

**ONE LOST SUMMER.**

**Richard Godwin.**

Everything I knew ended then as she put the Dunhill to her lips. I can still see her slender fingers holding the cigarette just before the sniper blew away her hand.

Her burning Diva Zippo fell to the ground. Then came the second shot, and I watched my reflection die in the fading light of her eyes. One lost summer that slow motion moment replayed itself forever in my mind. A key was turning in a lock. Over and over again.

**NEW BEGINNINGS.**

1.

I was sipping a highball as I watched the removal men load the Pickfords lorry with the last of my boxes. Leaning against the doorway I followed their movements in the haze outside. The driver waved at me.

I raised my glass as they turned at the end of the road. I lingered on the threshold of my immaculate Richmond home. Then I passed along the empty corridors, and stood in the vacant rooms.

I left my glass in the kitchen sink and removed my wallet from my pocket. I stared at the name on my credit card. Then I walked out into the burning street.

London was hitting the high 80's the day I moved, and that summer the temperature kept climbing. Pavements buckled, tarmac split. We were being given a glimpse through the cracks. I saw people break apart, tempers flare. It was like living beneath a magnifying glass. The city is never prepared for that kind of heat.

From what I recall, statistically, there were more assaults than previously recorded. But statistics do not concern me, nor do these incidental events. They were lost to me then. And while I may be interested in records, it is a different kind of memory I sought in those blazing months, when someone set a match to what I knew and who I was. I was left with only blindness and yearning.

I drove out of Richmond, away from the past. I stopped only once on the way to the new house, at a small pub where I drank a Glenfiddich. The men were getting out of the lorry as I pulled my Mercedes onto the neat gravel drive.

I'd arrived at my new life in Shepperton.

#

After they left I unpacked the box marked "Important Stuff." I removed my supply of whisky and wine, placing the 12 bottles of 1978 Montrachet in the fridge. The house was perfect, from the quartz worktops, to the oak floors. It was all new, and some distant, suffocated part of my being began to breathe. I admired the suede wallpaper in the living room, looked out at the tree-lined avenue, and passed through the French doors to the landscaped garden, and down the springy grass to the fountain at its end.

The water played out of Hermes' mouth like a liquid reel of film. Its noise troubled me, and the landscape turned to sepia for an instant, as all the colour went out of the world. I turned away and went inside to inhale the odour of newness again. I was high on the *tabula rasa* feel.

I scaled the stairs to the master bedroom. There was no history there. I entered the en suite bathroom, and found myself illuminated before the mirror, as the sensor lights came on.

I considered my even, expressionless face, the full head of silver streaked hair, and my watchful blue eyes hiding beneath the steel rimmed glasses. I stood back and looked at my physique, slim, toned, for someone approaching fifty. I had the appearance of a man who played tennis. I wondered what green courts I passed my hours in, and with whom. I seemed an empty proposition, plundered and lost. And I thought about tomorrow, feeling the sweat crawl down my back like a hungry spider. I saw a shape move on the tiles as I left my reflection there and found myself in the hallway. It seemed to lead nowhere and so I went downstairs, away from the shadow in the bathroom.

The estate agents had left a welcome basket in the kitchen, and a cheap bottle of champagne in the fridge. I opened it, since the Montrachet was not cold enough, and I thought how quickly the bubbles burst in the neck of the bottle and of the fragile nature of time. I tried to recall the feeling of hunger as I nibbled on a pear and some cheese, a basic cheddar from a supermarket, sweating in its plastic wrapper.

By now it was growing dark and the windows were full of the trees' shadows. They seemed unknowable, beyond my reach, and so I drew the curtains. A car was passing by with its windows down. I could hear the insistent opening notes of Fleetwood Mac's "The Chain", and Stevie Nicks singing "Damn your love, damn your lies."

The Zippo was falling again, its flame scorching me. I stood in the hollow room, my breathing laboured and exaggerated, as a nerve twitched in my right arm. Then I remembered the whisky I'd packed in my case.

Nestled beneath my clothes was the 64 year old Macallan. I caressed the lost-wax casting and opened it, inhaling its violent oxygen.

2.

It was 90 degrees the next day. I showered and dressed, then left the house.

I was opening the door to my car when I heard my name called.

“Mr Allen?”

I turned and froze.

She was standing on the edge of my drive in a floral print skirt and matching blouse, and she raised her sunglasses and looked at me with the purest translucent green eyes I’d ever seen. She seemed to have walked straight off a film set, and I looked around for the crew, seeing only the empty avenue.

