

Byblos

i.

'BEAUTY' (I THOUGHT): 'beauty-beauty-beauty; there's nothing else to say. A million varicoloured points tumbling without forethought into one design. As if a gas-main exploding under a kitchen produced – from the racket of copper pans bashing their way through brick walls – order. Calm, symphonic harmony. Every random semiquaver settling into massive chords. Beauty!'

I've never known St James's Park look as wonderful as it did that bright late afternoon in early October, gazing at it from the top floor of the Foreign Office.

And I've never known Benjy, the Foreign Secretary, sound more like the twelve-year-old he was when I first came across him at school, snivelling behind the gym.

But then, who's ever lived up to the Foreign Office? It's a porphyry palace for Greek gods: not exactly beautiful, in fact ghastly, but so swaggering that your littleness is crushed out of you. You've no choice but to exult in the coarse strength of those coffered ceilings. The gilt staircases seem built just for you, addressed to you: in each niche an out-sized mid-Victorian nude gesticulates, waving fist or torch or sword as if to say 'Bah! foreigners!' And your soul (you can't help it) shouts back 'Pah! Let 'em try, that's all!' You find yourself, as you ascend through giantish polychrome marble, ready to tear out an enemy's kidneys and eat them, to fling yourself on the Mad Mahdi's dervishes, to charge massed Ruskies, bayonet adazzle, smoking with gore in the snowy air. By the time you reach the uppermost floor you long to trample Germans or sepoys under your hooves, to fire off a Trident for the fun of the thing, to – but here a severe private-personal-secretary, tautly buttoned into her severe grey suit, subdues you with a look. Miss Litherland's hand pauses on the golden knob of the high door

shielding the innermost sanctum. She knows that after those stairs visitors are inclined to bound in, roaring ‘Blood! blood!’ Therefore she pauses; and you enter hushed, prepared to murmur wisely with the Great Man.

Only to be spun head-over-heels, as by an unexpected wave of surf. For over the shoulder of Benjy Wedgwood, advancing diffidently, mournfully, over the carpet (‘Hallo Felix’) is the view.

St James’s Park, which isn’t large, manages to be mysterious. Its sinuous waters bend under their exotic bridge as if Asia opened on the far bank. There’s a rich confusion of domes, spires, obelisks against the soft English vault, so that however much you tell yourself *It’s only ugly old Buckingham Palace* or *That’s the roof of my club*, your imagination prances, as if Trebizond or Karakorum were twinkling out there beyond the candle-blooming chestnuts.

So I patted Benjy above the elbow and went past, ignoring him, leaning over his sill into the Park, wondering how the Foreign Office ever gets any work done. What intoxicating complexity of vision! (And what late-in-the-day bird-music!) Glowing borders of foxgloves and stock, sedgy lake a dozen shades of grey-green, black swans, piebald Muscovy-ducks, scarlet geese, leaves turning ox-blood, lemon and amber. Yet there was ordered simplicity here, too. A coherent formula of bars, appealing to the mind as well as the eye. Lambent darkling-blue sky; heavy red foliage; everlasting English grass. Order!

‘...probable complications.’ Benjy was mewling behind me. ‘There could well be *definite*, I might even say *serious* complications.’

Sighing, I turned from the view. ‘Tell us about it, then – Foreign Secretary.’ The third man in the room didn’t look like someone who should hear the Foreign Secretary called ‘Benjy’. ‘I attend.’

Which was still only partly true. For the room too was distracting. In its heavy, rhetorical, Italianate way, it was just as overwhelming as the early-autumn Park. The carved ceiling was splendid as the russet sky was splendid, the woodwork was as sure of itself as a living trunk. The green wallpaper, painted with gilt stars, was as aweful as the golden plane-trees. Say what you like about man aping God, human art *does* sometimes seem to come out of the same workshop as nature; and requires the same rapt quiet.

However, this wasn’t a moment for æstheticism. I braced my eyes by resting them on the Winterhalter that hung over the malachite fireplace: a portrait of the Prince Consort in a kilt, gun in hand, welter of grouse about his ghillie brogues.

‘You probably wouldn’t know, Felix,’ began Her Majesty’s Secretary of

State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, who'd taken refuge behind his official desk, shuffling papers, 'that we've had a major exhibition over the last three weeks. Of a dead American. A' (he consulted a paper) 'Mark Rothko.'

I wouldn't know, eh? True, I don't hold with most modern art. Normally I'd have said 'No', perhaps tricked out as a derisive 'Really?'

But as it so happened I did know, thanks to a conversation last Thursday; a conversation which hadn't gone well. 'What d'y want for your birthday, Margot?' I'd asked; 'it's Tuesday isn't it?', pretending to be vaguer than I was. It's no small matter having a mistress turn twenty, especially when she's also your student, and in her first week as an undergraduate in your college. A ticklish moment; also, wonderful. I was looking forward to Tuesday. But 'I want Rothko and dinner,' is what she'd said: 'there's a show at the Tate that's about to close. Take me to that tonight, then to the Ivy.' When I'd snorted and demurred, making a short speech about the folly of Abstraction, she'd snorted 'Remote and ineffectual don' and left me, slamming the door.

Remote and ineffectual don. Remote and ineffectual don: the quotation had fixed itself in my mind, obscurely paining me. A childish insult, yet annoying, distinctly annoying. A man of paper. An oldster. *Ineffectual:* me.

But at least I was now able to say, severely, 'As it happens, Foreign Secretary, I was aware of it.' I was examining Albert's wizened thighs, wondering what excuse there'd ever been for such clashing tartan, scarlet squares streaked with mustard and green, flayed flesh, gangrene, pus. 'At the Tate Modern. Closed on Friday.'

'Ah! Finger on the pulse... An *important* exhibition, they tell me.' More papers. 'A dozen massive canvasses done in 1955 for the Shah. Who wasn't *savoir du jour* in New York – Rothko kept the commission quiet. The Shah was discreet too. Hung them in his summer palace on the Caspian. For his private delight, or to dazzle the Western woman he liked to take there. And since the Revolution the ayatollahs have kept them locked up, not saying a word. Although Abstract art apparently doesn't jar on Islamic sensibility – isn't that so, Professor um, um—'

'Jones-Brown', almost 'Joonth-Brown' semi-lispèd Jones-Brown, who'd been introduced when I'd entered a few minutes before, and had (my manner indicated) already dropped out of my mind. 'Their existence came as a global surprise. There's no suggestion,' he explained heavily, 'in the *catalogue raisonné* of any 1955 *hiatus* in the *œuvre*. None;' then shook his head as if he couldn't stop.

Jones-Brown had neat features, so tiny they seemed somehow folded away. But here's the thing: whereas neat-faced men should be stocky like pugs or sinuous like ferrets, he scarcely had a body. A favourite picture in one of my childhood history books showed a head paraded on a pike by a *sans-culotte*. That was Jones-Brown: a bobbly head. His shapeless clothes were a tent. Twitch them aside, you'd startle a dwarf wobbling a pole.

I blinked at the head, as if to fix its appearance. It seemed (framed by that Park, by that room) intensely insipid, fading from view as I stared, diluting the air. Had he sinned against the blessed sense of sight, and been punished with near-invisibility? Damn me if I can picture him even now. I snatch at this or that flaw, not out of malice, but because without his carbuncles he vanishes. Or was it freckles? Warts? Bulbous lips certainly, ajar like an urchin's. A spectacularly commonplace face, an extremely typical weak chin, an unusually usual receding hairline, a freak of normality. 'Even I,' he was drearily saying, 'had absolutely no idea at all.'

'Even you?' I said.

Perhaps my tone was offensive, for Benjy put in, unctuously: 'Our distinguished friend Professor Jones-Brown holds the chair in Modern Art at, at, at...'

'North Newborough,' said etcetera-Brown, half-apologetically, half-truculently.

'Ah,' I found myself saying, 'Northborough – Newborough.' It's odd how fatuity spreads about a room, like a yawn.

Anyway, I was only half-attending. I had to decide how to soothe a nineteen-cum-twenty-year-old who was used words like *ineffectual*. I needed to ingratiate myself before her important moment; which ought to be marked by something more than a cultural outing; something more.

'The University of North Newborough,' exclaimed Benjy, as who might say *Why not, why not indeed?* 'Professor Jones-Brown, the author of scores of books—'

'Books are obsolete. Eleven online articles.'

'—was academic consultant for the Rothko exhibition, and has kindly come back to town to give me his expert opinion.'

I made as if to reconsider Jones-Brown, now breathing through his nose, arms folded. (*What imposition on intellect of my calibre! Summoned to Whitehall indeed!*) A seriously stupid man; possibly not as stupid as he pretended. Certain marine creatures disguise themselves in hazes of black ink.

'In March,' continued Benjy, 'Tehran revealed its cache of Rothkos,

and announced a travelling exhibition to, well, *difficult* nations. Naughty Venezuela and Cuba, Lebanon, Syria. But then they offered to include London in the tour. A thrill for the art world, wasn't it, Professor?' But Jones-Brown was communing with his own rare thoughts. 'And for the F.C.O., cultural diplomacy's so easy – not like the real thing. An enemy loans us a picture, we send an orchestra, suddenly there's *rapprochement*, I'm on the front page of *The Economist* shaking hands with their Foreign Minister, we're accrediting ambassadors, selling them fighter-bombers...'

I smiled thinly. The insignificant third man uncrossed his arms to smooth his forgettable grey trousers.

'Well, the show was a success, queues round the block, wasn't it? Professor... er...'

'Joneth—'

'Jones-Brown. I was about to send an informal note about it to the Grand Ayatollah through the diplomatic bag. *This*, as it happens.' He held up a postcard. 'A Persian rug from the V&A. Apt, yes? Good turns of phrase too. Delicate ambiguities, openings for further discussion...' He read his beautiful phrases, having for the moment forgotten us. (Benjy's never been a dab hand with prose; indeed it was a particularly feeble *What I Did in My Hols* that caused him to be sobbing behind the gymnasium.) He sighed, and slid the card into a drawer. 'All that effort gone to waste. You know those lock-ups you see under viaduct arches?'

'I've always wanted to see inside.'

'Me too. At dawn today the Met kicked one in, in Hackney—'

'Did they indeed?' I murmured, staring up into the coffering. 'How'd they come to do that?'

'Anonymous tip-off.'

'Delivered just before dawn?'

'Well no, the call came yesterday afternoon. But they weren't impressed by the fake accent. "An effete suburban travesty of Irish."'

My eyebrows went up. 'Where d'you recruit coppers? Swiss finishing-schools?'

'So they didn't take it too seriously. Don't let that detail rankle, Felix, you have to stop loathing the police. Who naturally prefer to mount their raids at dawn. Sirens, smashing, screaming; that's all wasted on rush-hour London. Be reasonable.'

'Aha. And what *was* inside the cubby-hole?'

'Dank emptiness. And, flung into a corner: *that*.' He wagged his hand toward an easel, sheathed in bubble-wrap, standing anomalously in

a corner under the tremendous golden ceiling. (I'd been ostentatiously ignoring it.) 'Which I'd like to show to you and Professor, ah – who is, I should've said, the world authority on Rothko – isn't that so?'

'There is' (this seemed torn from him) 'a young writer in Orvieto...'

'In the British Isles.'

Jones-Brown, low, sullenly: 'Gale of Aberdeen is perhaps...'

'In England then,' said Benjy briskly, rising from his desk. (It's a surprise, after you've listened to him, to find him tall and spry.) 'No false modesty, Professor Smith-Br – Brown-Jones. Too much is at stake,' and he made a showy business of pulling the bubble-wrap off the easel.

It was, or had been, a painting six foot by four: a composition of three unequal bars, yellow and scarlet with a belt of white between. But it had been vilely treated. Most of the canvas was torn away, leaving a wreckage of wooden frame; what was left bore tyre-marks and boot-prints, and was splattered with sticky black corrosive muck.

Brown gasped, sprang up, and flung himself on this dirty ruin, pawing its corners, snuffling, groaning, whipping out a magnifying-glass to interrogate flecks and splinters. Benjy followed this carry-on with reverence. I, with no opportunity to show off my own charlatanism, observed it with disgust. I made as to speak. The Foreign Secretary stayed me with a hand. We waited.

'This is undoubtedly,' pronounced Brown at length, standing upright and facing us, '*Untitled Number 849*'

'Ah?'

'One of the Shah's Rothkos,' explained the unhappy Benjy.

'I didn't realise any were missing.'

'Nobody does. Officially speaking, all twelve were taken down and packed up two nights ago, and the exhibition reopens in Beirut at the end of next week. But since the Professor thinks—'

'Thinks? I know! This is genuine!' he snapped, and turned back to it. 'The Master's tonal values are *inimitable*.' (Benjy held up deprecating hands, having no doubts to cast on tonal values.) 'Besides, he was a magician, he employed secret ingredients, not even his assistants knew all. Formaldehyde, salad oil, resin, eggs, boot polish...' He was pressing his face to the desecrated work: fingertips, nose, cheeks. 'But not anchovy paste,' he added, in a muffled voice since he was now using his tongue, 'whatever lies they print! The case for anchovies rests on exaggeration, anecdote, even the *conscious fabrications* of self-seeking greengrocers.' Breezily: 'The whole tenor of contemporary Rothkology – driven, I may say, by my own work – is distinctly anti-

anchovy, whatever' (here he turned truculent) 'the *obscurantist insinuations* of Professor Gale.' He turned a fierce face on Benjy, who wobbled his head, disavowing neo-anchovian heresy. 'I've tracked down the Master's bills. He frequented a bodega on the corner of East 70th Street. Anchovy paste: zero. But mayonnaise! Guess how much mayonnaise a New Yorker of the Eisenhower era consumed?' Benjy wouldn't dare. 'He bought *three times* that amount. I've pierced his secrets. I've written papers on his late-period hair conditioners. Bath cleaner, nail-polish, insect repellent: I taste them all.' None of this sounded ridiculous. Jones-Brown was on his own ground. The innate strength of any man, which might be spent on pleasantness, wit, beauty, goodness, he had squandered on occult lore. He was the best-informed Rothkoist of his generation, between the Solent and the Tweed. He could speak *ex cathedra*. 'I, Jones-Brown of Newborough, am convinced of its canonicity. I pronounce.'

Benjy glanced at me. I shrugged.

Jones-Brown saw, and seemed to bridle. 'Diplomatic doubts? You find it *politically convenient* to deny the truth?'

'Sorry, Professor, perhaps I rushed the introductions. This is Dr Felix Culpepper—'

'Gulper?' Now he was deliberately riling me.

'Culpa. But spelled *cull, pepper* – quaint name, old family.' Jones-Brown looked pitying; my smile thinned. 'He helps us out now and then but he's not *with* the Foreign Office. He's an academic. Just like you,' at which I demonstratively blinked. Jones-Brown's tiny face squinted up into mine. (His eyes were crossed; I remember now.) 'Felix is in fact a distinguished classicist. Well, a classicist. At Cambridge.'

Jones-Brown's squint went blank. 'Classical music?'

'I study ancient poems.'

'Ah! We don't go in for primitivism at Newborough,' *né* North Cambridgeshire Polytechnical Institute: I'd remembered it now.

'Here's this,' put in Benjy hastily, pre-empting my riposte. 'Taken two days ago, that's to say Friday, the evening the exhibition closed.'

He'd handed me an enlarged coloured photograph of an art-gallery black-tie drinkypooh; grandes, patrons, connoisseurs, backs to the art, grimacing faces to each other; on the wall between Sir Michael Jagger and the Duke of Gloucester *Untitled Number 849*. Or not.

I passed it to Jones-Brown. 'Yes, yes, crude. Wholly unconvincing even in a photo. Brushwork too vertical, contours coarse, pigments blurred. I am 110% certain – 125%. If,' he added, with surprising bitterness, 'they'd invited

me to the reception, I'd have spotted it *instantly*'; and thrust his magnifying-glass back into his pocket, with the air of a sheriff blowing smoke from his six-shooter, then twirling it faster than eye can follow into its holster. On the verandah of the tavern lie six twitching bandits, drumming the woodwork with spurred boots. 'Anyway, you must yield to facts.'

Benjy nibbled a knuckle. 'All right. The buggers *have* managed to lift a Rothko from the Tate. *Damn the Tate*,' he burst out petulantly, 'what did it *do* with the' (another piece of paper) 'half million we gave it for extra security? Eh?' More nibbling. 'Replaced it with a crude fake – made a hash of getting it away. Drove over it, spilled motor-oil *and* trampled it, God knows how.'

'Haste,' I suggested airily. 'Panic. Easily done. Events always go awry, the physical universe has been a muddle for fourteen billion years. Only in the realm of ideas can anything work. Huge painting through a window in the dark, too many men – suburban Irishmen! – manhandling it into a dirty truck, everyone hissing. No, whispering effete. Crack, tear, swear, stumble, smear. A natural bungle. Frankly, I sympathise.'

'Frankly I don't. Anyway, by the time they examine their loot, it's worthless. They abandon it, feel a spasm of compunction, let us know where it is. But *where*?' he burst out with intensified self-pity, 'is the compunction in that? What about me? Why didn't they consider *me*? When does anyone, about to cause trouble with foreigners, stop to ask "Won't this be hard cheese on the poor Foreign Secretary?" Never.'

'Don't blub, Wedgwood *minimus*.'

'I'm not. I'm just saying: what am I, I mean what are we to do?'

I brooded. 'The fake'll be spotted quickly?'

'Instantly,' repeated Jones-Brown, sitting down again. 'The moment it comes out of the case. It's embarrassingly bad.'

'And then,' groaned Benjy, 'I'll have the most hateful difficulties.'

'It's insured?'

'Oh yes, yes, for' – he fidgeted with his papers – 'twenty-eight million. *That's* all right. But diplomatically! The Americans, who *like* to be unkind, will say... And these cultural exchanges can *backfire*. The Iranians'll claim we're incompetent. Or that it was a put-up job, that I lured the Rothkos here with fell intent. The hardliners will argue: "England never changes: behold, she steals our canvas, she despises us, let us enrich more uranium-238." Iran wobbles on a razor-blade, anything's enough to tip it, God knows where this ends.' He buried his face in his arms. There was a long unmeaning lull.



(I realise this affair seems to amount to very little. Jones had confirmed what Benjy Wedgwood must already have guessed; I, purveyor of clever violence to the British State, couldn't undo the damage; we were wasting Benjy's time. I'm wasting yours. It appears that way; but you see, my talk with these two pawns, these nullities, was a pretence. *I knew what was coming* and, despite my bored swagger, was queasy with fear. *Did I have to – was it worth – dare I go through – ? That lustrous room was my torture chamber. Nonetheless...)*



I coughed lazily, stirred and stretched.

Benjy had evidently gone down to wallow in the sewer of self-pity (which is never quite dry, even in resolute minds like mine). He was ignoring me.

'Foreign Secretary?' at which he looked up, bitterly. 'I'm awfully sorry and so forth. But why've you called me in? What d'y'want me to do? I don't feel helpful.'

'Now you mention it, neither of you have been particularly helpful.'

'If we had the stolen painting, I might try to swap it back for the fake. But we can hardly let the Iranian have *that*', gesturing toward the debris on the easel.

'No. That's good for nothing.'

Jones-Brown stared at it enigmatically, shaking head, unfolding insignificant legs as if about to leave. '*That's* worth – nothing.'

'Much less than nothing,' said Benjy morosely, 'think what it might *cost* us.' He was re-swathing it in bubble-wrap. 'Actually this rubbish will be worth a lot, to historians, if it's ever Iran's *casus belli*. And survives,' and the following picture popped into my mind: the Foreign Office a sooty skeleton, staring, through an ash-cloud shrieking in the nuclear whirlwind, at the consummation of St James' Park; every tree a bending flame.

'I'll burn it if you like,' I said, measuring in my imagination the fun of obliterating thirty million quid of paint, mayonnaise and sun-cream.

'No. It's an historic artifact. It goes to the Depository.' He had put on his sepulchral voice. 'I'll stow it where – oh I say.' Benjy had evidently remembered that he had to please us, or at least me; he was suddenly a

small boy offering bigger boys a treat. ‘Shall I *show* you my Depository?’

I smiled in a superior way (although I was thinking: *This is a killing matter*).

Jones-Brown looked at his watch. (Second-rate minds are never as happy as third; they realise what’s missing; they’re querulous.)

But Benji, excited now, jumped up and pulled a tasselled cord. Massive curtains fell, blotting out the darkening Park. He turned on his desk lamp, locked his office door, approached the fireplace; tilted Prince Albert to the left. There was a neat metallic creak, a ping. One of the porphyry panels beside the hearth swung open. Crouching, I saw a steel cavity stretching back and back, stacked with portfolios, boxes, papers bound with ribbon; a baby’s coffin; a prosthetic penis (I *think*) in a glass-fronted blue-satin-lined walnut box stamped in gold letters N.C.; rusty caskets, a broken sword; skulls.

Benji’s trickier than he looks. He can’t write because he can’t lie, but he can hustle. When Whitehall throws him out, Hollywood might take him in. When our French master announced, in tears, that his surgical truss was missing, Benji was above suspicion; in the end they sacked one of the gardeners because they had to sack someone. Yet Benji was the culprit; he let the whole Fourth Form try it on at two quid a pop, making enough for a new bicycle. Part of him’s always been a showman.

‘This,’ he said, lowering his brows, darkening his voice, ‘is the Foreign Secretary’s private vault, our Most Especially Secret Safe. Palmerston installed it. “To engulf what we owe it to history not to destroy, yet is too interesting to be healthy in the open air.” I get things out on winter afternoons when there’s nothing going on. Let’s see, what would you enjoy most?’ (I was interested despite myself. A bad sign. Benji only mollifies people when he wants something appalling done. *This, I was thinking, is the start of my death.*) ‘What about this, then?’

‘This’ was a bag of dark linen. He untied it, sniffed, put in his hand, and produced – what was merely horrible, a shrunken head: a brown boggling obscenity the size of a grapefruit, with tiny forehead and horrid swollen toothy jaw. Benji clutched it by its long blonde hair, and it swung back and forth, smirking, defying us to look away.

‘What is *that*?’

‘Amelia Earhart.’

‘Who?’ asked Jones-Brown, and, perceiving we were amazed, added with shame and pride, ‘I have no outside interests. I only read about Rothko.’

‘An aviatrix,’ I told him, dreamily, looking away from him, peering

into her cowry-shell eyes. There was, despite the distortion, a nightmare resemblance to her photographs. 'She vanished over the Pacific in '37, trying to fly around the world.'

'Without trace, as journalists always say,' said Benjy, twirling the head by its yellow locks. 'But here's the trace. Given to our Resident Commissioner in the Gilbert Islands in the 'Fifties. By the headman of a tribe that hadn't liked Miss Earhart's snarky attitude after she crash-landed on their atoll. The Commissioner didn't fuss because they were a friendly tribe, I mean friendly to us, and shipped it back to London. Since the Americans never let us know more than they have to about *anything*, we left them in the dark about *this*.'

The Professor observed stiffly that it had no artistic merit. 'Not Rothkoesque.'

'Well, then,' said Benjy, hurt, dropping Miss Earhart into her sack, 'what about this? A pretty thing?' He pulled out a grease-stained cloth suitcase worked with psychedelic swirls. The dainty Professor turned his shoulder. 'This' (he patted it) 'is an atom bomb. Code-name *Die uiteindelike laer*, the ultimate laager. The South Africans kept it in the basement of their London embassy as the final guarantee of apartheid. We stole it, dismantled the firing mechanism, kept it. Seven kilotons... Or what about this? *This* is significant.' A sheet of manuscript in a stiff plastic case, paper fading to yellow, ink to brown, a jagged-florid hand. *Ex M: Lutherus*, I read, *monachus falsæ religionis Nazarenorum : ad dominum nostrum generosa Suleimanus, sultano sultanorum...* 'We acquired this, well, looted it, frankly, from the Ottoman archives. When we occupied Constantinople in 1919. It tickled Lloyd George's fancy. He thought it might be useful one day. For vexing Ulster Protestants.'

'Luther,' I said, unaffectedly impressed, 'was in the pay of Suleiman the Magnificent?'

'Evidently. This is his annual report. He got twenty-four thousand silver thalers a year to make trouble for the Habsburgs.'

But Jones-Brown was a fanatic who cared only for his idol. Since Rothko owed nothing either way to the Reformation, it could have no fizz for him. 'I must get back, Mr Wedgwood, if you've no further need of me; I've notes to write for a graduate seminar.' He managed to look yet more extraordinarily ordinary, and at the same time sly. He wouldn't catch my eye.

Benjy put Luther's report back in the Most Especially Secret Safe, along with Miss Earhart, the Boer bomb, the mangled canvas that might yet undo Persia, and other broken toys of history. Including the French

master's truss? Was the prosthesis Chamberlain's? Too late to ask; our treat was over. Benjy moodily slammed the porphyry slab and there was a series of heavy, comfortable clanks.

He showed Jones-Brown to the door. The fellow had a peculiar gait, holding his chest as far forward as it would go, then spinning his little feet forward to stop falling over. 'Farewell, Professor,' said the Foreign Secretary in his blandest voice. 'I hope you have an easy journey back to, to, to—'

'North Newborough,' said Jones-Brown with pathetic dignity.

'Newborough, Newborough, yes. Thank you for coming in. Obviously you'll say nothing about this to anyone ever.'

'You have my word.'

'Oh yes, that,' muttered the changeable Benjy, suddenly not courtly at all, 'your word of honour. You'll *also* remember that the Tate hired you as a consultant, won't you? Which makes you a government contractor under the terms of the Official Secrets Act. Liable to two years in prison if you mention the theft; or my Depository; or Culpepper. Or anything. But especially Culpepper. If you divulge *him*, you'll soon be wishing for a nice comfortable cell.' Benjy has it in him to be formidable.

But then so does Jones-Brown. 'I would never,' he said simply, 'sensationalise the memory of Rothko.' Once at dusk I brushed against a rotten beech stump; a stag beetle reared up to threaten my passing boot. There was nothing preposterous about the insect. Jones-Brown was like that. 'Rothko is the greatest artist who has ever lived.' He sounded perfectly serious (although damn it, that was a wink he was giving in my direction. Hidden shallows). Then, in his impossibly pedestrian way, he got on his shapeless hat and was gone.

Benjy sagged against the door. 'Don't *you* go. Sit. Let me get you whisky.'

'Er – in my own small way I too have work to do. Must get back...'

'No you don't. You need to do something for the government.'

'For the—'

'For the country. For me. Come on, Felix.' The showman was gone; the Depository hadn't won me; the clingy small boy was back. 'Do you want water in it?'

'Yes. No. Thanks... But I don't see what I can do. Do you credit the scintillating Jones-Brown? He sounded like the Last Word.'

I do, he did... Wasn't he dreadful? Oh Culpepper, I'm so glad I'm a dunderhead. My clever colleagues spend all their time having in-tee-lect-shulls in, being told what to do. Appalling people, academics. I don't mean you.'

'We're drunkard idlers at St Wygy's.'

'No, no... But Smith, I mean Jones-Brown! How does anyone get like that, d'y'think?'

'Ah. I know how: I've give pedantry some thought, Benjy. Let me explain.'

Benjy, who couldn't possibly be interested, knitted his brows in concentration: 'You always could get to the bottom of things.' He was doing a good job of buttering me up.

'Saints, Benjy, give up the world without regret, believing the One contains the lesser many within Himself; so they're losing nothing. Pedants are the opposite of saints. They give up the world to pursue one tiny remote thing, one among the many, precisely because it contains nothing but itself. They don't want infinity, but finitude in its most extreme form. They *want*', I added, shuddering, 'to be ineffectual' (that word). 'They don't aspire to everlasting life, but immediate impenetrable death.'

'Golly. I'll try to remember that next time my Permanent Under-Secretary tries to set up a think-tank... But come on, Felix. What am I going to do about this damned painting?'

'My advice,' I said, teasing, since I knew he wouldn't dare take it, 'is to confess at once. 'Phone. Sound contrite. Better the Persians hear it from you before unpacking a bogus Rothko.'

'That won't be until tomorrow afternoon at the soonest, you know.' Benjy gave me his famous puppy look over the rim of his tumbler.

'What difference,' I said hypocritically, 'can a day make?' Tragic play with his lip. 'What d'y'have in mind?' More dog-eyes. 'Where are the paintings at the moment?'

'Ah!' said Benjy, brightening and putting down his glass. 'I was hoping you'd ask. Still at Heathrow. Just. On a small Iranian jet. It's scheduled to fly out at nine.'

'Raid it before it takes off.'

Benjy was appalled: 'Good God no, that'd violate the Vienna Convention. It's diplomatically privileged.'

'Then if you can't touch it on the ground, and can't bear to let it carry the fake to Iran, you'd better blow it up in mid-air.'

Benjy looked less appalled. 'They're very careful about bombs. Coming from where they come from. Don't know how we'd get one on board. Anyway, it's too late.'

'Shoot it down. They'll be flying close to Cyprus, where there's a British base – what's it called?'

'R.A.F. Akrotiri. But... do you really think I should?'

Oh, these men of paper. The wickedest statesman only dabbles in crime – does his skulduggery by not contradicting what an underling says he's about to do – or pretends not to hear, hunts about his desk for paper-clips while the essential words are being uttered, looks up with vague smile: "Hm?"

'Isn't there another way, Felix? You're so clever, you always get to the bottom of things.'

I'd known this was coming. I didn't yet have enough of Benjy's single-barrel malt inside me to say yes. The event needed softening. Prevaricate, prevaricate. 'Can't you delay their departure for a few hours?'

'I suppose. How should I do that? – Oh, d'y'want more whisky?'

I did. It was one of those late afternoons that require golden spirit to be poured on them, as haggis requires Scotch, plum pudding brandy – I thought, a bit incoherently; for I was passing through one of those moments when interior and exterior merge. I was lolling in one of the room's magnificent blood-dyed leather armchairs, and my eye was losing itself in the gilded coffering, sun after sun, receding into that self-contained heaven of the ceiling.

