

Less understanding

Vonny Thenasten and Carrienne Moore

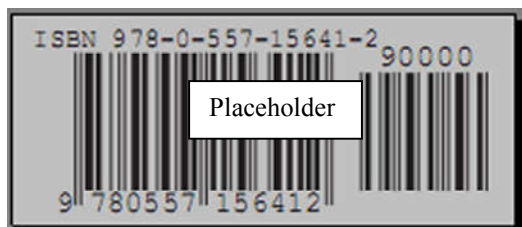
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Front cover taken from *Vase* by Vonny Thenasten

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This novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

Acknowledgements

Page 33 *On a night dark and unfathomable*, by El Greco

Page 91 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality', from *Burnt Norton*, by TS Eliot

Page 102 *Cherish Myself*, by Rabi'a. From Ladinsky, Daniel, 'Love Poems From God,' Penguin Compass, 2002

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Less understanding

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance

- TS Eliot, *East Coker*

Part 1. History

1971

Instinctively, Claudia touched the tiny cross hanging at her neck.

‘Don’t worry, Patrissia, everything will be fine.’

‘Pappa will find out. He always does.’

‘Who’ll tell him? They’ll just think I’m smoking with my friends.’

Patrissia grinned and clapped her hands. ‘Who is it? Giulio?’

‘I can’t tell you. It’s safer that way.’

‘Oh, tell me, Claudia! I can keep a secret!’

‘Better not, little sister. Don’t scowl like that, it makes you look ugly—look, tell you what, I’ll get Mamma to take us to tea at the art gallery again. We can have cakes on the terrace. Deal?’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise.’ Claudia examined herself in the ornate mirror. ‘How do I look?’

‘Not too bad.’ Patrissia sniffed. ‘Are you wearing Mamma’s *Acqua di Parma*? She’ll kill you!’

‘I couldn’t resist. Now, you remember what to say?’

‘We had a fight and you went for a walk. You didn’t say where.’

Claudia nodded. ‘Yes. Don’t let them bully you, Patrissia. Stick to our story and *never* give in, *never* confess, whatever they threaten, whatever they say. Then they can’t be sure, and we’ll be OK. Only stupid people confess. We’re too smart for that, aren’t we?’

The younger girl smiled artfully. ‘They’ll never catch us out, will they, Claudia? We’re smarter than Mamma and Guido and his horrid men, and anyway, we’re pretty so they’ll have to believe us.’

Her sister hadn’t been listening, too busy making final touches to her hair. She took a deep breath and turned, checking the time.

‘I suppose I’d better go. Show me your drawing.’

Obediently, the younger girl held out her pad. 'It's not finished.'

Claudia took it and stood, her head to one side, her eyes following the curves and smudges. 'It's beautiful. You're so clever, *cara mia*. One day you'll be a famous artist.' She flashed her teeth in a brilliant smile. 'Come, give me a hug.'

Patrissia laid her head on her sister's shoulder. In the mirror, she could see Claudia's profile and herself, staring. Behind them was Claudia's room with its big bed and pretty, delicate curtains, and through the bay window, the huge blue sky.

'We'll always be together, won't we?', she asked softly.

'Of course we will. I'll never leave you,' Claudia replied, stroking her hair. 'We'll seduce some dark and handsome men and run off to the mountains, and we'll milk goats and wear rags and weave spells for our lovers.'

Patrissia's eyes were staring blankly, her head filled with scenes of their mountain village and the wild winds and dangerous ravines and rasping cold.

'Good.'



Claudia checked the time on the big clock above the bar, and decided to have another Campari. She nodded to the barman.

Outside, the square was filling up with tourists, but the little bar in this far corner was still bearable, just the usual few Canadians sitting quietly, enjoying the warm night and easy atmosphere; and the girl, so obviously waiting.

Claudia stared pensively into the red depths of the glass as she lifted it to her lips and threw back the last dregs. *Oh God, forgive me for what I am about to do*, she whispered, not expecting forgiveness. *I can give him comfort, he is tortured*. She smiled to herself.



Ignatius, glorying in the airy space of the large hotel room—such a contrast to his tiny visitor's cell on the other side of the city—lay spreadeagled on the cool floor, gazing distractedly at the ceiling.

In spite of the uncomfortable heat he was feeling well, in fact very well, for the first time in his three months here. He almost smiled at the hoots and buzzing of the cars and scooters passing by in the noisy street below.

But now it was cooler, and he was overdue for a shower. Grunting, he peeled off his sodden T-shirt, and untied his cheap trainers. Standing, golden blue light momentarily filled the room as the sun appeared and as soon disappeared over the apartments opposite, and he rose and moved out onto the cracked tiles of the narrow balcony.

Having not seen the sun for a week while lying on sweaty sheets in his dark cell, he missed the idea of it, but not its hot and bleary actuality. He stood for many minutes in the thankfully cooler dusk, longing for a cigarette.

Ignoring the dirt and pigeon droppings, he squatted and then sat on the dilapidated tiles, stretching his legs comfortably. He didn't need to dress for half an hour yet: he could enjoy his freedom. He sorely missed the Marlboros, yet another bad habit, and he vowed to be as parsimonious with them as he was able. How he missed the cigarettes.



Claudia's heart beat a little faster as, anonymous in her large black sunglasses and chic grey dress, she turned a corner and crossed the busy street to the next square. Pausing briefly, she sat at one of the tiny café tables crowded round a large fountain, lighting a cigarette and staring in her turn at the drifting swirls of tourists eager to pay heavily for the dirty tables and poor quality wine.

Finishing her cigarette she rose, taking no notice as two men detached themselves from an exhausted-looking group sitting on the fountain wall and headed for her table.

A private lesson, oh yes, she whispered to herself as she passed from the busy square into one of the tiny alleyways. *My Credo could do with some improvement.* She sniffed: a sin here or there, what did it matter? She would be forgiven, eventually, and in a month he would be gone and so would she, to the university, to Sapienza. A month, time enough for anything, for everything.

Her parents would kick up a fuss if they found out of course, and they would stop her allowance for a while... but there was little chance of discovery. The room was booked in a false name and even her father's connections in the Polizia would be hard-pressed to link 'Mr and Mrs Joseph Green' with his daughter. She had paid for the room in cash too, just to be sure. No, she was safe as houses.

*

One of the men paused as he reached Claudia's vacated table, picking up the cigarette butt from the ashtray, only half-smoked. He carefully extinguished it, and sniffing the faint smudge of lipstick on the butt, placed it in a small plastic bag before hurrying to catch his companion, who was already ten metres ahead.

'Why do they bother?' he muttered. 'She's a teenager, of course she smokes, we all do at that age.'

'It's not smoking he's worried about,' said the other, anxious-looking, man. 'At least, not cigarettes. But he'll want to see the butt, the poor bloody girl. Come on, she's not hanging about and we'll get skinned if we lose her this time. If she's meeting some boy I pity him, but it's probably some girlfriends. I hope so, we might get to sit down for a while and have a glass or two of wine. Come on!'

Sweating in the heavy air, and cursing the tourists ambling randomly in front of them and seemingly determined to frustrate their passage, they turned into the alleyway, sniffing as though they could detect the young girl's scent.

*

Ignatius jerked awake as the room door slammed and a voice called his name.

'Out here!' he shouted hurriedly. 'You caught me by surprise. Could you throw me my clothes?'

There were sounds of heels quickly crossing the room.

'Are you really going to wear these again? They're disgusting!' came the voice from inside. A hand tossed the sweat-stained clothes towards the balcony door.

‘Thanks,’ he said, pulling them on, ‘and thanks for the cigarettes,’ he said as he entered the room and saw her emptying several red and white packets onto a small table. He stared at her hungrily: she really was quite beautiful.

Claudia smiled as she looked up at him framed in the doorway. ‘Ah, but this time you pay!’

*

‘So you lost her again?’ queried the tall man, sighing. ‘The *Signore* will be most displeased.’ He paused. ‘What happened?’

‘She got herself a lift, obviously prearranged. She knows we’re following her.’

‘Undoubtedly, she is not stupid. But why were you not prepared?’

‘We were, but you know how these kids drive.’

‘Did you get the number plate?’

The sweating man handed over a crumpled piece of paper, and grinned. ‘We took the long lens this time.’

‘Excellent, then perhaps we can save ourselves.’ The tall man picked up the phone and made a brief call.

‘Inspector Grazzini knows her friends, and he says it will be easy to find the rider,’ said the tall man as he replaced the handset. ‘Now go, and pray that his men are not as incompetent as you.’

*

Claudia leaned forward over the cheap, rickety table and opened her eyes wide.

‘But why? Why must I learn this?’ she pouted. ‘Can’t we have some fun for a change? I’m paying you to rescue my soul, not bore it to death! Can we go for a drink? Nobody will recognise us in this part of the city.’

‘No, Claudia. If we are found together... let alone drinking. I would be returned to the mission immediately, if I was lucky. And you—’

‘I would be scolded, as usual,’ she pouted. ‘So why don’t we make it worthwhile—you have to go back soon anyway.’

She leaned back, smoothing her dress and swishing her long hair out of her face, blushless as a Madonna. ‘If you don’t want to go out...’ She scraped back the chair and headed for the phone stuck to the wall beside the room door, ‘I have an idea.’

After a few seconds impatiently tossing her hair and grinning at Ignatius’ look of shocked concern, she muttered, ‘Paulo, *grazie*,’ into the mouthpiece and putting her hand over it, conspiratorially, explained, ‘My friend. He will bring us wine. No-one will know.’

Ignatius sighed and, leaning back in his chair, closed the heavy book that rested on the table. Claudia was far too attractive for his peace of mind, and he couldn’t prevent his eyes from tracing the curves of her body as she cradled the phone affectionately, gesticulating, laughing, cajoling, holding her long hair off her face and neck.

He took another cigarette and walked out onto the balcony.

A few minutes later, Claudia finished the call and he listened to her vague noises as she moved around the room. From his retreat on the balcony he saw a scooter roar to a stop, and a few seconds later Claudia appeared below him in the street, hurrying towards the scooter rider. Taking a clinking plastic bag from him, she gave him an affectionate double-kiss, her black hair swinging.

When was the last time Ignatius had been kissed by a woman? He couldn’t remember.

Claudia looked up at the balcony and gleefully tapped the plastic bag. ‘Glasses too!’ She laughed, and disappeared back into the hotel entrance.

She comes and goes as she pleases, in spite of her father, in spite of Secundus, in spite of me.

He was staring moodily into the street as the room door slammed, her footsteps echoing across the marble floor.

‘Come and open the bottle, Ignatius! Hurry! And fill the glasses—none of those priestly measures, for God’s sake!’

There was more banging, and she suddenly reappeared beside him, waving her hand. 'I found an opener!' she laughed.

Distractedly, he studied the label on the wine bottle.

'Ignatius, study is over! Open it!' Impatiently, Claudia grabbed the bottle from him and extracted the cork, handing it back with a contemptuous glare. He found himself pouring the drinks without protest, faintly aware of her kicking off her shoes and arranging herself on the drying towel. She lit two cigarettes and handed him one.

'It's nice like this, isn't it?' she murmured eventually. 'Do you get such evenings in England? I bet you don't have such pretty pupils!'

Ignatius continued to stare blankly at the apartments opposite, ignoring her. Claudia waited for his response, and when it didn't come as expected, she stood up impatiently. 'I don't know anything about you.' Her voice softened and she moved towards him. 'Come.'

Eyes still shut, he allowed her to take his hand and lead him into the cool room. He heard her dress fall, and felt her hair on his neck as she kissed his cheek, her warmth close to him, her delicate scent filling his head.

'Open your eyes, Ignatius, it's OK. God will forgive us.'

He felt her mouth seeking his, her soft nakedness against him, and filled with fear, confusion and boundless gratitude, he surrendered.



The tall man replaced the handset, smiling.

'We are reprieved: Grazzini has the boy. It seems that at first he was unwilling to tell them where Claudia was, but everyone has his price. The boy's, apparently, was a ticket to heaven—the Roma-Lazio game.' He sighed contentedly. 'So, to work.' He handed them a scribbled address.

'She has a sense of humour—she has become the consort of the great Verdi, it seems.' He smiled fondly. 'I imagine you will find her rather drunk or stoned, so be prepared for a fight. Nevertheless, do not handle her roughly! Bring her here first—we might be able to

sober her up before we take her home. Her father is not a forgiving man.'

No, her father shows no love for her, the tall man reflected as he poured himself a glass of wine, but he expects obedience. If you do what he wants, you are protected, yes, but is that enough? Perhaps it is, for those of us who have no choices.

His thoughts turned to Claudia's mother.

She loves Claudia, but what is the love of the weak worth? If you can't act from your love? Eventually, Claudia will choose love over protection, and her mother will be helpless, and I will be helpless.

Disgusted with himself, he drained the glass.

*

Claudia watched from the bed as Ignatius towelled himself off and dressed again in his stinking tracksuit. He glanced up with a serious face.

'We have to leave now. They'll be wondering where you are.'

'They're already suspicious. I'm being followed—as if I was a kid! But don't worry, I lost them.'

His head jerked up. 'Are you serious? They're following you?'

He watched as, clutching his too-small towel around her, she lit a cigarette and headed towards the balcony.

'Claudia, are you crazy?'

'Go if you must—Paulo will be coming back for me soon.' She checked her watch. 'He should have been here ten minutes ago. It's lucky he's late, I really need a shower.'

'When will we see each other again?' she continued, breathing out a plume of blue smoke, 'I have to go to the seaside house with my parents this weekend—Monday then? It would be so much easier if I could call you.'

