

“Yes.”

Recalling instantly the indistinct blonde woman in the gloom behind the bar who had been keeping her under surveillance, I filled out the image with premature bingo wings and a scowl, gave her a rising question intonation and awarded her an MA in Pushy Individualism, graduate of the Vanity School.

“She’s probably jealous of you.”

“Why so? Why jealous?”

Did she genuinely not know?? Someone more devious than I might have exploited this opportunity to apply flattery - even to make a clumsy, vile pass at her.

“The pushy world of commerce. Dog bark at dog, dog eat dog.”

“Dogs?”

She looked puzzled and then went back to her theme.

“She picks - you say holes? - in everything I do.”

“Well, threaten to leave! Lots of places would give.....someone as.....someone like you a job!”

But she had nowhere to live. The hotel provided a small room for her.

Me, I lived in Wilnecote, the village where Mary Arden’s house was situated. I would have offered her a room there and then - even the position of housekeeper but for the obvious danger of being misconstrued. *I am not that kind of girl - - I am not that kind of man.....* Horrible!

Oh to live in a world where we could be kind without arousing suspicions of ulterior motives.

Truth to tell, I did my monthly walk into town half in hope of meeting a soul mate. The town was a beacon was it not? What bright and breezy and unusual specimens of humanity might it attract? Someone with the same hopes and fancies as me? But not this girl.

“Is your father no longer.....?”

“He died in the docks. An accident. I was seven.”

“Oh dear.”

A butterfly, almost shocking after such a cold winter stretching into April, flew giddily past. It

was a Red Admiral and Magdalena gasped in delight to see it land on the lawn near her feet and slowly open and close its wings, as if signalling. I chose my next few words very carefully

“Is there no-one here to...protect you...a friend you can rely on...a boyfriend?”

“There is Adrian in the hotel bar but I see too well why he is friendly. Also he is friendly with Deborah, the manageress.”

“So as far as Adrian is concerned, you’re not.....”

“Not interested.”

“You have a friend in Gdansk?”

She looked afraid for the first time and failed to reply. My mistake. She got to her feet and pressed her lips together in disappointment.

“I came to speak to you because you were very kind to me,” she said, as if further disillusioned.

“No, please! I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Pry?”

“A horrible verb. To try to find out private things for bad reasons. I was only concerned for you.”

The butterfly flew away and I felt terrible.

“You seem so vulnerable.”

“Vulner -? Oh my English.”

“Open to danger...Easy to hurt. Please do not misunderstand me. I’m sixty. You could be my granddaughter, Magdalena.”

“How...how do you know my name?”

“Your name tag. On your apron.....”

“Oh!”

“Listen, I might be able to help you. This is my mobile number.”

She hesitated but then took out her phone and added it to her list of contacts.

“What is your name?”

“Harvey.....no, with an E-Y”

She relaxed a little. She said it had cheered her up to meet a nice person and I assured her - (though I had for a long time not been convinced) - that most English people were nice too. She raised an eyebrow.

“No, Magdalena. Only a few stupid people are hostile.....horrible to foreigners. They read nasty newspapers...like that one the man over there is reading - the Express - and it makes them even more stupid and narrow-minded.”

She looked at me, working out, I think, what I meant before finally deciding to trust me. She sent me a text and my phone beeped. I had her number. Leaning across, she gave me a kiss on the cheek and sprang to her feet. I watched her dwindle away and mingle with the crowds, passing a man in a yellow pullover, maybe the conceited man from the pub.

If I expected the impact of Magdalena to fade, I was wrong. I walked back along the canal entertaining the thought of offering her the chance to keep house for me, my rambling lonely old house, the museum of my happiest memories, which I could not bear to sell. Those memories, in those rooms, belonged to Cicely too and to take leave of them, to abandon them to new people would be an act of betrayal. I was torn between a desire for the new and the attachment of the old.

I paused at the lock keeper’s cottage where the bird feeder in the garden took me back to our very first meeting.

“It’s better than watching TV,” I had said to the lady who had sat down next to me to watch the

finches and sparrows taking the seeds from the bird table.