'A bomb you say, eh?' murmured the boyish man.

More of this.

Then I was descending the great staircase between marble figures, feeling more human yet more godlike as I passed through the subdued gold light, emerging into a Park that was like a dim furnace of autumn pigments. There I lifted my arms to exult – not least because I knew Benjy (if not already unconscious) would be looking down at me. St James's Park was clamorous with birds saying vespers, cold-warm with the green-red sunset, which seemed to have melted together the million points of colour. In my dark suit, against that rainbow foliage and flowers, I must have looked to him like the photographic negative of a goldfish in a murky bowl. I stood against the colours like death.

ii.

'Camel-diarrhoea on her grandfather's dick,' remarked the pilot, taking his seat in the cockpit, to his new co-pilot, an innocent fresh from a *madrasa* in Qoms. '*Choob too konet* [a brass-studded stick up her arse]'. The Persian language has endured twenty-five centuries of history, all full of occasion for invective.

'Sir! Reza! Whatever is the matter?'

'*Nanat sag suk mizaneh*. They say we can't take off, Hassan, that's what the matter is. The donkey-dung Britishers have telephoned our hyena-scrotum Foreign Ministry saying "Pretty please can you not take back this dreadful woman?" and I've just received orders from Tehran to wait for madam. *Marg?*'

'Who is she?'

'*Antar* [a baboon]! The wife of someone big in the *régime* who's been on a "shopping trip". I know these London shopping trips. Whoring herself to taxi drivers. Raping waiters. Fellating dogs. Anyway she's "overstretched herself". That's what the sparrow-brain in Tehran told me, she's "dizzy." Too drunk to walk is what that means. *And* she's lost her papers. Sold them, doubtless, Iranian diplomatic passports fetch twenty thousand euros on the black market.' The pilot, a hard-bitten man, did not care that the control tower might be recording whatever he said; as, indeed, it was. 'The Infidels don't want to deal with complications, so they ask, as a special favour, now our nations are French-kissing each other like Kurdish goatherds in heat, can't we fly her back with Pahlavi's pretentious grease-smears, and dump her on her husband.'

The eyes of the co-pilot widened with dismay. 'Is not Mark Rothko greatest of all Expressionists?' It had been a most broad-minded *madrasa*.

Reza shrugged disgustedly, he would not discuss such matters.

'Whose wife is she, Reza?'

'*Molla nanato kard* [a mullah fucked her mother]. Who cares? All big-shots are pigs from the same herd, and their wives are worse. If someone makes a pious speech in the Majlis about revolutionary purity, be sure it's his hangover speaking. He's just back from running amok in New York, Dubai, Bombay. Tel Aviv, even.'

'Reza. Surely not.'

'Nothing would amaze me. The things I've seen flying government 'planes. In Brasilia once' – and he retailed an anecdote that immediately undid five years of ethics classes at that excellent *madrasa* in Qoms.

When it was over Hassan gasped: 'Tell me the truth, Reza. Are there indeed such heinous places?'

'Everywhere. Why, in Paris airport itself, for the convenience of transfer passengers, there's an establishment where the tarts' – and he finished the rout of Hassan's education.

It was a very dry-mouthed co-pilot who managed to ask: 'Which terminal?'

Reza uttered a terrible laugh, but broke it off to exclaim '*Zamino bokoni* [fuck the soil]! Look!'

Hassan peered out of the cockpit window. A long black Jaguar was creeping toward them across the dark tarmac, British flags aflutter.

Reza leapt up. There was nothing he could do about his stubble, beer-breath or blood-shot eyes, but he smoothed his grizzled curls as well as he could and patted down his moustache – dashed back to the cabin-door, slapping aside two of his crew who tried to help, and got it open. He sucked in his paunch and struck a wide-armed pose of welcome at the top of the steps, just as the driver and two policemen extracted a figure in a cyclamen-coloured burqa from the back of the limousine. It seemed unable to stand. They propped it.

'Khosh amadid!' exclaimed Reza. 'A thousand greetings to you, most gracious lady. May the starry heavens in which it is to be my privilege to waft you be to – be to you –'. It was too obvious his guest wasn't listening.

The face was (perhaps happily) covered. No light shone though the eye-grille. But the enormous folds of the *chador* could not disguise the grossness of that tall body. 'She must weigh a hundred kilogrammes!' exclaimed young Hassan, peering out of the cockpit window. It was his innocent custom to utter his thoughts aloud. Until tonight no harm had been done, his thoughts being like dew on almond-orchards in the high Zagros. 'She could be hiding a youth in there! Vile thought!' He sucked his teeth in a way he'd learned from Reza. 'Praise to The Merciful we're carrying so little baggage,' and this utterance too was recorded by the control tower; recorded so that I could hear, and bear witness to his debasement.

With a tremendous burp, the pink, ogrish figure lurched from car-door to aeroplane step, clutched the hand-rail, swayed a moment, began to pull itself up. The left leg was stiff, hurt perhaps in some drunken tumble, the black-gloved hands groped like blind crabs; the head rolled sightlessly. The policemen, who had a sense of humour, saluted. Reza, horrified at the idea of touching such a one, made a ceremony of standing back and gesturing her into the cabin with bows and rolling forearm.

Hassan was distractedly readying the 'plane for take-off, muttering: 'How can the Compassionate Fashioner-Of-All-Things permit wickedness in the wife of a Guardian? Do opportunities for such wickedness exist even in Iran – if I look hard enough? ... Turbos off, throttles closed': that's how the drill goes. 'Inter-coolers cold, gyros uncaged; lights switched off; on; idle cut-off checked, cowl-flaps open right.' Usually this rigmarole soothed him, it was like telling worry-beads, or reciting the ninety-nine names of the Effacer, the Subtly Kind. But tonight it flustered him. The routine words had been dirtied, they inflamed him. 'Wanton idling, flaps

open, inter-heating'. When Reza came back to the cockpit, shaking his head, he was startled to hear his *protégé* muttering 'Up-thrust, kosefil; like any foul-mouthed veteran of the sky.

Back in the fuselage their monstrous guest was slumped in a seat – seats; draped over three of them.

'What about her seat-belt?' murmured Dr Naqdi of the Teheran Museum of Fine Arts, Curator of the exhibition. A cautious white-haired man in suit and no tie, he'd long since buckled himself in. But when he glanced back at the other two passengers, bleak-faced bearded young men who obviously had no use for seat-belts and seemed not to hear him, he gave up. 'Not a moment to quibble.' Instead he re-read aloud the plastic card of emergency instructions.

I suspect he exacerbated his anxiety about water-landings to take his mind off more pressing unease; for the men, lightly dangling sub-machine-guns, wore the dark-green uniform of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. These two rogues were, by definition, guilty of atrocities, they were free of compunction about killing, and although they were onboard to protect the Rothkos – *his* Rothkos, as Dr Naqdi thought of them – they were sure to regard him as a changeling and half-infidel. Whenever he glanced behind, to the baggage compartment at the back of the 'plane where his precious Rothkos were stowed, he was careful to display a faint mordant smile, a model of ambiguity and moral detachment. No one could fairly interrupt it as impudent criticism of their fellow-passenger, who might be anyone at all; no one could justly infer he condoned her excess, should there have been excess and who could say; it was just a smile.

The Revolutionary Guards had no use for such nuance. They glared at the massive pink bundle, their faces livid with the imagination of stoning.

Then everyone heard the engines.



What a piece of work is man! How adroit, unkind, inventive, base; how nearly godlike, how much more troublesome than an insect! Without fault the man-made machinery spun, the cunning vessel sprang on to its aerial road, bearing a cargo of luminous man-made beauty. But it also carried six actual people, a fairly typical sample: that is, one satyr, one half-corrupted faun, one coward, two cruel bigots; and one more, who stirred, snored, belched, farted and scratched.



Take-off was just after midnight; it's five hours from London to Beirut.

Outside the window wheeled the deathless stars, for it was a fine night; and the extravagant mortal lights of Europe twinkled below.

Around four the stars began to pale.

You'll have gathered who was lurking in the *chador*. I waited another quarter-hour, then put off my (almost-entirely affected) drunkenness, opened my eyes, adjusted my tremendous pink folds, and looked about.

The lights were low. Naqdi was anxiously dozing, dentures exposed, a distinguished glitter on his *pince-nez*. From the closed cockpit came a low mutter: Reza was further debauching his minion.

One of the Guards had deigned to sit, and was thoroughly asleep, face set in stern Islamic lines. But the other was alert, standing, gazing at me unkindly, cradling his gun. He was my difficulty.

This was a small low-slung jet, with ten seats and a tiny servery. There was no cargo-hold: luggage went behind a partition, aft, beyond the single loo. I knew all this from studying a plan of the 'plane during my journey from Whitehall to Heathrow, in that very embarrassing Jag.

So now I heaved myself up and began to move down the fuselage, hobbling because my left knee couldn't bend.

The Guard made a peremptory gesture as if to say *Sit, wretched harlot*, but I performed a charade of vomiting, and he shrugged in distaste. *Here then is the lavatory, much-befooled daughter of Shatan, make haste*. His glare as I approached him was so savage he must have expected more abandoned behaviour on the spot. Perhaps I'd produce noxious stuff, forbidden by the Prophet, and tempt him. As a matter of fact that's almost exactly what I did. (Here was one of the moments I'd foreseen. I'd foreseen it might kill me.) I was holding up a silver hip-flask and his eyes, which had been widening in rage, blurred, for a gas came hissing out as I unscrewed. If you did not hold your breath, as I did, you at once swayed, as he did - .

The bore of being a conspirator is that you keep looking ahead, not to what might happen, but to what you need to do if it does. When the future arrives you stop thumbing one version of the script and grab at another. Actual events pass you by. Thus I barely noticed, and could scarcely enjoy, the sight of my enemy toppling, for he made such a crash at my feet (at least it sounded tremendous to me) I had to swirl about. Here was another moment I might not survive.

But the other goon slept on, doubtless inured to the shrieks and thuds of police stations. Naqdi flinched but did not wake. The hum of the captain's conversation continued without pause over the rival hum of the engines, too engrossingly pornographic to be broken. All was well.

I turned back to the partition-door. Would it be locked? It *was* – no it *wasn't*. Glory, glory. I pushed it open, kicked the Guard through, bent awkwardly, left leg straight, to scoop up his AK-47, squeezed my own tremendous bulk through sideways, pulled the door behind us, let out my breath, and groped for a light. Click.

An untidy, windowless cabin. Suitcases piled over there, more guns and such unpleasantness *there*. But here, here, directly before me, were a dozen upright pine cases, an inch apart, each case three inches wide, five foot high, seven foot long, like coffins for folk crushed by steam rollers. It was the horde.

Edifying to see how well the cases were secured against turbulence and other airy troubles! Each was fixed to the floor with steel brackets.

Less delightful to find there were no labels. I might have to open them all.

I looked at my very complicated watch and swore. Late, late, late! It said 04:44 Greenwich time, and we were 33° 29' East: already beyond the coast of Cyprus. And we had (as I could feel myself) begun to descend: 27,000 feet; 26,500. I'd not given myself enough time.

Fast as I could I wriggled off my horrible robe. My fatness was composed of sacks of equipment strapped to my torso; these I flung about the floor. One sack was a toolkit; I got out a short crowbar, and after a second or two had prised open the first of the cases.

Remarkable, this: the famous Rothko glow works even on its side in a wooden box. Such white-green-yellow shone in my face, it might have contained a spring meadow. However, white-green-yellow bars were no good. It wasn't 849, and I hammered it shut. Nor was the next case, full of burgundy-crimson-brick light, right. Nor the third, nor the fourth; and we were now at 21,000 feet. The fifth case was lavender-purple-black (odd that black should glow so much) but the fun was going out of the thing. When I looked at my watch I found we were thirty-five miles from target, four minutes off, which was too soon; and I cursed Benjy for his pathetic eyes which seemed likely to get me killed. Why hadn't I left him whimpering behind the gym? Sixth case; no. Of course this wasn't really about Benjy, it was about – seventh case; no. Eighth – yes yes yes. Port-colour, green, a border of radiant sea-blue: this is what had caused all the fuss. I lifted it from its case, astonished at its weight. *Why?* Of course, the

frame: black resin, simple, tasteful, geometric, massive.

Despite my rush, I leaned the hefty black thing against the stack of suitcases, and sighed over it. Jones-Brown could say what he liked of 'crude fakes'; This canvas was beautiful. I let my fingers patter over its extraordinarily thick patina...

We were at 12,000 feet; 11,500. I got stuff like coloured Plasticine from one my packages, and applied a sausage of it to the cargo door. My admirable hands did not tremble. I inserted a fuse and clipped on a detonator. Good. I studied my watch. We were thirty miles off the coast of the Lebanon: good again. 10,000 feet: good once more. Forty-two seconds to go. Anything else? I bashed the empty case about with my crowbar to create the right impression. I dropped the tools, kicked them aside, frowned a little over the Revolutionary Guard's sombre young face, zipped my jumpsuit to my throat, pulled on a woollen cap. Thirty-four seconds; thirty-three; thirty-two.

At thirty-one came disaster: a sudden noise over the speakers. Reza was addressing his four passengers in a loud babble of Farsi. I caught the word *Beirut*. He was rousing them far sooner than I'd expected, blast him.

The other Guard was roused. I could hear him saying 'Jafar?', then shouting, 'Jafar! Jafar!' Jafar heard him too, and moved pitifully at my feet, trying to groan. One more moment and his comrade would be through the door, beating me unconscious with his rifle-butt.

We weren't yet in the right place but I couldn't wait. I touched the detonator, and although the bang was not much more than a Christmas cracker, the world was overthrown in the twinkling of an eye.

The cargo hatch tore itself free – shrank at incredible speed, was a dot in the roaring dawn air, gone, nothing. A fresh violent sunrise filled the cabin, gold, cold – tearingly-deathly cold – there was unbelievable roaring, every atom shrieked, kept shrieking – an alarm pulsed red overhead, its wail inaudible in the howl of the sucking air. The air was full of rockets, a thousand things firing themselves through the blazing gap that had been the hatch – all the bags erupted outward, some thumping me in the head as they crashed past – my *chador* whipped by, was gone – Jafar the Guard went to his reward – the hefty black thing –

And me. I'd clung to one of the brackets, letting the furious outward wind tear me with its hundred claws. Now I loosed my fingers.

Crack! Hell vanished. I was in ethereal free-space, burning red-gold, gently whistling, turning over and over, plummeting into the enormous dawn.

iii.

An interlude.

Since boyhood I've been prone to dreams that strike me, even when they're finished, as wiser than most waking thoughts. Such dreams come to me even when I'm not asleep – which isn't a sign that I'm a visionary, or incipient lunatic, but that the wanton part of my mind remains open by day, when in most people it hibernates. My languor, which (among other things) makes me so unpopular with undergraduates, isn't entirely feigned. I'm never perfectly asleep, never entirely awake.

Therefore I'm not shy to record what I saw during the half-minute I fell.

One particularly atrocious dream plagued me as a child. A noise of hurrying cataracts rouses me: something's abroad. I sleep with curtains open (closing them makes my visitations worse), so I sit up and look into the night. And out of the night, swimming through the burbling air, comes an eye. Unable to scream, I cringe against my headboard. The eye floats up to my glaring window. When it presses itself to the glass I discern the head of which it's a part: wolf, giant lizard, pale decapitated woman...

I'm sceptical about these complications. I suspect my imagination concocted them to blunt the insane horror of the eye itself. Or perhaps I invented them to *cheapen* my nightmare, so it could profitably be retailed at breakfast to dull Agatha, my sister. (A mere eye wouldn't make her scream; she was never very subtle; a born teenage suicide.) Certainly the adult form dispenses with such gothic touches. There's only the eye.

I'd suffer horribly, except I've discovered that my work blanks the eye out. When I'm beset, I get out of bed and go to my desk, to pore and scribble and thus cocoon myself in paper.

But there was no paper to hand that dawn, tumbling out of the sky; the eye visited me, unveiled.

And there was this difference: it soared out of the continent of Asia, from the east and a bit to the south; it came closer and closer; and as it approached it enlarged. A hundred yards off it was huge beyond words, blotting out the sun; by the time it was within arms' length it was vaster than the cosmos. I was a speck within a mote, and the mote was the physical universe, hovering faintly in front of the eye.

The eye! I was beyond terror now, my emotions had boiled off. All I could do was witness the unspeakable, unendurable beauty of that eye: glowing-black pupil, hazel iris flecked with yellow, white sclera; an abyss

of seeing and being seen.

It was only a flash, but then everything's a flash when you're accelerating at thirty-two feet per second per second. I'd seen what I needed to and looked away. Behold, I was far out from land, far above the water, deep in the golden air, still dropping, and wonderfully alone.

iv.

'Um – yes, hallo? Hallo!'

'Foreign Secretary? Have I woken you?'

'Most definitely not, Miss Litherland,' Benjy whispered severely; speaking might crack his skull. 'Up since dawn,' which was technically true. He'd fallen asleep on his immense leather sofa as soon as I'd left, and first light had roused him with crinkled neck, rasping eyes, throbbing brain, parched gums, churning stomach. He'd rung for crumpets and tea, and sat nibbling until it seemed likely he'd live; then returned to the sofa to regroup. (He owed as much to England.) Thus he'd been prone, dreaming of Bumper, his boyhood cocker-spaniel, who'd understood him. 'Consulting. Experts.'

'I have the Iranian Foreign Minister on the private line.'

Benjy sat up sharply. 'Put him through.' Click. 'Ali!'

'*Benjamin*.' A refined New England accent. 'Good morning. I have sad tidings.'

'Don't say that, Ali. Not today. We're exhilarated. Success of the Rothko exhibition, y'know. So gracious of the Islamic Republic to send.'

'It's that of which I have to speak. The aeroplane bringing it on to Lebanon suffered a mishap as it was coming in to land. A loose cabin door.'

'Good G – gracious, Ali. Was all well?'

'Sudden decompression. They landed safely, although the Curator gave himself thrombosis. But it grieves me to report that the distinguished lady you asked us to transport was lost. As was one of our Revolutionary Guards. I doubt their remains could be retrieved. Those waters teem with sharks.'

'Ah. Ali, I'm saddened, appalled, more than I can say... The artworks themselves?'

'One, alas, was sucked out – its case disintegrated. It too is unrecoverable. Although, of course, insured. The others are apparently undamaged.'

‘The exhibition?’

‘Goes ahead. The catalogue will be rewritten with just eleven paintings. The Curator, happily, is in no state to object. Nothing need be heard of this sensational incident. Sensation distracts from the calm spiritual beauty of art, don’t you think? As well as embarrassing us. The authorities have their media under control in Beirut. As have we.’

‘As have we, Ali. Or rather they control us, which works just as well. Rest assured, they’ll henceforth refer to *eleven* Rothkos. Nothing can, or indeed should, disturb the, the course our media have set, of’ (he was groping for the postcard; got it! Not wasted work after all) ‘of renewed friendship between the ancient nation of Britain and the yet-more-ancient nation of Iran, a renewed and renewable energy-source for both.’

‘That is very well put, if I may say so, Benjamin.’

But something struck Benjy. He put down his precious card. ‘I say, Ali, if negligence by our ground crew was in any way—’

‘Tut-tut. It was the pilot’s responsibility. He has already been shot. And his co-pilot. Uttering, I gather from our gallant friends in Hezbollah, obscene blasphemies. More important matters. This tour, which we have allowed *nothing* to disrupt, surely augurs further exchanges between our peoples.’

‘How wonderful you should say so. Ali: the Worcestershire Morris-Dancing Troupe is finishing a tour of India. If an invitation were to come – through the British-interests section of the Swedish embassy – we could arrange...’

‘It will be despatched this morning. After *that*, I see my schedule allows a stopover next month at the Cork Film Festival, where an Iranian animated short is in competition.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of missing it. And if we run into each other...’

‘Benjamin, I feel we might...’

‘I look forward to discussion which could...’

‘Range beyond art?’

‘Art?’ purred the Foreign Secretary, ‘what is art?’, and put the ’phone down knowing he was among the great. (Bumper had guessed; Benjy had seen it in his eyes.) The race is not to the swift, nor yet favour to men of skill. Was Talleyrand candid? Was Disraeli deep? Was Lincoln pious? Was Bismark upright? Was the Borgia pope scrupulous? Whimsical history passes over paragons to lay its finger on *this* chance statesman, murmuring ‘He, he shall be first of his generation.’

Thus Benjy nuzzled in the lap of fate; fate cooled his forehead; his

hangover was gone. In a twinkling, his youthful self-doubt, his innocence, had become, as it might be, historic curiosities, worthy to be stowed in the Most-Especially-Secret Safe. He contemplated (he told me; for he gratefully recounted this *dénouement*, sparing himself nothing) the Nobel Peace Prize. He contemplated *rapprochement*, reopened embassies, freighters cutting wakes through greasy blinding mirror-smooth Gulf waters; state visits, a knighthood, global realignment, the vindication of Shi'a. He thought of exported fighter jets and shortbread, of imported oil (oil!), dates, pistachios, Caspian caviar, of – of breakfast.

He strode across the room, flung open the door, and startled Miss Litherland by the booming fashion with which he uttered certain words of command; words they'll be quoting in Whitehall corridors when I am dust, when they gossip about the moment statesmen put off mortality and take on grandeur. 'More crumpets, Miss Litherland, *if you wouldn't mind too terribly?*'

v.

'So I let go of the steel bracket and bang! the 'plane whipped away. I was turning and turning in space. It wasn't like falling. I spun, hanging, like a god. But the sparkling sea grew wider, rushing up to embrace me.'

Frankly, I think I was telling my story rather well. But my tiresome chit wore her face of exaggerated interest – pretty expectation, jolly amazement – which is her way of at once suppressing and expressing a yawn. (Lady Margot ffontaines-Laigh is tall and her hair, redder than what's usually called auburn, is so massive and heavy it gives her the cachet of a statue. She's often still, partly from pride of caste, partly because she's not yet certain which note to sound. Intelligence and beauty came on her suddenly – she's a crimson-white lump in photographs from five years ago – and has yet to calibrate her displays of wit, voluptuousness and command. She already knows to underestimate her alarming self-sufficiency, and to dissimulate her boredom with male puppy-likeness. Me she both underrates and reveres. I fear she regrets being born female. Her eyes are very green.)

I tried harder, heightening my effects. 'The sea! Stippled, gilt and black. The Levant an immense craggy mass, deep grey. Coming out from behind Mount Lebanon, the sun. The same sun I'd seen politely descend into the lake in St James's Park the evening before. But it'd turned violent,

going round the back of the world. It came roaring out of Mount Lebanon, burning red. A cauldron in a foundry, tipped over to pour out molten iron.' Really I should take to the stage, I should rent myself out for children's birthday parties. Which is what this was, after all. 'The air was steaming with white vapours and flakes of gold leaf. But above me, all about me, was pure bullion. Not a scrap of blue. It was impossible not to think of that vault as solid.' Why was the minx not delighted with me? Wicked birthday-girl: she went so far as to raise her eyebrows (her admittedly excellent eyebrows, thicker than most girls or women would dare). 'Only far off, far to the west, was black. On the furthest edge of the planet, bending over into space, there was still night. There, this astonishing vast day had yet to begin.'

She held her *demitasse* for me to notice it was empty. To punish such coarseness, I attended to my other guest.

'More coffee, sir? No? Oh yes and what about *you* young Margot? And more Bénédictine?'

'Thank you, only coffee,' she said, dryly. She must be impressed despite herself; she must. 'Tell me, Felix, had you been sky-diving before? You obviously found it dreadfully exciting.'

'No, I was virgin. Read what to do in a book.'

'In a book. I see.'

'You?'

'Oh yes. Only the once, I think. Last year, when I was travelling. The Maldives. Or Seychelles? One of those places. It rained.'

'Then you know what it's like and I shan't bore you with more details. Have *you* ever been parachuting, Professor – um, um, Professor?'

Jones-Brown tittered weakly. 'I've no interests outside my academic field': again that gawky note, blending defiance or discomfort. For he was certainly uncomfortable.

We were in my rooms in College, although they were unrecognisable. My sitting-room had put off mellowness and become a silvery cavern. No longer did books or unbound papers form effete heaps, here and there, on upholsteries of silk. My desk was scattered with maps of Africa and the Amazon. The waterproof camping trestle I'd unfolded in the bay window bore an arsenal of spiky metal: skates, crampons, tent-poles. The mantel was stacked with hard plastic equipment, ration boxes, ammunition boxes, sky-diving helmets topped with cameras. (Thank God the Foreign Office was paying.) A complicated backpack was propped against a wall beside an inflatable mosquito-net. Two heavy hunting-rifles made themselves at

home on an ottoman, for I was considering a safari. Wouldn't shooting elephants, now that it's so illegal, be more fun than it had been in my grandfather's day? His diaries make depressing reading: bustling officials, crafty local chieftains, pilfering bearers, unspeakable insects, never enough to drink in the evenings. But of course grandfather, poor booby, always missed. Surely modern poachers must shoot straight? In the Carpathians there's still bear; I've always wanted to see the Carpathians...

The outdoorsy mood doesn't visit me often, but when it does, it gets indulged, despite my slightly creaky limbs and very slightly receding hair.

I'm sure outdoorsy moods never visit Jones-Brown. Invisibility clung to him: amidst these dense mineral shapes he resembled a human figure cut from tracing paper. He was perched spinsterishly in the corner of a sofa he had to share with a brace of oxygen tanks. Gutting knives on the coffee-table glittered so wickedly he seemed nervous about putting down his cup. Or perhaps his discomfort came from within. He'd just lunched with me on high table, although – as he told me, then all his neighbours, one by one (this was a man who used thought sparingly, recycling what he used) – he usually didn't bother with lunch, there being so much to read. Now he was sipping strong black coffee, which he was obviously not used to either, one hand pressed to his belly.

He had no interests outside his field. 'Oh well, I plunged two miles out of the sky in the usual way. But I'll tell you this. When I used to go to confession—'

'You did?' Margot was amazed at last.

'During a pious period, very brief, at school. I found going through the confessional door was like stepping into the Tardis.'

'The what?' asked the impossible Jones-Brown.

'Be quiet,' I said before I could stop myself, then softened it a bit with a smile. 'It's nothing, Professor, just pop cult. But listen: it's much more like dropping out of the door of a 'plane...'

It was refreshing to have Margot interested again. 'You catalogued your sins on the way down – once you'd finished itemising the colour scheme?'

'I thought of this and that.' I wasn't going to confess the eye in the presence of Jones-Brown.

'Let's have a *précis*.'

I hurtled downward for half a minute. Like death. Obviously. Also, birth. Glorious to be so alone. The 'plane receding off to the east, losing altitude quickly but clearly in one piece. Beirut a congealed blur. In shadowed folds of mountains to the north, villages with their lights still

on. A tiny white wake behind a tinier black dot: a boat returning from a night's fishing. But all about, for miles and miles and miles, just me. Me, and this ecstatic brightness.

I'd lost Margot. She was shaking her hair. Without making a sound so she managed to tell me: *This is my birthday; I've many pleasant things to do; it's not pleasant wasting my afternoon with your cardboard joke of a guest, this parody of you.* (Ouch! Is that how I seem?) *Why exactly am I here?*

Why exactly was she here? I'd noticed her in the crowded body of Hall as we dons and our guests filed up to high table. All the undergraduates stared; her stare was particularly hard. I'd vanished on Friday morning; it was now lunchtime on Tuesday, her birthday, and I was reappearing without explanation, bringing with me this sordid little man. She'd caught my hand-signal – *Come to my rooms after lunch* – and obeyed, but she wasn't being gracious. My account of being consulted by the Foreign Secretary, which had made Jones-Brown giggle, squeeze his knees with professional vanity, and turn almost human, had blackened her face. My stint as a fat Persian woman left her cold. Even my assault on the Guard and parachute jump seemed to weary her.

Yet I kept talking. 'D'y'know Doré's engraving of the *Paradiso* – the souls in bliss hanging in radiant circles?'

'Retrograde art,' sniffed Jones-Brown, 'of no developmental significance,' and was ignored.

'Heaven *was* like that. An untainted world. The new day felt impossibly fresh. To match the impossibility of being alive in mid-air. Too much joy for one man. The universe jangling from the final hammer-blows of creation.

'However, Professor, we seem to be irritating Lady Margot with these flourishes. At 1,500 feet I pulled a cord. Thwack! A lime-green canopy jerked upward between me and the sky. What? Oh yes, Professor, one of my parcels was a parachute.'

'I was jolted, then floated, not attempting to steer. Slight offshore breeze. Sun in my eyes. Freefall is godlike, parachuting's merely fun.'

'When my wrist altimeter read twenty-five metres I yanked at another package, a hard yellow cylinder the size of a magnum of claret. It split in two, and started hissing, writhing, spinning over itself, unfolding, inflating – officially turning itself into an inflatable raft.'

'I didn't enjoy this. For last seconds in the air I wrestled a soft fatness that *would* press its swelling belly into my face, however I grappled with its handles.'

'Hit the water upside down. Smothered and blinded by rubbery skin. Like every sea, colder than it looked. Raft on top, parachute an affectionate giant squid. I was unhappy.'

'Two or three strokes. Clear. Got hold of the raft's soft side. Got breath back. Loosed parachute straps, clumsily clambered aboard. Would've been easier if my leg could bend. Tumbled in face-first. Gasped and gaped for a bit. Slowly got my wet things off. Chucked 'em overboard.'

'The last of my packages was a waterproof bag. Towel, denim overalls, silly hat, electronic beacon, whisky flask. Gentle swell on the sea. Southern sun already warm. I lay drowsily sunning myself, content.'

'Pshaw,' said Margot, becoming exasperated, 'you must've been nervous. You'd blown the door too soon. Landed in the wrong place.'

'By half a minute. A bit high, a tad north, a smidgen too far off the Lebanese coast. But my beacon uttered friendly beeps, flashing its reassuringly unimaginative red bulb: *beep, beep, beep...* No, I wasn't concerned. They'd find me. Meanwhile I was on the bosom of the Inner Sea, still entirely alone. Watching the sun mount. Watching its waters flush silver, then indigo, then turquoise.'