'I'll see. It'll be difficult, but I'll leave a note with the barman as usual.'

'OK. Kiss me before you go or I'll think you don't love me!'

‘For heaven’s sake, Claudia!’ he laughed. I’ll see you next week. Be content!’

Claudia watched from the balcony as he emerged from the hotel entrance and started up the street, conspicuous by his height and pallor. Emptying the last of the wine into her glass, she closed her eyes and breathed in slowly, savouring the scent of his body on her.

*

‘So?’

‘She was alone, *Signore*.’

‘Alone? But what was she doing?’

‘She said she had just wanted to be alone for a while. Patrissia was getting on her nerves.’

‘Hmm. Are you sure there was no-one?’

‘No-one was there, *Signore*.’

‘All this trouble for nothing. I fear Paulo will not get to heaven.’

‘We are all sinners, to be sure.’

‘Bring her home then. No, wait—did you check the hotel desk?’

‘They were very busy, *Signore*, nobody remembers.’

‘Hmm. No matter, she is safe.’

March 1972

Marc stared out at the fountain, the leaves whipping round it like fish under the battleship-grey sky. It was getting dark and the house was cold. He pulled his woollen jacket closer and took a slug of the cheap whisky.

His house now, his home: he was grateful. His aunt had been prudent enough to leave him money for the upkeep, a little, enough to pay the bills for a while, but then what? The emptied house was bleak, the mattress by the open fire almost welcoming.

He walked across the bare wooden floor and through the dark doorway into the panelled hall where a bare bulb hung. His cousins had done an efficient job of clearing the house—they'd left nothing but the old green velvet curtains and the wrought-iron stove.

It didn't bother him, the starkness and cold were appropriate. But where do you go from there? How do you start again?

It hadn't been much of a surprise when he'd been summoned by his Head of Mission a few weeks after his return from Rome. He had half-expected the summons and confession had been easy. That he was sick did not matter—if anything it made their decision easier. They considered him beyond their help. He was alone.

Secundus had been grave: "Ignatius, we are human, all of us, but it can be no excuse, I can't help you. I pray to God that you will enjoy His grace once more but I fear that you have a steep hill to climb. I am here: return when you are ready, make use of me then; but for the moment—go with God."

Marc put the old kettle on to boil and took a mug from the sink. He could make tea, he could sell the house: he had two options, anyway.

He made the tea and wandered back to the mattress. He'd built the fire as best he could, but the bag of wood was poor quality and didn't burn well. There was light, and light would do for the moment, but little heat. The grey sky had infiltrated the room and an unfelt wind made him shiver.

September 1973

The light was fading fast, and Marc looked at the pile of dust and chips that he'd have to tidy up. Ignoring it, he stood back to consider his day's work, wondering at what he saw; and brushing some dirty overhanging hair out of an eye he winced, listening to the wild winds.

Washing quickly in the kitchen sink he gladly headed out, but by the time he reached his car the wind had chilled his tired eyes. Pulling out, he heard an angry blast from the car he'd just cut up. Cursing, he accelerated, heading with slitted and watery eyes towards Ladbroke Grove and the comforting arms of the Elgin, where he might find peace.

*

"I've seen you here before haven't I?"

Marc glanced up. He'd been sitting at the bar for an hour and had only just reached a level of tolerance that allowed him to open his eyes. The girl looked bored.

"I expect so. I suppose I'm pretty much a regular."

He looked her up and down—chainstore clothes but a couple of expensive pieces of jewellery.

"I don't imagine you're here by choice though?"

"No, not exactly. I'm waiting for someone but they appear to have forgotten. What's your name?" She didn't look that interested.

"Marc, you?"

"Sally. It doesn't look much like it would be your kind of dump either."

"Oh, I like it." He looked round the shabby bar. "Real people doing real things—shouting, swearing, arguing. It's real life."

She looked around. "I've been here a few times and it always seems pretty quiet."

"You're quite beautiful, if you don't mind me saying so. And I'm a sculptor. Have you ever modelled?"

She picked up her bag from the bar. “Sorry, I have to go now. Nice meeting you.”

Marc laughed and searched a baggy pocket. “It’s not a line—look, here’s my card. I really am a sculptor.” He held up his hands. “Real stone dust.” He pointed: “that’s a chisel cut, and here’s the nasty cracked hard pad you get from resting your hand on rough stone all day long. I’ve even got some grit in my eye—I’ll go and flush it out in the gents and show it to you if you like. It’s vicious stuff—I’m working on a Kali.”

She laughed, “Now that *is* some line, but it’s a good one.”

He smiled: “Why don’t you let me buy you a drink.”

“All right, I’ll have a cherry bomb.” She looked round at the other drinkers. “Actually, make that a half of cider.”

Marc ordered, getting himself a pint of lager instead of his usual pair of large Brandy Alexanders. “So, who are you waiting for? Boyfriend?”

“Maybe. He’s got hopes anyway. What about you?”

“Oh, nobody special. Nice dress.”

“Mmm, yes, I like it. Charity shop.”

“Any other virtues?”

“What?”

“Sorry, joke: charity is one of the virtues.” He paused. “You haven’t told me what you do?”

“Oh, I work in PR. I love it, you get to meet some really interesting people.”

“What sort of interesting? Scandals, fuckups, that kind of thing?”

“Sometimes, but it’s mostly campaigns—we do fashion so there’s a lot of drama and intrigue to deal with, a lot of detective work. That’s who I was waiting for—a designer for one of the big chains. We met at a party and he fancies his chances. Of course he fancies himself more, but it’d be a good contact.” She checked the entrance. “I’m not sorry he hasn’t turned up—I’m a bit too whacked for delicate negotiations.”

“Hmm, well it’s not exactly salubrious in here, and now that the furtive requirement is gone do you fancy going somewhere easier on the eyes? There’s a wine bar near my place where you might pick up some juicy gossip—Tarantino’s, do you know it?”

“Spend my life there. But we’re not really dressed for it, are we?”

“No, you’re right, undercover work needs appropriate garb—underwear, presumably.”

Sally looked at him. “You’re pretty direct, aren’t you? You don’t look the type.”

Marc returned her curious stare. “Why mess about?”

“Absolutely,” she sighed. “OK then, let’s just get a couple of bottles and go back to your place. You do have a place, don’t you?”

“Yes. I inherited an old pile in Westbourne Grove.”

“Good, not far then.”

“No. Shall we go?”

“I’ve just got to make a call. What’s your address?”

Marc told her. *Sensible woman*, he thought.

*

‘Marc, I’ve had enough now, I have to work in the morning.’

‘Just a few minutes more.’ He moved the tripod. ‘Look scared.’

‘I’m bored.’

‘OK, bored will do.’ He pressed the shutter. ‘Hmm, OK.’

Sally began to remove the ropes. ‘I’m not really into this. What does it do for you?’

‘I’m looking for stillness. If you can’t move... although it doesn’t always work that way. You have to be a special kind of person to have the calm I’m seeking.’

‘And I don’t have it?’

‘No.’

‘Well, nor do you, if you don’t mind me saying.’

‘I know.’

'I mean, you seem pretty nervous. I didn't expect that, from the way you were in the pub.'

'I'm not nervous.'

'Then why are you shaking?'

'Look, will you stop asking questions?'

'I'm not a tart, Marc! You know, you're a bit weird—I think I'll go now. What's the matter?'

Marc's face had gone white. He sat on the bed holding his head.

'Are you OK?'

He began to shake, slapping his face as if to wake himself up, and then, as she watched, his whole body arched and he fell backwards, scrabbling at the covers.

'Marc, you're scaring me. What is it? Can I do anything?'

She could see flecks of spit on his lips. This wasn't the deal. She reached for the phone on the bedside table and quickly pressed in the number.

'Ambulance, please, quick, I think my boyfriend's having a fit.'

She gave the address and, slamming the phone back down, stared at the figure on the bed, now jerking sporadically, eyes wide and white.

1999

Patrissia pulled in to the side of the road and cut the engine. Automatically lighting a cigarette as she yanked the handbrake, she tried to ignore the nausea that was making her breath come shallow and fast, blocking her chest. Shoving the car door open, she leaned out with a grimace of distaste, holding the smoking cigarette away in readiness, but she only retched painfully. She waited for a minute, churning her stomach, but she hadn't eaten for two days and there was nothing inside her. It just hurt.

Her phone beeped beside her on the seat and, face tight, she reached back into the car and picked it up. Yes. She read the message and then reluctantly pressed the delete button, sad at the thought that he would eventually tire of swearing at her.

She leaned back on the headrest and gradually allowed the darkness to calm her. Her eyes were half-closed when a mist of flowing colour appeared, moving slowly from under the surrounding black and leafless trunks until it stood ten metres away: a deer, dog-sized, turned its eyes to her, unblinking, uncaring, wary, then sprang sharply away, fading back into the grey fog as she watched.

It was ten minutes before she felt steady enough to pull away from the muddy verge, and even then her hands gripped the steering wheel so ferociously it was hard to control the car, and she veered at the angry whoosh of a giant 4x4 as it shot past in a whirl of bulk and careless self-obsession.

Taking a deep breath, she concentrated on the road winding along her headlights. Its curves worried her and its straights made her fearful of sudden blindness. But when she reached the motorway, and soon after, the lights of the city, she felt a great surge of elation that brought a smile to her lips, which still bore the salty traces of tears.

*

Entering her house slowly, she closed the front door and stood in the hallway for a moment contemplating the fist-cracked pane. The silence unnerved her as she listened for him.

She knew she ought to be relieved that he was gone, and she was, but as she slowly removed her coat and hung it on the broken hook, carefully smoothing it straight, her hand was trembling. There was sadness too, and a great rubbery feeling of hopelessness, so familiar that she settled into it without thinking.

Filling the coffee machine, she unlocked the back doors and swung them wide to the darkly-lit sky, ignoring the inrush of cold air. The house must be aired, freed of his spirit and his sound and his smell.

But he wouldn't leave. Later, when she came to bag up his clothes and the small heap of his personal belongings, she found she didn't have the courage. Without him, it was too bare—*she* was too bare—so he stayed, in cupboards and wardrobes and drawers, on shelves and in corners and in the air. He inhabited her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She put her hand to her breast. Her heart felt as if it were tapping a message to her fingers—*no more, no more, no more*. But as she poured steaming coffee into a cup, she couldn't stop the tension at her throat and neck pull her face into a ragged ball, and then, sitting at the empty table, she wept at her rediscovered freedom. She still needed Johnny.

Johnny, whose spirit filled her, whose eyes followed her in her dreams, whose hands and lips caressed her no matter which of her lovers was pawing her willing flesh. He had taken her, consumed her will and her body, her spirit and her mind, and had left only the sordid, mesmeric fantasy that had become her life. Sometimes she thought that what he had done to her could be undone, but the thought lasted only the length of a conversation. And she sometimes thought that Johnny had despoiled her in the same way that Ignatius had despoiled her sister, so that both were lost to life, metaphorically or actually.

Once or twice she had thought a lover strong enough to burn away her history, to rewrite it, to erase it, whose words and being she felt herself surrendering to; and she had sabotaged, in stealth and in open-eyed despair, in glittering confession, in anger, in tears—in whatever it took—that longed-for salvation. The mesh of lifelong deceptions that protected her could not be unravelled now.

Yes, there would be another lover; and yes, and yes...the eternally recurring procession, the wheel—it didn't matter what it was called. Lover upon lover, each bringing their own joy and pain and fear, each sapping a little more of her hope. She was a tattered leaf blown round and round a black hole, touching and rising, rolling and sticking, eventually to crumble and become one with the earth and the darkness.

And now it had to begin again.

Part 2. Art

I am an artist

‘*More* art?’ Theo stretched his arms above his head and yawned. ‘That’s the second show we’ll have been to this week. Can’t we just go to a movie? *Fitzcarraldo*’s on at the Carlton.’

Patrissia put down her glass. ‘It’s the *El Greco* exhibition, Theo, not one of Lu’s private views! I’ve been looking forward to it for ages, you know I have.’ She stared over the crumpled newspaper at his washed-out blue eyes. ‘And you said you *wanted* to go!’

‘*You* said we wanted to go,’ he corrected her, turning a page with a barrage of rustling. ‘By the way,’ he added, avoiding her accusing eyes, ‘we’re flying to Paris this weekend. You haven’t made any plans, have you?’

‘Paris?’

‘Yeah. We’re meeting with a major prospect. He’s coming over from the States for a couple of days. Very important guy.’

Patrissia’s heart sank. ‘What d’you need *me* for, Theo? You know how much I detest your clients.’

‘You’re the attractive half of the sales team, Trish, you know that.’ He looked up at last, his eyes cool. ‘This guy’s our ticket to New York. You *have* to come.’

‘I don’t want to move to New York,’ she stated levelly. ‘We’ve had that conversation enough times for you to understand that. I actually have a *life* here—my *own* life.’

‘Huh, what life?’ he drawled, making a careful note on the pad by his plate. ‘You call yourself an artist, but you haven’t done a single painting since I’ve known you.’ His eyes flicked up, sweeping over her until they met her own green-gold glare.

‘I *am* an artist, and you—’

‘And I’m scraping around this damned place for peanuts.’ Theo turned his attention back to the stock prices for a second before

slapping the newspaper on the table and leaning forward, his face fixed and serious. 'If we handle this deal right, we could be living on Park Avenue in five years.'

Patrissia scraped back her chair and stood up. 'I'm not going to argue, and I'm not going to Paris.'