“Incomparably better,” she had replied.

This was at Titchwell Marsh in Norfolk. Later, as I sat in a bird hide, savouring that delicious snippet of life, she, Cicely, had asked to borrow my binoculars.

“They’re saying there’s a water rail’s nest on the left....”

She was a rarer bird. We called the house Titchwell and sixteen years of bliss were to follow - quite unexpected in middle age, for me, a bitter divorcee. But now they were over. Strokes can be very cruel, particularly when they leave no time for farewells or instructions about what to do with a life afterwards.

I returned to the present and saw a robin bullying the peaceable finches.

“What should I do, Ciss?” I whispered. “The poor girl. Send me a sign. I could do her some good. Should I interfere?”

A gaudy chaffinch sang out his cheerful greeting from a nearby tree. Soon the swallows and chiff-chaffs would be returning. None of our resident birds much minded a migrant. They did not read the Daily Express.

The setting sun, discovering me in my armchair, dwindled to a diamond in my wine glass. The spaces where the sun did not shine were depressingly empty. My life was empty. Cicely looked down on me kindly from our photograph, with more, I sensed, than a hint of pity. I recalled an old conversation after a particularly harrowing child murder had been in the news.

*“You can’t put the world to rights, Harvey. Give it to God.”*

*“But God doesn’t care.”*

*“Oh yes he does. But in ways we can’t understand. Just try to do a little good in **your** small corner. Give it to God!”*

“Sunday school....You in your small corner, and I in mine,” I sang tipsily, remembering how she had gripped my arm and prayed for me. She was surprisingly strong for one so slight and something like energy had passed between us. I had kept going to church with her, even though I was rarely moved. It did me good to be amongst kind people, to hear the spiritual voice above the cacophony of materialism and consumerism. I loathed the pressure we were all under. I thought of poor Magdalena rushing from table to table with barely an acknowledgement of her humanity, chivvied by the woman she had mentioned. Kindness seemed as scarce as dapples of sunlight in a dark wood. I looked again at my inbox. Empty. I finished the bottle and went to bed.

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A cool, cloudy day followed. From an upstairs window I surveyed the uneventful fields where change and motion seemed suppressed by the low cloud. The bird feeder at the end of my garden hung down miserably unvisited. Poor old Howard was out next door, in green plastic mack and hat, inspecting his plants. Patricia, his wife, was amazingly tolerant and patient. He had a condition linked to dementia and compulsive behaviour which manifested itself particularly in an obsession with purple sprouting broccoli. In his sixties it had gradually taken over his garden and life, causing him to spend his days sowing it, planting it out, inspecting it and harvesting it. Ironically, he didn’t like it much and his regular gift of it to neighbours was a kindness which all tolerated.

The paperback I had impulsively bought in Stratford - two for a fiver - went into another futile

digression, and in a fit of pique I threw the obese thing across the room. What was wrong with pacy, direct tales which had no care regarding word-count? Size mattered for publishers - the book had to last about two weeks on a sunbed. The *Tempest* would not have stood a chance today.

The next day, that new phenomenon, the jet stream, had drifted north again, and the balmy weather returned. Can you guess what I decided to do?

“Excuse me asking, but is Magdalena not working today?”

The blonde with the wobbly arms paused from pulling my pint and looked at me in surprise. Her smile was forced and chilly.

“You know her?”

“Goodness, no. She was on duty Wednesday. She was wearing a name-tag - like you are....*Deborah.*”

She managed a laugh but remained very much on guard. I heard her thinking *dirty old bugger*. And who could blame her?

“Is she on later?”

“If you’re eating, Sir, I could start a bar tab for y-o-u-u?”

A gangly youth eventually brought me my steak and porter pie with *thrice cooked* chips, arranged in a lattice pile, all twelve of them, considerately ensuring I would have room for pudding - all at £4-50.

The waiter’s tag said Adrian. I told him - as casually as I could - that Magdalena had mentioned him to me as a friend. This produced a reaction not far short of horror and he hurried away to consult Blondie. Had my Polish girl been sacked? I stared at her boss with contempt. She stared back at me. Jealous, vicious bitch.....