Margot turned sarcastic. 'Perhaps the Mediterranean was gaudy from having a fake Rothko dissolved in it.'

'A pretty fancy, my dear. But here's the thing: I *couldn't* be scared. What with nearly being killed by Revolutionary Guards, falling through air, being cradled on sunny water...'

'Not to mention your hangover,' she said, unnecessarily.

'A wisp, the least wisp – my mind was transfigured. It beheld simplicity. I wasn't chugging through a thousand atoms of experience each second in the usual way. Nor did it waste energy thinking. The cosmos had resolved itself into broad, radiant elements. Which I had simply to observe. Admire.'

'All hangovers are like that.'

'Silly teen. I've been in an elevated mental condition, not just on the 'plane, but all week. A state of grace. Don't suppose it'll last, but it's interesting. I floated at sea unworried, unworriable, because the world is just as Rothko says. Luminous bars of orange sky, black land, turquoise sea. Visible abstraction.'

'That,' said Jones-Brown, putting down his coffee cup with a clatter and sitting up smartly, 'is reductionist. A crypto-naïve representationalist approach' – but I've seen that cross look on academic faces before, I know what it means: they object to *any* approach. Jones-Brown was a vestal whod given up whatever chance hed had of normal life to stand before his

tiny temple, burning paper on the altar, paper, more paper. It was cruel for him to see a normal man come up whistling, hands in pockets, and stroll past him into the shrine.

I laughed, and gave myself the last of the Bénédicte. ‘Then let me share less controversial thoughts that occurred to me as I lay embosomed on *mare nostrum*.’

Margot rudely pushed away her cup. ‘Don’t. Conclude. Were you eventually rescued? Or did you die at sea?’

I smiled at her insolence. I was spinning out my story for a reason, a reason I’ll keep from her; she’d find it creepy. She was born, I happen to know from Lady Rievaulx, her incontinent mother, at 16:41:22 on 9th October 1992. It was now a shade after four. If I could detain my impatient teen another half-hour, I’d witness her infancy cease.

Wasn’t there a mad New England doctor who installed fine scales beneath deathbeds, to weigh his patients’ departing souls? Didn’t Wordsworth observe the visionary gleam dwindle through youth to the instant (the *instant*) when *the Man perceives it die away and fade into the light of common day*? I couldn’t get Margot to stand on bathroom scales, but by God I was going to watch her carefully. The moment might prove as suggestive, as abysmal, as death.

So: ‘I feel oddly safe at sea,’ I said discursively, ‘like all Englishmen. Even as a castaway. Don’t you?’ Jones-Brown, tainted no doubt with unmarine Welsh blood, shrugged. ‘Continents groan with aliens.’ He was shocked. ‘But as soon as we’re offshore we’re in the keeping of the Royal Navy. Such as it is. Now, the flagship of our Mediterranean Fleet was close at hand. Eighty fathoms below my own craft, bolt upright, nose buried in slime. I knew this because my Great-Uncle Wilfred (bless him) liked to recite William McGonagall.

*’Twas on Thursday, the twenty-second of June,
And off the coast of Syria, and in the afternoon,
And in the year of our Lord eighteen ninety-three,
That the ill-fated Victoria sank to the bottom of the sea.*

*The Victoria sank in fifteen minutes after she was rammed,
In eighty fathoms of water, which was smoothly calmed;*

(as it was yesterday). Our Fleet was on manoeuvres off Beirut. Admiral Tryon, a furious fellow, couldn’t bear being corrected. “Sixteen points

to port!" "Surely you mean starboard, sir?" "Port!" bellowed the nation's hope. "What are you waiting for?" and they obeyed, shutting their eyes. *Victoria* was chopped in half by *Camperdown*. Tryon went down with his ship. So did most of his men.

"What colossal egotism! An admiral throwing away a perfectly good battleship rather than suffer contradiction!" Margot scowled, as if to contradict. 'Naturally Tryon was god of my boyhood.

*For he was skilful in naval tactics, few men could with him cope,
And he was considered to be the nation's hope.*

When I grew up I too wanted to sacrifice one incomparably beautiful thing to whimsy. Ideally, toss it into the *same* sea. To lie beside the wreck of H.M.S. *Victoria*. Meanwhile, what joy to have my hero lying near! The old boy's shade raging on the sea-bed, unassuaged—'

Jones-Brown made a *moue* of indifference. 'Slithering into mysticism, Dr Culpepper?'

I glanced at my watch. More. 'Then I raised my eyes and let them play along the shore. Directly opposite me was the town of Byblos. During that recent event, the Trojan War, Byblos was already renowned as the oldest city in the world. It had been standing for 7,000 years. Unimaginable! For millennia, its ships went about this blessed sea carrying papyrus – what the Greeks called *biblos*. Byblos caused literature. Alas. I'm no bibliophile, Jones-Brown, are you? I regret paper. Once you've got paper, you shrink to its level, you need it; it creates addicts; it's an export sinister as opium. Byblos, Byblos, Byblos: every time we enter a *bibliothèque* or consult a (horrible thing) bibliography, we're commemorating the city. Yet how can we criticize it, staring at it down such an abyss of time? A century of centuries!'

'What's antique cannot be relevant to the twenty-first century,' pronounced Jones-Brown as if it were an aphorism. Perhaps it is in the staffroom at North Cambridgeshire Poly.

Margot audibly groaned, and stood. 'Thank you for coffee, Felix. I'm glad your weekend exploits amuse you. I should go and read an irrelevant Latin book. Professor – um.'

It was only quarter past. 'Oh sit down. I've nearly finished.' A lie. She sat. 'While I was thinking these and other wondrous thoughts (now lost to you both for eternity), there came a tiny whirr, which grew to a whine, then a ridiculous deafening roar. A jot on the northern horizon had

swelled into monstrosity and crouched over me, flickering my raft with shade.'

'In short,' said the impossible man, 'a helicopter.'

'The sun, high now, had painted the universe to match itself. The vault was an almost-solar gold. I was awash on a pool of molten tinsel broad as the planet's face. It was dazzling to look up. Impossible light burned on the curved glass of the helicopter, burned and fled, flashed at me from steel – I covered my eyes.

'Something flaccid thumped my face. Rope. A ladder had dropped from the sky. I made a poor job of hauling myself on to the lowest rungs, what with my stiff leg, and the dazzle and bewildering racket, but I managed. Four hands stretched down and heaved me in. It seemed horribly crowded after such perfect solitude. Bizarrely dark. Suddenly the racket got worse: one of the squaddies was leaning out, shredding raft and parachute with his machine-gun. Nothing was left but a meaningless litter of rubber, untraceable, shrinking, shrinking – we were ascending now. With a swoop we were off over the sea to Cyprus.'

'I would have liked to get off the base and look round the island of Aphrodite – R.A.F. Akrotiri's a scruffy sort of place – but orders were to get me back to England at once. I tried to be discreet. Which wasn't hard. Picking unexplained people out of the sea was apparently everyday work. These airmen knew better than to ask how I got there. They all seemed to be twenty and thought of me as an old man, especially with my irritating limp.' A stiff-legged old fellow with an excessively young girlfriend. Another twenty minutes until she turns. 'They were patronisingly polite. Hardly any swearing at lunch. Which was surprisingly good. Barbecued octopus. We kept away from the one inflammatory topic, Abstract Expressionism. Afterward I was put on a twin-turboprop. We landed at R.A.F. Wittering last night in time for a less good dinner. I got back to Cambridge this morning by train. How wet England looks after even a few days away. You were kind enough to drive over for lunch, Professor. And here we are.'

Smug Jones-Brown raised an eyebrow.

'Oh yes,' I said, 'one last thing. The point of it all, really. I 'phoned the Foreign Secretary from Wittering. He sounded relaxed.' True. 'Clearly the crisis is averted. He didn't say but I could tell he was thinking' (a lie, this) "Thanks to the artistic acumen of um, Jones-Brown".'

There was a pointless pause for a second or two. Then Jones-Brown began to snuffle and twitch, and at last slapped his knee. 'To make a very long story short – you're defeated.'

'I am.'

'I've worsted you.'

'You have.'

Margot looked bewildered

'Ah well. Don't take it too hard.' He got to his feet and peered over Megiddo Court. 'It's pretty here in its way, but the real work's being done at more progressive universities. That's where the brainpower is. You see that, don't you?'

'Yes,' I said humbly, as Margot slumped back in her armchair, dazed. 'Do you need to get back to New Northborough? I imagine vital research calls.'

'North Newborough.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Yes. There's just the matter of...'

'Of course! To the victor the spoils. Over there,' and I gestured to a wooden case under a ski-helmet.

Jones-Brown shuffled over, peered down, hesitated.

"Port!" I mock-bellowed in hoarse naval fashion. "What are you waiting for?"

He sniggered, pulled out a bottle of 2002 College tawny, squinted at the label, dusted it with dampened forefinger, spelled out the lettering, admired his prize, looked round for something to clean his finger, didn't dare touch the wetsuit at his feet, and at last rubbed it on his trousers. 'Well, well,' he wittily remarked.

'Would you mind signing for it, Professor? Winners always sign my book.' I produced from a drawer a leather-bound ledger, heavily tooled in loopy gold in accord with *fin-de-siècle* taste.

'Ah yes, your funny old notebook,' said Jones-Brown condescendingly. 'Quaint reactionary customs,' and signed with a ballpoint pen. 'Now I'd better be off.'

But it wasn't to be. He couldn't get the case more than a hand's-breadth into the air. It came down again with a distressing tinkle of glass. He stared at me haplessly.

'It is heavy. For a man of such brainpower. Let me carry it out through the Lodge. Where's your car? ... Good. Meanwhile you—' said I to Margot, dropping the diffident manner, 'stay here and read this.'

I thrust the ledger into her hands, and went across Megiddo with the port jingling in my arms. Jones-Brown rolled along beside me: I think I've mentioned his extraordinary gait. I ignored him, smiling as one smiles who communes with Admiral Tryon and the King of Byblos.

*'Twas only those that leaped from the vessel at the first alarm,
Luckily so, that were saved from any harm
By leaping into the boats o'er the vessel's side,
Thanking God they had escaped as o'er the smooth water they did glide.*

I smiled as one smiles who dictates what goes on in another head. My ledger's familiar to me; I knew precisely what it must be inciting in Margot. The point of making other people read is to penetrate them and possess. The point of reading I cannot imagine.

vi.

**GERALD CULPEPPER'S
BETTING-BOOK**

reads the title-page in school-boy handwriting (but *BETTING* has been blotted and corrected to *BETING*, itself struck through. The third time, perhaps having canvassed his peers, great-grandfather gets it right.)

Next page:

Harrow, 4th Feb 1890

*WAGED: that Sibley of Rendalls House canot eet as many
jamtarts as Culpepper of Moretons.*

STAKE: two shillings

There are childish initials in the margin: J.S., G.C.

Harrow, 5th Feb 1890

VICTOR: G. Culpepper (27 tarts).

The greedy brat goes on to win a number of similar contests. At Cambridge his gambling progresses from food to drink. After Cambridge the entries take a more baleful turn; whores are mentioned; then:

Brooks's Club, St James's, 14th March 1900

*WAGED: with Charlie Baine that I cannot make the acquaintance
of his cousin Miss Margaret Baine, who has 4000 a year in the*

Funds, woo & be acceppted before midsummer's day.

STAKE: *a week's jaunt to Monte Carlo.*

[C.B., G.C.]

Monte Carlo, 21st June 1900

VICTOR: *Culpepper*

After marriage Gerald's atrocities taper off. There are a dozen pages of innocuous wagers about the weather. He generally wins. Finally:

*To my son
Osbert Baine Culpepper,
on the occasion of his XXIst Birthday,
22nd Jan 1922;
hoping he will employ this book as profitably as has
his affec: & profligate father,
G.C.*

In fact Osbert was a more cautious fellow, profligate only when it was safe. His bets concern shooting and fishing; they are seemly, modest, without gusto. It comes as a shock to find, from his time as a colonial judge in Kenya, this:

*The Club, Balambala, Tanaland Province
Tues 2/6/1953*

WAGED: *with Mjr Cyril Maze of the Lancashire Fusiliers,
that I can condemn a dozen damned rebels before Tuesday next*
STAKE: *as much gin as can be drunk in an evening.*

[C.M., O.C.]

*The same,
Tues 9/6/1953*

VICTOR: *Maze*

Osbert, having failed to hang enough Mau Mau, seems to lose interest in gambling. There's nothing more until a brusque note, dated 1990, to say that he's leaving his ledger *to my troubling grandson Felix*.

I've used it occasionally, mainly to settle spats with other dons about Latin adjectives. But here's my latest entry.

Morpeth Arms, Pimlico,

Fri 5.x.2012

WAGED: that Prof. Jones-Brown of New North Newborough
does not possess such standing that he can persuade the
authorities a genuine painting by Rothko is a forgery, to the
length of having them destroy it.

STAKE: a dozen bottles of middling St Wygefotis College port.
[S.J.-B., F.C.]

My rooms, St Wygefotis', Cambridge

Tues 9.x.2012

VICTOR: S.J.-B.

and then an uncouth signature, *Steve P. Jones-Brown, PhD (Keele)*. The final two-thirds of the book are blank, awaiting whatever mischief can be thought up.

vii.

In the six days since matriculation, Margot had acquired from St Wygy's perceptive and unkind undergraduates the nickname *Abishag*, after the girl who shared the bed of the senescent King David to keep him warm. But did she warm my age (I'm thirty-four); didn't I rather chill her youth? Now, as she read, she certainly felt cold all over.

But did she? Perhaps she felt *stricken*. Or: *for the first time in her life she considered the possibility of fainting*. Or: *she turned numb*. Or – very well, this is guesswork. You can be a person looking at a book, you can be in a book looked at; you can never quite look out. I don't know why I bother. Except that she did look old as death when I bounded back into my sitting-room. I'd achieved that much.

'Huzzah! We're rid of Jones-Brown.'

She said nothing at all.

'Self-absorbed brutes, these red-brick lecturers. I'm making myself whiskey and soda. Do you want? A hunter's drink... He's devoted his life to one dead artist. Worships him, collects tertiary relics – laundry-bills with Rothko's name on. Yet he's prepared to throw away his Master's masterpiece for a case of port.'

She said nothing at all. She was a silent teen.

'No, not even for port - I don't imagine he can tell wine from beer with the lights off. Just for the thrill of scoring points off Oxbridge. Isn't that sinister?'

Then Abishag burst out in horror: '*He's* sinister? Dear Christ. What are you?'

I enthroned myself on the oxygen tanks, stirring the ice with my finger, stealing a look at my watch. Not much longer.

'I follow it all,' she continued, wildly - 'this derring-do was just about repriming *me*. There was no robbery. On Thursday when I asked you for a visit to the Rothko exhibition you didn't merely refuse me. You decided to *act out* an ultimate No. You slipped off to London yourself the next—'

'True. Taking my betting-book. "Something sensational to read on the train".'

'—next morning. Went round the exhibition. Chose the best of the paintings. Found that dingy muppet Jones, flattering him with conversation on some technical point—'

'Cleverly guessed.'

'—took him out to some pub, got him tipsy, made your bet.'

'Wrong,' I said mildly, feet on sofa. 'He sipped a half of shandy. Booze was unnecessary. He *leapt* at my wager. That's why I say he's—'

'Then you had a Rothko forged—'

'Wrong again. Did it myself. Half an hour in my sister Gertrude's garage applying house-paint with a roller. Rather more time smashing and trampling the result. It only had to impress detectives, whose artistic taste rises no further than fox-hunting prints. And Benjy, who now and then admits a certain baffled awe for "Bellini, and Tiepolo, and all those fearfully clever Italian foreigners." Benjy probably doesn't grasp there *can* be American painting. Painting's something done in Italy the way champagne's made in Champagne... My daub wasn't remotely like the real thing. I don't know how Jones kept a straight face, keening over it, groaning about tonal values, egg-whites—'

'—stowed it in a lock-up, then put on a bad brogue—'

'That's simply a slur, I spoke a shade of County Wicklow—'

'—to 'phone the police—'

'—southern County Wicklow, which I could hardly expect the police to—'

'You 'phoned the police. And waited for that innocent, Benjamin Wedgwood, to beg you to save him. As he always does. Knowing he'd call

in Jones. God, I feel quite sorry for him, sitting there in agony, expecting a diplomatic crisis, with you two villains playing him along. Pretending not to know each other—'

'Credit where credit's due. Must've been harder for Jones. There are so many things he really doesn't know, think of the strain of *feigning* ignorance.'

'All so you could—'

'Feigning not to know *me*. The unknowable.'

'All so you could have the government help you get your hands on the loveliest thing Rothko ever painted. And *obliterate* it. A sacrifice to whimsy. *Then* come back and crow over my weak taste. On my *birthday*. And risk international chaos. And risk ruining Wedgwood, not that I care about him. And – O God, I can't endure to be in the same room as you.'

'You're overestimating my perversity.'

'But it's *true*. You just told me. Your crime's witnessed in this cursed ledger.'

'Oh that. Don't worry. I needed Jones to sign the receipt as a confession. We're quite safe from him now. He can never boast about what he's done. If the Official Secrets Act doesn't silence him, the thought of what art-lovers would do to him *will*. I mean if they knew he condemned a genuine Rothko worth thirty million pounds, just to win a bet... Don't think I like whisky and soda.' I put aside my tumbler. (She made a wild gesture of rejection.) "Worth" in some abstract sense, of course. It can't ever be sold, so it doesn't matter what it's worth, does it? We can only measure the delight it brings its possessor. And it *is* delightful.'

'Felix, I'm going mad before your eyes. Why are you using the present tense? Did you chuck it in the deep or not? Was the story you just told a lie?'

'The monster war vessel capsized bottom uppermost, And, alas, lies buried in the sea totally lost... No, every word was true. I left out certain details.'

'Have mercy. Where is *Untitled 849*?'

I glanced at my watch. (What a lot of our life we waste staring at clocks, watching the hands brush away the most precious commodity. Thirty-five seconds to go.) 'Deduce, deduce. You affect to be my disciple. Think like me.'

'About *what*?'

'Begin with my leg. You ought to've noticed – the infamous stiffness has cured itself. See?' I performed an improvised dervish swirl round the

room, which metamorphosed into a matador pose, watchful, menacing, graceful: I snatched up a mortarboard as cap, a long metal tube from my desk as sword, I twirled my scarlet doctoral gown as a cape. Death-incarnating, the bull lowered its massive head, blacker than night, pawing the yellow dust of an arena where a thousand beautiful women in black mantillas clutched lace fans, begging the Madonna to protect me; the sequins on my *traje de luces* scarcely glittered so still I stood, awaiting the beast's heavy onrush. Oh, I felt pleased with myself that afternoon.

'Your stiff leg was a fraud?' murmured Abishag, battered into stupidity.

'A container was strapped under my trouser-leg. Stuffed into my sock. To hold, don't you see, the canvas.' Her face, bewildered, almost bovine, was quite unlike itself. 'Which I cut out of its frame on the 'plane. Before I blew the door. D'y'follow?' I paused: seven; six. 'You seem not to follow.' Tick, tick: *ping!* Time. She transformed before me. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet sounded, the young were made old, corruptible; as we shall all be changed. 'Darling Abishag, it was just the black frame that went flying. To lie beside the *Victoria* and the bones of Sir George Tryon, on whom be peace.'

'Where,' my twenty-year-old persisted, in the heavy blurred voice of a sleepy child, 'is the painting now?'

'Here.' I handed her the metal tube. 'Happy birthday. Sorry I didn't have time for gift-wrap. Please never again call me ineffectual. Or remote.'

She held the tube in both hands and stared, and stared.

'I admit there are splashes. Sea-salt. But that tube's designed to withstand blizzards, it'll be all right inside.'

Like a sleep-walker she swept her arm over my trestle, sending studded-boots and ice-picks clattering to the floor. She unscrewed the metal cap and slid out the canvas, unrolling it with blind, unerring hands.

It was luminous; how are we to handle this fact, short of Jones's alchemical bubble-babble? Here were blocks of red, green, blue, formed of brushstrokes without any sign of effort, poised beside each other without mingling or jarring, radiant from each other's purity. Their harmony was so absolute the glow was like a zone of music – no, silence: perfectly new silence when the last throb of a gong has died into air, compelling as the silence of the spheres.

(Generally speaking, mind, I don't care about paintings, 'though I like them as *décor*: the important thing in a picture is matching the sofa cushions.)

I looked up from the canvas. My handsome sitting-room looked

cluttered and dusty. Margot had lost the power of speech. To clear the mood I transformed myself into her tutor, and chatted.

‘Y’know, it strikes me that Rothko paintings are made the same way as the universe. It’s made to be seen by us, and whatever we see’s an arrangement of colours. We can detect seven million colours, but each is a cocktail of three raw ingredients, red, blue, green. There are three types of cone in our retinas. We’re what the biologists call trichromats. Trichomacy’s the absolute limit of simplification.’

Margot, who wasn’t listening, let her hand pass an inch above the surface of her birthday present. It would be sensationalist to say the colours shone through her hand. Yet I did perceive this hand (wont to caress me) dissolve into its constituents: it broke down into pure form, nerves, molecules, atoms, down to the level of the quark, a trillion-trillion-trillionth of her hand. And above her appeared the planes of college, country, planet, sun, galaxy, finally the invisible plasmic edge of the universe, a trillion trillions as large as she. Abysses within, abysses without of much the same dimensions; and at the fulcrum her hand, moving over the glory.

A banal wheedling donnish voice, mine, kept chattering. ‘So what I want to know is why it’s *not* simple. If this is the bedrock of trichomat perception, why are we seeing something *behind*?’ (The face she turned to me was dashed clean of its usual intelligence.) ‘Someone said the secret of the world’s that we only see the back of things. We see trees and clouds from behind, and they appear brutal. But if we saw the face... Here’s mere colour, the elemental root, the base material. Yet it seems to be looking elsewhere. Bouncing back elemental light.’

(I meant more than that, too, more than I dared say: that the light seemed uncreated as well as unmixed; that the element almost showed a face; that it was human, and seemed to converse with the viewer, as if we could be comradely with an atom, or go drinking with a wave function. Also: that the painting was the apple of an eye. Also: that it would be her companion when I no longer was. It would hang above her bed and dye her body with its colours. I’m glad I said none of this, it would have been out of character.)

She sighed, collected herself, and began to roll up the canvas as if it stung her.

‘Off you go. No, don’t bother putting it back in the tube. Don’t hide it. Carry it across college, pin it up in your room. In plain sight. Don’t worry about discretion. If anyone gushes “Where did you get that fantastic Rothko copy?” you know what to say?’

“It isn’t a copy.” She spoke as if out of the ground.

‘Exactly. “It isn’t a copy, my lover nobbled it for me at ten thousand feet, then jumped into the sea.” You’ll get quizzical looks, shrugs. Not the police. Always rely on double-bluffs. Understand?’ She nodded and stood. ‘Now go and change. Be back here at seven for bubbly. Then I’m taking you out. You wanted Rothko *and* dinner I think? Be off with you, child.’

It’s swell being a man of action: one can address mistresses in brisk imperatives, and carry off gestures that would be camp or theatrical in a bookworm.

Of course this couldn’t last. I was bound to relapse into languor. A few weeks, or days, and I’d once again be ineffectual, a slave to the King of Byblos. But now I took her hand and chivalrously bent to kiss it.

And she said, a bit damp-eyed, ‘*Felix...*’

No doubt she’d never before loved me so much, and probably’ll never love as well again. She said ‘*Felix...*’, clutched the rolled canvas to her breasts, was gone; but for that moment none of my usual mental fidgets got in the way. No sheet of writing slid between us, not even this present writing (which of course I foresaw; for which I was posing). For that one moment everything, even this story, went clean out of my mind. In that moment her eyes shone into mine, my eyes into hers, my hand rested in hers, hers in mine.

Bah: what’s the point of putting black scratches on a white page? Pointless as pinning butterflies to cork. Nothing worth seeing can be captured, nothing worth describing can be described. There’s only the instant of sight, given once. There is only the glance, with its millions of points: irreducible, irrecoverable.

Thinking which, I sprang up impatiently. It was scarcely five, but the autumn day was already well gone in rottenness. White and yellow were leeching out the corrupt daylight, blue was seeping in. Beyond my windows Megiddo Court was turning into a lead model of itself. Within, each bit of furniture threw a shadow like a fresh bruise.

Roughly I pulled my curtains to, groped about in the sudden thick grey, found a caving-helmet, switched on its light, banged it on to my head. Sweep-sweep went its nervous beam over ceiling, walls, furniture. For cuirass I pushed arms into a life-jacket (white-water-rafting grade).

I snatched up the hollow tube Margot had left behind and sketched a salute: ‘*En garde, monsieur!*’ Paper? Paper? No! One must carve holes *in the air!* There. Better. *Prêt? Allez!* Aha!—’ A fine slashing upstroke; it was parried, but I gained ground on what we swashbucklers call a *tempo*

patinando (slow step, fast lunge). ‘That you did not expect, eh, Monsieur le Roi de Byblos?’ The bar of light from my head twitched back and forth in mid-air; I hacked at it in riposte; it caught the cheval-glass above my desk and stabbed my eyes – that old trick! I twisted aside my head. He was attempting a *croisé* now, taking my ski-pole on the *forte* of his own blade to thrust it down, across my torso. I leapt back and countered with a *raddoppio*.

How masterful he looked in the dimness, my morbid self-conscious! How fast his shadow arm flickered over the wall I’d hung with so many pictures! How much he knew!

‘A *Prise de Fer*? Bah, I saw it coming!’ – and I brushed it back. Now I almost had him: ‘*Touché? Pas de touche? Bien!*’ But when I brandished – ah! Aha, a-*ha*—

*If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, ...
here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come.*

MACBETH

Iolë

AFTERNOON OF THE FIRST DAY,
WEDNESDAY, 14 NOVEMBER 2012

—which was so irritatingly *wrong* (I can't bring myself to record it) that I, Felix Culpepper, threw myself back in my armchair and at once launched into

the first story (2:23 p.m.)

'Once upon a time, Ollie, Hercules sloped into view. Tripping along beside him, trying to keep pace with his enormous strides, was Deïanira. Deïanira, Hercules' lovely new tiny timid bride. They reached a torrent called the Euenes.'

'The—'

'Euenes. No, don't write anything down. And shut your Ovid which you're never going to master. No, shut it. Listen. The Euenes leaps, oh the glory of it, Ollie, it makes your guts leap against your ribs, leaps down through the mountains of Ætolia, in a gorge so deep the sun scarcely reaches the water. Where, here and there, it does, the pebbles on the river-bottom flush red-gold. An amazing colour. And the twisting banks of gravel glitter like silver. The pines soar up steeply on both banks, black not green, unimaginably dense. They're virgin, no axe has ever fallen in these woods. Here they hunted the Calydonian boar – Meleager, and Nestor, and Atalanta most wonderful of women. They made me look up from my kayak, through the spray, to see the very hillside where the boar charged Telamon and Peleus, out of a water-course choked with willow. It would have slain them if Atalanta hadn't shot it, just behind its left ear. Pppp-thwack' I gazed off.

Ollie Vane-Powell peered at me from beneath his expensive coiffure, his bloody, bloody coiffure. He wanted his tutor to tutor; my poetic mood was new and unimpressive. *This isn't much of a revision – I could see the thought forming beneath his kiss-curls: it's only eighteen months to frigging Tripos. C'mon, Culpepper, enough tourist brochure. Let's have another bash at the lines I slightly fucked up a moment ago.* He reopened his *Metamorphoses*. ‘*Überior solito*’, he recited aloud, ‘which means something unusually more than something—’

But I remained irritated. ‘Do shut up you horribly uninteresting boy. Just listen. Imagine a pure Hellene backdrop: sun, black sunny crags, forests. An aura of glory. We went down the Euenes in March, when the snows melt on the peaks above Delphi and rivers are in spate. The sky was already hard-blue, busy with eagles, but the air stayed cold ’til mid-morning. Swiftly, swiftly we flew down the white water. It took two days.’ Ollie visibly imagined the anguish of two days away from shampoo. ‘At Rigani, when I capsized and tore my forearm, I saw my blood gush into the stream, faster and paler than I’d have thought possible, gone in an instant. Below Trikorfo, the Euenes reaches the lowlands and turns mellow. It meanders through the plains, and muddies itself into the sea at Missolonghi, where Byron died for your sins.’

‘Nah that can’t be right, Dr Culpepper. Byron was back in the olden times. Before even you.’

‘I mean that classically-educated knuckle-heads like you drove Byron out of England, and made him want to die for Greece. In certain moods I – anyway. That’s what the Euenes is like. Was like. I’m told they’ve dammed it since my visit. They trap it in a reservoir and pump it to Athens. Remember that next time you’re staying there, on your way to a beach-rave on Mykonos. In some grotesque hotel with a disco and a buffet and a biddable *masseuse*. When you flush away your feeble piss, that’ll be the sacred Euenes.’

Ollie was doubtful. ‘None of this will be in Tripos, will it?’

‘Will lustral loo-water be in Tripos? No, I don’t suppose it will. But you are going to face unseen goblets of *Metamorphoses* book IX, and since you’re too stupid to translate Latin, you need to know the stories and fake it.’

Ollie perked up at the prospect of something for nothing. ‘It’s a scam!’

‘A scam. This is how it works: I speak; you’re silent. Close your eyes.’ I made an eye-poking gesture with two fingers. ‘*Hercules* is about to appear to you – more than you deserve. Nessus too. Even silver-footed Déianira...’

As I was saying. No, as Ovid was saying. *Venerat Eueni rapidas Iove natus ad undas.*

‘Er – the son of Jove came—’

‘Pluperfect, cretin.’

‘Had come to the rapid, or swift, Eue – um – Euena—’

‘Euenes, Euenes. Hercules and Deianira reached its banks in early spring, sunny and brisk: the same season I saw it. Dark, boiling waters full of bobbing boughs. The current tugging at low branches. The little beaches submerged. An unspeakable racket from boulders the size of shepherds’ huts grinding along the bottom. See it?’