'Oh, come on, Trish.' Theo looked her up and down appreciatively as she gathered the remains of the meal and bent to fill the dishwasher. 'Best take that Chanel suit I bought you.' Then, with distaste as she slammed the door shut and took a new pack of Marlboro from her bag, 'but no smoking.'

Blowing a stream of thin blue smoke from the corner of her mouth, Patrissia leaned back on the edge of the sink. 'If you don't like me smoking, you know what you can do. And what I wear is my own business.'

He let out a long breath. 'Yeah, yeah, I get it. But Jesus, look at you! You're forty, you're beautiful, but you dress like a refugee from some anarchist art college! These are serious people we're dealing with and it's embarrassing having you turn up for dinner with your tits hanging out of a rag robe.' His mouth turned down. 'And as for that rosary you're always wearing—what do think it says to Mankiewicz about me? *Sblemiel*, that's what. Not *one of us*.' He shook his head. 'You gotta think of that if we're gonna make it in New York, baby.'

'I'm thirty-nine. And I'm not your baby, Theo, I'm your lover.' Patrissia flicked ash into a dirty cup. 'And I'm not moving to New York.'

'OK, OK,' he replied with weary patience. 'Look, just get yourself tidied up for the weekend, huh? Maybe a visit to the stylist, what do you say? We can talk about the other stuff later.'

Patrissia could feel her jaw tightening as she watched him stand and pick up the newspaper. He smiled and came over to her, cupping her shoulders to kiss her forehead. 'You're upset, I can see that, you need to relax. I'll massage your back in a while, huh? C'mon, I'll bring the glasses.'

Twisting away from him, she stubbed out her cigarette in the sink. 'Don't worry, Theo, I won't embarrass you this weekend.' She

picked up her bag. 'I'm going to have a bath and an early night. Turn out the lights when you come up.'

*

The next morning Patrissia stared at Theo's black briefcase standing ready for departure by the front door while she phoned for a cab between sips of coffee and deep drags of her cigarette.

Paris, Chanel...She could see the look on Lucinda's face now. 'Sleeping your way up the ladder is working out quite well for you then, Trisha?' Not that she'd actually say it, instead she'd give her the usual joys-of-family-life sermon, followed by an account of the wholesome success of her ceramics business, '*which one doesn't take too seriously, of course*'.

She felt sorry for Lucinda, selling her *tasteful* pots, and shackled to her time-consuming daughter and faithless husband. But, she reflected, maybe she had a point. Patrissia had been playing the game with some success—Theo *was* a success, she had to remind herself—and there was satisfaction to be had from being a good player, but something else was pulling at her, something she couldn't put her finger on. Her head fell, and she let out a deep sigh.

God! What's happened to me?

*

When it came the cab was overheated but the driver refused to unlock the back windows in spite of her repeated requests. She distracted herself by reading an article about one of the paintings she was about to see in the flesh.

Peter and Mary are laying him down, his skin the texture of blue marble, smooth, ethereal, while Mary Magdalene kneels anguished at his feet. Their hands seem to be joined, supporting his body. Four figures are depicted, yet only three of them are of this world. On earth the colours are cool and pale while in heaven they growl and rage.

She closed her eyes, and she was *there*, the flaming sky filling her with a fierce light that made her body want to burst and wail.

By the time they crawled past the fountain in Trafalgar Square, she was nursing a dull headache. She stared out of the window at the grey crowds, her reflection showing a thin, tired face, sleepless and anxious. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed her shoulders and neck and massaged her face, pressing her temples, knowing that the headache would be with her for an hour at least.

Maybe a weekend in Paris wouldn't be so bad. Theo was simply inviting her to share an important part of his life with him. Isn't that what everyone wanted? Participation, support, *care*? Isn't that what *she* wanted?

No, it fucking isn't... Well, of course it is, but...

As soon as the taxi stopped she threw open the door, tossing crumpled five-pound notes onto the cabbie's lap and trying to ignore the headache that was now threatening to demolish her temples.

And then, turning and catching sight of a huge poster covering the façade of the National Gallery, she stopped dead. The poster showed the *Pietà*. It was massive, stretching across the front of the building like the entrance to another world, and with a shock she suddenly knew why she had felt such a compulsion to come.

Johnny had brought her here the week before her final year show, and they had stood where she stood now—artist and apprentice, tutor and student, lovers—and then they had walked up the steps, hand in hand.

Two weeks later, she'd left him after another blazing row.

'Lack of discipline?' she had screamed. 'Make up your bloody mind, Johnny! What happened to *emotion*? What happened to *spontaneity*? You're turning into a fucking academician—I don't *know* you any more!'

She had expected him to come after her, blustering and raging, desperate to find her, but he never did. She let a solitary tear roll slowly down her cheek. It was more than fifteen years since she'd said those last words.

And now she had Theo. How long had they been together? A year? She reflected that their relationship had not so much developed as solidified. She never missed him when he wasn't around, never wondered who he was with or what he was doing. He moved in and out of her life imperceptibly. Whether beside her in bed, in the next room, or in New York, the distance between them remained the same.

Suddenly, the familiar crumbling, ever-widening hole opened up in front of her, the hole that grew darker every time she looked, the hole that had been appearing ever more frequently, plunging her into a state of hopeless melancholy.

Lifting her eyes to the broken figure above her, she fingered the rosary at her throat.

Oh Lord, speak to me.



It was a relief to be sucked invisibly into the queue that trickled across the vast reception hall, and Patrissia felt her momentary lapse melt away as she became one with the slow-moving stream of art lovers and tourists.

The portly middle-aged couple behind her edged closer to the *Assumption*, brushing deep-filled Fortnum and Mason bags against her back.

'What's with the flowers, honey?' the woman demanded of her husband, whose head was buried in his guide, bored fingers leafing through the glossy pages. 'They're real pretty. You know, I think they must be, like, symbolic?'

'Uh huh, I reckon so.'

'Don't it tell us some history about it, or something?'

'It says it's on loan from the museum of Santa Cruz.'

'Oh, is that all? Such a shame they don't tell us a bit more about it. What's it for? Are we supposed to guess? I wanna know what it all means. What's the point of coming if they don't tell you what you're seeing?'

Patrissia was about to move away when a voice intervened impatiently, 'It's really not that much of a mystery.'

'What?' The woman turned to the man who had responded to her so abruptly. 'It's sure a mystery to me, hon.'

'To most people, I'd say,' said the man, 'but that only reflects their lack of imagination.' He paused, and Patrissia felt his glance. 'The painting is a collection of symbols of faith, reconciled into a representation of the world. It attempts to show how the divine is manifested among us. It took El Greco six years to complete—perhaps it needs more than a couple of minutes to understand.'

So much for spontaneity, thought Patrissia. *Johnny was right about something, anyway.*

'Six years? How can a painting take that long?' The woman pursed her lips. 'I guess it's hard making all those symbols play nicely. Personally, I've got better things to do.'

'Hmm, well, I think for El Greco it was more a case of toning it down...' The stranger took a long breath, sounding slightly defensive now. 'Artists, painters...some people...we, some of us, we need to think there are more to things than is apparent. That the senses hint at things but don't reveal, that...'

Bored, the woman turned away, leaving only Patrissia as the stranger's audience.

'I agree, it's not that obscure, is it?' she murmured in the stranger's direction, her interest piqued by the sincerity in his voice. 'The dove represents peace, but here it also carries The Word of the Lord. It was God's wish that Mary should carry His child.'

She paused, watching for his reaction.

He smiled. 'Quite. The lilies, the fountain of clear water, the roses—they're all images related to the Blessed Virgin. And the city below is Toledo—El Greco uses it as a representation of all earthly things.' The stranger smiled. 'But only pretty things allowed, do you see that?'

Patrissia now found herself face to face with him. With his black eyes, long thin face and look of haunted knowledge, he might have stepped out of the painting himself.

She raised her eyebrows enquiringly. 'You seem to know a lot about El Greco?'

'A little,' he replied neutrally. 'I studied Art many years ago.'

'Me too,' she nodded. 'Not such a coincidence really, considering where we are.'

'Don't you believe in coincidence?'

Patrissia felt his black eyes searching her face. 'Well, probably not, no,' she replied in the same tone. 'Then again, I probably don't believe in the Assumption either.'

'Well, that requires a great deal of faith,' the stranger replied, grunting, 'and understanding. I doubt many people have enough of either to honestly say they believe in anything.'

Intrigued by the turn of events, Patrissia held out her hand. 'My name's Trisha.'

'Marc.'

His handshake was brief and light, his fingers cool in hers.

Feeling slightly foolish, she inhaled gently, wanting to draw him close and smell his skin. 'I think people believe in what they think they already know.'

'Hmm, maybe. Maybe beliefs are no more than habits we're coated with, like dust. Some stick more than others.' He nodded towards the canvas beside them and murmured, 'El Greco said that *'a light burned in his heart, more resplendent than the noon'*.'

With an effort, Patrissia tried to concentrate on what the man—*Marc*, she reminded herself—was saying, but her head seemed determinedly nostalgic.

It's fifteen years since I left Johnny, fifteen years since I painted anything.

'I guess a divine light that burns in your heart is a pretty well-installed habit,' Marc continued, turning. 'And speaking of the divine, how did you come by your necklace? It's a rosary, isn't it? It's quite beautiful.'

'Oh, I've had it since I was a girl,' Patrissia answered, grateful that the conversation had taken a simpler turn. She lifted her hand to

stroke the necklace at her throat, turning the tiny gems between her fingers.

‘Um,’ the man hesitated, ‘Are you in a hurry? Do you fancy a coffee afterwards?’

Taken by surprise, Patrissia smiled and nodded without thinking. ‘OK.’

‘I know somewhere I think you’d like—Say one-thirty outside the main entrance? We can get a cab.’

Patrissia nodded and watched him walk away into the adjoining room, relieved at the opportunity to try to make sense of what had just happened, and wondering how his kiss would taste.

*

The remainder of the exhibition towered and glowed above her as she slowly circuited each hall, and if she could have seen the sky at that moment, it might well have changed colour again.

Violent perspectives drew her into ripped-up skies, rhythms of light danced across her skin, earth to heaven and heaven to earth, in unending flux...and she began to recall where she had first heard the words that Marc had quoted to her. It had been at art college, years before, during a slide-show on Delacroix and Freidrich, canvases brilliant with turbulent seas and devastating cold.

At her very first tutorial with Johnny, she had asked him to explain why El Greco was called a Romantic when he seemed to be more of a religious, or at least, spiritual, painter. He had looked at the painting that patterned the studio wall with its spiralling angelic hosts and had consulted his notes, conceding that her question was an interesting one.

As he packed away the slides at the end of the tutorial, Patrissia had paused to thank him, smiling. ‘That was inspiring! Are you a Romantic painter yourself?’

Johnny had smiled back. ‘In a manner of speaking, yes.’

The next morning, while she was drinking coffee from a polystyrene cup in the art school canteen, he had come straight over to her, pulling a slim journal from his rucksack.

‘Here,’ he had said without ceremony, ‘keep this. I think you’ll like this quote in particular,’ he urged her warmly, planting his thick finger under the first line of page two. ‘Read it.’

And she read it aloud to him.

*On a night dark and unfathomable
as anguish was consumed in flames of love
I left my house, tranquil and calm,
unseen, and I not seeing,
without any guide but the light that burned in my heart,
more resplendent than the noon.*

Then she had breathed out, long and hard, just as she did now, drowning in the swirling light.

It was the start of their affair. Doomed, of course, as Lucinda had warned. She remembered the way she had looked at her, disbelievingly and with concern. And she had been right, of course: their affair had made life awkward for everyone. But that was the price of being an artist, wasn’t it? That’s what being an artist *was*.

‘It’s the handling of the tension between instinct and imagination, and the opposing forces of empathy and duty, that makes pictures worth painting and life worth living,’ Johnny had declared. ‘You set your priorities, and then you find out how much pain and loneliness you and those around you can bear.’

Patrissia had never thought of life like that, of the sacrifices required and the pain to be endured. She didn’t want to make sacrifices—and neither did he, she had realised, eventually. She was sure that his *wife* had endured plenty of pain and loneliness when he was painting for hours in his studio or spending the night in her bed, but she failed to see how *he* had.

A phone beeped, and looking around, Patrissia saw that she had been shuffled back to the vestibule.

‘In the end, the choice is made, not by courage in pursuit of what you want, but by acceptance of what you are.’

It was one of the first things she remembered Johnny saying to her. At the time, she had listened as a lover, amused by his pretty speculations, designed, as she knew, to further her willing seduction, and she had simply accepted them. But now, she could see how hackneyed they were, so conventional...so *Lucinda*.

He had it the wrong way round, didn't he? You find out who you *are* by looking at what you *do*. She sighed. There was no escaping what she and Johnny had done, and when it was over she had repeated it all with her next lover, and the next, and the next... *and here I am*, she thought unhappily, *lacking art, lacking love, lacking substance*, and, it seemed, about to wreak her particular brand of seductive havoc on yet another—not victim, for that suggested a victor, and she knew very well that there was no victory to be had, but—what were they, her and these grunting co-conspirators?

What had Marc said? *'Without faith, what can you be sure of?'*

Yes, *faithless travellers* could describe them well enough.



The café was quiet, except for a group of elderly Italian ladies in a far corner, spooning profiteroles into their busy, lipstick-smoothed mouths.

As soon as they sat down at the circular table in the window, Patrissia saw Marc's eyes return to her necklace, the one her father had given her when Claudia had been spirited away.