I was clearly not going to get any information regarding Magdalena. I paid my bill and left without a word to saunter around the town for a while. Stratford in May, when the blossom and the wysteria our out, and the tourist count is relatively low is normally a delight. I called into the theatre coffee bar on the off chance that one or two of my old colleagues might there, but it was pretty empty. Time was getting on so I headed back to the river where the spur of the canal began, feeling a little low and not particularly enamoured of my fellows. I stopped to watch a narrow boat descending into a lock and laughed to see the owner’s large cat tied to a door post. “He’s a bit of a dare-devil then!” I shouted down to the Bohemian in a headscarf.

“Had to jump in twice to rescue the nutcase,” he shouted back.

There was a squad car outside Howard’s house. Had he wandered off again? Poor Pat would be at her wits’ end. The other week I had come across him lost in a field with a bag of broccoli. I had escorted him home. Never doubting that Pat had heard the same advice from family and friends, I nonetheless gave it to her.

“Don’t you think it’s time, you know...”

“No, I won’t,” she had answered politely and firmly, after he had toddled off to the bathroom.

“He’ll never go into care while I have breath and strength enough.”

I had looked at their wedding photo and compared that jovial, strapping petty officer in his cap and uniform with the grey, stooping shadow he had become. Patricia was beautiful in her Wren’s uniform. Now in her seventies, though still robust, her face was careworn and she fought back her tears. My eyes began to water too and I promised her I would help if ever the need arose.

“Thank you. Here,” she said, picking up a bag and smiling. “Have some broccoli.”

Returning to the present time, I decided I would start my casserole and then pop round to see if I could help. My front door key was barely in the lock when a voice behind me spoke my name. I turned to find two officers of the law on my path.

They refused my offer of a cuppa and made themselves - deviously - comfortable. It was a routine enquiry, said the burly one; they needed to *tick my box*, said the other. They were a well-practised double act, a Little and Large in uniform, though not quite as humourous. There was a moment's silence while they studied their notebooks.

"In what capacity did you know Magdalena Sawicki?" muttered the burly one out of the blue, making me gasp.

"How on earth did you trace me to here?"

"Your credit card, Mr Craig. Deborah Stenson at the Swan got in contact. You made her suspicious. We didn't need Sherlock Holmes...."

"...Not this time."

"Miss Sawicki has gone missing."

"Perhaps you know."

"You didn't answer the question."

"I ate at The Swan on Wednesday. And she came and sat on my park bench later."

"Why?"

"I was kind to her. I gave her a tip."

"How much?"

"A fiver."

"A fiver??"

"A big tip!"

"I felt sorry for her."

"Would you have given her a tip if she'd been fat and ugly?"

"I - er - don't...."

"Why sorry for her?"

"She looked unhappy. Homesick. And that Deborah woman is mean to her. She sacked her, I think. These girls come over here to work hard and make money - whatever the Daily Express might say. What has this to do with me??"

"She's a pretty girl. You fancied her?"

"No! Whatever do you suspect me of? Sexual harassment?"

"We never mentioned sex. Did we mention sex, Paul?"

"No, Brian.....But fact is, she *has* gone missing....."

"Left her room very untidy....."

"Looked like Tracey Emin's bed....."

"The only thing missing ...besides her...is her mobile phone...."

"Can you say what you were doing after eleven last night?"

"I was here, thinking about bed - going to sleep. I live alone. My wife died last year."

"So, no-one can vouch for you."

"You hadn't arranged to meet Ms Sawicki after work?"

"She wouldn't be the first to try and earn a little extra on the side..."

"Czech girl disappeared in Warwick in similar circs last month....On the game..."

"We know because a client - a curate, would you believe - came forward to eliminate himself.....met her after hours, he did."

I stood up and told them to stop it.

“This is crazy! She was homesick. That foul blonde was bullying her. She probably just went home to Gdansk.”

“Without clothes?”

“Without a passport?”

“We think not.”

“Where were you on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> March, after nine p.m.?”

“When were you last in Warwick?”