“I believe you’ve just bought The Telescope,” she said. “I’m your neighbour.”

I walked over to her and extended a hand.

“I just got here last night, slept like a log, and still half asleep, forgive my slowness.”

“Welcome to Broadlands Avenue. I thought I’d introduce myself, Mr Allen, and ask your indulgence.”

“Please, call me Rex.”

She lowered her voice to almost a whisper.

“Rex, we’re having a party tonight, it won’t be noisy, but we don’t want to disturb you. I’m sure you’re busy unpacking, but I thought it would be a nice opportunity for you to meet the neighbours.”

“What time?”

“Drinks around six?”

“Can I bring anything?”

“Just yourself.”

She looked over my shoulder.

“It’s a fantastic house, I’ve seen the work they did on it, although...”

“Something I don’t know?”

“It’s the only one round here with no swimming pool. I’d feel a bit cheated.”

“I don’t particularly like them.”

“How odd.”

“And the garden is fantastic.”

“That’s true.”

“I wonder how it got its name.”

“One of the previous owners was obsessed by astronomy, he had telescopes everywhere.”

“That must have been a bit discomfoting.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it depends if you’ve got something to hide. I like the SLK,” she said, patting my Mercedes, “good body. See you about six then, and if you want to, bring your swimming trunks.”



She was walking away when I said, “I didn’t catch your name.”

“How stupid of me, it’s Evangeline. Evangeline Glass.”

#

I did some grocery shopping, and spent the day unpacking boxes, stopping to eat a lunch of smoked salmon and to imbibe a bottle of the Montrachet. It was almost five when I stepped into the shower.

The house next door was secluded behind Beech hedges. I stood on the pavement and looked around. It was a long and silent avenue, punctuated only by the noise coming from the party. I heard female laughter as I rang the bell.

Evangeline answered the door and led me through to the kitchen. She was wearing a light blue sarong, wrapped tightly around her body.

“I brought you a couple of bottles,” I said.

“Krug, how generous Rex. I think I’m going to like you.”

She kissed me on the cheek and I watched her bend and place them in the fridge. I estimated she was in her early thirties, but her body was younger, full, and toned. I could smell melon rising from her tanned skin.

“Come and meet the neighbours,” she said.

I put on my sunglasses and stepped outside into the glare.

By the pool a fat man in a beige jacket was talking loudly to a smaller guy in white shorts and a Miami shirt. Two women in bikinis were lying on loungers set against the back

wall, while a swarthy man in a pair of faded jeans stood putting sausages on the barbecue with a pair of tongs. He was wearing an apron that looked covered in blood.

“Rex, meet my husband, Harry,” Evangeline said.

He came over and shook my hand.

“You’re the new neighbour.”

“I am.”

“Excuse the blood stained butcher’s apron, one of my wife’s jokes. I buy her expensive dresses and she buys me this.”

“I think it suits him,” Evangeline said, handing me a glass of champagne.

I heard a splash as someone got into the pool. Its water was an intense blue, and I looked away from it into Evangeline’s emerald eyes. There was mischief and knowledge in her face. I watched the sun on her dark hair, that day of the first of her many summer parties.

“How you settling in?” Harry said, picking up his tongs.

“Not bad. Unpacking’s always a chore.”

“I hear you’re living there alone.”

“Just a quiet neighbour,” I said.

“No kids?”

I shook my head.

He was looking over my shoulder and I followed his line of vision as it tracked Evangeline around the pool. She was laughing with the man in the shorts and at one point she put her hand on his chest, to avoid spilling her drink.

“Something’s funny,” I said.

“Looks like it.”

Harry went to put more steaks on the barbecue and I found myself shaking hands with the fat man.

“Kevin,” he said, pumping my hand, “Kevin Fancy.”

“Rex.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you at one of the Glass parties before. They’re quite a hoot, especially when the women get drunk and plunge in.”

He sniggered like a school boy.

“I just moved in next door.”

“Oh, you’re the new neighbour. I don’t live in Broadlands Avenue, but I’m a Shepperton boy, have been for years. This is my wife, Brenda.”

As we were talking, I’d seen one of the lounging women get up, slip into a skirt, and walk over with a glass in her hand. She was in her late thirties, dark skinned, and looked like she’d peroxidized her hair until most of the nutrients had been stripped out of it. But she was attractive in a brash way. She had full lips and dissatisfaction written into the lines on her face. Her hand was cool and she left it in mine just a little longer than was necessary.