The delicate triple braid of red, yellow and white gold strands encircling her neck was all she had to remind her of her sister. Automatically, she put her fingers to it, remembering kneeling beside Claudia, wide-eyed, watching her take each tiny blood-red stone in turn, lips moving soundlessly, asking to be forgiven. And when at last she kissed the cross at its centre, a great silent calm descending, Claudia had taken her little sister's hand and kissed her fingers softly.

*'You're safe, cara mia, you'll always be safe with me.
Don't worry that Pappa shouts at us, I'll take you away
as soon as I can, and we'll live together in the
mountains where he can't find us.'*

'Your necklace is exactly the same as one I saw when I was in Rome.'

Marc.

'I told you,' said Patrissia, disoriented at being dragged back so abruptly, 'it's a family heirloom. You can't have seen it before. My father had it made.'

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, and Patrissia tensed, waiting for him to insist he was right.

'Well,' he said at last, leaning slowly back, 'it's very beautiful. As are you.'

'Thank you,' she smiled, surprised and relieved, and she bent forward to listen as he told her about his work.

And when she in turn revealed a little about herself, he actually listened to *her*, his black eyes narrowing with the same intensity as when putting his own views. Patrissia had come to believe that men simply didn't care what she wanted. They feigned interest in her opinion, but when it came down to it, they didn't care so they didn't listen. It warmed her to hope Marc was different.

'When are you going to stop making dates with strangers, Patrissia? Do you imagine that one day one of these strangers will reveal yourself to you? That's not the way things work. While you're looking for yourself in me, in Picasso, in Friedrich, in guys in bars, you'll always be disappointed.'

Johnny's words still haunted her, but was he right? So much of what he'd said had turned out to be bluster and wishful thinking. He'd been wrong about her search for herself—she felt there was no-one to find—and wrong about his ability to sustain the illusion: the descent into sordid acts of betrayal had been swift. He had relied on her to weave the web of deceit, carefully avoiding responsibility for the squalid excuses he forced her to invent.

Their dramatic tempests soon became bitter squalls, their visions revealed as tricks of the alcoholic fog in which they had wandered. He had seduced her, drugged her, and used her. And in return, she had loved him. She *had* loved him.

Patrissia sighed. Marc wasn't Johnny, but she had a feeling that he wouldn't be just another lover, either. What if she fell in love with him? Johnny had taken everything except her fantasies—what would she have left if the stranger took those?

*

Marc paid off the taxi and turned towards his house. Victorian gothic had never appealed to him, but at least the energy it took to dislike it distracted him from his thoughts.

Who was this woman? She seemed quite happy to come along with him, asking no questions, allowing him immediate intimacy. It was shocking, in a way. Habituated as he was to casual pickups, this felt different. Instead of the usual superficial and even businesslike exchanges that characterised his relations with women, he felt somehow involved with Patrissia already. She seemed to present no barriers to him, only a soft acceptance.

When he'd dropped her near her house he'd had trouble controlling an urge to follow and grab her, to demand some answers. What did she know about herself, about him, that brought her such confidence? How had she managed to make things so easy for herself? Just being near her he could feel himself dissolving, shifting, crumbling. Where did the power come from that made her so fascinating to him?

And what about the necklace, Claudia's necklace? It didn't make sense. Who was this woman?

He felt a terrible magnetism drawing him to her, disturbing and compelling. She had seduced him already, his hard-won detachment blown away. It was all too much of a coincidence, and he felt himself panicking.

Heart pounding, his head filled with scurrying untrappable pieces of random sentences, questions, answers: the unending obsessive narrative that consumed his life. He leapt from one thought to another, dwelling for seconds or minutes on some spurious explanation to himself, without achieving any kind of resolution or even order in the chaos. He was back in that frightening place where nothing was familiar, or even known: not himself, nothing.

Lighting a cigarette, he forced himself to walk down the side passage and through the unlocked gate into his garden, walled and secluded. Sitting down in an old and creaky cane chair under the tree he felt his heart slowly regain its normal inaudible rhythm.

Closing his eyes against the bright sun, he gradually allowed the words in his head to slow down and fade as he felt himself sink into the chair. At last, a scene came into focus, a hotel room, the hot smoky interior, the streaks of sunlight on the wall, and Claudia, naked and smiling on the bed, the strands of her necklace—the necklace that Patrissia now wore—tangled and twisted around her throat, the cross underneath her. He remembered her mouth and her hot breath. He remembered everything.

*

Marc woke shivering but restored, and thankful once more for the retreat that was his house. But too much thinking. He stood and retraced his steps to the road, and entering the front door stepped purposefully along the passage to his study.

Taking the latest photograph of Sally from its folder, he held it up, half-closing his eyes. ‘Claudia? Sally?’ he said aloud. ‘Patrissia...Patrissia?’

Secundus had said:

*You may well find faith through the love of a woman,
Ignatius, but if that is your way, you must love that
woman as you wish to love your god.*

He stared impassively at the photograph of Sally he still held in his hand, wondering; and then coming out of his reverie, he found that he had made a decision.

Taking a pen and a sheet of pale blue writing paper from the folder, he began.

Secundus, my dear friend,

*I have news. I recently met a woman wearing a necklace
that I recognised as Claudia Vecchia's. I was reluctant*

*to ask directly, but I imagine this woman might be
Claudia's sister or cousin. Is that possible?*

*I know pursuing her can only bring trouble, but it gave
me such a strange feeling when I saw the necklace, the
rosary. It was as if a light shone from it, a light for me.
I've been rather a wanderer recently, in my work and in
my thoughts, and I surely need something, some sign,
and maybe this is it.*

*You probably think me as confused as ever, but I'm just
looking, I'm not confused. I'm on a path whose
destination I don't know, and signs are what I need.*

*I hope this news is not too upsetting for you and I await
your reply with impatience—*

Ignatius.

He signed his former name with a flourish and lit another cigarette. Opening the doors to the garden he gazed blankly at the figure outlined against the dirty white walls of his studio: his own *Pan Pangenitor Panphage*, the horned god, everywhere violent, everywhere feared.

He'd completed *Pan* a year after his return from Rome, the first actualisation in what he had come to think of as an act of regeneration after what Secundus had referred to as a 'spiritual malaise'. It was his masterwork, confirmation that any malaise he had suffered could now be sublimated into the results of art. It sounded almost like magic when he put it that way.

Nevertheless, while skilfully crafted, he considered *Pan* imperfect, as such pieces inevitably were. It was a foundation that had failed him. He had deliberately placed it where he would see it often, to remind him of his own imperfection.

He had been waiting for a suitably imperfect companion for *Pan*, a maenad, a female satyr, and Patrissia... He wondered whether she would sit for him.

He could already feel himself working the smooth stone, running his hands over her cold flesh, seeking the lines of her neck, her

throat, her breasts, belly, buttocks, thighs: not a sex-fantasy but a discovery of the life within, the dark within. His work did not celebrate beauty, but exposed it, crude and raw, seeking to reduce it to a known and conquerable carcass. His *Pan* was not pretty.

*

The house was chilly when Patrissia got back. Her pale green raincoat hung on the coat rack in the hall, and under it her knee-high boots. Theo's umbrella and briefcase had gone, but there was a note in their place. Patrissia picked it up and glanced over the hurried scrawl as she made her way to the kitchen.

'I hope the El Greco was worth it. Don't forget the stylist. See you later, Theo x'

She screwed it up and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. 'Theo', she said aloud to herself, 'is that what I am to you? A haircut and a kiss?'

Kicking off her boots, she slowly relaxed as she moved across the cool wood floor and up the stairs to her bedroom, where she tossed her jacket on the unmade bed.

Staring at its creased seams, suddenly she felt the great void open up beneath her again. Thirty-nine, and all she had was Theo, with his Gucci'd clients and rabid, nauseating friends, and...what else? What if she wanted a child?

Feeling cold and tired suddenly, she sat down on the bed and stared at herself in her dressing-table mirror. She looked disappointed, frustrated, resentful, her face blank and set.

Her thoughts turned to Marc. For a moment she imagined him in the house with her. His edges were ragged, like an El Greco figure himself. So different from Theo, whose glossy pop-art superficiality warded off the world like an acrylic curtain.

A curtain I'm sheltering behind, she reminded herself.

Sheltering. Suddenly she remembered the look in Marc's eyes when he'd leaned across the table in the café, admiring Claudia's necklace. Its intensity had startled her, but she was more startled by how it had made her feel. It was the same ferocious look that Johnny had worn when he had sketched her.

But Marc wasn't like Johnny, and that was good because she didn't want another Johnny: no, it was time to stop hiding. But would sleeping with him help? Another stranger?

Well, I guess I'll find out, she sighed—but first she'd have to decide about Paris.

Leaning forward, she opened her wardrobe doors wide, and pushing aside the mass of filmy, flimsy, colourful skirts and dresses and scarves, she found the Chanel suit half-off its hanger at the back. She adjusted it and smoothed it down. It would need cleaning and pressing if it was going to Paris with her.

Laying it carefully on the bed, she turned back and started to remove some of the more tangled clothes from the pile on the floor of the wardrobe. As she untwisted a long burgundy kaftan she realised that it was the one she had worn to the exhibition with Johnny. It had hung here anonymous among the other relics of her old life for fifteen years. Holding it close to her face, she smelled the dust and old mothballs and then something else, a faint residue of oil.

She rubbed her eyes. She had never really accepted that Johnny hadn't loved her, even though he'd made it quite plain at the end, just as Lucinda had predicted.

Lucinda had been scandalised when she'd found out about their affair. Patrissia's chaotic lifestyle was quite outside her experience, and she found her romantic entanglements incomprehensible.

'You're sleeping with Johnny?' she had asked incredulously.

'Everything was fine to start with but then,' Patrissia had explained, her cheeks pink and her words thick, 'I fell madly in love with him! Oh God! It's like I'm walking on air!'

'Oh no, Trisha, you can't possibly love him,' Lucinda insisted, 'especially if you're sleeping with other men too. I mean, it's just plain wrong!'

'Love is never wrong, Lu,' she had replied, the flecks around the rim of her gold eyes glittering like green flames. 'It's just sometimes a little inconvenient.'

And when it had become too inconvenient and tiresome even for Patrissia, and as she was planning a dramatic exit, Johnny had surprised her, who could not be surprised.

'Oh come on, Patrissia. What's love? You're a fabulous girl, and we've had great fun, but love?'

She had looked up, shocked.

'I mean, you're absolutely spectacular, no-one could deny that. I was flattered when you wanted us to get together. But I thought you knew it was just—'

'Just what?' she whispered, her throat tight.

'Fun. Just fun.'

Fun? Patrissia snorted. Whatever it was, it had never been that. She screwed up the kaftan and threw it back in the wardrobe with a sweep of her arm.

Picking up her phone she tapped Marc's number, but it had only rung twice before she hung up.

She stubbed out her cigarette. She didn't want to be alone any more. *That* was the black hole. She had always thought that love would seek her out, that one or other of her lovers would be clever or strong enough to survive her attempts at sabotage... but she had always left an escape route, and she had always escaped.

She sat back down on the bed. But if she was always going to escape, then what was the point? She wiped sudden tears from her eyes.

She wondered whether Lucinda was at home, but dialling her number, she was directed to an answer-machine. Leaving a non-committal message, she hung up.

She balanced the phone on her palm. Fate could decide whether or not she'd go to Paris with Theo. She'd ask Marc to meet her again. If all went well, the Chanel suit would stay in the wardrobe with the burgundy kaftan.

She dialled Marc's number and waited, but there was no answer.

*

She didn't have to wait long. The next day she received a letter explaining his dislike of technology, even telephones, and after

asking forgiveness for being so neanderthal, he invited her to dinner at his club.

‘My club’s the only place I can stand,’ he’d written. ‘It’s so noisy everywhere now.’

She was amused at his confession, never mind that he’d written her an actual *letter*. He was undeniably odd, yet here they were.

‘This is rather grand, isn’t it—you didn’t say! Should I have worn my Countess outfit?’ Patrissia smiled and looked around her, pleased and happy. ‘And you’re a sculptor?’ she asked as he led her through ornate doors into a huge room. She warmed with pleasure at the plush red velvet sofas, antique gold and blue wallpaper and the few discreetly-placed tables.

‘I’m glad you like it. I come here sometimes to bask in its fading glory. Modern life is anything but comforting, don’t you think?’ He slowly swept his eyes over the soft fabrics and rich colours. ‘Some people are intimidated by such displays of luxury... um, what did you ask?’ There was a pause while he appeared to switch channels. ‘Oh yes...I’m a sculptor of sorts, yes. I mainly do commissions—nothing spectacular.’ He paused again. ‘Look, find us somewhere to sit and I’ll get the drinks and tell the waiter we’ll be dining,’ he said, leaving Patrissia stranded in the middle of the room.

She stood for a moment absorbing the richness of the textures and colours surrounding her, a faint flush coming to her cheeks. However, while it might be luxurious, it wasn’t exactly intimate—and she certainly didn’t feel intimidated. Spotting a small table by a fireplace with two splay-legged wing chairs waiting, she made her way towards it.

*

Marc returned from the bar, followed by a waiter carrying a tray with two large glasses of red wine and a fresh bottle which he placed carefully on the table, making no sound on the thick carpet as he nodded and discreetly left.

‘You said you knew Rome?’ Patrissia murmured as Marc sat down.

'I spent a little time there some years ago, that's all,' said Marc, pulling his chair closer to the table. 'It was arranged for me, and actually—'

'Oh, I see,' Patrissia interrupted. 'I thought you might have been attracted there by something in particular?'