“Last year? The year before? I don’t know - don’t care for the place much. I’d like you to leave now - if I had anything to do with her disappearance, why would I go in today and ask about her?”

The thinner one shrugged. The other looked at him then at me.

“Muddying the waters? Guilt? Split personality? Ingenious alibi? You just implied as much - *why would I, Your Honour, if, if, if....*”

“You picked her up, as arranged, brought her back here, you couldn’t perform, she took the piss, you lashed out....”

“Dropped her in the canal....like the other one...Angelika..”

“You felt terrible...you’re not a bad person....”

“Intelligent...cultured...retired admistrator at the Playhouse....”

“Lonely, deprived widower...”

“A moment of weakness...”

“*Two* moments!” I retorted, losing my cool.

Now the hounds, scenting blood, leant forward. One more onslaught and the confession would surely be made. All at once, I remembered her sending me a text.

“She gave me....”

I stopped myself in time.

“Gave you what?”

“Gave me...to understand that she was very unhappy here. A boy was pestering her.”

I felt immediately guilty but it was a material fact, even if I was personally convinced that gawky Adrian would not hurt a fly.

“I think she said his name was Adrian.”

The burly one scribbled down the name and stabbed the page with his pencil point. They wanted to know how long I had spoken to her on the bench. I told them ten minutes. The burly one looked around the large shadowy room. The clock clucked slowly as if in disapproval.

“A big, empty house, Sir. It must get very lonely on your own.”

“Yes, it does.” I looked at Cicely’s picture. “But not so lonely that I would violate a beautiful youngster, my granddaughter’s age - if I had one. Now you have a choice to make. Either leave - or arrest me.”

They thought this over and then stood up. I showed them to the door. The burly one smiled and apologized for the grilling.

“We had to tick your box, Sir. Police routine.”

“So, am I eliminated?”

“Oh no. You’re a big spot on our radar.”

“See it from our point of view.”

“Nothing personal.”

“So am I your main suspect??”

They put on their caps and went outside.

“Nice garden.....If she fails to turn up - or worse, CID will handle you.”

“We’ve done our bit.”

I was handed a card with a number on and told to phone in any information I might have forgotten.

“Or buried,” added the thin one, with a meaningful look.

As soon as they had driven off, I began to curse myself. How stupid not to give up the mobile number. What would they think when they found out later -as they surely would from phone records - that she had texted me?

Eventually I dialled her number but a foreign recorded voice told me - I assumed - that she was unavailable. I sent her a text asking her to contact me. The feeling grew that something terrible had happened to her, even that she might have harmed herself - though her family obligations and ties made that unlikely. I experienced that dreadful sinking feeling as if hope was drowning. That poor girl. Was there a serial killer around?

Unable to sleep, I got up and mashed tea. I kept checking my inbox and made certain that the message had gone. If the phone was in the possession of her abductor, might it do some good to send a threatening message, and mention the police? No.

The message tone woke me as I lay on the sofa. It was 4:48. She had written - *What do you want?* Instantly I replied *Hotel blonde said you had left. Are you ok?* Five minutes later - and the delay should have made me suspicious - back came *Am fine. Met someone. Am in caravan by river. Not to worry.*

Relief! And then something else - it was jealousy. How awful. I climbed up to bed and slept till mid-morning.

When I checked my phone there was another message - a much longer one. *I was stupid to leave in hurry - will lose job. D hates me. You said you might help.*

Unable to resist, I replied - *Please be my housekeeper. £600 per month. Genuine!*

After an excruciating delay, back came - *I will!* I phoned to speak to her but the call was cut off. I dialled again. That officious Polish voice replied and I cursed.