‘Yes?’

‘Then try again: *Uberior solito, nimbis hiemalibus auctus.*’

‘Um, um – richer than usual.’

‘*Uberior*, more copious, yes—’

‘Rains of winter. Bigger *because* of the winter rains.’

‘Good. Crowded with *verticibusque frequens*, frequent torrents, and *inpervius amnis*—’

‘Impassable rapids!’

‘You’ve done it. Yes. And those whirlpools you’ve brilliantly discerned: they frightened Deianira. Hercules was *intrepidum pro se*, afraid of nothing himself, being just a walking fist.’ I walked my fist across my Ovid; how tempting to clout my student just below his curl-line! ‘But he was concerned for his wife, *curam de coniuge*. Who clung to his elbow, mightier than the shoulder of a normal man, moaning.’

‘Bit of a goer,’ sighed Ollie, puckering his eyelids.

‘You make me numb... They looked about and saw – a prodigy. A tall man cantering toward them, four hooves kicking up the meadow dew.’

‘That can’t be right. Centaurs don’t exist.’

My voice hardly shook. ‘Te, *Nesse ferox*, says Ovid: You, ferocious Nessus—’

‘Oh. I thought that was about the Loch Ness monster.’ My fingers tightened on the arm of my chair. ‘Which science has seen through too.’ It’s remarkable how much Ollie denies, given how little he knows.

‘Te, *Nesse ferox*: “Bestial Nessus, what *ardor* you felt for that poppet!”

Ardor: frenzy. Desire *more* than human, but also less. A centaur can speak with us, mislead us, war on us, mate with us. But it can’t pity us. It’s an animal, with no more restraint than an avalanche. A cunning animal. Knowing it was no match for Hercules’ strength, it concocted a whopper. ‘You’re in luck. The gods have appointed me ferryman of the Euenes.

Swim across, you incomparable, while I carry this sweet baggage dry-shod through the flood." Hercules believed his story. So—'

'Wants to show off to his squeeze by swimming. Hoping for an admiration blowjob on the other side.'

'—swinging his tiny quaking wife on to Nessus' warm withers—'

'Mistake!'

'—flinging his club and bow across, he dives in. Even for him it's a pull. When he reaches the far bank, over the waters' shrieking, *coniugis agnovit vocem*.'

'He, er, recognised the spousal voice.'

'Deftly put. Deianira's howling. *Biformis* is galloping her up the piney slopes, venting joyous human neighs. "Rapist!" bellows Hercules, in sopping lion-skin, "she's mine! I'm coming for you! With wounds not words!" His curses are strong, like everything about him.'

'But he shouldn't be cursing. He ought to do something.'

'He is, he is. *Ultima dicta re probat*, that last word he proved real. He's getting an arrow on the string. Just as Nessus flings Deianira on her back in a convenient clearing and prepares to fall on—'

'I don't buy this.' His eyes were still scrunched. 'I saw a centaur statue in the what's-it in Paris. Horse-willy between its back legs, not at the front. It couldn't fall on a girl, it'd either have to squat, or get her on her—'

'To fall on her,' I continued through my teeth. 'Thwack! Hercules' bolt, stinging with Hydra-venom, goes straight between its shoulder-blades and out its chest. Down it goes, horse-body on top of man-body. The woman-body rolls out of the way, splashed by blood, semen and death-sweat.'

'Arrow arrived in the nick of time.'

'You wouldn't say "nick" if you'd seen that hole. Hercules' arrow-heads are like elephant-bullets, meant for big scaly monsters. The exit wound's the breadth of a fist. The mess is unspeakable. Deianira has to rub gobs of horse-plasma out of her face before she can shriek. And when she shrieks no one hears but the gods and poets. The Euenes is thundering away. Even Hercules' roaring is inaudible. The centaur murmurs to itself "I shan't die unavenged" and, with a smile, annihilates him.'

'Er – what?'

'Kills the son of Jove.'

'Can't be right.'

'Anyone can kill anyone.'

'I can't.'

'You're subnormal. For the rest of us, it merely calls for some off-the-

cuff ingenuity. Fatal moonshine. Hercules can turn his words into wounds because he's unusually muscly. Nessus turns its dying words into wounds because it's commonly clever. *Ultima dicta re probat.*'

'Um—'

'Strength is nothing, it can always be bent against itself. Deceit is power.'

'Er—'

'Listen: every instant reality comes pouring over us. It's too vast to describe, it's ineffable. But chop it into a narrative shape, hand it on to someone. If he takes it – he usually does – he's yours.'

'That can't—'

'What's language? A Darwinian struggle between stories. And what's a story? A lie that lives and therefore kills. A falsehood big enough to inhabit. Listen to my untruth, enter my miniature world. Inside it I'm God, troubling you at whim. Or blessing, or slaying.' Ollie wrinkled his brows. Sculpted curls jostled, much as thoughts jostle each other. 'That's what the horse-man does. As it dies, it thrusts its gory tunic at Deïanira. A mess of guts, venom, *et cetera*. But it'll do to hang a story on. *Dat munus raptæ velut inritamen amoris.*'

'*Dat*, it gives, *munus* a present to – er. Er. Give us a sec.' (I gave him that second, thinking: *He's not naturally doltish. If the time spent fabricating curls were spent reading, he'd get a First; if the same energy went on writing he'd have finished a novel. That mane's a waste of fiction.*) 'Nah. Can't get *raptæ*.'

'It means *raphee*. It gives its *raphee* a prezzie, naming it an incitement to love.'

'I wouldn't buy that if I were De – whatever she's called.'

'If you deny centaurs exist, how can you disparage centaur-blood? I can't think of a more plausible aphrodisiac. Anyway, Deïanira does accept this cock-and-bull story. Cock-and-stallion. She keeps her centaur-fluid in a stone jar. Treasures it as the years pass. Until a certain young woman comes along. Even younger than herself, even slimmer. A new wife. Iolë.'

'Natural, that. He's muscle-bound. Likes 'em small, likes 'em tender.'

I frankly shuddered. 'Hercules is off on Mount CÆta with Iolë, making sacrifice to this god and that. Before dawn, sleepless Deïanira gets out her jar. Soaks a wad, dabs it over a nice new shirt. Wraps up a parcel. Gives a slave the gift, watches him jog off down the road. For the rest of the morning she's happy. She's preoccupied by Nessus' bosh about love-philtres. She even adds to it, I mean she tacks on a final episode: as hubby

does up the buttons he claps his forehead: "What am I doing? Naff off, you horrible small tart, I'm going home. I'll bring my darling wife flowers..." Then she sees what makes her scream: the wad, discarded on the tiles of the courtyard, spitting and smoking in the sunlight.

Ollie, still with eyes closed, allowed himself a guffaw. 'Can't be right - they didn't have chemicals like that in th'olden times.'

The nails of my left hand nearly pierced the fabric of my chair.

'*The chemical's not the point.* What caused Hercules' blood to hiss like a bucket in a smithy? *Not Hydra-venom.* The centaur's invention.'

'Oh - a fib.'



I put down the book and growled 'What exactly are you doing here, Ollie? What're you reading? Why waste three years studying Latin and Greek "fibs"?"

'Can't do maths.' His eyes, open now, were bland as a child's.

'Why be at Wygy's at all?'

'My family always comes here. It's the stupid college and one of our traditions is being stupid.'

'I mean, why come to 'varsity?'

'Girls. That's where they keep'em. The rich ones who are up for it. Supply's pants everywhere else.'

The comfortable way Ollie said this made a hand grenade go *boom* in my mind. I dropped my Ovid, reared from my armchair; I loured over the horrid youth and his strawberry corkscrews, genuinely enraged. 'You're less than human. A donkey-centaur. No, hair-centaur - this great *do* is welded to the scrap of you that's man.'

Ollie looked mildly alarmed. 'That's not right. In fact, isn't it a bit superstitious? I'm not special. Wygy's *is* the dim randy college, I'm like everyone here, Seb, Toby, Hugo, Rajiv, Tristan—'

The vulgarity, the justice of this made me go limp. I turned away and pressed my forehead against the pane.

It was a classic St Martin's summer; I've never seen College look so gorgeous and futile. My wholesome outrage dribbled away. There was no one to reproach but myself. 'Why am *I* here? Why did I choose—' I took a sudden jump - 'or rather, why, having chosen to drop myself into this ditch, do I see *the Foreign Secretary* hurrying toward me?' For, in a swirl of good tailoring, face swaddled in silk scarf, that very grandee,

Benjamin Wedgwood himself, was coming with furtive speed straight across Megiddo Court. 'Incredible!'

'Secretary coming here?' prattled the boy inattentively; he was ogling over my shoulder a triplet of strolling girls. 'A foreigner?'

'Out! Out, out, out! Go and prey on credulous females like the half-human you are. Story's done, supervision's over. Ovid's too good for you. Begone! See you Friday. I've got a serious politician coming up the stairs.'

'That can't be right,' said the insupportable Ollie, 'why would he come here?' I bundled him out of the door, mock-kicking the brat in the buttocks and rumpling his curls, as the Foreign Secretary came in. Expensive damage.

'Oh, hello,' murmured the diffident Foreign Secretary to Ollie.

'Don't bother with him, he's sub-human,' I cried, elated by Benjy's greatness. 'Come in, come in.' I slammed the door and got his scarf off. 'Sit. Drink?'

'No.'

'Cigar?'

'No. Stop prancing, Felix. Can't you sit? Something to tell you.'

'Oh God – *something* means a narrative,' I thought, and indeed, before I could get myself properly comfortable, Benjy launched breathlessly into

the second story (3:12 p.m.)

'It happened in Soho last night. Just before twelve. Young couple, knocked down and killed. Professionally done. Dark green Mercedes. Veered on to the footpath, splatted them against a brick wall, stopped, reversed over the girl's head (she was still wriggling), roared away.'

'Were they important people?'

'She was a primary school teaching assistant, he worked in a bookie's. They shared a flat in Harringay. No.'

'Were they *really* that? Not spies or blackmailers?'

'Really just that. Labour voters, too, I gather.'

'Have you been demoted, Benjy? This doesn't sound like your usual beat.'

'They'd just left a nightclub on Shaftesbury Avenue. A louche place called *Déshabillé*.'

'Good God, that takes me back. Round the corner from Great Windmill Street, isn't it? There used to be a woman there—'

'Do pay attention, my car's waiting outside the Lodge. I need to get back for a Cabinet meeting. But I didn't dare telephone you with this. It's too important.' I subsided. 'Someone'd rubbed mud over the Mercedes' licence plate, but the plods enhanced a security camera picture. They're pretty sure it had diplomatic plates.' I looked more interested. 'In fact, an Harani embassy car.'

'Ah!'

'And 'though the driver wore a woolly hat low over his forehead, it seems to have been the ambassador himself.'

'What nasty habits it instils, Benji, diplomatic immunity.'

'Quite. Well it dawned on the coppers, after a few hours' hard thinking, that this was politically ticklish. They got in touch with the Foreign Office. The problem worked its way up the chain and reached yours truly in time to ruin my day and obliterate lunch.'

'God. Sherry, then?'

'No. Thank you. Meanwhile the police had found some witnesses from *Déshabillé*. It seems the dead couple had been involved in a *fracas*. A shortish fellow had propositioned the girl. To put it politely. Doesn't seem to have had nice manners. In fact he'd been making a general nuisance of himself before molesting the Harringay girl. Groping left and right. The Harringay boy wasn't particularly upset, but she was, so they—'

'Intrepidum pro se', I murmured, '*curam de coniuge*.'

'—knocked the intruder about. Not much, he being so scrawny. Everyone cheered. Then the bouncers threw him out. There's a camera over the road, on Great Windmill Street, and we have a good picture of him dabbing his forehead, and whimpering, and making a 'phone call. Here's the photo, by the way.'

'Humph.'

'We got a positive identification around noon. The boy's visiting—'

'From Haran.'

'Yes, from Haran. And staying at their embassy.'

'Does he have diplomatic immunity?'

'Much worse. He's the President of Haran's youngest son. Idris ibn Ali al-Mutlak.'

'Hm. What's he doing here?'

'Shopping, basically. And whoring and drinking. His excuse is that he's being interviewed at, let me think, the University of the Mid-Pennines.'

'The what?'

'There are 115 universities on this island, and in every list Mid-Penn's

115th. You mustn't smirk, remember I'm in the government, it's partly our fault these places exist.'

'Was I smirking? I'm sure not. This is St Wygy's. We have no prejudices against chuckleheadedness.'

'Young Idris aspires to study office-design at Mid-Penn, and last week satisfied the entry requirement, which is possessing a daddy who can write a cheque.'

'Whereas *you're* an intellectual snob. Inexplicably.'

'He's due to fly back from Gatwick to Paddam Aran tomorrow evening.'

'You're not going to arrest him?'

'Ticklish, Felix, ticklish. The Met say they don't have enough to charge him. And my lip quivers at the thought of annoying the Haranis. Especially' (he put on his portentous face) '*just at the moment.*'

'Then overlook his naughtiness and let him go.'

'Her Majesty's Government,' said Benjy with grandeur, 'does not countenance foreign hooligans coming to the West End and having our citizens squished.'

'Proles from N15.'

'Felix, *your* snobbery's always been preposterous.'

'A teaching assistant. Crushed at the command of a Mid-Pennines office designer. *Really?*'

'In fact I suspect it's just a pose.'

'All right, let's pretend the dead boy was a paladin. And the girl a mitred abbess of Merovingian descent. It's still not much of a case, is it? Purely circumstantial. Young al-Mutlak *might* just have been reporting to his embassy he'd been beaten up. The hit-and-run *could've* been the ambassador's own naughty idea. Vindicating the honour of Haran and the al-Mutlaks.'

'We don't take that view. Of course we'll declare the ambassador *persona non grata*. At some point. But what about Idris? At eighteen he's already got the name of a murderous little bastard. The President's middle son was machine-gunned at a camel race last year, and public opinion around Paddam Aran blames Idris.'

'I see. Not a good sign, is it, if the ambassador thinks it worth his while obliging Idris? I mean to the extent of running over girls who annoy him.'

'No, not a good sign. In such a very young person it implies pushiness.'

'What would the President think? I mean, if you told him?'

'Papa has a dicky heart, he's probably past doing anything. But the oldest son, who'll soon be President, we hope, might not mind seeing the

last of baby brother. Name of Jasim. A Sandhurst man. Fairly decent as Haranis go' – Benjy looked sly saying this.

⁂

I pondered the Foreign Secretary for a moment.

Cagey is the word. He's curiously unembodied. It's hard to believe there's simply a column of flesh or solid bone beneath his bodily movements – which are rather good, a charming fluttering motion in the hands, a boyish fidget in the feet. His eyes are sea-blue and slightly epicanthic (Benjy is one of those people so English as to look Chinese), and he shakes them about like pretty marbles, not as if he uses them to look through.

This is all curiously appealing on television. Even his obvious shiftiness has charm; since no one can credit his lies, he can never be said to mislead. As he dwindle into late middle-age I foresee Wedgwood will become a national treasure, unassailable, ageless.

'So that's the end of your yarn, Benjy?' He did his tossing-back of the head, slightly disarranging hair thin and platinum as it must have been in the nursery, washed back over his skull like an otter's pelt. 'I'm to do something unofficial about Idris al-Mutlak?'

Now he performed with his vivid eyelids, ears and hands: it could not be defined as Yes or No.

'You want me to find out exactly what he did last night? And then, so forth?'

More of the mime.

I exhaled heavily and pulled the 'phone toward me, pretending to be wearied, in fact tremendously excited. 'Where's this wretched youth staying?'

'A suite in the Savoy. Number 322.'

I paused, drumming his fingers. 'Does he have a rank?'

'He's notionally governor of Arpachshad Province.'

'Hmm.'

'Direcory enquiries,' said a depressive.

'The Savoy Hotel, London... Yes, please put me through.'

'A wonderful morning to you!' said a manic euphoric. 'This is the Savoy!'

'Room 322, if you would.'

'Course at once sir! Been a pleasure.'

The 'phone rang and rang. 'Yeah?' came a surly boy's voice at last.

Smiling murderously at Benjy, I adjusted my tone. ‘Can this be His Excellency the Governor of Arpachshad? You elate me. Your servant, the Tutor and Fellow in Latin at St Wygefotis’ College, Cambridge;’ and at once I launched into

the third story (3:29 p.m.).

‘May I first bid you welcome to our chilly capital, Excellency? At this remote seat of learning we barely regard the pleasures of London, but rejoice that such a distinguished youth should savour them, having heard so much... Nonsense! You are too modest... Oh, from the dutiful *fellaheen* of Arpachshad Province. And the intelligentsia of Paddam Aran, who speak of you as the hope of Haran.’ Idris became more lively; I covered the receiver to whisper to Benjy. But he’d already vanished. I went to my window, and saw him receding across Megiddo Court. ‘...Hm? Oh yes, England holds Haran to be the light of the Near East, and Your Excellency as the light of...’ I wasn’t paying much attention to what I said. ‘How often we discuss you on High Table. Let me tell you a story: last week the Master remarked... And the Bursar cried “Young al-Mutlak! I’ve heard...”’

The larger the lie, the harder to see round it. I didn’t stint. I think my story finished with the Fellowship leaping up to toast Idris and sing the Haranian anthem. It doesn’t bear repeating.

‘You are honouring, I understand, the University of the Mid-Pennines? An institution in a league of its own. Nonetheless, should Your Excellency care to consider instead classics at Cambridge...’ Much more of this. ‘It would be,’ I concluded, after some minutes of fantastic fiction, wandering about my rooms poking at piles of books with my feet, ‘a privilege for this College to invite you here. If it were possible for you to come for an interview tomorrow. A mere formality, of course... What? Oh, at your convenience... Four? Four would be surpassingly excellent. Until then. *Ma'a as-salāma!*’ Perjury complete.



A little nauseated, I replaced the ’phone, sported my oak against visitors, picked up the half-finished translation Ollie had left behind, dropped it in my bin, drew my curtains, fell on my bed. It was past my usual siesta time, but sleep’s sleep, *ennui ennuí*. I’d had enough of the fourteenth

of November for a while. For an hour I would opt out of that tiresome narrative. I shut my eyes, disgustedly, which brings us at once to our

fourth story (3:46 p.m.).

Idris ibn Ali al-Mutlak had been expelled from three international schools in Switzerland for increasingly grave offences. He spoke gutter-American and gutter-Swiss-French as fluently as Arabic. He'd travelled all over this sorry globe, admittedly not often getting beyond the beach, where his hotel possessed a beach. He had squandered many fortunes and was guilty of things grown politicians only aspire to commit. Yet the embarrassing truth is that he was at heart a child.

Only three generations separated him from a camel-hair tent in the wilderness. His great-grandfather had been an illiterate sheikh whom the British had taken up toward the end of their Mandate, needing a strong man to hold Nahor Province. And this old sheikh, for all his cunning and flocks and wives, could not gainsay the young British officers who came to see him because they spoke so well, so wonderfully! It was delight surpassing all delights to sit with them.

His great-grandson had inherited this susceptibility. To look at Idris – slight but wiry, heavy-lidded, long-fingered, hawk-nosed, loose-lipped, well-tailored, drug-worn – you'd think his twenty years had already rendered him jaded and cynical. But part of him remained a child of the desert, capering delightedly before the baubles of the towns. And language was for him the gaudiest of all baubles, as for most Levantines. The Hebrew scriptures and *The Thousand and One Nights* were composed with bedouin toughs in mind. The Prophet denied his warriors wine; he dared not forbid the deeper drunkenness that comes from words crushed, fermented, aged and strained.

Idris al-Mutlak had denied himself nothing: not wine (although he usually cut it with Coca-Cola), not white chocolate liqueur, not heroin-morphine speedballs. But no excess mortified his addition to stories. They were his one secret vice, amidst many vices well known to all. When he locked himself in his suite in the summer palace, in the hills above Paddam Aran, the servants assumed it was women, or boys, or some terrible Western drug of which they had not yet heard; or that he was plotting against his father with Colonel Adeeb of the Presidential Guard; whereas in fact he was lost in the world of Brazilian *telenovelas*.

His favourite was the gloriously interminable *Dias da Paixão*. Idris

scarcely noticed real people being shot or hanged before him on his own orders. Yet when he fell to wondering whether even now, in episode 899, Fábio might emerge from his coma to reveal what he knows of the helicopter crash that killed Glória (or her secret twin) in episode 324, his face became so rapt that personality was chased away; he looked almost pleasant.

Even so, Idris' terrible great-grandfather had sat before the opening of his tent in the Nahoran waste, chewing dates slowly with his sparse teeth, spitting them out, nodding for his Somali slave to bring him more tea in bronze bowls, shading his eyes (although he was nearly blind) as the sun declined toward the mountains of Pildash. Behind him, in the odorous gloom, his four wives crouched on their haunches, chins in their henna'd palms, embroidered veils pulled low. Fat Daborah, ever the favourite. Thirteen-year-old Aanaa with her frightened eyes. Beautiful unloved Raaheel, shrill, a scold. And pale-haired green-eyed Frida, a half-Bavarian camp-follower captured from the Ottomans in a raid, long ago.

Before the tent, uncomfortably cross-legged on a rug, as if back at prep school, sat British officers with toothbrush moustaches. Twenty years had worn away since the romance of the Arab Revolt. These were a hard-bitten generation, who got their ideas from *Scrutiny* and the Left Book Club. They spent a lot of time feeling silly. 'Honestly,' they'd tell each other apologetically, bouncing back to H.Q. on their dromedaries, 'don't you think this T.E. Lawrence carry-on's a bit shopworn? I mean to say, amusing a feudal oppressor all afternoon, it's a bit thick.' But holding down the Nahor meant charming wicked old Sheikh al-Mutlak.

Therefore they gorged him, with everything they could remember: tales from Shakespeare and Kipling and Boccaccio and *Pickwick*, Ealing Studio comedies, smoking-room stories, anecdotes of the War, reminiscences of *Punch*, slithers (lightly disguised) of the Bible, nursery tales, muddled opera plots, shoddy problem plays, expurgated sagas.

The sheikh's wives (who cared only for love and heavy gold jewellery and quails braised in a certain way over embers in a mess of pounded almonds) were tremendously bored by these stories. So were his tribesmen, sitting a respectful four paces off, keeping their views to themselves; the mildest criticism of the sheikh was apt to lead to being pegged out on a dune and eaten by jackals. They were indifferent to other men's adventures, dreaming only of their own. They dreamed of how it would be when the conspirators of the capital, with their soft hands and womanish European suits, staged a Nationalist revolution; for then, they'd been promised, the British would let the Mutlaki clan ride, whooping and cavorting, to

the sack of Paddam Aran. Meanwhile, why concern themselves with the profane doings of the *bint* Becky Sharp?

But the sheikh himself never wearied. He demanded hours and hours of fiction before he would discuss the shipment of rifles.

Three-quarters of a century later, Idris did not enjoy his great-grandfather's liberty. Obviously he could be as degraded as he pleased; indeed, he could scarcely be degraded enough, everyone found it useful to push him further down that path. But innocence was forbidden. The al-Mutlak dynasty had moved beyond noble savagery. Their regime had postmodern fittings: there were elections to manage, websites to hack, visiting celebrities to bemuse. Beyond Haran, the al-Mutlaks ran a complex of offshore shell companies, not to mention two American Congressmen; they owned houses in Chamonix and Hampshire and Long Island, and retained lawyers in many countries. By choosing nannies carefully they'd acquired chirpy Californian accents. They had arrangements to keep fresh with Al Jazeera and Fox News. International press barons sometimes took their calls. Such was the family business. The last thing it needed was a younger son with an atavistic barbarian heart.

Idris was no *naïf*. He was aware of his outrageous innocence and realised its peril. If Jasim found out about the soap-operas he'd certainly inform their father Ali, a hard, serious, dangerous man even now he was so sick; Idris didn't like to think what would happen.

But what (he asked himself) could he do? He was a throwback, as simple-hearted as his great-grandfather; he inherited with his one-sixteenth of Bavarian blood the irresponsible romanticism of the Danube. He couldn't escape his debauching thralldom; indeed he longed to sink deeper.

For he'd heard of an even stronger narcotic than Brazilian soap-opera, lush, fulsome, humid; he craved it. It was called literature, and was manufactured in Europe. One line can be enough to intoxicate. Take it and you're transported into a lie, a lie vast as a city, far out beyond the ergs of non-existence: gleaming, with pinnacles beyond number, walled about, rose-coloured, watered by springs, visited by storks. The mere rumour of that city had been enough to bewitch his great-grandfather; Idris wanted to enter it, to get lost in its alleyways, push past unicorns laden with panniers of roc eggs, with the shadow over him of a tremendous wooden horse...

He'd heard of schools (not, admittedly, Mid-Penn) where this drug is administered. And now Cambridge had rung! Idris was overcome by my call. I wasn't just some smarmy teacher who would have to be bribed. I was a *djinn*.

For hours he lay on his hotel bed, dabbing at bruises and cuts left over from last night's brawl at *Déshabillé*, while his imagination rioted with pleasure at the thought of what lay ahead. He was so happy he didn't think of his cocaine stash in the bathroom, or revisit his ornate plans for the torture and dismemberment of Jasim once he was President. He forgot the glaring infidel city beyond the plate glass of his suite, pulsating with lawlessness. He pictured himself as a Wygefotis undergraduate: fornicating expansively of course, boozing and snubbing and shopping; but also (to do him justice) sitting at night in the College library turning pages.

Thus Idris, while loathsome as to morals, was *imaginatively* in advance of Ollie Vane-Powell, who couldn't see the point of Ovid.

It was ten o'clock before Idris remembered what he owed to himself and to the House of al-Mutlak. He rose and showered, doused himself in unfortunate cologne, and went to a nightclub to pull, still hugging to himself the fabulous ecstasy of education—



It's shocking that you're swallowing all this. How can anyone possibly know what passed through Idris' head, alone in his room in the Savoy? We can't even be sure what he *did* there. The police didn't have a camera or microphone in the suite itself, they merely staked out the corridor, and observed from across the road. This hazy stuff about rocs and sheikhs and Frida the German is the daydream I, Felix Culpepper, spun for myself as I dozed.

The only facts are these: at 23:04 the Suspect emerged from his room (it's perfectly true, it's in the police report, that he reeked of cologne). He asked the concierge the way to a nightclub, found it, sat at the bar, and ordered (23:14) a grilled cheese sandwich. He consumed three Jägerbombs, looked around for a woman, found same or was found. By 23:22 he'd got her on the barstool beside him and bought her a drink, buying also, as he clearly assumed, her attention, adulation and sexual obedience, and launched into his familiar, coarse, reliable technique, beginning, 'Hey! How's it going? Great to hang out. You cool? You a secretary or whatever?'

'Whatever.'

'Whatever. Feeling all right? Great. Me too. Really cool. More about me. I'm like a student at St Wygefotis'. It's part of Cambridge College. I'm going there to study Latin stories. They're kind of all right.'

'Are they? Coo,' said the undercover policewoman, who was wearing a

wire, ‘you must be ever so clever.’

‘Yeah, I got smarts.’

‘And you’re really a provincial governor?’

Idris hadn’t mentioned this fact, but he was too pleased with himself to notice. He smirked.

‘Tell me about governing.’

the fifth story (11:24 p.m.)

He told her, holding back no crime. Idris’ innocence did not, of course, make him good. His cruelty was gleeful, his greed for money and women childish: a piling-up of pretty things. Possibly he embellished the horrors (although many of them are, alas, verified by Foreign Office reports on Haran). He’d read in dirty magazines how excited women get in the presence of masterful men, shedders of unrighteous blood, whip-wielders.

In any case the detective sitting a mile away in earphones, listening to the boy’s boasts – a detective never one to hold back in the thrashings of prisoners or the fixing of evidence – found his mouth swinging open. ‘Never in my born days have I heard the fuckin’ like—’

MORNING OF THE SECOND DAY,
THURSDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2012

Naked, rosy, tanned (but snoring and very slightly dribbling), Margot ffontaines-Laigh lies with her hair spread over pillow, counterpane and shoulder, an incredible aureole of orange-brown. There’s never much sun in England, but what there is, is doing its best: enough has worked its way through a flaw in the autumn clouds, and a gap in Margot’s curtains, to turn her hair to fire.

I, Felix Culpepper, having just stolen up staircase II of Gehenna Court, through her sitting-room and into her bedroom, stand over her with folded arms, mingling indecently my roles of tutor and lover.

But can these roles be mingled? Walking across Gehenna just now I was officious and stooped, as a don should be when crossing a College court; coming up the stair I was eager but unsure of myself, two steps at a time, face held up to glory in the approaching door, the ideal lover. Dissonance, you see.

And dissimulation. Even at St Wygy's, where the shameless undergraduates nickname Margot *Abishag*, Fellows are meant not to sleep with students; certainly not with Freshers they tutored over the summer and got into College in the first place; and the other dons (many with similar arrangements of their own) have to be helped to overlook it.

Now, standing over her, the lover recedes and morbid empiricism reasserts itself. 'Yes she's lovely. But,' I tell myself, 'it's beauty of quality, not form. Not one of these shapes is particularly fine. Certainly not the nose. Yet if it's not the best tailoring, the fabric's superb. Tall, loose-limbed, flawless skin, perfect bones, clear eyes. And the hair, the hair! Of course there are days when she's not wonderful at all. If she's tired or out of sorts, the bloom dims, the hair's just lurid and unkempt. Consider, though, the decades to come! Stuff outlasts shape. She'll be splendid in old age, when all forms sag and blur. Still splendid eyes, still ruins of uniquely splendid hair.' She snuffles in her sleep.

Not that she is unique; no one's that. We're all twice-told tales; slaves of heredity, with each generation crushing the next to its own shape. Left to his own devices Ollie would be inoffensive enough, but he conceives his purpose on earth to go to bed with as many females as he can, because that's what Vane-Powells do; and fusses with his curls as a spider tends its web, much as his Victorian ancestor must have fussed with macassar-oil, and his Georgian ancestor with horsehair perukes.