'No, although there was a...religious element.'

'Religious? Oh, God! It's certainly the place to go for that. Hard to escape it, in my experience anyway,' she laughed. 'I was brought up there as a Catholic, as you might have guessed. Our family was terribly religious, even for Italians—my father was so strict he'd genuflect at a crossed wire.'

'I've met people like that,' said Marc, neutrally. 'They at least know where they stand, I suppose.'

Patrissia carefully smoothed her dress. 'They might do,' she said slowly, but it's not like they don't break their own rules, is it?'

Marc was leaning forward, staring into the small fire that burned brightly in the centre of the fireplace, his hands clasped together on the edge of the table.

'No... you're right, most people break the rules. But *professing* to follow some faith or other is just practical, it simplifies things. It offers rituals and comforting ideas. If you don't have something to hang your life on you're in a constant dilemma about what you actually value, aren't you? Just decide, and stick to it. It's a much easier path to take than going it alone.'

'Easy is good, isn't it?' Patrissia agreed, smiling. 'Why make life harder than it has to be?' She shrugged gracefully, pouring herself another glass. 'I suppose if you look at it like that, just making life simpler...' She paused, staring at the glass of red in her hand, transparent against the yellowish glow of the fire, then shook her head and giggled, 'I suppose that does make it sound more attractive.'

'It's just practical, isn't it? Anything else invites problems.'

'It sounds a bit New Age, though.'

'Ha!'

Patrissia jumped slightly at his sudden bark, but relaxed as he continued, laughing, 'New Age! Not at all! I don't understand what the point of all that is. It seem to me it's just undisguised self-promotion. No, there are things bigger and more important than we are, and our lives...as individuals, we're pretty irrelevant.

'But there must be something there, something that might be called a soul, or an essence, or... it doesn't matter what it is, only that I'm interested in letting it shine through. And how to do that is the problem, how to erase the object from the work.'

He relaxed, and turning to her and seeing her expression, smiled. 'You're thinking *who is this maniac?*'

Patrissia put down her wine glass and drew closer to the fire. 'Don't worry, I went through all that, you're safe with me. I'm a bit mad too,' she grinned. 'You might be interested in finding something that's out there, but I've *found* something, and it's in *me*. I'm interested in what's going on here, right now—and what things mean is what I want them to mean.'

'That's the alternative isn't it? mused Marc, snorting. 'Be God, and recreate the world? So much energy required, and so much discrimination—no, I couldn't do that. I don't have so much faith in myself.'

'Oh Marc, please! I hope you don't mean that the way it sounds.'

'I'm not that much of a victim, if you think it's the cry of a desperate man,' said Marc, looking amused. 'It's more that I distrust faith... and like I said, that tends to make life a little difficult.'

Patrissia almost blushed. 'Of course not, I'm sorry... But yes, my way takes energy, lots of energy, sometimes more than I actually have. Maybe that's not such a good thing—and I'm not saying that *what I want things to mean* is a particularly conscious decision,' Patrissia said, smiling, 'I don't think I'm God! I just look at how things are and try to relate them to something inside me that wants to know them, to feel them, so that what's inside me becomes realised and explicit and meaningful in my actual life.'

'When you put it like that, it certainly sounds attractive,' said Marc, nodding.

‘Of course, that often involves torturing reality so that it fits in,’ she grinned, ‘and so you might consider it a bit iconoclastic, for sure, and people get hurt, but what other way is there for revelations to be had? It’s the only chance for me, a dialog with myself and my visions...’

Patrissia paused, her heart beating. It was unusual for her to be so forthcoming and suddenly she felt a little anxious. ‘Yes, well, anyway, I think my paintings express me, the painter. My art tutor called them a vision of an ideal, although I always thought that sounded rather precious.’

She paused, glancing at the disintegrating fire. ‘And, of course, that assumes you can call them ideals—and I don’t think I can. Nothing stays still for long enough to be called that. I think that’s why I stopped painting—no ideals—too dispiriting. Now I keep a journal instead.’ Quickly, she added, ‘That sounds rather regretful, doesn’t it? It’s not, you know, not really.’

Marc was leaning forward, serious now. ‘You stopped trying?’ But why? If you’re a painter, that painterly part of you can only be expressed that way, can’t it? Writing’s not the same. I mean, if El Greco could have written a two-page pamphlet explaining clearly what he wanted to express, I doubt he would have bothered spending six years on one painting, do you think?’

‘True.’ Patrissia was tiring of detail and explanation now, and would have been quite happy to continue in grunts and laconic stories. She continued a little wearily, ‘I’m a simple person at heart. My vision of an ideal is pretty blurry, and I make it fit whatever I come across, with variable success.’

She paused, becoming uneasy at how fixedly he was gazing at her. ‘I had a bit of a crisis at the end of my time at college. There was this sudden feeling like a balloon going pop, and everything went flat. Until then, I really thought I was destined to be a painter, discovering the spirit within, as you put it. But life intervened, and life doesn’t, despite opinions to the contrary, accommodate ideals that easily. I found that it takes too much energy, even for me.’

‘Can I fill you up?’ Marc offered, nodding at her glass.

‘Please.’ Patrissia watched carefully as he manoeuvred the bottle towards the wine glass.

‘Here, let me.’

Taking the bottle, she continued speaking as she tipped the remains into her glass.

‘All those ideals I thought I had more-or-less successfully portrayed weren’t really mine at all, but someone else’s. And, like I said, they weren’t ideals, either.’ She held the bottle in front of her eyes. ‘I was empty. And Jesus,’ she breathed, ‘that was a shock, I can tell you. I *was* that fallen angel.’

Marc stirred at the hint of bitterness in her voice. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It wasn’t simply that I hadn’t found my own voice, as they say, it was more that I couldn’t hear any voice at all. I was lost from the sight of gods and men...’ She laughed. ‘Such drama!’

‘Well, some people might say that could signal a return to sanity...’

‘Perhaps so,’ Patrissia laughed again, ‘but I suddenly lost faith in *me*, I didn’t recognise *myself*. It hit home that I was Johnny’s apprentice, and my ideas were his ideas. So that was it. I needed a rebirth.’

Patrissia, to her surprise and embarrassment, was fighting back tears. She tossed her hair forward over her shoulders and bit the top off another olive.

‘I don’t know anything, Marc, I wish I did. As you said yourself, it’s hard to see how you can find anything outside to mesh with, in your case, or inside to express, in mine, without *intent*, without *intensity*. Do you know what I mean? Weighty with intent,’ she repeated approvingly. ‘So, I got a real job.’

She took a few sips of wine. Marc hadn’t said much, but their second bottle was of red was going on empty and he had relaxed now, his voice losing its occasional brusqueness. She glanced up just as his eyes flitted across her face.

He was clearly interested in her, but seemed to have trouble translating that interest into action. Why was that? He’d invited her here... Was it something other than the obvious he wanted? Intrigued, she leaned forwards and cupped her chin in her hands for a few seconds, studying him.

‘What about you, Marc? Does sculpture satisfy you? Have you found the goddess in your art?’ she asked lightly.

‘Not yet, Patrissia,’ he said, smiling into her eyes, ‘but I’m still hopeful.’

‘Perhaps you have the wrong subject.’

She lifted her glass and smiled her widest smile, knowing that her eyes would catch gold in the light of the chandeliers above.

‘Perhaps, but lacking faith, hope might be rewarded.’ Marc raised his glass to hers. ‘To Faith and Hope; and to Charity from the Beautiful. You really are beautiful, you know.’

‘Yes, well, beauty isn’t everything.’ Patrissia was eager to engage more deeply with him, and compliments only distracted her.

‘You’re on the right track, I think,’ she said slowly and carefully, ‘exposing the subject, I mean. And the reason I know is because I’m coming from the other direction—I’m looking for the right object.’ She almost giggled. ‘I know how vague that sounds. All I can really say is that sometimes I get a feeling that if only I could find the right person, they’d make me think about what I want in the right way, and we could maybe drift back and forth, meeting over the halfway point as we wander...’

She left the invitation lingering in the air and sat back, letting her eyes drift companionably towards the fire.

Johnny had many times explained to her that God, which he insisted was otherwise just another inexplicable impulse to an ideal, could be made real by imagination—but only by that most difficult feat of the imagination known as faith.

Faith is true art, Patrissia. It is created, not discovered, it cannot be given or received, it cannot be traded—and it does not fade. If it does, it isn’t faith, it is merely hope. Faith hurts, it must be burned into your soul.

She smiled to herself. How could she have forgotten?

*‘And the product of faith is beauty,’ he had continued.
‘For those who have sufficient imagination to truly*

believe, to surrender their very soul, the reward is inevitable, and it is real. The world becomes a wonder.'

Patrissia turned her glass in her fingers. He was talking about connection, wasn't he? Always about connection.

*

'You can't really expect it to fall into your lap, Marc. Maybe you should try again? It's not easy finding the right person. I've looked for my right person in art groups, at music festivals, philosophy clubs, spiritual meetings, all kinds of places—'

They'd decided not to eat after all. Mark had settled into his chair and Patrissia had ordered brandy as a waiter hovered discreetly. She was cupping a golden balloon in her hands, and now she lifted it to her nose, inhaling gently. She felt soft and hazy and protective of this odd man sitting in his pool of abstract Grecian light. Taking a delicate sip of the liquor, she wondered what the woman had done to him—and when. It had to be that.

Lighting a cigarette, she leaned forward, sweeping back her long hair and letting her necklace hang glittering in the firelight.

'The trouble is that these groups, they're focused on pulling you into some prefabricated box, and that's definitely not what I was after.'

She took another sip of brandy, holding it in her mouth until she felt her tongue begin to burn, then, raising her head she continued, 'It's funny, you have an air about you... I know we've barely met, Marc, but...'

Her head was buzzing now as she remembered what it was like to discuss *big themes*, as Johnny had called them, sarcastically.

'Isn't it funny the way we talk about these things, these problems?' she said, smiling quizzically, a little drunk. 'We're told that communication is the key, but it seems to me that this word, *communication*, is a trap. It's always used to mean *talk*, and it implies that if you don't talk, nothing is happening and someone is to blame. But that's silly, isn't it? We're constantly communicating when we're not talking. Talking is the worst way to communicate, if you ask me.'

Stubbing out her cigarette, she lit another and passed it to him before taking one for herself.

‘Talking shops, talking heads’ she continued, ‘I’ve often thought about setting up a group of my own, just to get all that bloody talk out of the way. A ten minute rant for each slot should be enough, do you think?’ she grinned. ‘Would that be long enough?’

Marc was listening, an interested smile softening his face.

‘You want to set up a ranter’s forum? He laughed. ‘It’d be damn popular I should think.’

He poured another glass of red for them both. The light in the room was low, and watching the wood flames curl and dance, Patrissia felt stirred for the first time in many years, and at the same time calm and secure—it felt *right* in this place, with this stranger listening to her, absorbed.

A shiver went through her. ‘So what do you think?’ she said teasingly, smoothing her skirt and watching his eyes follow her hands back into her lap. ‘It could be fun.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, looking up, feigning immunity to her little display. ‘It couldn’t be a debate type of thing, could it? Rants don’t fit into that, and anyway, nobody wants to have to justify themselves. Maybe we should call the group ‘The Blisteringly Obvious?’

She laughed, comforted and excited equally.

‘I’d like to see who would come to something like that—world saviours, possibly,’ she snorted. ‘But I don’t want to talk to such people. *Everyone’s stupid but me* has been done to death, surely?’

In spite of everything, and to her wonderment as they lounged comfortably in front of the glittering fire, talking quietly and easily, Patrissia relaxed. Far from trying to flatter or amuse her as she expected, Marc made no attempt to impress her, listening neutrally when she spoke about her job and life, with only the occasional nod or fleeting smile. When she tried to flirt with him, he ignored her. His indifference, like Johnny’s pointed self-absorption, was at once intoxicating and freeing.

Transported, she felt an urgent need to move things along with this undoubted new lover.

‘Marc, I have to say that when you invited me here, I was expecting—well, you know, the usual routine.’ Patrissia spoke softly, looking directly into his eyes, rehearsing the words. ‘But we seem to have somehow already bypassed that stage.’

He looked away, and for a moment Patrissia thought she had miscalculated. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to spoil the mood. It’s just... can I ask if you have a partner? I mean, why did you ask me here? I’m sorry, maybe I’m jumping the gun,’ she babbled, giggling.

‘Have I not been blisteringly obvious?’ Marc replied, suddenly mournful. ‘I can imagine, I’m not good at this.’

‘This?’ Patrissia, seizing her chance, emptied her glass and rising, moved around the table and bent to kiss him. ‘Mmm... We could continue our little discussion at home,’ she murmured. ‘Would you like to come back to my place? Just need the loo.’

Marc watched her as she walked away from him, and frowning, emptied the dregs of the bottle into his glass.

A direct path

Patrissia woke early after a restless night, and, tempted to cancel her clients and take the day off work, she threw on a pair of old jeans and a loose shirt, and almost fell down the stairs in her eagerness to check her phone, but it revealed only a couple of reminders from her secretary about her mid-day meeting. Nothing from Marc

It was with mixed feelings that she realised they had definitely not had sex. This surprised her greatly. The unlikelihood of the fact held her enthralled periodically for the remainder of the morning, every so often bringing the faintest of smiles to her lips.