It was nearly four hours later that the fateful message arrived - *Pick me up from Avonside Caravan Park.*

She was standing at the entrance shivering, in a leather miniskirt, arms folded across her chest and looking up and down the road. She embraced me warmly and got in. I decided it would be unfair to interrogate her - if she had something to tell me, she could do so in her own time. Her private life was no business of mine. We drove to the hotel and while she gathered up her things from her room, I asked the astonished receptionist, another foreigner, for a pen and paper. I handed in this note before we left:

*Dear Deborah Stenson,*

*Please let the police know that Magdalena has agreed to work for me, Harvey Craig. You drove out a lovely young woman from your employ by bullying her - and incidentally lost a life-long customer, me, into the bargain. I will tell all my friends what a spiteful person you are,*

*H.C.*

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“I will cook you family speciality - garlic meatballs in beautiful spicy paprika sauce with rice!” she declared as we drove away. We stopped at a supermarket and bought the ingredients. The gloomy house seemed to welcome her immediately as she threw back the curtains and let in the late afternoon sun, illuminating Cicely’s photograph.

“Oh. Is she your wife?”

“Was. Died last year. A stroke.”

I explained the word and she sympathised. In Polish it sounded terrible. A phone call from the police interrupted our conversation as we were working together in the kitchen. I confirmed that Magdalena had turned up safe and well and was now in my employ.

“My housekeeper!”

“Mmm - could I have a quick word?”

I handed her the phone, miming *police* - and her self-assurance - which, I admit, had seemed rather odd, in view of her subdued and rather shy behaviour in the park - evaporated! She stuttered and blushed and kept saying - *yes, yes, yes* - before handing me the phone back - or rather dropping it into my hand like a hot rock.

“Policeman wishes to say something,” she said, turning quickly away to the stove.

“Well, Mr Craig.....that seems to wrap matters up....I’m sure she’ll do a *very* fine job for you...”

Sarcastic bastard. Magdalena was silent. I explained briefly about their visit the day before, leaving out their allegations and the tale about the Czech girl. She turned to say something - and then dropped a dish on the floor, shattering it.

“You are a very nice person,” she stammered. “I am very sorry.”

“Not to worry! It’s only an old dish.”

I realised then that she was not looking at me, but past me, into the lounge. I turned. On my sofa were sitting two men, one very muscular and the other small and bronzed - wearing a yellow pullover.

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“I swear to you - I have only one account I can access. The rest of my money is tied up in bonds - you understand? - to earn enough interest to live.”

The yellow man stood over my left shoulder peering at my laptop, at the banking screen I had brought up. He looked at the big man who sat opposite, helping himself to my whiskey, and translated what I had said. The news did not impress him and he muttered something sinister.

“My friend says you lie.” the yellow man explained. I knew then that I was doomed. I looked at his bank code and account number he had scribbled down on a piece of paper. Pointing at my bond letters and the maturity dates, and then back at the £43 246 I had available on the screen, I told him that he could have everything accessible.

“You do it - now.” he snarled.

“The bank only allows a maximum transfer of twenty-five thousand per day to outside accounts - for security reasons. The rest will have to wait till tomorrow.”

“Then we wait here till after midnight. Do twenty-five now. The rest later...”

Then bye-bye Harvey, and probably Magdalena too, she having served her purpose.

With a heavy heart, I entered all the details, my password and pressed the SUBMIT button.

Seconds later, my mobile phone beeped. He grabbed it and demanded to know what was happening.

“The bank sends a code. I have to enter it in that box for the transfer to be approved.”

“Then do it.”

Slowly, ensuring I made no mistakes - as was usually the case with my clumsy fingers - I put the code in - and saw the money go. £18 246 remained. His leathery face creased in a grin and he patted me affectionately on the back.

“Now you tell me password.”

To do so would guarantee an even earlier demise.

“I will not tell you.”

“Then I kill the girl.”

“Your Trojan Horse? I doubt it. I will enter the password after midnight - as long as you promise not to harm her. I don’t matter. I’m dying of a disease.”

He stared then smiled. The gamble seemed to work. It was 20:58. I had until 00:01 to outwit them.

The big man brought Magdalena into the lounge and remained with us, still drinking, while the other sauntered off with my laptop into the kitchen. She had been crying.

“Well, young lady, quite a disappointment you turn out to be.”

“No, you don’t understand. I argued with Debbie and went out to the river after the pub closed. They grabbed me and put me into car.”

She had found herself in a large caravan with two other girls who were drugged. A woman was in charge.