Erudite Margot is even more enslaved than oblivious Ollie, because she knows exactly where she gets her red hair, and much else. They're inherited from her great-great-great-grandmother, the intellectual *Urania née Romilly*, Lady Rievaulx. It's *Urania* who compels Margot to be so artfully self-possessed, crushing, slatternish. She'd no doubt be a normally timid, well-groomed, dull, sweet-tempered girl, if she weren't self-conscious about being a reverberation.

I adore Margot. I think. Would I have liked *Urania* ("patron of the theatrical Kemble, friend of John Stuart Mill, comfort of the elderly Coleridge, *confidante of Disraeli*" – who all, in their different ways, were besotted with her colour)? Could she have abided me? She's almost as familiar to me as her descendant; indeed she must seem almost as intimate with my darling as my darling is with herself, since the girl spends so much time poring over the privately-printed memoir (1904), *Urania Rievaulx, A Merry Life, by various hands*. It's her private Bible, the infallible scripture of her religion of herself; I study it myself so that I can understand not *Urania* but Margot.

Here it is on the shelf above her bed. I take it down, open its soft green leather covers, lettered *U.R.* in gold, and consider the frontispiece: a sepia photograph of Lady Rievaulx in court dress for the Golden Jubilee, still emphatically handsome, still with her amused, sardonic smile. Despite the grisly late-Victorian upholstery, Urania manages to look indefinably lax, as lax as she must have been in her Regency girlhood, when she ran about in loose muslin, listening to loose Jacobin talk at Holland House. Urania was never subdued to the age; she subdued.

Yes, Margot too will be splendid in old age. In her eighties she'll have become entirely Urania, a magnificent reproduction. Not that I'll see it, being dead.

I open *A Merry Life* at random, and on page 64 find a letter from the Leader of the Opposition, Disraeli, which tosses me into

the sixth story (8:44 a.m.)

1 Aug 1862. Confidential. My drst Ldy Rievaulx I write in ^{t^h} wildest haste & w/ ^{t^h} most fervnt congrat:ns. We have hd a proper coup d'état in ^{t^h} H. of Commons ^{t^h} evening! As we feared, that wearisome bigot ^{t^h} Chan: of the Exch: launched upon an insulting survy of American affairs. D-v-l take M^r Gladstone! he seemed perfectly bent on giv: offense. A few more such provocations & I verily believe we wd find ourselves at war w/ ^{t^h} Union hand-in-hand w/ ^{t^h} slaver Confd:r'cy & ^{t^h} Empr. of ^{t^h} Fr. However I sent over an anon. note to the Govt. benches intimating wh: you told me of ^{t^h} conduct of Gl's ~~hussey of a wife~~ (which by-the-by I learn fr/ Ldy Warboro' was not - & cannot have been so - that Mrs Gl: was w/ her ^{t^h} whole evening you allot to her criminal rendez-vous w/ Mr Radvers - that in fact ^{t^h} whole ~~wild~~ scintillating & plausible tale not excepting Mr Radvers himself sprang Minerva-like fr/ yr own head). However this the Lib'l. were not to know & as ^{t^h} passed my note fr/ hand to hand I cd see mingled consternacion & astonishmt. At last Ld Palmerston tugged on Gl's coattales and whisp'd; upon wh/ he quite blew up before us & subsided into fragments. 'Not a rack remained.' He begged ^{t^h} H.'s pardon, sat. We rose w/out a division, & I have bustled out to pay lay at once my tribute at yr feet. Of course Gl: will soon estb. his wifes innocense & the nonexistnce of Radvers but ^{t^h} moment for mischief over ^{t^h} Amer: war is passing, &

since Parlmt is soon to be prorogued 'til t^h close of Oct I verily believe we need dred him no more. Thus drst Ldy R you have outdone t^h romancers of t^h age & warrant t^h admirat:n as well as gratitude not only of yr own Dizzy but of t^h nation. T^h olives of peace (tho' of necessity secretly bestowed) are more precious than t^h bays of war nay even than t^h laurels of the noveliste & I hasten to press them on yr brows, my thrice-precious friend. A 1000 adieux, D.

I shut the book; the gentle noise wakes Margot. She smiles, raising golden-brown arms to pull me down, saying nothing true or false. I, unworthy brute, baring my own body in all haste, leap to her. Warm flesh for the moment casts out even the possibility of words.

❧

Afterwards, we lay for a while in immaculate silence, her head on my shoulder, her glorious hair half-covering me. She smiled up at the abstract canvas fixed above her bed with drawing pins: the shining blocks of yellow, white and scarlet, from which her hair, perhaps, draws its strength. She was thinking (I think) of me. I thought, not of myself for a wonder, but blessedly of nothing.

Not for long. The beastly fidget of meditation resumed, the stories that outlive us, cascading from father to son to son, the main reason I suppose fathers bother begetting.

I didn't consider her: when a Culpepper's mind's not gnawing at itself, it pesters the infinities. Wobbling between narcissism and metaphysics, it finds the middle range, that is, other people, comfortless – which isn't my fault, in more sensible ages I'd have made a tolerable monk; I'd have had a skull to finger in my cell, instead of making *memento mori* of a healthy girl of twenty years and one month...

Meanwhile I wound a strand of her incomparable hair about my fingers and tried to read her thoughts in her eyes. *How he likes my hair... How disgusted Urania must have been*, she reflected (perhaps), *when the Pre-Raphaelites made heavy negligent chestnut hair fashionable, therefore common. Of course the fashion didn't last; it went out before she died, and it's gone in and out of fashion since her day, in and out, displaced by all sorts of ringlets, bobs, shingles, peroxides; now in this year of grace 2012 it's as out as it's ever been, thanks be to the merciful and infernal gods. How he likes it.*

I do; but what I was wondering was whether Urania could have

prevented a war with the United States if she'd been a watery blonde; and, conversely, what Abishag might be capable of, given the colour she has.

Her green eyes turned to mine. There's always a postcoital danger she'll whisper 'I love you', which is after all not quite true. To pre-empt her I sat up, and launched abruptly into

the seventh story (9:14 a.m.)

'Last summer, travelling through the Basque Country disguised as a priest, I met—'

'Why?'

'I'd been ordered to go there and settle someone.'

'No, why that disguise?'

'Englishness reads to foreigners as fussy clericalness. I don't have to adapt my manner, just make people understand it differently. A useful mistake.'

She said 'Ah,' clearly repulsed.

'I met an old woman, in a mountain village called Urdax, near the French frontier, which I needed to cross without being seen. Urdax is a tiny place in the folds of gigantic valleys, set about with gaunt beautiful rocks. The crone was gaunt but unbeautiful. Cheeks like rotten potatoes, teeth like crumbs of coal. She was probably in her early fifties. I was in a hurry but she saw me passing and pulled me in, insisted on giving me stewed elvers, unburdening herself to me in appalling French. People always tell me things when they see me in my cassock. They can tell I care for their stories.'

'But you're entirely self-absorbed.'

"Aita!" she told me (*Aita* is Father), "you must hear me. I grew up on a farm high above this village. As my parents were dead I belonged to my grandfather, a harsh man bent double who needed me to work our bad holding. We had few sheep and moreover our flock had *la tremblante du mouton*", which means scrapie. "Terrible was our wool, the shame of the district. My grandfather would not let me marry. I was never allowed to come down here to Urdax for the *festa*, and there were no young men in our heights. I began to suffer *la chlorose* and—"

'Suffer what?'

'Known to physicians – meaning the physicians of the sixteenth century, in whom I put my faith – as *morbus virgineus*. Green-sickness.'

Listlessness, bad stomach and moodiness in maidens.'

'What is it really?'

'By *really* you mean *according to the nineteenth-century materialist quackery*. Hypochromic anaemia in adolescent females.'

'Oh *that*. Go on.'

'I will. But do try not to be such a credulous materialist. So-called science is obfuscation, little else. Men in white coats are tame witch-doctors.'

'Yes, Felix.'

"“I began to suffer *la chlorose*, Aita, and became pale as goats' milk. The night before All Saints' Day an immense storm settled on the peaks of the Pirinioak and—”"

'Is that the Pyrénées?'

'Yes. "And the thunder was so terrible one of our ewes miscarried. But I went and lay in the field above our hut, in the angle of the stone wall, with my skirts pulled up. At each stroke of lightning I cried *Bai, bai*," *bai* is yes, "with each roll of thunder I groaned as with delight, and when the rain came, big and hard like pebbles, I opened my legs. At midsummer I gave birth to the most beautiful son. Neighbours, enemies, said it was my grandfather's but how could that be, seeing my grandfather was small and crooked and squinting?"'

I think my story was chilling Margot, who stirred uncomfortably on my warm shoulder. 'Were the elvers nice?' she said, to say something.

'Pale wriggly worm-things browned in oil, with lots of chilli. I had thirds. "Never has a boy like Absalon been seen in these hills," the witch told me during my second bowl, "never in all the Pirinioak. So good, so obedient, above all so clever. His thoughts came fast as lightning, they rolled in the mind like thunder. Where all the rest of us would say what we felt, he would calculate, calculate. Listen to his cleverness, Aita. I inherited the farm and flock when with three grammes of black hellebore cooked with onions I poisoned my grandfather, who ought never to have touched me: Absalon taught me how, and he was but eight. *There is a one-in-six chance any one of our lambs has la tremblante, mother*, he would say, *we must sell them to the butcher at a fifth less than the usual price and with the margin we'll have enough to silence him should anyone sicken from our meat*. Or: *If we pay the notary eleven thousand pesadas to muddle our wool with the wool of Txabier we need sell but eight bales to cover the bribe*. By the time he was fourteen we were rich and bought this splendid house in Urdax, where folk live who have never known hunger. My Absalon

was the marvel of the schoolmaster, who said that when he grew tall he must go to the university and study the mathematics and be a great man. Meanwhile it was like hearing music to see him cheat at his exams. Like the *ezpatadantza* which is the great sword-dance of the Basques and most hazardous if an error is made which it is not."

Margot's mental discomfort was tainting her physical ease. There seemed no comfortable place for her head along my whole warm flank.

"The dreadful thing occurred, Aita, because the summer before his matriculation I tell him *Always you work too hard, go down to Irún and make merry with Gillermo*, who was his great comrade at the *lycée* and the son of a wealthy fisherman, for by now we had acquired magnificent friends. Absalon went and was back two days later, before the dawn. He scratched on my window and almost I suffered convulsions when I saw his face through the glass, so haggard and owl-eyed. When I opened the door he fell through, dripping with rain, went to that dark corner there beyond the wooden chest painted with the saints (do you see it, Aita?) and dropped himself down with his face turned from me. For a long time I could get nothing from him. Then he told me." Here she paused to give me my third bowl of elvers. "Absalon and Gillermo had had too much of the strong beer they sell in Irún and gone out in Gillermo's father's motor-boat, and bashed her prow on the jetty but ignored it and went many kilometres out and turned off her engine and floated, singing and drinking and telling each other what they would do in the wide world, and how many women they would have, and how many men they would cheat. They sang and they boasted, Aita, until they found her sinking, with her engine flooded beyond revival. Then they began to bail but the ebb took them and they became afraid. The *bateau* sank lower and lower until the seawater was around their ankles and the sun began to sink also and the coast to fade in the haze. Gillermo wept until he was breathless but Absalon suffered more, for he could not stop calculating. He was bailing thirteen or fourteen times a minute but Gillermo, a fat boy as are the sons of the rich, only eight or nine. Moreover Gillermo weighed seventy kilogrammes whereas the small metal plaque on the gunwale said that the boat was to be loaded only to 220 kilogrammes. Therefore taking the boathook he struck Gillermo over the head and pushed his body under the sea while his eyes measured the gunwhale, which rose four centimetres for she rode much more lightly in the water and he was safe. Then he went on bailing more slowly than before from weeping over his friend whom he had loved, until a short while later he was rescued by

a yacht of Russians which against expectation was making its way along the coast at dusk. He had the Russians land him on a strand with no folk about and walked inland until he got a ride with tourists with German licence plates who would be gone and not testify of him. When they let him off he trudged by backways and so came to me with no one having seen him. The next morning Gillermo's father appeared in Urdax, wailing that his son and mine were drowned and lost. And now you must have yet more of my stew. No? Then you shall take some *patxaran* which I make myself from the best sloes.

“I had to have a requiem Mass said for Absalon who was hidden in our old hut up in our fields, may the Virgin forgive me the sacrilege, and the day of that unholy requiem our flock took the murrain. Within the week the drains in this fine house were disturbed and there had been a fall of hail, most unseasonable. And there were other things, too, forgive me for naming them in your hallowed ears. The *iratxoak* and *lamiaik* grew sportive (these are imps and nymphs, Aita, *plus puissant et maléfique*), and there were rumours that the other thing was abroad, that which has not been glimpsed since our fathers' fathers' time.”

‘What other thing?’

‘That’s what I wanted to know. Her voice sank to a whisper: “The *basajaun*, the *basajaun*.” When I pressed her she just mumbled “*Chut, chut, assez.*”’

‘What—’

“Understand, Aita,” she insisted, stilling me with more of her fiery *patxaran*, “Absalon was a good religious boy for all his book-learning. *I am accursed, mother*, he told me, *unclean things run riot because of me*. What could I do but weep and hold his head to my breasts, not daring to let him know the *basajaun* itself had been seen trotting along a high ridge of pines at sunrise? *Hélas*, had I not had Mass of the dead said for my poor son while he yet stood upon soil? Had I not surrendered him to the other realm? Made him over as prey to the prince of the air whose spawn he perhaps was? *Hélas! hélas!*”’

‘I’m more interested in the *basajaun*.’

‘So was I. But my garrulous old woman clammed up. From what she let slip I gathered he’s something like the woodwose – y’know, the wild hairy man of the woods the mediævals knew about.’

‘I’ve always hoped the woodwose was the yeti.’

‘That’s because you, as I keep pointing out, are a shallow materialist. Cryptozoology seems solider to you than respectable legend because, even

if it's vulgar and imbecile, it at least pretends to wear a white coat.' Margot pouted. 'Why can't a woodwoose be a folk memory of fauns? Or satyrs? Or, yes, yes, of centaurs? Or not even just a memory?'

'Why can't the woodwoose be a confused report of chimpanzees?'

'I disown you. Anyway, you're interrupting. Absalon thought these bugaboos, whatever they are, were drawn to him, and wanted to be exorcised before he died. His mother found a Dominican, a theologian – he must have been a clever man, God knows what he'd done to be exiled to those benighted mountains. Anyway, she brought him to the hut. "I left him alone with my poor son, Aita, and stood without listening to voices rising and falling and rising, then a howl so terrible I looked about lest the *basajuan*... But it was just Absalon. The friar emerged from the hut, pale, with his mouth set. *I cannot absolve him, Madame: alone in all the Pirinioak your son can never be redeemed, for his great sin came not by perverse appetite but by what he calls calculating, that is according to right reason, of which man cannot repent. He is assuredly damned.* With that he hurried away down the path to the village, the coward, to be far from that font of evil, my son, my beautiful son.'

"I went into the hut, Aita, expecting to find Absalon dead or raving. He was standing like one of the carved figures on the front of our parish church. *I have grieved enough*, he said, and I scarcely knew his voice, *I am dead to the world and now to Heaven also. There remains only America. Mother, give me your money*, also he took the money of the schoolmaster who loved him too, and fled to a city on the far side of the world which is called Seattle, because that, the schoolmaster certified us, is where those with *capacité surnaturelle* in the mathematics are employed writing spells to cast on machines and where no one exorcises anything. The schoolmaster is wise and reads on what he calls the Web of Chuck or Mikey or Lance, which cannot be their true names: men who have acquired riches writing mathematical spells in the city called Seattle. I am sure one of them is my Absalon and wonder if he is at peace. Do you think it is possible, Aita?" I said I hoped so and thanked her for her stew and got away, because I had to be in France before the light failed.'

Margot had snuggled down into a position that involved no contact with my skin. 'Do you really believe Absalon made it to America?'

'I forgot. "Aita," she told me, "every month an envelope with many banknotes arrives from the United States." Her house in the village was quite opulent. And she had a servant, a cringing girl who spoke only Basque and kissed my hand because I was a priest. So I'm sure the brilliant

Absalon did triumph in Seattle.

'What I wonder is whether he's hidden invocations in the machines to which we bare our minds. The code that runs them is almost infinite, no one can get to the end of it, it could harbour anything. Three-dimensional *simulcra*, for instance. When you switch on your computer and dive into its parallel world, what unthinkable thing comes to the surface to welcome you? What clatter of implacable hooves, what lustful neigh-saying, what black incredible whinnying?'



'Felix,' said Margot presently, 'have you ever really been to the Basque Country?'

'No. Have you?'

'Only the beach at San Sebastián. My mother had a thing for the yoga-instructor at the *Hotel Splendide*.'

We were both silent for a second, wasting that second reflecting on the desolating incontinence of the present Lady Rievaulx.

'You invented the whole *canard*?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'Now. As I went along.'

'It's unsettling how good you are at lies.'

'It doesn't *feel* like deception. More like brass-rubbing. Y' know, you scrub your pencil over the paper. A ghoulish mediæval face shades itself in.'

Margot may have been trying not to be a credulous materialist, for what she said next was: 'Ever wondered if you're demonically possessed?'

'That theory's occurred to me.'

'What was the point of your story?'

'I'm not sure...'

'The friar struck me as the hero.'

'Yes, didn't he... I suppose the point is that he's right: a man's the sum of what he's done. A shuddering misshapen tower of rocks. He can repent of this deed or that – tear out a stone. But can he remove his foundations? Repent of what he *is*?'

'He can regret a murder, but not being essentially a murderer.'

'Exactly. Absalon went off to program calculating-machines after a calculated crime because he *was* a calculating-machine.' I'd ungallantly

bounded from bed, and was briskly getting dressed. ‘What’s man like? Murdererous; Cainesque. Few fulfil our doom. Where’s my other sock?’ She pointed. ‘Ta. Those few, homicides by nature, are a different species. Fully human, fully damned.’

‘Er—’

‘There’s a boy coming this afternoon. *He’s* the point of my story.’

‘Why’s he coming?’

‘Candidate classicist.’

‘Clever?’

‘Direly stupid. Cufflinks?’

‘There and there. Too dim even for Wygy’s?’

‘Even for here.’

‘So why’s he here really? *He’s* not “fully human”, is he?’

‘I need to find out. A couple were run over on Tuesday night. He may (trousers on) ‘have ordered it.’

‘Beat it out of him?’

‘In fact’ (one shoe on) ‘I’m going to do just what the *basajaun* did.’ (Other shoe.)

‘Frighten him into confession?’

‘Just that. So I need to recruit a bogeyman. Ollie, I think,’ and I was gone before she could volunteer. It’s not that I’m chauvinist; I daren’t employ Urania-Margot for my capers. Who knows what she might be capable of?’



Was Margot annoyed? Did she feel snubbed? Yes, she told me later that crowded day, she was, she did. To soothe herself she reached above her head for *A Merry Life*.

the eighth story (10:01 a.m.)

The world thoroughly neglected the broken Coleridge once he retired from it; Urania Romilly did not. Such friends as visited the Sage of Highgate would often find Urania already there, still little more than a child, already famous as a wit.

She delighted Coleridge with her grace; she bore with him, too, when he was fuddled by his morning laudanum; and softened his apprehension of his own decline with kindly deceptions. It was, for

instance, the custom of the prematurely aged poet to sit beneath an oak in the garden with the long view down to London behind him, and regale his guests with ghastly or demonic stories, so effective in the days of Lyrical Ballads, so tame in the era of the Biographia Literaria. She would slip behind that chair, and the poet never guessed that the starts and shudders of his audience were due to horrible faces she pulled over his shoulder.

'It is strange,' records one visitor, 'that a ruined man should yet sound so sublime; stranger still that Miss Romilly, a lissom, lovely creature, should be able to flash the very visage of a Gorgon. At sixteen she is already mistress of fiction; perhaps, too, of abomination—'

Margot, who had known this passage since childhood, put down the book, as she always did at this point, went to her bathroom, and began rehearsing abominations in the looking-glass. She rolled her eyes so only the whites showed, she waggled her ears. 'I shall rule the world with scary stories,' she informed the mirrored monster. She sucked her cheeks hollow, she protruded her eyeballs, she let her tongue hang like a dead thing, pulled her hair over her chin, fixed her mouth like a marauding shark's. 'Surely more frightening than a *basajaun*? Anyway, more frightening than anything Ollie Vane-Powell can manage,' and satisfied, expectant, ran her bath.



But meanwhile you, reader, if you had been poised on top of Acheron, would have seen me emerge from staircase II looking like a lover (distracted, happy, vaguely disordered), glance about, shake myself, metamorphose back into a don, and cross Gehenna Court with that rapid round-shouldered shuffling known only to Fellows of Oxbridge colleges. You would have seen me vanish beneath Acheron, and – if you were nimble enough and moved quickly – emerge on the other side, striking across the grass of Megiddo Court toward my own set.

Acheron, although officially the Chapel tower, bears no particular relation to Chapel; nor to any known style of architecture. Guidebooks hardly prepare you for the mere bullying menace of the thing, seen for the first time from the railway station. It gouges the low soft flat grey vault of Cambridgeshire like a battle-mace. On the brightest day clouds gather behind it, as if the wound festers; the glow of sun, the sheen of rainfall

seem alike powerless to soften the curious deadness of its black stone.
And its shape!

Acheron rises, slightly swelling, in audacious incoherence: spiralled fluting gives way to inverted fanvaulting like the wings of bats, from which howling turbaned gargoyles jut into the void; then come immense ossified cobwebs holding up a storey of rusticated stone nearly irregular as a crag. This, dangling stalactites, is topped with a crazy dome set about with a crown of spiky balustrade. Finally five ribbons of stone, for which there seems to be no term, leap overhead and knot themselves together. Acheron seems to owe nothing to the Gothic, the Moors, faërie, nor even Milton's Pandæmonium. It makes an infernal impression which seems wrung from the unmediated experience of some overtaxed soul.

I excerpt this paragraph from my *Quincentennial History of St Wygefornis' College*, a book I am laboriously composing at the command of the present Master, Sir Trotsky Plantagenet ('You have so little teaching to do, Culpepper'). I am indulging myself in my *History*, shamelessly. Nor am I embarrassed to quote myself.

The tower was designed by Theophilus Knipe, Master of Wygefornis', who, about the time the House of Brunswick usurped the throne, turned from being a sound scholar and Churchman to an informer, a double agent, and something like a satanist. He was, at least, the only man to be expelled from the Hellfire Club for excess. Knipe corresponded recklessly with the Old Pretender; one by one the men involved in these intrigues fell into the government's hands. He was a Hanoverian creature, but the government so dreaded and despised him he found it prudent to retire to Wales, dying there by his own hand in a goatherd's hut. He willed the College an immense sum, £33,300, on condition the Fellows erect a tower, for which he left detailed drawings. They accepted the bequest and built Knipe's Turret; but the late Master had such an evil reputation no one calls it that; it is universally known by the gentler nickname 'Acheron'.

Imagine you had spent that morning, the fifteenth of November, on the walkway running between Acheron's bulbous dome and the balustrade. You would have observed, once I was out of sight, all the sluggish life of St

Wygeförtis' College acted out beneath you.

Thus you would have seen undergraduates slouch into the Porter's Lodge and out again, loitering with cigarettes and joints in cobbly Gehenna Court, the oldest portion of College, which Acheron overhangs, looking down into it as into a well.

You would have seen Margot *alias* Abishag emerge from staircase II, bathed and severely dressed, sail across Gehenna indifferent to her peers, and head out through the Lodge into the world.

You would have seen Ollie, or rather Ollie's pampered locks, drifting across Gehenna in the opposite direction. Beside every female head of hair, the curls pause.

You would have seen Tristan Bolswood's brown hair come out from the far side of Sheol Court, which is Art Deco on one side, spacious and Victorian on the other three: polychrome brick, bas-relief of saints, sandy paths, herbaceous borders, much like an opulent prison.

You would have seen bedders come and go with their buckets.

Would have seen workmen come and go with ladders, which are their excuse for doing nothing.

Would have seen traffic in and out of the Library, which stands to the north of Chapel and Hall; but not much.

The low, pale, clear sun, oddly warm, would be approaching its zenith above you. Directly below is a curious indecisive whiffling, and looking down you would see the College Chaplain, Dr William Leigh – *Woll-yam Leee*, a tall Ulsterman, always known as Woolly – stand haplessly before the doors of Chapel, turning this way and that, trying to decide what to do with the last of the morning. What fine dead heavy long white hair he has! How well it goes with those tremendous fog-lamp eyes! (He lifts them blankly now, toward the sky, toward you; but you can tell they see nothing.) If a traveller above the Arctic Circle, having dug a latrine in a floe under the midnight sun, would pause for a moment to watch it fill with pale-blue water, he would know what it is to look into Woolly's eyes, those wide, flawless, featureless shallows. No definite thought ever soils their colour; it harmonises wonderfully with his cassock, which is very pale green. Anything more emphatic he thinks too 'denying' (a favourite word). Apart from the eyes Woolly has no face to speak of. He's like a tree frog in a judge's wig. Yet he is beautiful. His fatuity is cosmetic, it makes a blur to which imagination gives generous shapes: mystic, bard, wistful Old Testament prophet.

And you would have seen Sir Trotsky Plantagenet come out of Tartarus, as his Lodgings are called, and cross pinched, sunless Cocytus, his belly

preceding him. He is bound for the Senior Combination Room and an early drink.

You would have seen, as soon as he was out of the way, the staff of Tartarus – butler, chef, secretary – slip into a shady corner of the Master's Garden with a lion, not quite full-grown, which they methodically set about buggering. Its stiffness and awkwardness give it away: it is long dead and stuffed. Sir Trotsky, then a young man on National Service, shot it in the Sudan. ('Anyway, some oppressed proletarian shot it, and by purchasing it in the Khartoum bazaar I paid for the shot; least said.') He is rightly proud of his lion cub; it is his favourite possession; he keeps it in his bedroom, despite its puzzling stink. If he were a good man to work for his servants would honour that lion cub. But he is cruel and tetchy, and this is the recompense they permit themselves every non-rainy day. God knows what put such a macabre idea into their heads.

You would seen (noon having rung from Lethe, the other tower) the outflow of student slow, the influx increase, the aimless mob in Gehenna increase. Lunchtime is close.

You would have seen the kitchen staff spill out into the chaotic area behind Hall called Limbo for a final smoke. They have brought with them a cauldron full of what is pale and bubbling. When they are done, they add their butts to the stew, one or two spit in it; they stir it well and carry it back inside to feed their foes.

Fabulously tinny with distance comes the tinkling of the lunch bell. There is a surge of young heads up the steps to Hall. We dows, however, approach Hall dramatically, over the roof from our Combination Room. Our gowns billow behind us. Sir Trotsky, a little unsteady, leads. Woolly can barely fix himself in a straight line. I, tall Dr Culpepper, disconcertingly, have my head back and am looking up, directly at you.

The crowd vanishes, is engulfed. Suddenly Wygy's is empty. Wygefortians, old and young, take victuals seriously. In the sudden absolute hush you might have heard birds sing and trees move; also, from within Hall, Woolly's over-ripe voice chanting the notorious College Grace: *Domine, qui in novissimo die os gehennæ omnibus indignis pascet...* He hesitates painfully, self-searchingly, over each phrase, for his Latinity's as uncertain as the rest of his mental equipment.

O Lord, Who at the last day will feed the maw of hell with all the unworthy, grant today (we beseech Thee) worthy meat to us, unworthy as we are, that we might live on to endure all

Thou hast appointed for us to suffer in these latter days.

– and when at length he is done the entire community of the College sounds out a rumbling *Amen* resonant enough to reach you atop Acheron, as if all were eager to eat and drink damnation on themselves.

AFTERNOON ON THE SECOND DAY,
THURSDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2012

Now that everyone's at meat, you feel so lonely up there it's a relief to spy movement.

A dirty mop of blond hair is emerging from the corner staircase of a Georgian polygon built around a lawn. This is Abaddon Court, standing to the north, apart from the rest of College, beyond Willow Walk, which is spanned by a covered bridge. In the midst of Abaddon is the shimmer of falling water, and a bewildering mass of stone: the College's celebrated allegorical fountain. Scholarly Endeavour, a dowdy goddess in academic cap and gown, pours eternally from a tremendous stone inkpot the pure water of learning, while fending off the javelins and slingshots of Indolence, Error, Concupiscence, Indulgence and Spleen – half-clad nymphs much more alluring than herself, particularly Error.

The dirty mop of hair, which belongs to Sebastian Hawicke Trocliffe (*hoik trosly*), sways a little in the mild air. A hand comes up to shade the hungover eyes against the afternoon sun, the only sun Seb ever sees. He is, as usual, evaluating the water splashing on Error's stone bottom. But this is as far as he gets from bed. After a sad moment the mop turns and recedes back into the staircase, defeated by the throbbing within. Seb will not rise today.

You lift your eyes from unpeopled St Wygefotis', and are relieved to see undergraduates from other, better colleges, whipping along Emmanuel Road on their bicycles, distorted by your perspective to two slashes of black. You cast your gaze further, looking north to Jesus College, west to Christ's, south to Emmanuel, east to nothing at all, the tremendous nothingness of East Anglian mud-flats, North Sea, half-tamed steppe of the Germanies, Russia, the Urals. Returning, you regard Cambridge spread out below you, sweet as an apple in the still quiet air of the Indian summer, that season outside the seasons, perfect, apparently incapable of wearing away.

Suddenly the doors of Hall open again and you see people once more, disgorging themselves down the steps. Some undergraduates hesitate, retrieve bags of books, pass through the Lodge, presumably to lecture-rooms. Most frankly go back to their rooms in twos or threes, for the wines of Wygy's are quite remarkable.