He puzzled her. His only interest seemed to be in art. There was no mention of family or friends, and he didn't appear to know anything of the events and ideas that daily compelled her attention. Wars, trends, people, society—nothing seemed to impinge upon him. She had never met anyone who appeared to be so completely isolated from life, and yet so intensely keen on divining its mystery.

And to avoid sex with her! This was unprecedented. True, she'd been annoyed when he'd claimed fatigue and ordered her a cab, and had snapped at him rather embarrassingly since she was pretty drunk by then, but that shouldn't have stopped him, surely? What kind of man refuses a beautiful, willing, tipsy woman?

Impatient to get on with a flyer for the meetings she had already outlined in her head, she filled the coffee machine, pushed aside the pile of work brochures, opened her sketchpad and wrote 'It's Blisteringly Obvious' in large capitals before sitting back and lighting a cigarette.



Suddenly startled by her beeping phone, Patrissia was alarmed to see that an hour had passed, and hastily finished scrawling the cross-hatching on the face she had drawn, Marc's face. She'd made it even longer than it had seemed in front of the shadowy fire, emphasising his hollow cheeks and the stubble that gave substance to his thin jaw. The eyes were hooded and set so deep she might have gouged them into the weave of the paper. The face spoke to

her of suspicion and suffering, of disappointment and disapproval, but the strongest impression was of exhausted struggle and yearning for release. Had she found her subject?

There is only one subject for an artist, Patrissia. Every brushstroke, every slip, every piece, is a judgement of yourself. Look well, for great art is God's judgement.

She sat back. Damn Johnny and his glib pronouncements.

The message was from her secretary. She had booked the restaurant, the clients were looking forward to meeting her—it seemed that there was to be no escaping work today. Roughly stuffing the brochures into her work satchel, Patrissia glanced at her sketch and sniffed.

Checking the time again, she pulled off her jeans and shirt, tossed them in the corner with last night's stockings and bra, and ran upstairs to her bedroom in a slight panic. Without thinking, she slipped into the newly-pressed Chanel suit and some heels that seemed to match.

Stopping in front of the hall mirror, she brushed a few stray hairs back into line and pulled at the suit, fingering the necklace at her throat, the rosary that Theo had insulted, the one part of Claudia she could still hold on to.

It was true, she thought, as she dabbed her lips with a ruby gloss, her fantasies of living the imaginative life had been just that, fantasies. She had talent, but she couldn't allow herself to paint because she didn't want others to know her. She knew what God's judgement of her would be.

She leaned closer to the mirror, searching her face for a spark of hope, but the light in her eyes was as deeply buried as Marc's in her drawing. She took a deep breath. She was weak and selfish, but so what? She would not give up yet, neither on him nor on herself.

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The clients hadn't been too awful in the end, and Patrissia had spent a satisfactory couple of minutes with her boss after they'd left being flattered about her handling of the presentation.

But the exultation of success no longer touched her, and she had become more and more agitated until, finally she had had to invent an excuse to leave. Then, rushing for a cab while checking her phone for a message from Marc, she had tripped and broken a heel. He still hadn't contacted her, and she had kicked the heel into the gutter, swearing volubly and loudly in filthy Italian.

The cabbie was slow, the traffic was bad, and it was seven o'clock before she burst at last through her front door and kicked her broken shoe under the hall table, only to hear the familiar sound of Theo's voice coming from her living room.

Her heart sinking, she dropped her satchel with a clatter and went to lean against the doorway. He was gesticulating into his phone, and seeing her, put a hand over the mouthpiece, his finger to his lip.

'What's up? Had a bad day?'

'No, why?' She lit a cigarette.

'You've got that look in your eye.'

'I just didn't expect you tonight.'

'I've made us a nice chilli. Just give me a minute.'

Flicking ash into his empty cup, Patrissia nodded and turned towards the kitchen.

He joined her five minutes later, waving his phone, 'I've got great news—we've hooked him.' He grinned. 'Yeah! We've gotta celebrate this—'

'I'm tired, Theo.'

He didn't seem to hear her, and, sitting wide-legged on the edge of a chair, he leaned forward and began tapping rapidly on his humming laptop. 'Never mind the chilli, let's—'

'I'm not that hungry either,' she said, staring at his smooth, unlined forehead, spotless shirt-collar, and over-gelled chestnut hair.

He didn't even look up. 'OK, I've got business to do anyway. Can you see if there's any rice?'

She felt the familiar pulse in her temple begin to throb. 'Sure. I'll do it, shall I?'

Wishing he would hurry up and go, she barely touched the meal, reliving the previous evening with Marc as Theo talked relentlessly about Paris and his prospect, who apparently had now invited them to New York to discuss strategy.

The meal ended, it did not take her long to persuade him that she needed a night to herself, and, irritated, he left before they even had coffee, gathering his phone and laptop and giving her a reproachful kiss which she wiped off her lips as soon as she'd seen him out.

Returning to the kitchen, she gathered up the plates and scraped them into the bin along with the contents of the half-full saucepans.

Theo wanted her, but she didn't want him. She wanted Marc, but did he want her? She couldn't shift a nagging doubt about his reluctance that made her feel he was hiding something serious. Was there someone else?

And *why* did she want him? She shook her head. He seemed straight enough, but there were glimpses of something else... She sighed. There was always a reason to escape.

Dirty work

Roy put the kettle on, getting a whiff of his armpits as he sat heavily on the kitchen chair. Grimacing as he relaxed his aching shoulders, he told himself he'd have to have a shower before he went to bed.

While he slumped waiting for the kettle, he thought again about the last job and the luck he'd had. He could hardly believe it.

He'd been finishing off an office clearance in the city. It had been a hard day and he was tired. Contemplating yet another run to the warehouse in the Transit, he'd spotted someone parking their 4x4 next to a skip. Looking for a break, he'd wandered over and told the driver that the skip lorry was due, and that his car might get a clunk if the fellas loading up weren't as careful as they should be—which they usually weren't, he warned.

The bloke had thanked him, moving his car to a safer spot that Roy had pointed out. A moment later he'd come back over to the Transit.

'Just say no if it's not your thing,' he'd said in a friendly voice, 'but I'm a bit pressed for time and I promised the wife I'd take the car in for a wash and valet. Are you interested? I could pay you cash?'

Roy found himself mumbling, 'Yeah, OK mate, no problem. I'm nearly done 'ere.'

'You're one in a million, my friend,' the man had laughed, slapping Roy's shoulder. 'Jamie's the name. I've got a bit of business to sort out in there,' he said, pointing vaguely towards the office block, 'but it shouldn't take too long. How much time d'you need? Couple of hours do it?'

Roy nodded. 'Jus' got another load to deliver, then I'll get onto it.'

'Good man,' said Jamie, looking at his watch. 'See you at six.'

'Nice one,' Roy told himself, watching Jamie wander off fiddling with his phone, and wondering how much he should ask. Twenty would do, he decided.

The 4x4 had been immaculate outside, and Roy had been concerned that the wash and polish he'd inflicted on its shiny black paintwork had made it look dirtier rather than cleaner. The

passenger-side footwell had been a bit pongy though, and it had taken some doing to clear it properly. But he had finished it all, and was just scooping out some used tissues and other rubbish from underneath the seats when Jamie had returned, waving a wad of fivers.

‘Excellent stuff—thanks a lot, er...?’

‘Roy.’

‘Well, cheers Roy, you saved me a right ear-bashing,’ he’d grinned as he pressed at least six fivers into his hand. Roy was about to protest when the bloke looked at his watch, and added, ‘Fancy a pint?’

He would have refused, but feeling guilty about taking so much for the job, he gave in to Jamie’s good-natured insistence. It made a change, anyway, not going to the pub by himself.

He was glad he’d given in. After a couple of pints he’d realised that Jamie was just another bloke—obviously well-off and full of himself, for sure, but just a bloke and amusing for all that. He certainly had a way with the ladies. They’d only been in the pub ten minutes when he’d got the barmaid’s number. Roy thought he’d said he was married.

‘You live round ’ere then?’

‘Ladbroke Grove. Doesn’t do to shit in your own back yard now, does it?’ Jamie had grinned, his blue eyes shining. ‘You really did me a favour today. Had a girl chuck up in the passenger footwell yesterday and I haven’t been able to take the car home.’

‘Oh. What, like a girlfriend?’

Jamie had laughed and ordered them both one for the road before asking how business was going. ‘You’re a hard worker, Roy, you must be making a bit.’

Without thinking, Roy had replied, ‘Not really. Clearances don’t pay much. It’d be different if I ’ad a proper van, a seven-an’-half tonner. With a tail-lift. Then I could do proper removals.’

Jamie had looked thoughtful for a second, taking in Roy’s threadbare jumper and worn boots, and then swivelled round on his bar stool with a grin. ‘I might just happen to know where I can

procure you such a beast, my friend. Leave it to me—a beast you shall have!’

‘Then he’d given Roy his card and told him to call at the weekend, when he should have some good news. ‘I can’t guarantee it, mate, but I know some people who owe me a favour. Chin up!’

Roy was brought round from his daydream by a gruff voice through the letterbox.

‘Oy, Roy! Giss ’and wiv the bin, wouldya, darlin’?’

He got to his feet and went out to help old Mrs Hullit wheel her black bin into its habitual spot in front of her kitchen window, ‘In case they nick it,’ she had told him, tapping her nose conspiratorially.

He caught another whiff of himself as he strolled back down the steps to his basement flat. Not only did his armpits still stink, but now his fingers were covered in something that felt like tar but smelt like kippers. He wondered whether to have the shower now, in case he met Siân at the supermarket.

Siân lived in one of the other flats. They often passed each other in the supermarket after work. He had offered her a lift back a few times, which she had accepted gratefully. She had even invited him in for a cup of tea once, and they’d had a nice chat.

She didn’t seem that happy, he thought. She was quite fussy too, and had made him take his boots off even though they weren’t dirty, and was always dropping hints about how grubby his clothes were, but what did she expect? He did dirty work, didn’t he?

He opened his fridge. There were a couple of sausages and eggs left over from the day before. He lifted out the carton of milk and shook it. It was almost empty, but he could drink his tea without milk if he had to, as long as there was sugar.

No need for shopping, then. No need for a shower either if he wasn’t going to see anyone. Grunting, he put the kettle on and settling in his armchair, opened his paper to see if there was anything on TV.

A good life

'You never listen to me, do you, Trisha?' Lucinda poured the tea.

'What d'you mean?'

'I told you that you and Theo wouldn't last.'

Patrissia took out her cigarettes. 'But you've said that about every man I've been with. And you only met him once.'

'Once was enough to know why he was with you.'

'Which was?'

'Arm candy.' Lucinda chuckled. 'You ought to be flattered, at your age.'

Patrissia reached for a cigarette. 'I bet he'll want the suit back.'

'What, the Chanel? It's too small anyway, isn't it?'

Patrissia blew out a cloud of smoke. 'He's welcome to it. It makes me feel like an estate agent.'

Lucinda nodded slowly. 'So, when did all this happen? What did you say to him?'

Patrissia grimaced.

'You've *told* him it's over, haven't you?'

'Not in so many words. We had another row the other night and I said I needed some space. I'm hoping he'll get the hint.'

'He won't, Trisha. Just tell him.'

'I suppose you're right.'

They both took sips of tea, Lucinda licking her lips slowly and dabbing her chin with the napkin, refolding it neatly by her plate. 'I'm surprised it lasted so long.'

'Why?'

'You forget, I've watched your shenanigans for twenty years.' The smile was strained. 'Who's his replacement?'

Patrissia laughed weakly. 'What makes you think there's anyone else?'

'There always is, isn't there?'

Patrissia took a sharp drag of her cigarette. She couldn't deny it. But she hadn't come to hear Lucinda catalogue her defects.

'Lu, I know this might sound a bit strange, but what's it like being married to Jamie?'

There was a long pause before Lucinda answered. 'Why're you so interested, suddenly?'

'What d'you mean?'

'You've never asked me about my life in all the years I've known you. I mean, I tell you things, of course, but you don't really listen, do you?' Her smile was still there, but it had cooled. 'What are my children called?'

'Sarah and Daisy?'

'Zara, with a zed. You see? But why are you asking about Jamie? Or are you asking about marriage?'

Patrissia felt her face redden and took a deep breath. 'I was just wondering if you were happy? You always seem so cheerful and serene, but *are* you? What with Zara and her problems, and Jamie's affairs—'

'Zara is my daughter, Trisha. I love her with all my heart, and it's my job to look after her. I do so willingly.' Lucinda's smile had disappeared.

'Yes, of course. I didn't mean to imply anything—'

'I'm sorry.' Lucinda reached across and touched Patrissia's hand lightly. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. The truth is, it does get me down sometimes. But those are the cards I've been dealt, and I can't complain, really. I have a good life.'

'You're not bothered by Jamie's affairs? You can't still love him, surely?'

'Still?' She paused, reflecting, 'I'm not sure I ever did.'

Patrissia leaned forward on her elbows. 'You mean you gave up your freedom to be with someone you didn't even love?'

'Oh, Trisha, how wonderful it must be to be so idealistic!' Lucinda smiled, shaking her head. '*Freedom? Love?* Oh, I know we all talk about them as if they're everything, but really, when it comes down

to it, do they matter that much? What did I do with my *freedom*? What have you done with yours?’

‘That’s not the point—’

‘No? Then what *is* the point? I could understand it if you were content, but just listen to yourself. You wanted to know if I’m happy, but are *you*? I don’t think you’ve been happy since I met you.’ She took another sip of tea, her eyes cool. ‘And I don’t think you’ve ever been in love, either—at least, not what I’d call love. All those men you’ve had, and none of them respected you, not one of them really cared about you, nor you them. Tell me that’s not true.’