“A foul Romanian - like these filthy pigs. I would have to work for them. You can guess what kind of work. They took my phone off me - and then later it rang. It was a message from you. I had to tell them about you. Then the little man said he had a better idea. He threatened to kill one of the girls if I did not agree to do as I was told.”

“So they used you as bait to catch me.”

“I am sorry. He said I only had to wait for your car and go with you.”

“You could have told me!”

“I did not know they would follow! I was just glad to be free.”

“I could have phoned the police.”

“He warned me to say nothing at all. To be your housekeeper. I was frightened. I am sorry.”

She began to weep and the Romanian laughed. He had a very pleasant face - a clever disguise. I lied to reassure her. “When they have all my money, they will go.”

“No. They will kill you. They will take me back. To be their dirty girl. I would rather be dead.”

We fell into a dismal silence as the clock clucked on and on. The big man had only an inch or two left of whiskey in the bottle but he showed no sign of being drunk or sleepy. He was our only chance. There was a storage jar not far from my hand. Could I hit him square on the head with it and knock him out?

All at once there came a frenzied knocking from the front door. The little man reappeared in the hall- (it turned out he had been surfing internet porn).

“You go answer it,” he snarled. “But remember, I am right behind you. Tell them to go way.”

He produced a knife and pushed me to the door.

“Who is it?” I shouted.

“Harvey? It’s Patricia. Have you seen Howard? He’s disappeared. I left the front door unlocked...”

Feeling the point of the blade between my shoulder blades, I thought quickly and came up with an ingenious load of rubbish.

“He’s not been here....he might still be.....at the golf club.”

“Eh? What golf club? He hates golf. Are you losing *your* marbles??”

I was pushed aside. The man opened the door and yanked her in. She fell onto the hall floor.

“You play games!” he shouted. “Now she will die too, you bad man!”

I groaned. Could it get any worse? Pat raised herself onto her elbows and looked pure evil. She had dealt with Howard’s illness with remarkable patience. Now three years of pent-up frustration was released as she raised a foot and kicked her assailant expertly in the balls. This acted as a release catch on the knife and it went spinning as he howled and collapsed in agony. Pat was strong and heavy. She sat across him and punched him twice, left and right.

Out of the kitchen staggered his accomplice with brave Magdalena taking a piggy-back ride, swiping him with the empty bottle. He laughed, feeling no pain, and then tripped and fell. I rescued her as he tried, cursing, to get to his feet. On a half-moon table there stood a vase which we had once taken to the Antiques Roadshow. It was only worth three figures. Disappointing. I glanced up at Cicely and she smiled back in approval. Ah well. I picked it up and brought it down with a resounding crash on his skull.

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Howard turned up in a ditch still clutching a bag of broccoli. The girls in the mobile brothel were soon liberated. Perhaps all three Romanians would escape deportation after they had served their sentences. Maybe a liberal-leaning judge would believe their promise to go straight and set up a refuge for fallen women. The Express would then stoke itself up into a blue-hot fury over the European Court of Human Rights - but would doubtless announce, the following day, a miracle cure for incontinence.

A remorseful Magdalena offered to work for me for nothing. After I had told my bank to stop the payment - would you believe they were awkward about it? - yes, you would, O fellow victims of those useless, corrupt bastards - after my money was restored unto me, I gave her two thousand pounds to stay on until the end of September.

She wept and clung onto me at the airport.

“My mother would like to meet you,” she blubbed. “She is much, much better now.”

She showed me a picture on her mobile phone. She looked like her elder sister and I was smitten.

Cicely instantly said in my head that I should pay a visit.

“You know, Magdalena, I have a confession to make before you check in.”

“What?”

“I came into town that day looking for a soulmate. Understand?”

“Soulmate? Oh my English! You have no soul??”

“No.....Yes! I mean I was looking for a stranger to share my dreams.”

“And?”

“Well, I found you.”

“Oh...”

“No. I love you like a daughter. And I would like to come to Gdansk and meet your...family.”

So that’s what I’ve done. And I’m planning to stay for a while. A foreigner. A migrant - as we all

are. But nobody cares. The Daily Express has a circulation of nil here.