There are no gowned figures yet: evidently the Fellowship lingers on high table, waiting for the Master to ground his gavel. At last you see us, a single black-clad undulating body, pocked with bald heads, reeling back across the roof, clutching at the stonework for support, hiccupping gently. It reaches the shelter of the Combination Room – coffee, for God's sake coffee, brandy and snuff and asafoetida.

Two figures do not go in. The shaggy white hair of Woolly slouches off unsocially in one direction. And another, more wholesome head of hair separates itself as well: myself. I toss my gown over my shoulder; fix another troubling glance on you, invisible (surely) in your perch; and stride about Gehenna Court, back and forth like a fish of prey through the shoals of idling undergraduates. I stop before a mass of curls – Ollie! – and you see me produce (a flash) a silver case, and offering (distinguished flick of black) a Turkish cigarette. Then we two conspirators sidle into a corner just beneath Acheron itself, which stands arrogantly at an oblique angle to the western range of Gehenna. Since Acheron overhangs we have made ourselves, as if deliberately, invisible to you.

Impatiently you lift your eyes and see a taxi pulling up in Emmanuel Road, just outside the Lodge. A black, lavishly oiled poll emerges, topping a well-developed brownish nose and slight figure in shiny clothes. The driver takes two, three, four matching suitcases out of the boot (does the boy mean to stay here forever?) and piles them on the pavement. The luggage is matching, it is too bright, it twinkles with a gold monogram, *I.i.A.a.M.* The boy in the bad white suit looks about, with deadly innocence, for someone to carry them for him.

The victim, in short, has arrived. It is time for you to come down and witness the mischief.

This is a little easier said than done. Your route is halfway down the tower by its treacherously smooth stair, then across the roof of Chapel.

The Chapel interior is empty enough, after a bewildering history of being expanded, lopped, remodelled, reoriented, de-gothicised, plastered, frescoed, re-gothicised, unplastered, re-catholicised, de-christianised, and finally carpeted, as religious fashions have drifted here and there; it now resembles a shapeless ashlar auditorium, with a few anomalous pointed

arches; except where Woolly has erected Buddhist and Hindu shrines to reveal the breadth of his mind.

But the Chapel roof remains a chaos. Steep gables of slate run in every direction, tracing the spine of side-chapels long since demolished by Cranmer, or Cromwell, or the abominable Knipe (who moved a wall to annex the altar of the Holy Innocents to the College kitchens. He liked to enter the kitchens in the full glory of his doctoral robes, to watch live lobsters being strapped to the grill, or turtles boiled in their shells, or eels flayed). It has been trimmed, too, with complex iron parapets, lacework and spiky lilies. It's easy to get lost up there. Each undergraduate generation initiates the next into the maze, although in principle no one is allowed up; the Chaplain's second-floor rooms guard the only window with access to the roof. However, Woolly is so vague he can never persuade himself he is hearing a footfall ('*as such*') in the corridor that runs behind his sitting-room until it is too late.

You descend the tower, cross unerringly the labyrinth, and step through the little window. You are not perfectly silent. Woolly lifts his baffled head, a bush-baby head rolling loosely on the torso of bony Ulster farming stock. His face is particularly blurred after lunch. 'One hand clapping,' he thinks, 'feet that are and yet *in a profounder sense* are not, unfixity of the cosmos. God is love, all is one' – and so, unchallenged, you pass his door and descend into the bloody shambles.

EVENING OF THE SECOND DAY,
THURSDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2012

The sun has descended the sky, broken up on the edge of the world, gone to America like Absalon. November dusk is folding Acheron into a larger darkness, making it minute by minute less horrible.

Day has dwindled slowly in this idle wicked place. There is nothing much to be said about the afternoon; now the inmates are wasting the evening. They dine early at St Wygefornis' to make sure there is time and appetite left for a large supper at eleven. From the Junior Combination Room comes a monotonous baying and the occasional bash of thrown crockery. From the Senior Combination Room comes a lower rumble: the College elders are also at play.

Otherwise a splendid quiet lies on Cambridge and on St Wygefornis'. Ten days of unseasonal warmth has produced immense peace in everyone's

mind. In the pubs and courts there is mellowness. There is mellowness in the green places, except where fanatics lope along sweatily in shorts. The scholars themselves are contentedly turning pages, doing no harm of any sort, in every college library.

Every college library but one. A Wygefotis undergraduate seen reading at this hour would risk debagging. Only Abishag the Great, who is beyond criticism and can do as she wishes, kneels in the bay window of her set, amusing herself as usual with *A Merry Life*, waiting (arrogant child) for me to turn up and admit I need her as my bogeywoman.

the ninth story (8:12 p.m.)

Lady Rievaulx remained a devotee of Coleridge for the rest of her long life, and was always fond of retelling his eerie tales, most memorably to her grandson Reginald, the present Earl of Rievaulx, on the occasion of his sister Edwina's coming-out ball.

Urania, although now only the Dowager Countess, insisted on giving the ball herself. 'Edwina's a dry stick of a gal, sure to throw herself away on a stockbroker,' she told anyone who asked, 'don't care for her one bit. But there's family honour to consider and Constance,' she added, Constance being her daughter-in-law, present mistress of ffontaines House, 'gives such thunderin' dreary parties.'

Lady Rievaulx did not give dreary parties. Edwina's ball was the triumph of the 1890 season according to everyone, or rather everyone except Reginald, who was compelled to remain upstairs in bed. 'I'm not having that beany cub spoil my blow-out, grandmama, d'y'hear?', said Edwina, crossly and coarsely. Constance backed her up; which was a mistake.

As soon as the Dowager Countess's first guests had arrived, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, she was seen to slide upstairs in her wonderful jet-bead frock, bearing champagne, a plate of foie gras, cold truffled ptarmigan, and other titbits unsuitable for a thirteen-year-old. She fed these to Reginald, and as he scoffed, recited from The Ancient Mariner:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold :

Her skin was as white as leprosy,
 The Night-mare LIFE IN DEATH was she,
 Who thickens man's blood with cold.

The lines are evocative rather than descriptive. But Lady Rievaulx was happy to expatiate on their full dreadfulness, and to act out the rôle of Life-in-Death: her wiles, her mingled heat and coldness; above all, her terrible faces.

When she had done her worst she tucked her grandson in and came downstairs, and an hour later was still smiling her famous smile (no one had ever been able to analyse it) when Reginald's shrieks started rolling down the great staircase: shrieks so terrible that Deepford the butler, who drank, dropped a bowl of punch, the orchestra tripped over its waltz and foundered, the dancers stopped, everyone looked upward.

Reginald did not miss his cue. He appeared at the top of the stairs, naked, horribly pale, flecked with blood, with Edwina's pet budgerigar, pierced by a hat-pin, hung about his neck. He was sleepwalking, more or less, but still managed to put up an excellent fight against the footmen sent to tackle him.

Meanwhile the Prince of Wales was heard to utter a guttural oath, and Edwina – 'Her temper's gettin' frightful bad,' remarked her grandmother, cheerfully – flung down her bumper of champagne-cup, which unhappily shattered over the shoe of a young Marquess who had been working his bashful way towards confessing to Edwina that he 'cared'. (No more was heard of that, and she has indeed recently, at a mature age, taken the hand of Mr Alfred Nuttall, of a reputable City firm.)

After a year's convalescence at Baden-Baden, Reginald was declared well enough to return to Eton. But he was soon asked to leave, and has not since recouped his health despite a world tour with his tutor. He succeeded last year to the ffontaines-Laigh title and property, but despite—

Margot sighs, closes her book, and stares out of her window. It is too lovely to think about Great-great-uncle Reginald, his blood thickened with cold.

Yes, even here in Wygy's-the-damned it is a delicious evening. The burble of the allegorical fountain weaves a fugue with its echoes against the severe Palladian walls of Abaddon; the clatter of servants washing the

surviving dishes sounds not unmusically round Limbo; from Tartarus comes scratchy music (Sir Trotsky is keeping the faith, playing L.P.s of the Red Army choir), but the mild November softens even that to a harmony.

All things go at peace with each other. In the-furthest, southernmost end of College, leaves die and fall from their trees gently, gently, on to the lawn of the Fellows' Garden.

And from the Fellows' Garden comes suddenly *CRACK! CRACK, CRACK!* *CRACK!* – immensely loud bangs; then a metallic crash as of a garden gate slammed; gasping, terrified gasping; a lone figure pelting across Sheol Court (ignoring the paths, a College offence, but no one sees it), through the tiny abyss of Cocytus, across the lawn of Megiddo, still at top speed, up the wooden steps of staircase IV three at a time, thud, *thud*, tumbling over himself as he (it is Ollie) crashes through the double doors into my rooms, and still hurtling through the air, not quite having steadied himself by the grasp of an armchair, shrieks, bellows, red-faced, slick with sweat, launching at once into

the tenth story (8:27 p.m.).

'He has a gun! You didn't say he'd have a fucking gun!'

'Then you weren't thinking,' I purred, shutting inner and outer doors and pushing Ollie into an armchair. 'Course he has a gun. Dictators' sons can't go about unarmed. Now, d'y'want scotch or Drambuie?'

'You didn't say he'd *fire*!' Ollie was unmanned and nearly blubbering.

'No, I couldn't be sure of that.' I lifted Ollie's nerveless right hand and folded its fingers round a tumbler. While the boy sucked at this, I picked up the 'phone on my desk and pushed zero for the Lodge. 'Lint? Lint? Evening, Lint. Culpepper here. Those slight bangs a minute ago – oh you heard them, did you? *Shots?* No, no, good heavens no...' ('The head porter says he heard *shots!*' I said in a stage whisper. Ollie didn't smile.) 'No, no, Lint, don't bother coming to have a look. It was just that fool Ebbe. He's been doing smelly experiments in his rooms again. Blew up a retort by the sound of it... Yes, with luck! Although I think I still hear him stomping about... Good night, then.' I hung up, sighed, and contemplated the wreckage of Oliver Vane-Powell. 'Can you speak?'

'All right, all right. I'm over it.'

'Then speak. Tell me what happened.'

'I did all you said. Took him out drinking—'

'No, no, this is important. Slowly. Small things may be significant. I want nuances. You went to his room—'

'All right, I went and banged on his door. Abaddon IV, 5. There was some sort of video playing. In foreign.'

'Foreign.'

'Um... Portuguese! Yeah, that's it, I had a Portuguese nanny after Marcellite got one up the duff and left us.'

'You're a sophisticated fellow, Ollie.'

'Funny Portuguese, though.'

'Brazilian?'

'Maybe. God. Is *that* significant? How can it be? He turned it off and opened up. Haughty little fellow in whites. Estate-agent-in-Barbados look.'

'Yes, yes. I've seen him. Get on.'

'Nervous, too. He looked up and down the staircase before he said "Hallo?" "Hi, I'm Ollie," I say. "I'm upstairs. You're Idris. You're the candidate. You're here for an interview. Did it go well?" He didn't look very well. In fact, he looked drunk already and his room smelt of brandy. "It was a triumph," he said. *Was it?*'

"*Amo, amas, um um um, amum.*" No, he's hopeless. I've never interviewed such a one. *Infinitely* ignorant. Makes even you look like a Latinist.'

'He *said* it had gone well and that he was sure to get in so I said "Cool, come upstairs for a decent drink", and we finished a bottle of the claret my father sends and then I said "If you're coming here next year, you'd better see College," and I took him round. We stopped off at the Bar first. Where he got really drunk. On Jägermeister.'

'Exactly how drunk?' I asked, with my severe judicial precision.

This is a science well understood at Wygefotis'. 'Drunk enough to talk too quickly and loudly but not slur his words much. Slight stagger but at least half a dozen pints below passing out and could easily get it up.'

'Hm.' Sober enough to know what he was doing.

'I showed him the courts, showed him Hall, turned on the lights and showed him the Library, not that he'll be needing that, showed him the whatsit, the Chapel. He liked the big gilded Bodhisattva, so we sat cross-legged in front of it and I unscrewed its head-dress and got out a couple of joints. That's where Woolly keeps them, y'know. He thinks we don't know.'

I sighed again. College is never sure what to do about Woolly.

'He told me about what his family used to do to people they caught worshipping images. *Cripes.*'

'Really? Who could they have been? Armenian Orthodox?'

'Yeah. S'pose so.'

'I didn't know there were any Armenians in Haran.'

'There aren't now. According to Idris. Strewth, the things his family did to them.' Ollie paused, obviously wondering what Idris would do to him if he caught him.

'I'm sure it was good for the Bodhisattva to hear atrocities,' I said comfortingly. 'Take that smug smile off its bronze face.'

'Yes. Anyway, by the time he had finished telling me about massacres the spliffs were gone and he said "Back to the Bar!" But I said what you said to say: "First you've got to see the Fellows' Garden. We call it Aceldama." "Why?" "Don't know. But it's way creepy. The stories I could tell..." Well, he wanted to get back to the drunk girls but he seems to like stories even more than he likes girls, so I got out more ganga and told him all about Aceldama.'

The eleventh story.

All about Aceldama!

This is lore all Wygefortians know, no matter how ignorant. There's a tradition that newly-matriculated undergraduates and newly-elected Fellows must spend an hour there alone. The experience sinks in, and is not repeated. It isn't a place for old men with bad consciences, the most morbid youth won't strike poses there.

Aceldama is a fantasia, a *jardin anglais* in high Romantic style. But how are we to speak of its clumps of yew, sideways-pyramid of porcelain, bent columns, herms, looking-glasses embedded in trunks, abstract topiary bushes? These elements defy rational analysis without quite suggesting randomness. Perhaps they accord to an order which is not human at all. Perhaps they're a coded picture of somewhere far away.

There is a river in Cambridge no one has seen complete since the reign of Elizabeth, when it was dammed, diverted, run through conduits and otherwise tormented, before being allowed to drain into the Cam below Peterhouse, in the boggy ground called Coe Fen. This buried river resurrects itself here and there. It breaks ground in the strip of green called Christ's Pieces, rushing through a deep ditch; after twenty yards it vanishes beneath Emmanuel Road. This stretch, which is called the Stygian Creek, cuts off from the rest of the world a tongue of land lying under the blank south wall of Sheol Court; a patch of ground serving as

the College's vegetable garden until, in the fat years after Waterloo, it was laid out formally by Myre.

Josiah Myre, florid, red-haired and well made, was another Master elected in the odour of piety and learning, who went suddenly to the bad. It happens at Wygy's once a century or so.

'In robust middle age Master Myre was guilty,' reads my luscious *Quincentennial History*,

...of an infatuation with the youthful wife of Alcock, the saintly Archdeacon of Ely.

Lady Fanny Hervey had by all accounts been born as desperately wicked as she was rich. She was undeniably handsome and shapely, as we can see from her infamous portrait by George Romney, as Iolë, dancing in dissolving draperies on Mount Cœta; a painting refused by the Royal Academy as 'conducive to the decay of public morals'. By seventeen her family thought it best to marry her off to a clergyman. By the time she was nineteen her affair with Myre was the common talk of the University.

Septimus Alcock was a devout, abstracted man. He might have overlooked the Myre scandal which was not, alas, the first. He might have borne the wrong to himself, as he had done before.

But Fanny, who was witty as well as lovely, committed an act of unwise cleverness. She persuaded her husband that her frequent visits to St Wygeforsit's College were 'occasioned by orthodoxy': that she went to the Lodgings bearing improving tracts and Patristic commentaries, with the object of reclaiming the Master, who notoriously inclined to the errors of Rousseau. She would read Bishop Butler's works aloud, until tears (she told the Archdeacon) ran down Myre's lovely red cheeks, and into his wonderful foxy whiskers.

Perhaps Fanny was a thwarted novelist. In nay case she must have been a bewitching storyteller, for she made Alcock, who was no fool, credit this pretty tale. The result was that when he learned the Master was boasting of Fanny's personal charms on high table, he found insupportable not Myre's wrong against himself, but Myre's calumny against her.

The two men met at Grantchester at dawn, with no witnesses but their seconds, a doctor, and a tipsy undergraduate who turned up in a brougham. It is possible that the Master fired first, too soon. In any case Alcock's pistol misfired and he fell, fatally wounded in the lower

abdomen. His dying words were of forgiveness, but Myre did not hear them, having already fled in the brougham. The tipsy undergraduate was Lady Fanny herself, shamelessly disguised. They drove to Harwich and took the packet to Holland.

Even during the Regency, it was not good form for Heads of House to shoot Church dignitaries. Attempts at prosecuting Myre, or simply depriving him of his Mastership, went nowhere, for Fanny was an heiress with connections at Court. But it was made clear to her family that she must never return.

So the guilty couple wandered. They reached France and shocked the Parisians, not least by staying in the château of 'Kitty', Viscount Courtenay, who as a boy had been Beckford's paramour, and was still dragging out his life beyond the reach of English prosecution. They reached Venice (there is a scabrous sonnet about them by Byron). They reached Greece (Myre carved a Greek hendecasyllable in praise of Fanny on a column of the Parthenon; tour guides refuse to translate it). They had an audience with the Sultan, who jestingly offered Lady Fanny a place in his seraglio; Myre jestingly asked his price. When the renegade Princess of Wales led her entourage of hundreds into the Holy City, bare-breasted on a white mule, Fanny and Myre rode behind on a dromedary, and were duly enrolled in the Order of St Caroline of Jerusalem created to mark that occasion.

All these doings were reported in England, and the standing of St Wygefotis' College fell very low.

At last came news that the notorious Fanny had died at Smyrna, of the pox (although rumour was not slow to allege her lover had throttled her for infidelity with a dragoman). Myre came home like a pirate, bearing nothing but an antique bronze treasure-chest of Coptic design, having, he said, burned all their chattels against infection. There is an unkind aquatint by Rowlandson of Myre standing on Dover Cliff, with his threadbare Armenian tapestry cloak snapping about him in the breeze, his lilac-and-silver ribbon as Sacred Chancellor of the Order of St Caroline about his neck, clutching his outlandish casket: a grim, lawless figure.

Then for a while Myre was a fixture of the Chancery Court, a spectacle, a hissing, an indecency. He wanted Fanny's fortune, and claimed they had been married by the English chaplain in Florence, a sottish unreliable man. It was only after bitter litigation that Myre won his case.

Little good it did him. He was shunned in London, even more thoroughly shunned in Cambridge, and spent his last years as a virtual recluse in Tartarus, the Master's Lodging. Too worn for further debauchery, he wasted his money on grotesque improvements to the College he, perhaps, loved. It certainly abhorred him then, and resents him still. He also bought the unfortunate Romney portrait of his mistress or wife and hung it in the College Library, where it has distracted generations of undergraduates from their work. He also perpetrated the rose window in the chapel, showing the dalliance of the Nephilim, the copious asses of Ezekiel, and Moses as a bloody bridegroom; generations of scholarship have failed to explain it away.

Worst of all, Myre is responsible for the Fellows' Garden, so sinister in appearance that Cambridge called it Myre's Horror, or the Rape Garden, and even worse things, before settling on 'Aceldama'.

You can laugh at Aceldama if you haven't seen it. It sounds like a grubby toy of a sort common enough at the time, or rather a little earlier. By 1821 dirty pleasure-gardens were old hat, and Aceldama was dated even when it was laid out. For instance, it contains, just as you'd expect, that hackneyed eighteenth-century joke, a white-marbled Temple of Priapus, tiny, with miniature colonnade of blue-veined marble, and a miniature cupola in rose-coloured Carrera. The Temple is embellished with mock-Pompeian murals of Cassandra being forced, Chrysippus, Tamar, and Leda. Lest anyone require tactile titillation, there's a bust on a plinth of Lord Courtenay. (When Lord Courtenay heard about Aceldama he sent his portrait. 'Didn't realise,' he remarked to his dubious hairdresser, 'chaps back home still went in for *questo genere di cose*, that sort of thing... Sì, Beppe, il solito, the usual.') Yet no one who actually sees Aceldama laughs it off as a period piece. Significantly, even the degenerates of St Wygy's never employ it for its obvious purpose. No one but Myre ever found a use for Aceldama.

What did he use it for, exactly? In a niche of the priapic Folly he kept his 'idol', his Coptic box. Did he spend his hours in Aceldama worshipping it? Rumour said so. On his deathbed he spoke so curiously of *passion that has defied the grave, of favours if not love enjoyed even beyond death*, that the College chaplain sent the servants out of the room, along with Myre's spinster niece, who hoped for a bequest. Soon afterward Myre began to scream. When the screams were over the butler, rising open the door, found his master stone-dead, and the chaplain in strong hysterics.

The spinster niece was thwarted. Myre left all his fortune to the Fitzwilliam Museum ‘for the purchase of antique herms’, a direction the Trustees quite properly ignored. Myre’s desire to be buried beneath his Temple of Priapus was also not honoured. And Aceldama, although College has never quite nerved itself to tear it down, was neglected. The casket vanished; the loathsome frescos of the Temple grew stained and faded; the weird topiary grew confused and inoffensive with generation after generation of College gardener. True, a mid-Victorian Master added to Aceldama’s ferocious, inviolable gloom by burying his pugs there, one after another, each with its miniature headstone and Greek epitaph. And in the ’Twenties some high-brow published an article, ‘*Un certain jardin à Cambridge et les origines du Surréalisme*’, which however did no harm because a vigilant customs official at Dover glanced at the photographic plates and had that number of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* seized and burned. Aceldama is so extremely evil, so supremely repellent, that, paradoxically, from Myre’s day until that unseasonably warm November evening in 2012, when I found a use for it, it did little harm.

the tenth story, resumed (8:32 p.m.)

‘All about Aceldama, Ollie? You told him all *that*?’

‘I skipped the boring bits. Skipped the really nasty things too. I got it just right. He wasn’t *too* scared. Just spooked enough. He said: “Let’s have a look at it then.” I wish he hadn’t.’

‘So?’ But Ollie was silent, listening for further gunshots, listening to the thunder in his own chest. ‘Ollie? Come on.’

Ollie took another swig. ‘All right. So we went across Sheol into Aceldama. Through the garden arch. The gate was unlocked for a change.’

‘Did you go first?’

‘Yes. God it’s dark in there. We were both a bit jumpy. I don’t think Idris often gets jumpy. But as soon as we were beside the little temple thing I said what you said to say. I mean I whispered it. “Oi, Idris, look out. There’s someone lurking behind that funny-looking bush.” He looked terrified. So I said, as you said, “He looks like you. I mean, Arab. He’s holding – is that a rifle?” And that’s as far as I got because instead of being frightened he reached under his armpit and got out this gun, this fucking gun, and starting blasting away. A gun. You didn’t tell me. Blasting

away. Bang bang bang bang. Mad bugger. Mad bugger. So I scarpered. You didn't tell me he'd have a gun.'

I heard out Ollie with my hanging judge face. Which is exactly what I was. 'Guilty, guilty, guilty. Al-Mutlak started at a shadow: that's conclusive. To fire once might be panic. *Four* times is bloodguiltiness. One shot, he hears nothing, no one fires back; yet he still pumps another bullet into the bush; and when the lurker must surely be hit, another, then another. Only someone with blood on his hands, recent blood, could be so nervous, cowardly, savage. Absalon has to kill Gillermo, because it's his nature; Idris is a homicide not a human... Am I sure of that, am I *sure*? Yes. Four times: that's proof. Trial by imagination's a real trial. Forces the mind to judge itself. Good enough for Prince Hamlet, good enough for me.' I smiled in condemnation; smiled again passing sentence. 'If the mousetrap makes you start, it's time to wheel on the guillotine.' Then I looked a shade more troubled.

'You did well,' I told Ollie. 'Very very well. One more thing to do before bed. Find Idris—'

But Ollie turned tearful again. 'Fuck that. Fuck fuck *fuck* it. I'm not going near him. He's a fucking loon. He's got a *gun*. He'll put a bullet right through my hair. Head. I'm going to my room and I'm locking myself in.'

'Oh come on, Ollie.'

'No. End of story.'



'Ollie—'

'I've had enough of your—' but he evidently didn't want to define what it was I had that he rejected. It seemed safer to put down his tumbler and blunder out, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

I watched him critically from his window, running across the court toward the looming silhouette of the Library and the shortcut over the covered bridge to Abaddon Court.

'This,' I told myself, 'is no good.' I paced up and down. 'It's no good using children as helpers if they snap like this. But I do need someone to lure Idris.' I knew perfectly well what came next, and was curiously alarmed.

I was even more alarmed a minute later, standing in Gehenna Court and looking up at Abishag's window, open to the mild evening. She was so obviously *waiting* for me. She raised her eyes from Urania, saw me, smiled in triumph.



After his experience in the garden, Idris required drink and he required talk.

The boy was not, you'll understand, distraught. He was used to shooting shadows in the course of an evening – shooting people, indeed. Why, one morning he'd supervised an interrogation of one of his bodyguards from the cafeteria of the Berne International School, muttering instructions into his mobile 'phone, looking at his watch. The man had, probably, been spying on him for his half-brother Jasim; he had to be broken in the next quarter of an hour because he, Idris, had an algebra test, and then Jasim would be back from Beirut at lunchtime. The staff, swabbing the tables before setting lunch, glanced about curiously: even with the earpiece covered, they could hear squeals down the line from Arpachshad. The man broke and Idris got a C+, which was all he needed.

This evening he was hurt, nonetheless. Ollie had seemed so friendly. Idris was not used to friendliness untainted by fear. It pained him to be the victim, after all, of a trick. Once he had kicked and trampled the bush and made sure Aceldama harboured no assassins, his impulse had been to go back to Ollie's room and – and – well, pistol-whip him at the least.

But then he remembered he was about to be admitted to St Wygefornis'. There would be plenty of time for revenge. In the meantime, he needed drink, he needed chatter, and he needed a woman.

It is not etiquette for a candidate, who is not a member of College and statistically unlikely to become one, to go into the bar alone. But Idris was so prodigal in buying strangers drinks that he was tolerated. When, an hour later, Margot found him loafing on a barstool, he was looking almost at home.

She floated to him. There was a miasma of awe about her, because she was meditating on her ancestress and Life-in-Death. *Her lips were red, her looks were free.* She's beautiful (most of the time) without being the least bit pretty, and was wearing what could have been, and in fact was, a dress made in Paris in the 'Fifties, an unadorned cylinder of grey. It was a College saying that if Abishag would give up tiresome King David she could rule Israel. She was a paragon, and had no business going up to Idris, this mere stranger, and putting her hand on his shoulder. The two of them had nothing in common but the roles I had assigned them in my plot.

She said ‘You’re new’ and he, looking up, felt dazzled by the wisdom of her remark.

She flicked her head. The lesser females on either side of Idris vanished from their barstools. She sat beside him. A faint tremor went through the watching crowd.

‘Well?’ she said, quietly, so no one could hear, when he had got her port. ‘They call me Abishag.’

‘I’m Idris.’ He had nothing to tell her, there was nothing in him true and interesting. But lies are always to hand. He leant forward so as to gloat over her breasts and launched into his staple chat-up: ‘Listen to this. A guy walks into a sperm-donor bank wearing a ski mask and holding a gun. He goes up to the nurse and says...’

He observed her weary look and stopped. His story was stillborn.

‘Perhaps,’ he said lamely, ‘you’ve heard it before?’

the twelfth story (10:22 p.m.)

‘My great-great-great-grandmother Urania,’ said Abishag, a little shyly, ‘once snubbed The Prince of Wales for telling her the same dirty story twice. “You grow tedious with age, Sir!” she said, and turned her back. She was forty years older than he was, too. Poor Bertie went puce, couldn’t speak, nodded brusquely to his hostess (the Duchess of Devonshire), and had to be helped to his carriage. He wasn’t seen anywhere for days, and he didn’t forgive great-great-great-grandmother for years. But she stayed on at Devonshire House and was still dancing when the sun came up.’

the thirteenth story (10:23 p.m.)

‘My great-grandfather,’ said Idris, even more shyly because he was in thrall to this redhead, ‘didn’t know many stories, not ’til the British came to the Nahor. Once, when he was telling for the thousandth time the tale of the Woman who Made her Husband Sift Dust, one of his men yawned. He had him buried up to his neck in the sand and sat watching until the kites had finished with his eyes.’



'Princes of Wales aren't allowed to do that. Still,' she added, not wanting him to think she was criticising his ancestor, 'I like men who take things seriously.'

'I could take you seriously. I think,' said Idris, who had never fawned on a woman before, even to this extent. Being gallant gave him vertigo. He didn't like the sensation. She would pay for his discomfort later. 'I like what I see.'

'The best view in Cambridge,' said Abishag primly, looking away and folding her hands, 'is from Acheron. That's the big tower beside Chapel. We're not supposed to go up there, but of course we do. It's quite easy. Up Megiddo staircase VII, along the corridor past the Chaplain's rooms – he's deaf and very silly, he won't catch you. Out through the window at the end. There are catwalks all over the roof. Go left. Take the third turning on the right, first left, first right, and you'll find yourself in front of a dark stone arch. Through that, up three turns of the stairs, and you're on the platform. You'll see everything. Be there at exactly twelve. I'll be there at two minutes past. My sable is bulky to wear on such a mild evening but it's lovely to lie on.' She laid two fingers on his lips to stop any reply, and glided away. The mob of drinkers parted before her as she went, sightless.

That is all she said. I'd told her nothing, merely giving her her orders: 'Get that Harani yob on top of Acheron at midnight.' But she went back to her room feeling a bit like Idris' great-grandfather, who slew his own men because of his own bad stories. Possibly she felt, for the first time in her life, that she was getting beyond Urania. For although she loyally kept *A Merry Life* open, it is to be doubted whether she read. When the yell came (twelve was still tolling) she rose without starting and went out, with her finger between the pages marking her place. She reached Cocytus, and gazed about the cobbles. Nothing. Slowly, slowly, though, she raised her elegant head and found what she was looking for. It had not cleared the roof after all. It had got snagged in the steel lacework on the way down. Indeed – a rabble of shouting, gesticulating undergraduates was forming behind her, the windows were flying open, someone had got a big lamp and was shining it on to the Chapel roof – it was impaled. One of the metal lilies had pierced the shoulder-blades, and stuck out through the chest. Another fixed the groin. The dreadful white suit was stained with what looked black in that bad light. 'Get a ladder!' someone was bellowing. 'A ladder!' A semi-circle of slate below the untidy figure was shiny with gore. The tracery of ornamental ferns was festooned with loops of gut.