There was a long silence.

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.’

Patrissia was staring at her reflection in the window, tears welling up in her eyes. ‘I don’t know what’s happening to me, Lu. I’m so tired of struggling, I keep wishing the ground would swallow me up.’ Tasting salt on her lips, she licked them, then dabbed her eyes. ‘I try so *hard*.’

‘Trisha, don’t take this the wrong way, but have you ever tried considering other people for a change?’

‘I know, I know. But I feel so *resentful*, Lu, so *frustrated*. I know I’m selfish, but so is everyone. Well, not *everyone*, I mean—’

‘What?’

‘Theo, Johnny, the others. They all had their angles.’

Lucinda sighed. ‘Well, you do seem to deliberately go all out for problem cases, idiots, obsessives—It’s quite scary when you bring a new man round. I don’t know whether to put the riot squad on alert or just hide the knives.’

They both laughed, but Patrissia could feel an ache in her throat, and saw something she couldn’t define in Lucinda’s eyes.

‘I know,’ she said, her voice wavering, ‘but what can I do? They’re obviously the ones I’m attracted to.’

Lucinda passed her a tissue. ‘You could always try thinking more than five minutes ahead,’ she said, her voice quiet and serious. ‘I know committing yourself is adult and *bourgeois*, Trisha, and I know how you hate being thought *bourgeois*, but perhaps it’s time to

consider settling down, wouldn't you say? You're not a student any more.'

Patrissia sniffed. 'That's what Theo said.'

'Well, he's right. You never know, sticking around for the long haul could be an answer. There might be other answers, but what's the chances of finding them? It's not as though you haven't experimented.'

'So you think I should give in?'

'Give in? What an odd thing to say. Not if that's how you think of it, no. And please, not for Theo! But I do think you might take some responsibility for your own happiness, Trisha. Why not accept what's on offer rather than continually comparing it to what you want? It's not as though you're offering anything in return. I'm sorry to sound so judgmental, but the way you are, you don't value anything, it seems to me. And detachment might be fine for a Buddhist monk, but it doesn't make for a fulfilling life on *this* planet.'

'I don't want to *be* detached any more, Lu. I want to find someone to love, and who loves me.'

'Of course you do,' Lucinda said emphatically. 'Real, genuine love is worth giving up a lot for, but—'

'What would *you* give up, Lu?'

'What?'

'You just said love is worth giving up a lot for. I'm asking what 'a lot' might cover?'

There was a crash from the conservatory, and then the sound of crying.

Lucinda jumped up. 'Sorry, Trisha—that had better not be my vase.' She hurried inside, leaving Patrissia on the terrace holding the screwed-up tissue.

Zara's wailing grew louder, then Patrissia could hear soothing murmurs, no actual words, just the gentle sound of a voice and bits of pottery being brushed across the floor. Then there was a giggle, and a few minutes later, Lucinda returned, Zara sitting on her hip,

her head buried under her hair, looking out at Patrissia with a big brown eye. She smiled.

*

Jamie checked his mobile one more time, slid it carefully into his pocket and began to walk slowly down the steps. The air outside was decidedly chilly. The streetlights were on, hazily, as if just warming up for a long, cold night. He strode towards his car and spread himself comfortably over the driver's seat, lifting the pack of Marlboro from the passenger seat where Beatrice had left them at lunchtime after he had driven her home. His mobile phone beeped.

"God's sake," he muttered. "Fucking God's sake."

*

Jamie softly clicked the front door shut, and turning, heard Lucinda in the kitchen filling the dishwasher. The hall clock showed ten. Arranging his face into a smile, he dropped his coat on the hallway chair and padded towards her to deliver his customary bear-hug.

She turned her cheek to his lips. 'Hello, Jamie. The girls were asking for you. Zara wanted *Angry Arthur*—she says you read it better than me.' With a sniff, she clattered the cutlery basket into its slot and disappeared into the sitting room.

Dropping his smile, Jamie went to the fridge and taking out a half-empty bottle, poured himself a glass of wine.

Just the perfunctory lecture tonight, thank God.

He downed the glass and refilled it before going to join his wife.

The room was wide and softly lit, with warm wood underfoot and an ornate chest-high mantelpiece framing the fire. Lucinda was curled at the end of the sofa, her skirt folded around her knees, a tumbler of red wine hugged to her chest.

'I'm almost tempted to say that it's nice to see you,' she said as he entered, and stirring her wine with a finger, continued, 'You're rarely here lately.'

Bugger, I was wrong. It looks like I'm in for the extended version.

Jamie looked into the large gold mirror hung over the glowing fireplace and raised his eyebrows theatrically. 'Oh?' he said. 'Well, it's a busy time of year.'

'The girls are always asking when you'll be home.' His wife's voice was thin and hard. 'They're in bed by eight, Jamie, you know that. Just once in a while, just once—'

'I know, I know.' Jamie clinked down his glass on the mantelpiece and turned towards her. 'I really wish I could get back by then, but you know how it is...'

Lucinda looked straight into his face, her pale blue eyes icy.

'Jamie, what's going on?'

'What d'you mean?'

'Are you having *another* affair?' Her tone was resigned, almost bored.

He turned back to the fire. 'What d'you mean?'

He took up his glass and emptied half of it, standing for a moment in front of the photos of his children arranged beneath the mirror. Eventually he turned to face her.

'Come on, Lu, I'm not having an affair. I mean, it's bloody ludicrous! I've got my hands full with work.'

'Then who,' Lucinda demanded, 'is Beatrice?'

His hand instinctively touching his jacket pocket, Jamie shook his head. 'Who?'

'Beatrice,' she said again.

'I don't think I know anyone called—what did you say her name was?'

'Jamie, you're such a bad liar.' Lucinda stood up. 'I'm going to bed.'

He listened for the quiet pad of her feet on the stairs. He listened for the sound of the medicine cabinet sliding shut. He listened for a long time, resigned to the click of the bedroom door, the tight, hard cocoon of bed sheets wrapped around her, the ferocious armoury of legs, elbows, shoulders that protected her from his touch.

Well, fuck you.

Taking out his phone, he re-read Beatrice's last apologetic message, asking forgiveness for messing up his car. With a sigh he deleted her and her messages, and subsiding into Lucinda's vacated, scented, seat, slowly thumbed through his contact list.

Cracks and schisms

Marc's impatience to hear from Secundus had caused him several sleepless nights, as had Patrissia's text message the day after their dinner at his club, suggesting that they should meet again soon. He had been tempted to answer, but he needed to wait. Patrissia had to be Claudia's sister or cousin—incredible as he found the thought—but he needed confirmation.

And here it was, along with even more incredible news. He read Secundus' letter again.

My dear Ignatius,

I'll be honest: the subject of your last letter gave me grave cause for concern, since, by coincidence, I was recently visited by one of the Vecchia family. Claudia Vecchia's daughter came to me seeking news of her mother, which of course could not be given her.

Ignatius, I have come to realise that my interference in the Vecchia affair cannot affect its eventual outcomes, therefore, reluctantly, and after much prayer, I arranged that she be given your address. Her name is Ciara.

So, it had happened.

And now, in answer to your question. Claudia has only one other living blood relative, apart from her father: her younger sister, Patrissia.

O—~~kay~~. Marc took a slow breath as he let his eyes skim over the final paragraph.

There are no coincidences in the Kingdom of God, Ignatius, but only you can discern His will in putting this woman in your path. Pray wisely—the Lord is always with you, no matter how treacherous and painful your way may seem to be. I too shall pray for you, that you at least do her no harm.

Secundus

Do her no harm. Fumbling a cigarette out of the packet, Marc stood up and held it unlit between his lips as he re-read the letter several times, his hands clammy. The cigarette sparked as he finally lit it and inhaled deeply, sour smoke escaping from the corners of his mouth.

He had to see Patrissia again, and that would be painful. The visceral, compelling attraction he felt for her was beyond his experience, and disturbing in itself. And on top of that he'd have to tell her who he was and what he'd done to her sister.

He looked up, searching the dingy walls for clues, and going over to the bookcase, he ran a finger gently along the spines until he came to a small leather-bound book. Lifting it out carefully, he cradled it for a moment with eyes closed and then let it fall open. Again, the same passage.

Closing the book, he held it like an offering, spine down, and slowly opened his hands. This time the pages stayed clumped together, revealing the message written inside the marbled cover in a neat schoolgirl hand. *From your devoted lover...*

The memory made him feel tired and alone, and it came again to him that anything to do with Patrissia would surely end in catastrophe. She was Claudia's sister, and he had no will to oppose her, and now there would be nothing to hold him back.

Reaching into the top drawer of his desk, he took out a dog-eared sketchbook and flicked through the smudged charcoal images to the last sketch, letting his eyes follow the lines of Sally's bound arms and hands, spotted red beneath a spiky wrapping that might have been barbed wire.

'What do you get out of this?', she had asked him, more than once.

He shook his head and turned the page just as his phone rang. With a deep breath he picked it up.

'Hi, Marc, it's Patrissia. Listen, I've been working on that flyer I promised.'

Just hearing her voice emptied his head of all the preparations he had made, and he was immediately thrown into her world, her preoccupations.

'What flyer?'

‘Don’t you remember? We talked about it at your club last week.’

‘No—’

‘I suppose we’d had a bit to drink by then.’ She laughed. ‘But never mind, I’ve made a start and I wondered if you wanted to meet somewhere to discuss the next step?’

Here it came again. He could feel his will draining away as his heartbeat increased.

‘Um, I’m very busy, but if—’

‘Good. My train’s just getting in to Paddington. Why don’t we say Kensington Gardens in an hour—It’s such a lovely day. I’ll jump in a cab and meet you by the fountain. OK?’

Well, that’s that.

‘OK Patrissia.’



Patrissia lay her coat on the grass, and, pulling up her blue knitted dress, sat and then stretched out, enjoying the feel of the sun on her legs.

She hadn’t written much more than the title of the flyer, but it wouldn’t take long, and anyway she didn’t want to give Marc an opportunity to discuss it. She knew what he’d be like. Instead, she’d been busy finding a venue for their first meeting, an old industrial unit in a semi-converted warehouse overlooking the river. It had lovely views, and she had taken some photos to give him.

She smiled at herself. When she’d first thought of the group it was only as a necessary part of Marc’s seduction, and easily dispensed with if required, but once she’d started on the flyer the success of this odd project had unexpectedly gripped her, although setting up a discussion group as a love-gift seemed rather strange even to her.

Nevertheless, the idea had grown on her and she’d begun to think of it as an open-forum airing of unpalatable truths: the kinds of truths that hit you hard, shameful, sometimes pugilistic and iconoclastic, a bit bloody. She’d enjoy it, anyway—it would be a relief to forgo the dinner-party rules for once and risk a black eye while getting in a scratch or two. She sometimes wanted just to

keep things physical, no explanations, no resistance. Maybe that was going a bit far... although... She smiled.

The idea of the group expanded in her mind. Not only could she bare her very hidden soul in deliciously pious and suitably contrite ways that should fascinate anyone inclined to the mystical, which she'd somehow felt Marc might be, but she would enjoy just seeing who came. She'd have to get the tone of the flyer just right—best to get it checked over by someone at work. She made a note.

The simple ways of persuasion that she practised continually amused her, as did the ways of her imagination. Thus she was good at her job, and deserved her position

She knew some people found her mesmerising, and she helped them learn and play their role in her fantasy. She didn't question why they wanted to join her, or what their plan was, because she had no long-term plan herself and was happy just to see things play out. She wasn't the director of her story: no, she was the heroine, and how the others responded to her story was their own affair. Their story didn't interest her, but she'd play along with it until she didn't, it really was as simple as that.

She'd loved the opportunity to spend a cloudy afternoon phoning agencies and traipsing around quite unsuitable and unaffordable buildings before chancing on the one she'd mentioned to Marc. As soon as she'd entered it, she'd known it was the one.

Bare except for stacks of padded chairs and a couple of large beechwood tables, the feeling of space and light had overwhelmed her with memories of the painting studio at college. She'd stood in front of the huge window looking out over the river, her head flooded with voices discussing Art and God, the real and the impression, form and meaning. And rising above the other voices was Johnny's in full flow, reducing the whirlwind world to calm and limpid abstractions, comforting and containable.

And later, making love, without plan, without shame or guilt or conscience, or any thought at all. A place such as that was the home she sought, the home she tried to recreate with each move and each lover; and which recreation became less real with each attempt, eventually arriving at Theo, with whom she'd barely tried.

Suddenly feeling chilly, Patrissia pulled her dress back down and checked her phone for messages, but there were none. Irritated, she tapped in Marc's number.

'Marc? It's Patrissia. Where are you?'

'Ah. Sorry, I stopped off to settle a bill, and—'

'Marc, where are you?'

'Er, Portobello Road, the Elgin. You know it?'

'You were supposed to meet me—Oh, never mind. Stay where you are and I'll get a cab. Won't be long.'

*

When Patrissia arrived, Marc was sitting at the bar, picking at a bowl of nuts. There was a half-empty bottle of wine on the beer mat and a fug of smoke around him. He'd obviously been there some time. She touched his shoulder.

'You look comfortable.'

'Oh, hello. Sorry, my head was full of some things I had to sort out and somehow I ended up here. Were you waiting long?'

She sat on the bar stool next to him and opened her bag. 'Long enough to appreciate a drink.'

'Oh, yes, of course. What would you like?'