“Rex,” I said.

“Oh, *that* Rex, Evangeline mentioned you. You bought the end house.”

“Clever chap,” Kevin said, “it means he only has one neighbour. And, with one as charming as Evangeline, who needs more? Another G & T, Brenda?”

She nodded and he wandered off.

“How do you like The Telescope?” she said.

“It’s perfect for what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“Privacy.”

“Are you a bachelor?”

“You could say that.”

Her eyes wandered to Evangeline, who was talking to Kevin. As Brenda stood there in a purple bikini top, polka dots dancing across her large breasts, she seemed to be weighing her hostess up. I felt the crackle of hostility hover in the air around azure blue, ever cool, Evangeline.

The party began to fill out. Couples arrived every few minutes until there was almost no room to manoeuvre the edge of the pool. Harry watched his wife with possessive scrutiny.

The balding guy in the shorts talked to me about property and how he was about to pull off a major deal.

“Retirement cash,” he said, in a whisper.

“Is it a secret?”

“It is from my wife, if she finds out she’ll go on another shopping spree.”

He punched me on the shoulder and let out a laugh that sounded like a pistol shot.

“Did I hear my name mentioned?” the other lounging woman said.

She’d fallen asleep by the pool and now stood there looking hazy eyed.

“This is the Glass’s new neighbour,” he said.

“Oh, Brad, you simply are dreadful with names.”

He put his hand to his mouth.

“Rex,” I said.

His wife shook my hand.

“Alberta.”

She was pink-faced from the sun and her fair eyelashes made her small eyes look empty of expression.

“These parties have something of a reputation,” Brad said.

Alberta put her hand on my arm.

“Oh yes, all sorts of naughty things happen, haven’t you heard about the Shepperton orgies?”

I mustered a laugh as Evangeline joined us.

“Are you gossiping about me?” she said.

Alberta attempted a sly smile that made her look feckless. It didn't suit her flat face.

"Of course," she said.

Evangeline took me by the arm.

"Now, Rex, I want you to meet everyone, I can't have the Smythes hogging you."

I spoke to most of them, the tired wives and loud husbands, and thought about my new house, empty of the pretensions that were beginning to grate on me. They were not Evangeline's, but those of her strange collection of guests, all uncomfortable, all trying just a little too hard. But then everyone looked awkward in Evangeline's presence.

I found Harry annoying and aggressive, and wondered briefly what I was doing there that Saturday as the sky held the promise of a hotter day. And I saw the answer as she stood by the pool and removed her sarong. It was a simple, sensual gesture that almost stopped my heart. She arched her wrist and pulled on the tie, letting the azure silk slide down her legs. She stepped into the water in an indigo bikini. She was perfectly toned, with a model's figure, and I was aware of Harry standing next to me watching as she swam while night fell and the sky filled with stars.

Evangeline was an exotic misfit among the mundane. Brenda joined her, and a few of the other wives splashed about. They looked ungainly and awkward, like women learning to swim in middle age, while Evangeline moved as if she was in her own element and water was made for her. As she climbed the steps and dried herself with a towel, there was a moment when she caught my eye with a knowingness that chilled me. I sensed conspiracy amid the drunken chatter.

I was watching her when Harry slapped me on the back.

“I made my money from scrap metal,” he said, “worked my way up, now I own half of London. You could say I’m a diamond in the rough, not good enough for a lot of the people around here. What do I care? Look at what I’ve got. A gem, isn’t she? Imagine how good looking our kids would be if we had them, but Evangeline doesn’t want to mess up her figure. Who can blame her?”

We looked at her in mutual admiration, and I was aware of the warning as he squeezed my shoulder.

“Coming for a swim?” he said, removing his apron.

His chest was covered in a large tattoo of a snake and his right arm sported the letter E.

“No thanks.”

He paused on the pool steps, unbuckling his belt and throwing his jeans onto a chair.

“What is it you do, Rex?”

“I’m retired.”

He began to swim, his head floating in the spotlight, a black helmet of menace covering his submerged body.

I was putting my glass down on a poolside table when Brenda came up to me and said, “You mustn’t take any notice of Harry, he’s jealous, that’s all.”

“No need to be where I’m concerned.”

“Still, I can’t blame him. Evangeline’s a friend, but sometimes...”

I waited for her to finish.

“Sometimes?” I said.

“She pushes things too far.”