The body looked freakishly funny, as surprising carnage does, until

you noticed that it wasn't a body, but feebly moving, twitching one of its dangling arms, jerking its foot, still, moving, still again, flopping like a landed fish.

THIRD DAY:

THE SMALL HOURS OF FRIDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2012

Not since the tumults of the Protectorate had so much blood been on offer within College walls. Never had College hoped to see so many agitated policemen in its Courts. *And* a police helicopter overhead, *and* three fire-engines at the gates, *and* half a dozen television trucks, although the ferocious Lint had kept these outside the walls in Emmanuel Road, where they told each other on camera 'I'd say the mood is tense, Tom.' 'Yes from what we're seeing Shazia, I'd certainly characterise the mood as tense.'

The police, with little else to do, had made a great aggressive business of clearing the mob of undergraduates from Cocytus, and roping it off. Margot had managed to remain.

'Hop it, you, *now*.'

'But I spoke to him in the Bar.'

'Who?'

'That – person up there.'

'Oh you did, did you? Well stand over there and don't go away.'

'I spoke to him too,' said Tristan Bolswood, most jaded of the first-year classicists. 'I spent half an hour teaching him ride-the-bus.'

'What's that?' The detective clearly hoped for muck.

'Just a drinking game. We played it with Jägermeister.'

'Oh you did, did you? Very nice I don't think. You stand *here*, see. And don't you go talking to each other.'

So Margot stood beside Tristan and watched the constables push everyone young out of the little Court. She watched them, once there was no one left to boggle at the roof, boggle at it themselves. She heard the ambulancemen who had climbed on the roof call to each other pitifully from between the gables, lost. She watched the firemen bring in a mechanical ladder and try to approach their quarry from below. She would have seen more, but a bald detective had thought of a searching query and strode over to her. 'What did you talk to him *about*, miss?'

'Nothing in particular. We exchanged stories about our ancestors.'

'Stories, eh?' He wasn't sure about putting that equivocal word in his

notebook; but had a flash of brilliance. ‘Would you say that these so-called ancestors were *dead* at all?’

Another, younger, hairier detective had thought of something to put to Bolswood. ‘How would you describe his state of mind?’

Lascivious, thought Bolswood. ‘Tense,’ he said, ‘and drunk.’

The bald detective, who was writing *Conversachun about dead persons* in his notebook, nonplussed by his rival, appropriated his wit and flashed it at Margot. ‘How would *you* describe his state of mind?’

‘Drunk,’ she said. ‘Drunk but intense.’ The hairy detective, who was writing *Morebid state mind?* in *his* notebook, glanced at her piercingly, then held up the page to his colleague, who blenched. This young fellow would go far, he could see him at the Yard one day. Very well: best to co-operate. He gave a Napoleonic nod, and the two policemen strode off together to compose their Preliminary Report.

Sir Trotsky Plantagenet, Master of Wygefornis’, and a few other College officers too great to send away, stood in an arch of Cocytus. I was conspicuously nowhere (watching and listening, as it happens, from a darkened window). Tristan and Margot, forgotten, stood beside the dons, watching the firemen prise off the corpse – for that’s what it clearly was, long before they reached it.

‘Poor loves,’ breathed fat wheezy Mrs Oathouse, the College nurse, creeping up from behind, ‘this must be ever so awful for you. Do you need a little something?’

Bolswood was bored more than anything else, but it was Junior Combination Room policy never to say no to Nurse’s barbiturates and risk freezing her generous heart. He held out his hand.

The detectives were squabbling again. ‘Actually I think you’ll find *self-destructive psychological traces* sounds better than *self-destructive remarks*. More smart-like. See?’

‘Not if you spell it without a *p*, I think you’ll find.’ They flashed looks of hatred at each other, for art is the cruellest tyrant and English prose most exigent of all the arts.

The firemen were handing their burden down the ladder now, its head sprawled backward at a terrible angle. A paramedic hopped about below with a stethoscope, trying to be the first to get at the gory chest and pronounce the obvious.

‘Manners,’ sniffed Mrs Oathouse. ‘This is my patch and I think they might have asked me to have a little listen.’ Tristan patted her hand and was rewarded with two more Seconals, which Nurse keeps loose in her

cardigan pocket like doggy-treats.

The mangled thing lay on the stones of Cocytus with a stretcher beneath, muffled with a blanket. The uniformed men stood back. Margot and Tristan lowered their heads. Mrs Oathouse became snuffly. Even the police detectives put down their duelling-notebooks.

This is a moment painters and playwrights love (although there's nothing novelists can do with it): the instant after martyrdom, before the spectators resume their chatter. Groaning is done, specious last words are out of the way. The human body as such, all passion spent, is allowed to express whatever it expresses, before being bundled away. Then *Take up the bodies. Go, bid the soldiers shoot*, and so forth. But first comes the moment when dead flesh casts out even the possibility of words. In the particular silence flesh suggests – well, it hardly matters what, for in this case there was no silence.

Enter stage left the Rev'd Dr Leigh, burbling. (The Court had become very stagey, roped off and floodlit as it was: a cube of dressed stone on four sides, cobbles below, night sky above.) He threw himself down over the corpse, and broke into long, fervid speech, while everyone else stood about shyly.

In justice to the Chaplain, let's make clear that there were no journalists about, only one indifferent police photographer. It is greatly to Woolly's credit that he knelt so long and photogenically over that blanket, and that he outdid himself in his prayers. Idris was promised (Margot noticed; she was at first the only spectator attending to Woolly's words) the Catholic resurrection of the body, *and* blissful obliteration in nirvana, *and* reincarnation as whatever is even better than an al-Mutlak, *and* Primitive Protestant exemption from hell, *and* Modern Protestant quality time with Jesus; as well as the more orthodox *Jannat al-Na'im*. 'Which means Garden of Delights,' Woolly explained to that bumpy part of the blanket, not much stained, where the face was hidden. He had an anthology of *hadith* in his hands and leafed through it nimbly. 'You'll soon be finding *houris* so light and pleasantly-scented that their very *hijabs* are better than the world and whatever is in it. You'll soon be selecting your new soul. Already the fever of Being is being abated by ineffable Nothing.'

These firemen, like most firemen, were rugged papists, and here one of them coughed. *Houris* he could tolerate because the buggers hold with that sort of thing out there in Arabia, but what was this heretical faffing about new souls? It wouldn't have passed muster in Holy Name parochial catechism class.

Woolly turned hungrily at the cough, because it was what he'd been waiting for. His brand of willful moronism isn't fulfilled in itself; it needs to know that it is offending sense. 'Don't you see,' he whined, eagerly, plaintively, and belligerently, still on his knees but shuffling slightly sideways, away from the unresponsive Idris, toward the more promising fireman, 'don't you *see* all these promises *are the same*? All truth is in the most special sense *one*. We all look out to the same point. We need never deny. The essence of every faith...'

He was doing no harm and really might have been allowed to blather. But Tristan, who couldn't abide Woolly, found that his own slight capacity for reverence was now used up. Seconal, on top of all the liquor, was making him belligerent. So he suddenly snarled: 'What d'y'mean, Mr Leigh, *every* faith? My daddy's a pantheist, he doesn't believe we look *out* at anything. You slighting that?'

A quiver of dismay went through the crowd. Everyone glanced anxiously at the body, which expressed no embarrassment. As for Woolly, he relished desecrations. He liked folding them into his routine. It was one of his party tricks at weddings to urge the bride to explore her lesbian impulses, and then pounce on any wriggling or intolerant leg-crossing amongst the congregation. So now his pulse quickened from its usual sluggish forty-four beats per minute to the low sixties. 'Idris ibn Ali,' he pronounced, twisted back toward the blanket, 'merge with our Common Mother the Cosmos whence—'

'Ee, 'o you callin' common?' protested Mrs Oathouse, the only mother present in that ruck of youth, burly firemanhood, sadistic policemanhood, and barren dons. This time the crowd's rustle sounded like approval. The Oathouse folded her arms, pleased with herself. '*Cosmo* wench indeed.'

'Idris ibn—'

'I'm a pagan,' said one of the medics, angrily. He had a ring in his nose. 'And I don't reckon he's merged into anything.'

'Yeah, he's gone to The Summerland.' This one had reddish dreadlocks.

The crowd was closing in on Woolly, who grew confused and excited (72 b.p.m.). 'Pass, Ali, for a space to the warm, gentle realm of reflection, of recuperation, in the—'

'Not Ali, Idris!' corrected half a dozen voices. 'Idris ibn Ali!' Even the dons were joining in now.

'— in the company of *sídhe* and faerie sprites—'

'Aam a haythin tay,' growled a backward under-porter named Scurf who, to my certain knowledge, has never been north of Loughborough.

'I'll thenk ye nae tae belittle Sell-tick Reconstructionist Pag'nism wi' thes toffy-nosed gab ay summer resorts.'

Like Scurf, but in a different way, Woolly has been educated beyond his intelligence. 'Come, O Ibn, unto *Tír na nÓg* – which means,' Woolly informed the dead boy, 'Warrior Land of the Young—'

'Idris!'

'*Tír na*,' he insisted. He seemed to himself to be surrounded by bigots who wonderfully spurned, as they always did, his one idea. One minus two is three, One God No God, good God, oddgod, Godforsaken, many gods, doggone: all the same. How he cherished denying bigotry. Farrago was his nirvana (or Summerland, or *Jannat*), but just as a drunk can't get giddy until physics pushes back against his staggering, only contradiction could release pure muddle into Woolly's blood. Still kneeling in his lama-hat and cassock, he lifted vague and ineffectual hands, begging to be heckled, to be tussed (lightly). More, more. A martyrdom of pushes and gentle pokes! The veins stood out in his pale forehead.

'Our friend Idris is discovering that all is one!' His pulse had reached a plateau of 96, and he could barely sustain such throbbing. 'I feel almost orgasmic,' he thought; 'I imagine.' Soon, perhaps, would come the faint, the plummet into perfect and infinite confusion. He'd achieved it only once before, at a wedding when an infuriated bridesmaid had thrashed with him the bride's bouquet.

But tonight Woolly's timing was off. He had enraged his audience too quickly. 'Get off!' they said. 'Buffoon! Idolater! Show-time over! Amen!' Mrs Oathouse gave his shoulder a push and he swayed. Tristan wondered if he dared kick the ridiculous man's buttocks.

There is a God, just One: ther'd be no point in writing novels if that weren't so. A novel is a pretend God's-eye-view, a trespass into the Royal Box at the opera house, an impudent attempt to picture things as they must look to the Patron. If you can bear novels, you'll know there are certain breaches of theatrical convention not to be borne. Woolly couldn't grasp this.

Sir Trotsky did. He was a devout Marxist with clear ideas, who dreaded and loathed the opiate of the masses: dreaded it in a fashion that betrayed an anxiety that it might be true. Woolly's fruit salad of the masses offended him to the marrow. History was, Sir Trotsky hoped, a comedy of manners with the Communist revolution for *dénouement*. It might, terribly, be a mystery play. But in either case it was not *this*. And so the Master strode across the court, pushed through the ruck, seized his Chaplain by his

dog-collar, heaved him up, dragged him away – exit Clown stage right; a dissipation of noise, a recrudescence of dignity.

Enter an ambulance crew. They came forward to the blanketed shape, with its pulse of exactly zero. (Yet Woolly's receding babble could still be heard testifying that everything means everything. No one has ever refuted silliness. The abject have access to underground pools of complacency which you and I will never understand. He was happy.) It was nearly three. The helicopter was gone. Darkness, quiet. Night-time is night-time, even in Wygy's. Death is death. When the ambulancemen heaved up Woolly's prop, a rectangle of dark dampness remained on the dry stone. The quietness turned to absolute silence. Then the ambulancemen's footsteps were loud on the cobbles. They passed offstage and there was a gust, everyone releasing breath at once. A sterile pentecost.

Such was the passing of Idris ibn Ali al-Mutlak, favourite son of the President of Haran.

LATE MORNING,
FRIDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2012

College got out of bed late, and groggily, as after a debauch. The impaling of al-Mutlak had inebriated the most unimaginative undergraduate – Ollie, that is: although in fact Ollie kept to his rooms. It had inebriated everyone else, that's what I mean to say: inebriated them with the enhanced possibilities of life, its weirdness, brutishness and glitter.

But blood hangovers, like the usual sort, ooze backward through time. The past warps and spoils in memory, the only place it exists. When the morning feels so unsatisfactory, we become agnostic about the dwindled pleasures of the night. Were we really so gay?

Margot gazed through the drizzle on her window. The Indian summer was suddenly over, and it too shrank in hindsight. Normal, unsatisfactory November had resumed, blustery, drizzly and dim. It was hard to see, amidst such greys, why a scattering of pink intestines had seemed such gaudy fun. In this unsatisfactory universe, everything grated, or itched.

She'd had ill-omened dreams. Their thrust was simply: last night's butchery had been so indiscreet I'd certainly go to prison; she'd go too, as my accomplice, and not enjoy it. Even Urania hadn't experienced gaol.

It was close on eleven before a wary, puling Margot emerged from her rooms. She made her way across courts dotted with haggard

undergraduates, like her crapulous with gore.

Cocytus was still blocked off. She could hear the splashing of firehoses rinsing the Chapel roof. *Down goes the al-Mutlak bloodline*, thought Margot, hoping to ease her depression by being ornate. *What held the Nahor for six generations gurgles into drains; what keeps all Haran in awe is contained by guttering.* But her terror would not relax. *It washes underground into the Styx, runs through pipes to the Granta, dilute but vengeful, toward the – oh damn it. Damn damn damn. What a clumsy performance. He'll have fled. He'll have been arrested.*

Nonetheless: ‘Come in, come in,’ came my voice when she tapped tentatively at my door. I was still there. Indeed she entered to a breezy Culpepper, an airy Culpepper, a jovial Culpepper in whom guilt was sublimated into jauntiness. No, not jovial; some lesser god than Jove. Hermes the thief.

I was in my grand crimson silk dressing-gown. I smiled at her but didn’t speak, for I was traipsing back and forth from sitting-room to bedroom, packing a suitcase.

She sat on the arm of a sofa, trying to place my mood, regarding the suitcase sideways. ‘You’re running away?’

‘Venice,’ I called happily from the bedroom. ‘I’ll be – *what*’ (re-entering the sitting-room with two pairs of shoes) ‘did you say?’

‘Are you escaping the police?’

‘*What?* No. Of course not. *The police?* You mean about young al-Mutlak? Good God no. Why would I? They’re entirely satisfied.’

‘They are?’

‘They’re quite certain he flung himself from Acheron, yes. You’ll see no more rozzers stomping about College and a good thing too. They smell.’

‘The case is closed?’

‘Where d’you pick up this vocabulary? Been watching telly?’

‘If they become unsatisfied, I mean about suicide,’ she persisted, heavily, ‘do you have an alibi?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t use words like that. *Alibi* isn’t proper Latin.’

‘Do you? I want to help. I need to know where I stand.’

I sighed. ‘Thank you for what you did last night. Cozening, gulling, snaring. But don’t worry about the consequences. There are none. And don’t try to expand your role. I have no need of a regular sidekick.’

‘At least tell me what happened.’

‘Nor do I need a Dr Watson. To explain my cleverness to after the fact.’

I was expecting her to persist. (I’m genuinely clever, but easily

manipulated; if you say something thick I become annoyed; when annoyed I'm indiscreet, and tell you all you want. Stupidity trumps cleverness. The dimmest undergraduate – Seb, that is – knows how to play me; so does my three-year-old nephew. I'm so nearly a fool.) But instead of annoying me tactically, she simply said: 'Tell me what happened. Because I'm afraid for you. Also, afraid.'

I stagily consulted my watch. I looked sceptically from the oxblood shoes to the brown, sighed once more, put them both beside my suitcase, deferring a hard choice, sat down and folded my legs. 'Really there's no hurry. It's three-quarters of an hour before I need to leave for the airport. And you have a point. About fear.' And thus, ungraciously, I launched into

the fourteenth story (10:45 a.m.)

'Here's what happened late last evening. I went to your rooms and recruited you. Then I came back here and rang Woolly. I told him I needed to come and see him at five to twelve.'

'He can't have liked that.'

'No, it's cocoa and beddie-bye at ten for our Woolly. With a mystical paperback to put him to sleep. That's how he preserves his glittering mental clarity. But he can't say the word *No*. He said "Well perhaps in a certain sense," which is Woolly for *Yes*.'

'Meanwhile I went to the bar and found al-Mutlak—'

'Yes yes, we know all that. In due course I went over to Woolly's rooms and tapped tenderly on his door. You know how deaf he is. Nothing. I let myself in and called "Leigh", and he came shambling out of his bedroom. "Ah," said he in his dead-alive way, "um, Culpepper. Here you are": he looked reproachful. "Didn't we say ten to twelve?" "Oh yes," he mumbled, unfocused, peering at his clock. You know what his rooms are like: grisly, pale, ostentatiously Franciscan. Bad posters pinned to the panelling. The carriage-clock on the mantel is the only decent thing he's got, no doubt inherited from his mum. There are sad little pencilled notes propped against it, including one reading *F.C. 1155*. "Time flies. I was reading... what is it?" He had to look at the cover. "A book called *A Handbook of Rituals of Thelema. Concerning*" – he had to look again – "Aleister Crowley. Terribly um denying. Yet affirming in an esoteric sense. As denial, paradoxically, often..." You know how bemused he gets in the presence of thought; even his own. "Would you like to sit down? Would

you like some cake?" *Like* is a strong word. Woolly's confectionery is not so much inedible as uneatable, so crumbly with age your fingers can't get it into your mouth. Like his ideas. And his armchairs look and feel woven of porridge. If you're not careful he gives you mixed-berry squash. His least horrible hospitality is ginger-wine. I was fussily given a mug of this and propped myself against his sideboard. "Leigh, old thing," I said, "it's about those statues in the antechapel," and of course a pallid light flared up in his eyes. You know how he craves persecution, he's such an Ulsterman despite all his infidelities – defending his rainy province against bigoted Zouaves of one sort or another—'

'*Felix*,' said Margot despairingly.

"Well, to get on. "I'll give you one minute, Culpepper," he said severely enough, and I explained what was objectionable about his bronze Buddha and his soapstone Shiva. His attention wandered a little because when I said "Half-human!" very sharply he sat up abruptly, blinking at me. "Did you hear a shout just then?" I asked. "A shout?" "I thought I heard someone shout *Wygeforis!* Didn't you?" "Well I don't know. That's not to deny – what a strange thing to – I suppose in a sense I did." "It seemed to come from out that way. Over across Chapel. Toward Acheron"; meanwhile I'd jumped up and opened the back door of his sitting-room, the one that opens on the forbidden corridor. "In fact I think I heard a slight patter a few minutes ago." "Oh dear yes, yes, they will go creeping over to the Tower. Despite such a clear rule. But in a way to break a rule is to acknowledge –" and at that instant Lint burst in. "Padre, Padre, someone's jumped off Acheron. Come at once," but Woolly can't do anything at once, he was fully three minutes pottering around finding his purple stole, wittering "This is dreadful, dreadful. He must have come this way poor soul. We, you might say, heard him. Or *her* of course. Culpepper and I have been sitting here for the last five minutes. Discussing – what is it we have been? – oh yes, gods. The unity of all faiths. And we heard in a sense a certain cry and we opened the door and of course no one came back ... A shout of – what was it? Just *Wygy's*, so ambiguous..." until Lint led him off. I came back here. An hour later a dull policeman came and talked to me. I told him the dull tale I've just told you. Then, despite the racket of that helicopter, I went to bed. End of story.



'Now I must get on.'

Jollily I headed back into my bedroom, jollily I came out again carrying a dark suit. I started squeezing this into my case. I was trying not to smell fishy.

Margot considered me and sniffed. '*That's* what you told the police?'

'That's what I told the police. That's the story they took down in their little notebooks, that's the story that'll be in the evening paper. That's the story that'll be printed in Harani history books, which I imagine are mainly concerned with the fortunes of the al-Mutlaks. And that' (I lowered my forehead to give Margot a hard look through my eyebrows) 'is the story you'll tell anyone who asks.'

'Ye...es. Yes, I will, Felix.'

'Most importantly, that's exactly the story Woolly will have told the police. Bless him, he inspires absolute confidence in policemen, they adore senile tenacity – prize it above everything except fear. They can see he's too muddled to fabricate anything. Especially now. I looked in on him earlier. He worked himself into a state last night. From his mild martyrdom. His being jostled. Mrs Oathouse's sitting by his pillow feeding him Mogadon tablets as if they were lumps of muesli. The police are in awe. Virtually took his statement on their knees. He's a drugged prophet. What he says must be truth. And what he says is that no one went past his door but one.'

'But Felix. Your story *doesn't make sense*.'

'Every word of it is so.'

'Yes. But there's a lot missing.'

I weighed her expression, and finally let out a long breath. 'There is. My account leaves out

the fifteenth story (10:58 a.m.).

my running across the roof of Chapel in my socks, dashing up the stone stair, catching the parricide staring out over the lights of Cambridge. The racket of midnight was sounding from Lethe Tower. He didn't hear me patter up behind. I caught him by his belt and at the scruff of that atrocious suit. It's easy to throw a man off balance if he's not expecting you. Also, the boy was undersized. He went sailing into the abyss so smoothly he hardly had time for a cry. A breathless half-hearted sort of cry it was, too. Probably unsure whether to bellow in rage or scream with fright. One should decide beforehand. Always be prepared for sudden assaults,

Margot. *He* fell between two stools. Speaking of which, I did intend a good clear splat on the rounded flints of Cocytus. But I got the angle wrong. He was so puny. He got spiked. The end.



‘Do I need a mac for Venice? It’s supposed to be wet.’

‘No, your mac’s vile. Buy an umbrella at the airport. But Felix, I still don’t understand. Stop! Stop doing whatever it is you’re doing to that poor suit. Get dressed. You have thirty-five minutes. I’ll fix your suitcase.’ I disappeared back into my bedroom while she heaved the case to the floor to pull out the top layers of packing, which went to ruin. Had gone to ruin – pluperfect, cretin.

‘I don’t see,’ she called after me, ‘how the two bits of your story fit together. One of them must be a lie. They seem to require bilocation.’

‘They do,’ I called back. ‘Or time travel. Which is the same thing. Listen. I had a magic carpet. It took me beyond fixed space or time. Of course I mean Woolly’s mind. In him the noble comprehensiveness of our Church of England has cankered into...’

She looked up, started, and shook her head in disgust. I was still in my boxer shorts, but had strapped over my shirt a parson’s vest-stock (a high starched-linen dog-collar on a black watered-silk false-front). Among the remarks that must have queued in her brain, hoping to be uttered, was *Take that rotten disguise off if you’re going to tell about your slaughters*. But the remark that made it through her teeth was: ‘Do you really need two pairs of black shoes?’

‘Yes. Venice is dressy but subdued.’ I went back to choose a suit.

Angrily, she began to repack. I returned in navy blue, seated myself in my favourite armchair, folded my legs neatly, and made a spire of my fingers. The clerical miasma was settling on me.

‘You know that mad thing they demand in court, “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but”? No one’s ever dared produce it. Imagine a barrister asking you “Did you see your wife put rat-poison in your Ovaltine?” The only truthful answer would be to begin *In principio verbum erat*, then work forward through *all the innocent blood of those murdered on earth, from the murder of righteous Abel*. What of any importance has happened since the world began *except homicide?* Finally you’d give an account of yourself, sitting in the witness-stand at a murder trial, deciding which things to leave out. *That* would be accounting for events and their causes.

That would be telling the whole truth.'

'That would be contempt of court.'

'Yes, my child.' (How quickly the clerical mask settles on the brain behind.) 'That's what stories are: leavings-out. Chisel away at stone, toss shards behind you, what's left has a human shape. That is, a falsity. The stone never had that shape. You're not really freeing what was already there. But Woolly's mind's different. He can't cut away, he won't reject. If he were ever forced to make a choice about his own life, willing *this* possibility and therefore dooming *that* to oblivion, crediting *that* and thus denying *this* – he couldn't endure it, he'd die. Even a small choice in real life would make him faint. And in a story, a choice must make him – can you guess? Do you see why he's a magic carpet? How I need only say the words of incantation, and be taken wherever I will?'

'No,' sighed Margot, although I think she did. She triumphantly shut the lid of my suitcase, fastened the catch, and offered her master a small weak grin, apologising for doing anything better than I can. She sat. 'Tell me what you did with Woolly. Tell me the whole truth.'

'I shall,' I said, and with an untrustworthy smirk launched into

the sixteenth story (11:01 a.m.)

'Here's what happened yesterday evening. When I got to Woolly's rooms, about half past eleven, I—'

'Aha!'

'Yes. I walked into his sitting-room without disturbing him, put my finger on the minute-hand of his carriage clock, pushed it forward to just before twelve. Then I called him in. I got my unspeakable drink, I got him sitting, then I talked about his Asian idols. "I'll give you one minute, Culpepper" He expected me, of course, to denounce their presence in a Christian church. That's what he wanted. Not a bit of it. "Leigh, Leigh," I said, "you are so doctrinaire. What about the Yazidis?" His hands made vague wild gestures of deprecation or synthesis, then subsided in his lap. "Why is there no image of the Peacock Angel, the penitent Satan?" Woolly's lovely white hair sleethed up and fluttered like an aureole, then collapsed to his chin. "Where is our portrait of Joseph Smith?" He had no answer. "We must have the chapel walls painted!" He was staggered. I talked of what was needed. Such a pandæmonium of goats' heads and sacred fires and mandalas and Assumptions and flying saucers you never

heard. Cronus with his castrating hook, Mohammed with his face veiled, Hades with Persephone shrieking across his shoulders, silver Tianlong the Celestial Dragon, blue Krishna, the Green Man, snowy Pegasus: hundreds of figures. The whole cast of *The Golden Bough*, Hesiod and Dante, bedlam, *The Naked Lunch*.

‘What’s a story? A forged weapon. But weapons do their good work in different ways. Gas burns lungs, maces shatter skulls, hydrogen bombs vaporise. In this case I didn’t want to break up the order in Woolly’s brain. I needed to suffocate. I needed to hound him beyond time and into oblivion. It worked. He fell into more than his usual state of disintegration. His eyes swelled and wandered ’til they’d erased his whole face, his lips popped like goldfish lips. There was a silence. “Leigh!” I said, experimentally. His eyelids fluttered: “Quite quite, possibly so.” I spoke further and his torpor became profound. His clock said 12:23, so it was really just before the stroke of midnight. I slipped off my shoes, ran out, did the needful, ran back, turned the clock back to the right time, and exclaimed, “We need to be able to worship gods animal, human, and especially” (very loudly) “half-human!” Poor Woolly. He was awake at once, or what passes as awake with him, terrified that I was going to start hurting his head again. “By the way, did you hear a shout just then?” He half thought he had, in a sense. I got the door open. Half a minute more and the dreadful Mr Lint was upon us shouting “Padre, Padre!” and dragging him off to glory. What an evening Woolly had. More fun than a month of Sundays.’

‘You wouldn’t call it fun if you’d seen the way he behaved over the corpse.’

‘Bah. The police are perfectly happy with him. *I am happy with him.* There’s only one way up the Tower, and two distinguished members of College were happy to swear they were sitting beside that corridor. Only one person went by, a few minutes before twelve. We heard his cry; we pushed the door open at once; we can swear no one came back. Idris was alone on Acheron, his suicide is airtight. And *that* is absolutely the end of the story. *C'est fini!*’



Nothing was satisfactory that morning. Margot frowned. Rain went on making rude noises on the glass. ‘*Ce n'est pas tout à fait fini.* What if Idris had lived long enough to whisper to a fireman “I was pushed, Margot ffontaines-Laigh lured me”? That’d be awkward.’

'Um – yes. But drop of a hundred and fifty feet is a drop of a hundred and fifty feet. He wasn't going to survive.'

'And anyway, it's not nice. Tearing open a boy.'

'He wasn't nice.'

'No, I know,' she said uncertainly. 'He had his half-brother machine-gunned. He had two people murdered on Tuesday night. That sweet couple from Harringay. At least they're avenged.'

'Er, well, yes,' I said absently, not liking to add *if they existed*, which as a matter of fact I didn't know and still don't. I sincerely hope they were real. But I avoided looking into the question, by checking for instance whether there'd been any recent runnings-over in the West End. I was aware the sweet couple might be an invention of Benjy's. Who, if pressed, would say, "Very well, Felix, yes; that's something I carefully didn't tell you. We *did* need to straighten out the Harani succession. Al-Mutlak junior really *was* murderous. And even victims *in stories* ought to be avenged, don't you think? I mean the better sort of story, the true-in-spirit sort."

I didn't mention this possibility to Margot. Nor did I point out that I could have arranged the necessary butchery anywhere, yet called the wretched boy to College – *Dirtying your own nest*, you say; yes, if you must – to prove (to Benjy, Margot, myself) the plenitude of my immunity. I concoct the stories, I control time and space. I shred my victims at my own door, and nonetheless stand aloof.

Margot was still wrinkling her brow. 'If the police are happy, *why* are you rushing off to Venice?'

'I've been given, um, more work. By Her Majesty's Government. As a reward for work well done. Benjy rang this morning.' I didn't say that he had been cock-a-hoop with news of a natural gas concession for a British company, signed that morning by Jasim. The Haranis had been holding out for a year; sudden bereavement had given them a fresh perspective on their friendship with England. 'An assignment on the Grand Canal.'

'I thought virtue was its own reward,' said Margot, softly and bitterly. I stood, frowned, and popped back into my bedroom. 'How *can* you go, though?' she called after me. 'There're still two weeks left of term.'

'Oh, that. I've only got Ollie this morning. And you this afternoon. If a chap can't skip the occasional supervision, where's his ease in life?' I emerged complete in clerical costume. 'God, is that the time? I *am* going to miss my flight. Will you let Ollie know I'm off? Discreetly? Kiss? Filthy rain, isn't it?' And I was gone.

Gone; but here's what Margot reports.

From my window she watched me hopping boyishly across the court. Her expression, she was aware, was sour. 'I'm going to grow up looking like my mother. Her everlasting pout... *Am I growing up?* I seem stuck at child-helper level. Little boys forced up chimneys to scrape out the soot. Useful *because puny*'.

She wrote out the most indiscreet notice she could think of (DR CULPEPPER HAS GONE TO VENICE, GO AWAY UNTIL AT LEAST NEXT WEEK, THIS MEANS YOU), taped it to my door, pulled the door locked behind her, and almost stepped into the arms of Ollie, who was bounding up the stairs.

'Don't bother. He's gone,' she said, pouting. 'To Italy. Until next week at least,' and waited for what must follow. A greasy lascivious fire would flare up in Ollie's eyes ('A whole week!'), an appraising stare, an insinuating smile – but none of this happened. He just sighed, turned, and started down the stair. She glanced sharply at his descending profile.

Ollie's hair was simply not old enough to go grey. But since yesterday it had definitely unravelled a little with shock. The curls did not spring and spiral as they used. Moreover Margot perceived a new element in his face. 'Not precisely sober, not even subdued. Just ... inward. Great God, I recognise it! He's turning *human*.' And because she was young, for all her sophistication, and because he was her friend (even though she thought of him as a scampering puppy, yapping for girls as if for walkies), she called 'Wait!', and followed him down the turn of the stairs.

They sat side by side on the landing, staring hopelessly out over the back wall of Wygy's, over Christ's Pieces to the typewriter-shaped wedge at the back of Christ's College. *Tt-tt*, went the rain, *tt-tt*, *tt-tt-tt*. *This planet is experimenting*, thought Margot. *It's refining a new improved grey. A shade so crushing all thinking people will simply prefer to die. We are bacilli, this November dinginess is antiseptic. Yes, that's right, planet, a touch more mud in your sky. A little more blurring of blackness in your light...* And on this morning of universal dissatisfaction, Ollie Vane-Powell (she glanced at him sideways, humbly) *is joining the doomed ranks of the thinking. The man element's predominating over the rampant quadruped. How? Why?*

It was gunfire that had done it: gunfire, that great educator. What the poets of the Great War learned from years of the Western Front, Ollie, more sensitive, was taught by two seconds of Idris' revolver. The bullets had gone nowhere near him, but had penetrated his froth. The fact that bullets exist had pierced his soul. Which now twitched with weird, galvanic life, like an electrocuted dead frog. *Death*, said a violent spasm, and his mind kicked; *love; essential seriousness; wrong; chance; time*—

Of course he wasn't going to say any of this to a girl, especially not a clever girl like Abishag. So he said, sounding aggrieved as any child: 'Culpepper might have been here. Y'know, I stayed up all night. Waded through *Metamorphoses IX*. Translated the whole frigging thing.'

'Really?' She stared with a certain awe at the papers in his hand: a plastic envelope, acid-green, rain-spattered. She thought of him "pulling an all-nighter" with his curtains pulled against the helicopter and the sirens and the blood-drunk undergraduates.

'Yeah, I've translated it. And I still don't know what happened to Deianira. It doesn't say. I wanted to ask him.'

'Deianira?' Ollie caring about a female he couldn't touch? Abishag nearly laughed. Then she considered his woeful look, and the violence they were carefully not discussing. So she put her arm round his shoulder, as if he were eight, and she were anything old, thirty-eight let's say, and told him

the seventeenth story (11:27 a.m.)

'What happened to Madame Hercules? I'll tell you. A messenger came pounding up to the palace in Tiryns—'

'Oh. One of them,' said Ollie bleakly.

'Yes. There must have been a whole corps of them in ancient Greece,' she said, sounding, even to herself, every instant more like the vanished Felix. (*He's so imitable. I am eventually, through mere slavish imitation, going to become him.*) 'A corps of men trained to cast their news into metre as they jogged along through the dust. They sat waiting in post offices for the gods to be annoyed, for heroes to be destroyed. Then off they went, trohee, trohee, rat-a-tat-tat.' Ollie had lifted his face to the bleeding pockmarks of water on the skylight. 'Deianira was pacing the *stoa* of the palace: ten paces, turn, ten paces, turn. She was tearing the backs of her beautiful hands, scratching, scratching. Had her second messenger, the one with the warning, outrun the first, the one with the venom? She thought of what the venom had looked like, the day she'd collected it beside the sunny Euenes—'

'Culpepper says the valley's too deep to be sunny? Did it hurt the rain more if it smashed into another drop, or if it hit the glass cleanly?'

'The sunny Euenes. Nessus' blood had been brighter—'

'He went down it,' said Ollie's far away voice, 'in a canoe. Ages ago.'

When he was young and not so nasty.'

'Been brighter, thicker, hotter than the blood of men. It seemed to come from—'

'Culpepper bled into the river too. He said' He sounded miserable, but not with simple boy-misery; more like a man stripped raw to mourn. 'Gashed his arm on a rock below a village called I can't remember what.'

'From the horse part of him. How could she not have guessed the stuff was murderous? Or *had* she guessed? That near-rape was as close as she'd come to adultery, while her husband violated their vows constantly, heroically – the fifty daughters of King Thespius in one night—'

'That doesn't sound right.'

'In one night, said rumour. He was always lying to her. Had she lied to herself about Nessus' lies? Was she, deep within, vengeful? But there was a dot on the road by now, getting close, closer. She stopped pacing, she stood with her ruined hands at her sides waiting to hear the fate of the son of Jupiter, her fate too. The palace slaves assembled behind her, in the shade of the columns, getting ready to raise the ululation of lament. The messenger ran toward her, *slowing down* now, the wretched show-boater, in order to get his breath. He'd been on the road for two days and now he wanted to make a good entrance. The dust of every kingdom from Phocis to Tiryns stuck to his sweat. "He looks like a man made of sand," thought Deianira, horrified that such fancies could occur to her at such a moment. It was the beginning of her horrors. "Your husband's dead on Mount Æta," cried the messenger in passable verse. "Hydra-poison in centaur-blood".'

'Burned him. I know, I know. Tore off shirt, flesh came too. Bones showed. Knew what was happening. Tore down trees.' CRACK, CRACK. Revelation, mustard gas and barbed wire. 'No more fluff or fighting for Hercules. Built a pyre and climbed on. Torch. Whoosh.'

'Yes,' sighed Abishag, bilked. 'That is exactly what the messenger told Deianira.'

'But it wasn't *true*. I mean, the important thing's left out of the story. He didn't burn. Papa Jove whisked him up to Olympus.'

'She wasn't to know that. She was consumed by partial news. Undone by too much guile,' said Abishag sadly. 'An overconsumption of lying stories, a superfluity of mendacity. One porky too many.'

'But how? I mean, what does *consumed* mean?'

'I don't think anyone bothers to record. Hanged self, stabbed self, drowned self. Evaporated into mythology.'



'I don't think,' said Ollie grumpily, 'I'm any the wiser. I'm sliding,' he said shakily, getting up, 'my translation under Culpepper's door. Then I'm going to bed. But thank you,' he added grudgingly, 'for the bedtime story.' The old Ollie could never have said such a thing, or not without a leer, and as he ascended the stair toward the pittering skylight, and she descended, Margot brooded in a way common to clever children approaching twenty. *He matures, I deteriorate. He ages, like a side of beef; I'm corrupted, like an apple. He learns to read, I learn fraud.* But that wasn't quite what depressed her so much. It was more the feeling (which causes terror) that such developments, although they seem enormous, are small deliberate movements in something else. Dance steps. *In what, in what?* she wondered, stepping into the rain.

A WEEK LATER:

BEFORE SUNRISE, THURSDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2012

"Wygefornis", says our College prospectus, "has always had a special place in Cambridge"; and so it has. No sooner had Bishop Worthyal founded it than it acquired a reputation (says Caxton) for

*y^e most cvrst & vncleenlie stvdies in y^e ij. vnuersties
of Englaude too vvit diuinacions astrologie
alchymie castinge of oroscvpvms confortinge vvith
hobbgobbelyns sattirs feyfolke and y^e lyke euен
vnto svmmoning vpp of famillyerr spyrts &c alle y^e
most deuilyshe cvnninge knowyn to y^s vnhallowyd
ayge: vnto y^e vvhiche clerkes chorysters scholars
fellowvs & y^e master of sainte VVigifortes collyge are
most greeuiovflie addycted to y^e perill of y^r fooles
& y^e scandille of chryftendoome nay euен of y^e
sarrassenes beeyonde y^e sees.*

Under Henry and Mary, Wygy's was the most heretical college. After the Restoration even Emmanuel dows could console each other by saying *We were not loyal, Sir, but we were not like St Wygefornis'.* In Georgian times

no other college had to worry about being quite the idlest, drunkenest or most deistical. And now that dons make such a shabby suburban fetish of exam results, the comfort is: *Thank God for Wygy's: whatever happens, we can't fall below second-worst on the Tompkins Table.* That's why the University has always coddled College. Cambridge not only tolerates our undergraduate illiteracy, it cherishes it, for it allows every other college to recalibrate its own youths; the same goes, thank God, for the Fellowship. As far as it can, the University overlooks even our grossest scandals. Thus there was no inquiry into the spectacular plunge from Acheron of one of our admissions candidates. It was tacitly agreed he killed himself out of anxiety about the interview process. No blame was assigned.

The event caused far more outcry among the Saracens beyond the seas.

The death of Idris killed his father, Ali al-Mutlak. The next day there was an infectious outbreak in the clinic in the Palace where the old president lay sick. With him perished his doctors, Colonel Adeeb and the entire Presidential Guard – it was a wonderfully virulent infection – and even certain Ministers who had not been sufficiently careful about cultivating Jasim; who stepped into his father's shoes without opposition.

One of his first acts as President-for-Life of Haran, after the purges, was to email Sir Trotsky Plantagenet.

In the circumstances the Harani Republic does not desire the body of my beloved brother Idris to be flown back to Paddan Aram. There might be popular demonstrations, overflows of our double national grief. So I have an unusual request to make. I wish my dear younger brother to rest forever at St Wygefornis' College, desire for which was so strong it killed him.

He proposed a donation from mournful Harani people to Wygy's as a memorial. Although the Master was still in dudgeon about all Mutlaks, the sum mentioned was really too much to refuse.

Woolly was still luxuriously prostrate, and in no condition to lead one of his syncretist services; the entire College was sulky and petulant, a reaction against the excitement of last Thursday night; Sir Trotsky wanted nothing to do with it; the Haranis wanted it to happen quietly. 'Quietly,' they insisted, 'very very quietly.'

That was the situation when I got back from Venice. I was a bit taken

aback to hear my victim was returning to College; I felt like Saturn being made to vomit up the children he had devoured. But I rallied. After the death of the hero come the funeral games: of course. I volunteered to arrange the burial, and no one got in my way.

'You won't want the body carried through College,' I told the Harani ambassador in lordly fashion; 'collect it from the hospital morgue and deliver it across Christ's Pieces at dawn. My suite and I will receive it.' I put down the 'phone. 'The ambassador,' I told Margot, 'will deliver Idris at seven tomorrow morning.'

'The ambassador? He's not been deported then?'

'Hm? Oh. No. That is – not yet.'

'Who is "your suite"?'

'You. Of course. And get Ollie and Tristan along. We don't want outsiders mucking about.' I could see she liked the idea of being an insider. 'Not Seb, he can't do anything before noon. Tell them to wear something rough.'

So at raw half-light the next day the boys, in rugby shirts, and I, in my regal brand-new Italian overcoat, and Margot, in dark grey and heavy silk scarf (black being too heavy-handed), found ourselves forcing open the tiny rusty spiked bridge that spans the Styx and is hardly ever used. We stood formally in a line on the far side. The pompous melancholy of funerals had infected us. We didn't speak.

Of course the Haranis were late. I was dreading a dark green Mercedes, and that's exactly what turned up. (I couldn't detect any suspicious dents.) It parked illegally in Earl Street. The driver, a burly fellow with moustaches and a trench coat, got out and opened the door; a burly fellow with moustaches and trilby worked himself out of the seat and got himself upright. Then the driver opened the boot and lifted out a parcel, which might have been two sacks of potatoes laid end to end, sewn up in sacking.

'God – is that *him*?' whispered Ollie out the side of his mouth. 'It?'

'The Mutlaki clan,' I whispered back, 'belongs to a particularly severe strain of Islam.'

'Its tenets,' Margot murmured (why at funerals does everyone mutter in this snide fashion?) 'didn't seem to cramp him much.'

'Not while he lived. But they forbid coffins... *Mr Ambassador*.' I mingled all too ably grief and unction. The ambassador, edified, shook my hand, nodded slightly at the boys, leered then bowed at Margot. He wasn't unpleasant and my *protégés* couldn't decide what to feel when later, just after Christmas, he was recalled to Paddam Aran and shot.

Meanwhile, that was that. The driver heaved the parcel into the boys' arms; stood back; didn't quite salute. Then the Haranis wobbled back to their car and drove away. Not a word had they said.

I led us back over the bridge. We shut and locked the gate behind us with a creak, placed the cadaver on the damp step of the Temple, and dug a grave.

Not that I actually dug. Margot stood beside me handing tools to Ollie and Tristan, who did the digging; I lit a cigar. Why does everyone behave with muted affectation at funerals?

A cold windy half-sunny dawn in November: bracing, sceptical weather. But Aceldama's always an uncanny place, and it was hard to laugh off its menace. Ther'd been no rain for three days, so the air was crisp and dry, but everywhere in that neglected garden was water. Every tree dripped. The Stygian Creek gurgled out of the ground and back underground through a grille. The soil was waterlogged a foot below the surface. The deeper the boys went the vaguer the distinction seemed between Aceldama and Styx. They soon sank to their knees in the mud, and proceeded by spooning rather than digging.

Deep in the runny mud they came across the bones of a puny dog. Then more; far more. 'The pugs!' I cried, breaking out of my funeral spirits. 'The pugs of Master Wakefield! Let me have them.'

I sat on the step of the Temple beside Idris, unconcerned, wiping the soil off the little bones and assembling a complete dog. The boys, moodily, kept digging.

Cling! Cling!

'Eh? What's that now? Gently, gently!' I jumped up and peered in. They were poking round what looked like a block of mud. When they worked it (swearing and groaning) up on to the grass, it still looked like a block of mud. But when I had soused it thrice with the gardener's watering-can, it became metal: metal so rotten that it crumpled under the pressure of a spade, but distinctly a metal box, with rusted bands and bosses, of vaguely Eastern design.

'Perhaps Coptic?' suggested Margot.

'Perhaps,' I muttered, pretending not to be excited. She handed me a screwdriver, with which I broke off the rusty ruins of a padlock and prised back the lid, and...

There was a mass of straw, which I scooped out delicately. My impression was of a muddy coconut, some rusty piping, and a faint stench. I sniffed, scowled, and, too feline to dirty my paws, took Margot's silk

scarf, wrapped it round my fingers, and groped for the coconut. I got the thing on the grass. My snort of revulsion turned into a chuckle; I spun it suddenly round toward the two gravediggers, who went 'Fuck' and 'Urgh' at once.

A face – the head of a woman! And quite unlike the clean shrunken head I had been shown last month in the Foreign Office. This was life-size, death-size, half rotted away, and smelt of the earth. But it was a head rather than a skull. Enough skin remained to make it a person.

'Loathsome,' said Margot, and Tristan added:

'Chuck it in the stream.'

'Nonsense. Don't be unfriendly. You know her. You see her every day. Or would if you did any work, you—' Here I paused suddenly. My fingers had jagged on a fissure in the lowest part of her skull, just above the highest vertebra. My thumb caressed it. No doubt about it. A bullet-hole.

Tristan was peering into the face. 'It's the woman in the Library.'

'Nah,' said Ollie, more out of habit than anything else, 'not her. That can't be right.'

'The one draped in shower curtains,' said Tristan. 'With nipples and thighs coming out at you.'

'Goddess-like limbs, I'd have said, floating amidst translucencies.' My voice had taken on a mystical sheen. I was suddenly dazed by the impenetrable dark glory of sacrifice. This little hole opened into the underworld, it was an abyss, bottomless. (I wasn't going to mention it to the children. If I don't know things they don't, what am I for? Besides, it sets a bad precedent. Who knows if one day ...?)

I'd got the head sitting upright now on a nest of Margot's scarf, and rocked back on my hams to worship the goddess. 'This,' I pronounced in my public voice, 'is Iolë! The wonderful nymph Fanny Hervey, who had become Fanny Alcock, and later, perhaps, Fanny Myre! Wonderful!' And even Ollie couldn't deny it.

She was no longer wonderful. The state of her hair was depressing; her skin showed the pox; her eyes and mouth were fixed open. But it was the gape of her lying mouth that was most disquieting. It suggested – what? Astonishment?

('The endless howling O of a tragic mask,' suggested Ollie that evening in the bar, where the three of us met to ease our secret – Ollie, newly awake to the possibilities of pain, said odd things that term. 'It was like an inflatable doll's mouth,' offered grubby-minded Tristan. 'It'd have to be doctored to stay open like that,' said practical Margot. 'Fixed open with a

nail. Although *my* fingers weren't going in to find out.)

Meanwhile, at dawn in Aceldama, I shook out the casket. 'What else?'

All this time Idris lay on the step of the Temple of Priapus.

The metal pipes were guns: a brace of duelling pistols. I scrubbed and scratched at them, murmuring to himself. 'Ollie, Tristan: back to work.' Shrugging, they continued gouging out a grave. 'Too rusty for any maker's marks... no, no, look. You can read it here. *Wogdon & Barton - London*. Must have been lovely things in their time. Ten-inch barrels. Identical, of course.' I can never resist explaining. 'Perfectly weighted. Feel them.' I handed the muddy things to Margot.

'But they're not. This one's heavier.'

I frowned and snatched them back; swapped them from one hand to another, frowned again. I squinted down the barrel of one pistol; considered; squinted down the barrel of the other; frowned some more; then took the second pistol and carefully bashed it on the steps of the Temple, just by Idris' head, four times, until the barrel cracked and I could tease it open. Then I began to laugh so much that for a moment I couldn't speak.

Tristan gazed at me malevolently over the lip of the grave. 'What's amusing him?'

'Oh, it's too good. This one's been tampered with. It's still got its bullet in it.'

'It wasn't fired?'

'It *couldn't* be fired. There's a... pin. A hairpin. Yes, a jewelled woman's hairpin. See? Hammered down the barrel.' I rolled back on the damp grass with my feet in the air. 'O Iolë. *Io triumphe*.'

'We've finished,' said Ollie, not so very sulkily considering how much mud there was in his hair, and how too much conditioner debases the timbre of the cuticle.

Death's death. Even I, remembering what they were about, sobered up. I took out my cigar and balanced it on the balustrade of the folly; took off my fedora and hatted the bust of Lord Courtenay with it; slipped the hairpin into my pocket. Then I got Margot to take the feet of the thing in sacking, myself heaving the shoulders. As decently as we could, we handed the parcel to the boys, who settled it in its cocoon of mud and scrambled out on to the grass.

I had a sick spasm of imagination: how seedy we'd look to Idris, if he'd been able to open his eyes and measure us through his sacking as we stood over his raw grave, hands crossed over groins, guilty heads bent: Margot's chestnut hair, Ollie's soiled blond love-curls, Tristan's dull

English sandiness, and mine. Ollie had proved him a murderer, Margot and I had hoaxed him to death, Tristan had made his death riotous by mocking Woolly. It also struck me that graves, in the moment before they're closed, turn implausible. *You fools, there's a person there:* it seems a mistake has been made.

Dong-dong, dong-dong, dong-dong, dong-dong. The bell of Emmanuel, ringing for early Mass, came over the garden wall. Beyond the grim walled garden, Cambridge was stirring; virtuous colleges were already awake; not Wygy's.

Ollie, who is improving and may live to be a good man, coughed. 'Oughtn't somebody to say something?'

I shook my head. 'I think Woolly pretty much exhausted the possibilities of prayer. Don't you? Fill it in.'

But Ollie really is becoming a better person. He dropped his shovel, produced a half-bottle of Jägermeister from his pocket, wriggled back down into the muddy grave, and deposited it by Idris' right hand. 'He seemed so fond of the beastly stuff,' he muttered, apologetically.

The rest of us were stung. Idris must not be buried like a dog. His funeral took a Viking turn.

'In that case,' I said, entering into the spirit of the thing, and I handed Ollie the pistol, the unsabotaged one with which Josiah Myre had slain the Archdeacon of Ely. 'Put that in his other hand. Young Mr al-Mutlak liked firearms.'

Then Margot did a brave thing. She stooped, picked up Lady Fanny's head without flinching, and handed it to Ollie. 'Put that on his knees.' I stirred in my expensive overcoat, but Margot, not glancing at me, asserting herself against me for the first time, said: 'You're *not* keeping it, Felix. If you want a human skull you'll have to kill one yourself. On his knees, Ollie. Like a trophy.'

I sighed. But I used to rub tomb-brasses in boyhood; I enjoy doing what is no longer done. 'If a man was a Crusader whod reached Jerusalem, the legs on his tomb effigy were crossed. You might cross Idris' legs.'

'Did he visit Jerusalem?'

'He's reached Aceldama.'

So Ollie, reluctantly, fidgeted with the legs in their wrapping.

Tristan has an A-level in history. 'If we're getting mediæval ... noblemen's feet used to rest on lions.'

'We don't have a lion,' I said. 'And I'm not burgling Tartarus for the Master's.'

‘We’ll use your pug,’ Margot said, coldly.

‘My pug! My composite pug! I want that.’

‘You can’t have it, it’s too revolting. You can keep the hairpin. Ollie: here it is.’ And so the lower end of the sacking was propped on the canine skeleton. ‘And use this wreck of a box to pillow his head.’ I didn’t dare say a thing. ‘No, stop, it looks jagged. Wrap it in this’ – and she poured her grimy black scarf into Ollie’s hands.

Tristan stared uncertainly at the result. ‘All these bits and pieces?’ I think he meant that the trench looked like a not-so-unsuccessful experiment in the black arts. ‘Aren’t we, y’know. *Polluting* College a bit?’

‘No, no,’ I said, trying to sound breezy, ‘we’re tidying up. Sorting out the tenantry of Aceldama. Putting them on a more comfortable footing with each other.’ Sorting out the crimes that have been done at St Wygefornis’ since the beginning. Taking on ourselves every homicide since Cain’s. ‘They look perfectly decent, don’t you think?’ We all stared at Fanny Myre’s gaping lips. ‘Well, not *her* so much. Here.’ I retrieved my cigar. ‘Plug her mouth with that.’ Ollie screwed the burning cohiba between her gums. ‘And now’ – for the cavity was suddenly unbearable, Ollie had leapt out of it, Margot had covered her face, my voice rose to a sort of wail – ‘for God’s sake fill it in.’

Which the boys did, frantically. Then they threw down their shovels behind the Temple of Priapus, and the four of us fled, clanging the garden gate behind us so hard every undergraduate in Sheol Court must have stirred in his sleep. Tristan and Ollie ran back to their staircases to shower. But Margot and I fled to my rooms and leapt under a duvet, lying together untouched in that safe dimness like thoroughly wicked children.

TWO MONTHS LATER:
WEDNESDAY, 16 JANUARY 2013

I don’t mean to exaggerate the horror. There was a dimness; Margot and I emerged from it and went our ways. Hours passed and became a day. Days passed and completed the term, during which Scholarly Endeavour was once more worsted by Concupiscence, Indolence, and Spleen. Snow fell at Epiphany, hiding the wound we’d made in the earth. Lent Term began – yesterday in fact – and soon enough spring will arrive, grass will spread, the wound will heal altogether; Aceldama will seem no more ominous than usual.

Yet it's remarkable that I've never revisited the garden, except in nightmares; also, that the four of us have a tacit rule not to mention our Harani victim to each other.

Until today. Every 16th January St Wygy's keeps Founder's Birthday, which his statutes prescribe as a unique day of humiliation and winelessness, fasting and lament, until the end of time. Lunch in Hall was grim: rice, rye bread, crab apples and water. As soon as it was done I hurried back to my rooms and, in defiance of College tradition, got out my bottle of Lagavulin. What luxurious iodine, what smoke, peat, salt, seaweed! They'd all been captured on an Atlantic islet, ten years ago when I was still an innocent; now they came forth, and consoled.

The first knock on my door, half-expected, was Margot. Within a few minutes the rest of my undergraduate coterie had shamefacedly turned up: Ollie, who's got his nerve back and is becoming nice, worldly upper-middle-class Tristan Bolswood, and even Seb, that sunny-haired bipedal animal, just out of bed.

The Founder enjoins us to spend the day bemoaning his birth. We were infracting that law; and since every transgression inspires other transgressions, we presently found ourselves being indiscreet about Idris al-Mutlak – to the amazement of Seb, who knew nothing about it. ‘Fucking hell,’ he said, ‘what a spooky thing to do. Doesn’t it give you all nightmares?’

The hush was so acute it answered his question; it went on and on, so that it was a relief when Margot boldly drained her tumbler in one, and told

The eighteenth story

‘Rot. I dream of rot.’

I refilled her glass, and she reported that she sees Fanny’s neck dissolving into Idris al-Mutlak’s knee, his thigh into her head.

(A peculiarly disgusting abomination; the comfort is it can’t endure. A few more months and this bifomed monster, more frightful than any *basajaun*, is bound to fade into clean loam.)

‘Meanwhile it likes,’ said Margot, ‘to join in the midnight chorus.’

Has no one told you about our midnight chorus? Has it not reached the guidebooks? At the moment each Cambridge day becomes extinct, as Little St Mary’s rings its twelvefold knell, the dead stir. Freshly laid

cadavers scarcely gone squidgy, diffuse lengths of ooze, mere vague pockets of sticky earth, ash urned, ash naked, dust: all of it wriggles, chuckles and begins its purgatorial chant. If you happen to be in a Cambridge graveyard at that hour, do lie full-length and press your ear to the carved stone. You'll hear them at it: *spec, spec, spec* is what you'll make out first, like the meaningless scratching of beetles; then, as you better catch the mirthful sound, *specto, specto*.

Apparently Fanny Myre snaps open her half-consumed eyes, ogles Idris' feet, ogles the Four Last Things, spits out her cigar. Idris' wormy eyes reappear behind his shreds of eyelid. Because the complacent grin of skeletons is so like the complacent grin of seducers, he looks for a moment quite his old self. Then what's left of his mouth starts to move in perfect time with the half-embalmed lips of his baptised lady. The monster (murderer-murderess, murderee-murderee) sings its prayers from double mouth: *Expecto, expecto!*

'Even the pug quivers beneath the monster's toes,' said Margot; 'I see its mandible twitch. Of course it doesn't understand, but you know how dogs are. They always like to woof along. *Expecto resurrectionem mortuorum!*' And she finished her scotch.



'What does that mean?' asked the imbecile Seb (who reads sociology). 'Is it Spanish?'

We explained. 'The nightmare Life-in-Death,' added Margot, moodily but so artfully I suspected she'd invented her vision.

'Gross-oh,' declared the cheerful Seb. 'That's totally the pits.'

'Not so *totally*,' I said. Why should Margot affect to suffer more than I do? I threw him off the tower. 'You only have to *watch*. Last night, y'know,

The nineteenth story

I was Josiah Myre. Once again. Metamorphosed. I found myself putting on my lilac-and-silver ribbon of St Caroline. And my battered Armenian cloak, the cloak Fanny loved when we were outcasts, so heavy now with grime it seems to cling to my flesh. To sear. (I tossed back and forth, trying to wake.) I find myself lighting a candle, I steal from the Lodgings past the

stables – Sheol Court isn't built yet – toward. Toward—'

'Yes, yes,' said Margot.

'Toward that odious garden. Cambridge's spires are silver as peppermints between scudding early summer clouds. Constellations veil and unveil themselves. Winking at what's about to happen. I endure this, and cannot wake. The garden gate groans. I go through. Between silhouettes of yews I make it out, the cupola of Priapus. Gleaming. I open the casket. A skull in moonshine. *Ma chère petite*, I hear, a creaky whisper from my own mouth; *Pardonnez-moi, ma chère, chère petite*—'

'That's enough of that,' Margot said briskly. 'Ollie? 'Fess up.'

The twentieth story

Ollie looked shamefaced. We had to worm it out of him. He's emerging from goatish pubescence, and hardly likes to say that he dreams of – love, most awful of all frenzies.

What he sees is Fanny as Iolë, dancing for her belovèd on Mount Cœta; and it seems to him, sleeping, that her allure is larger than the world. The cosmos is too slight to hold her. Hercules son of God is happy to die for her. Her loveliness abolishes death, and thought, and law. That lift of bare foreleg cancels the weight of mountains. The gyration of ankle undoes Greece, she lifts her arms against the virginal columns of the Parthenon and prevails. In Ollie's dream he both craves her singing and dreads it, for should she sing as she dances, should she sing tales and make them true by uttering them, should she rest her eyes on him, surely he would dissolve—

⁂

'Total downer!' said Seb, although the concept of love is naturally over his head (and at that moment it occurred to me how useful it would to have such an oblivious creature as Seb help me in my work. Yes, I will use him). 'What about you?'

Tristan pulled a long face. He's a hard-boiled youth, yet strangely enough the bleakest vision is visited on him. At night he beholds, or so he claimed,

The twenty-first story

the universe turned inside out, with the land of the dead at its apex. The cigar in Iolë's mouth keeps smoking, like a fuming tripod. Its column of infernal incense rises downward, under the bed of the Stygian Creek, past a three-headed pug, exciting the dead with news of fresh atrocities throughout this transient realm of men. Most of all it carries tales of ill-doings at Wygefotis; and these acrid wisps reach the supreme depth, tickling the nostrils of Dis.