'A glass of red would be fine. Anyway, have a look at these.' Patrissia carefully pulled out the photos of the views from the warehouse unit in front of him. He stared at the top one.

'What's this?'

'It's the venue for the first meeting.'

'You're serious, aren't you? I didn't think you were, you know. So how do we go about setting up the 'Bloody Obvious' forum? You need people as well as a venue. I mean, I like the idea of it, but would either of us go? What could be the hook?' He glanced at the photos again. 'Where is this place? It looks expensive.'

'The new development down by the river.' Patrissia turned up her enthusiasm a notch. 'It's perfect—Just look at the views!'

‘Yes, it’s nice, but what has the view got to do with it?’ He looked genuinely perplexed. ‘We’re not trying to attract samplers, are we?’

‘Oh,’ said Patrissia, a momentary stab of frustration sharpening her words. ‘Don’t you like it?’ And then with a slight frown. ‘What’s a sampler?’

‘Samplers? A bit like the people who Chogyam Trumpa called spiritual shoppers, but they pursue the more material end—yoga in Mauritius, Facebooking the Camino de Santiago, stroking environmentally friendly dolphins and suchlike. Topping up their virtue quotient.’

Marc paused. ‘But anyway... I thought I remember you mentioning a church? I was kind of assuming that sort of atmosphere...’ He passed the barman a ten-pound note. ‘Another bottle please, Roger.’

Patrissia relaxed. It appeared that Marc had come on board. *Why are men so easy?* she asked herself again.

‘Let’s go and sit over there, shall we?’ she suggested, touching his hand. ‘It’ll be more comfortable.’

Leading the way, she chose a small table in a discreet corner. ‘So, you’d like a church or chapel, or something like that?’ she said, sitting and patting the seat beside her.

Marc, having avoided looking directly at her up to then, suddenly met her eyes. ‘I’d really like that, and so would the type of people I’d want to join us,’ he said nodding. His eyes were hazy, their renaissance darkness lifted by scattered reflections from the lights overhead. ‘It’s the religious feeling I’m after—not any actual religion, of course—and seriousness, and order. And we don’t want any damned piss-taking atheists, do we?’ He shook his head and grinned. ‘No, broadminded and undecided only.’

Patrissia waited patiently, watching the lines on his forehead deepen, but she was disappointed. Instead of continuing, he leaned forward to refill their glasses, and she couldn’t read his expression.

‘You know I’m not here just because I want to set up meetings, don’t you, Marc?’ she found herself saying, hiding her sudden impatience by tucking her hair behind her ear. ‘I mean, if that’s all you want, that’s OK, but I’d like to know.’

He stayed hunched forward but lifted his head slightly. 'That's unexpectedly direct of you, Patrissia, he said slowly. 'Of course I'm attracted to you, you're beautiful—but perhaps, for now,' he muttered almost inaudibly, 'we can get this group or whatever set up before we start anything more... I really like this idea though! Raw feelings, real opinions...' He petered out, and reached for his cigarette fuming in the ashtray.

Patrissia saw that his hand was trembling, and smiled through her chagrin, wondering what he was keeping from her.

'OK, Marc, that's fine. We'll just see what happens, shall we?'

*

When they left two hours later, Marc had to stop in the doorway of the pub to get his bearings. Patrissia linked her arm through his, and kept him steady as they made their way up the street.

'Is it far to your place?'

'No, just around the corner.'

She was already used to his ways, and they continued in silence until they reached a crescent of tall Victorian houses.

'Here we are—Goodbye, Patrissia.' He disengaged his arm awkwardly, then dropped the door key while fumbling it out of his pocket.

She picked it up and moved close to him, raising her lips to his cheek. 'I'll call you when I've found a better venue.' Pulling his head down she pressed into him, feeling his warmth. He smelled of wine and cigarettes, and the sweet scent grew stronger as their mouths met.

Feeling his arms rise and encircle her, she helped him negotiate the threshold and they entered the house.

*

The sound of a car horn woke her, and lazily remembering his warmth the night before, Patrissia stretched her arm across the bed to feel it again, but he was gone.

Lying still, she listened for him, but the house was silent, and feeling vaguely unwelcome, she rose and dressed quickly.

Picking up her dress from the chair beside the dirty window, she wondered if he chose to live like he did deliberately, or if it was just that he couldn't be bothered. The house was almost a parody of neglectful bachelorhood—a dismantled iron bedstead stood against one wall of the bedroom looking as if it had broken one day and he had simply dragged the mattress onto the bare black boards and used that.

There was no note in the kitchen, and no sign that Marc had been in there that morning.

Wondering if she should leave, she stared around her at the mess and clutter and then checked her phone for messages, but there were none, not even from Theo, who normally made a point of keeping her informed of his whereabouts, and frequently complained when she didn't.

'What's the point, Theo? We don't see each other for days. You can always call me if you want to know where I am.'

'I guess so.'

She checked her phone again. It was eleven-thirty. Unwilling to speculate why Marc had disappeared, she made a pot of coffee and, filling a large mug she found in a dusty cupboard, she took it into the garden and stood for a moment in the morning sun, enjoying its warmth.

The garden was large and unkempt, and, she saw with pleasure, surrounded by a high old dark brick wall. Mangy, straggling trees and swathes of ivy contributed to its air of neglect. An enormous willow shaded the far corner, a rusty wrought-iron table almost invisible beneath its canopy.

But what held her attention was a life-sized grey-green figure that had been placed in front of an old, much repaired, shed. The sinewy stone looked almost wet in the light, and she went closer to study it.

She recognised it as a version of Pan, but rather than the usual sentimental fantasy, its features were disfigured and gross, fat and

greasily effeminate, almost sweaty, and expressing a self-satisfied brutality. It suddenly reminded her of the face of Salomé as imagined by a Christian fantasist she had studied, and she ran her hands along the contrasting slim but muscular shoulders and arms appreciatively.

Forcing herself not to think about where Marc had got to, she uprooted an old kitchen chair from under the tree and setting it down by the back door, she sat and lit a cigarette.

If she made a few calls now, she might be able to surprise him when he returned. If a church was what he wanted for his meetings, she would get one for him.

*

‘Hello Marc? Where did you run off to this morning? I waited, but when you hadn’t turned up by one...’

‘Sorry. I had some work to do.’

‘Oh, well. Are you free tomorrow? I’d like you to come and see a chapel I’ve found. It’s quite near, and we needn’t be there long.’

‘Chapel?’

‘For the meetings, remember? I’ve been busy too.’

‘Oh, yes, the chapel. Really, you found one already?’

‘I move fast when there’s a need,’ she laughed. ‘I’ll come and pick you up. Is ten OK?’

‘Ten’s fine, sure. Thanks for calling.’ There was a pause and Patrissia thought she heard the clink of a bottle. ‘Night.’

‘Night, Marc. See you tomorrow at ten.’

That was just his way, she told herself as she put the phone down and folded her legs under her on the sofa. He was friendly and open enough, and talked as much as most men do, but sometimes he faded out for minutes at a time, lost somewhere else, and then his face changed fleetingly as if he was frightened of a thought, and he became brusque and tense.

Patrissia had hoped that somehow this time it would be different and easy. Marc was an artist, not a businessman, and weren’t they

supposed to be raw and expressive? Not secretive anyway. The call left her feeling uneasy. Not liking to make small talk was one thing, but he didn't seem very warm towards her, even now they'd spent the night together. It seemed quite obvious that he had things to hide.

She lit a cigarette. She couldn't imagine him helping in the kitchen, either. At least Theo made a passable curry.

*

The following morning they stood together in the doorway of the chapel, the pointed arched windows letting in a diffuse and colourless light that reminded Patrissia of some spiritous Friedrich monastery. She felt at once pleased and obscurely jealous as she saw him slowly take in the shadowy dark-beamed walls and rafters, the deserted aisle and plain pews grey with age and desertion, his eyes bright.

Imagining herself veiled and gloved in black lace, she gently took his arm. 'What do you think?'

In response, he pressed a light switch, illuminating the altar with a pale, white glow. He turned it off again. And then on. And then off...

'The damned light works, Marc, now just leave it alone!'

He raised his eyebrows and mumbling a dismissive 'Sorry', dropped her arm and went to the head of the aisle, staring down it, his face fixed and neutral.

'Is anything the matter? Don't you like it?'

He turned towards her, nodding his head, his pupils wide, and without speaking, stepped into the back row of pews. Sitting, he ran the palm of his hand across the seat. She came to sit beside him.

'It has potential, doesn't it?'

He nodded again, almost reluctantly.

'Did you say you might know some people who might be interested in joining us?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact,' said Marc, suddenly animated, removing a thin rectangle of folded paper from his top pocket.

Patrissia smiled with relief. 'Good, me too. There's someone I know through an old friend of mine. He's an Irish-born Catholic, though not practising, I wouldn't have thought, given his rather modern interpretation of the marriage vows.'

'Hmm. Is his wife Catholic too?'

'Lucinda? Yes, she is.' She saw with pleasure that his eyes were wide and alive now, and continued, 'But why are you so interested in Catholics? They're not our targets, surely? We want *bloody*, don't we? Not tight-arsed.'

Marc laughed with a faint sour note. 'Of course not. It's well to know their background, though, don't you think? And I like talking with Catholics, they usually stick to their guns.'

'Hmm, I suppose so. Well, she goes to church from time to time, but I doubt if this would really be her cup of tea. I'll ask her if you like, but I don't hold out much hope.'

'I suppose we're more likely to attract the disgruntled than the indifferent,' Marc said, studying his piece of paper carefully. 'I hope so, anyway. I have an acquaintance who said he'd come along.'

'Just one? Is that all?' Patrissia's smile faded slightly. 'Oh well. Anyway, the Irish chap is called Jamie, and he says he'll bring his friend Roy, and a woman called Siân.'

'Six of us then?' Marc murmured. 'That's enough for a few pricks. Pinpricks, I mean—we can get into the bloodletting later,' he laughed.

Patrissia joined in. 'I'll look forward to that, I'm O minus, I can have anyone's blood I want. Anyway,' she said, changing the subject when she saw the look on his face, 'I took a stroll along the high street yesterday with some copies of the flyer. We should get a few more people from that.'

'You finished the flyer too?'

'I told you, when I move, I move. It doesn't matter what it says as long as it makes the right people come, does it? Trust me, PR is a great teacher of persuasion.'

'I suppose not.' Marc looked slightly confused, and Patrissia saw him close his eyes for a few seconds, his hands clasped gently in his lap as though he had slipped into a brief meditation.

As her eyes skimmed his floppy hair, creamy, almost damp, skin and his long, sinewy neck, a duet of mild irritation and unexpected sympathy played through her.

'You do like it, don't you?' Their heads were so close she could hear him breathing. Marc looked up towards the altar and laid his hand across hers.

'Yes, it's perfect.' he said.

Patrissia turned her hand over to cradle his. 'Come back to my place. I'll make us something to eat and we can talk.'

Better get moving

Siân looked again at the pamphlet Roy had given her. She knew he wasn't a great one for reading, and it had been a bit of a surprise when he had thrust it into her hands the day before.

He'd waylaid her in the supermarket again, much to her irritation, and she'd been about to tell him to bugger off and leave her alone when he'd explained that his friend Jamie had suggested that he come with him to this talk session a friend of his was setting up. Have a laugh, meet some new people, he'd said.

Roy had mentioned Jamie before—a right jack-the-lad according to the stories—and Siân was quite interested in meeting him, just out of curiosity.

'Siân, are you ready yet? The film starts in half an hour. We'd better get moving.'

'I'm ready whenever you are, Manu. What's the film again?'

'Er, can't remember. Caravaggio?'

'He's an old painter, isn't he? You sure?'

'Something like that. Fitzcaraggio?'

'Doesn't ring a bell. Never mind.'

She skimmed the pamphlet again. '*Do you get what you want?*' it asked. '*Do you get what you deserve? Let's talk about it...*'

'I know the answer to that,' she muttered to herself.

'OK, Siân, let's go!'

'I'll get a couple of pizzas out of the freezer before we leave, shall I? We're bound to be peckish when we get back.'

'Good idea. Hurry up.'

'OK.'

She took out the two big pizzas and put them on the sink rack. They were three months out of date, but they were frozen, weren't they?

She went back to the pamphlet and read some more. The pamphlet kept going on about talking things out, and she could do with some decent conversation. Between them, Manu and the

people at work, it was hardly worth opening her mouth, really. Yes, if they meant proper, serious, conversation like she'd had at college, that'd be good, wouldn't it? It'd get her out of Manu's clutches for a while anyway. She had to do *something*.

Mind you, Roy'd said he was going, hadn't he? Not that that was a big problem, as such, although she'd have to find some excuse to stop him offering her lifts.

She looked at her watch and sat down on one of the old kitchen chairs.

What do I believe in? she asked herself. *Nothing much*. Not in, what was it? *'Myself, my job or my talents'*, anyway. She hefted her breasts and stared at them. *Not a lot of talent going any more, have I?* What else was there?

Manu appeared, patting the pockets of his fat leather jacket. 'Have you seen the car keys, Siân?'

'On the hall table, Manu, where they always are.'

'I wish you wouldn't take them out of my pockets.'

'If you didn't put them in your pockets, I wouldn't have to take them out, would I? I use the car too, you know.'

'Just don't do it, OK? I can never find them if you do that.'

She shrugged. 'Are you ready now then? We'll miss the beginning.'

'Doesn't matter, it's a long film.'

'Oh, good.'

I'm definitely going. I'll talk to Roy tomorrow.

It's all just talk

Patrissia arrived at the chapel half an hour early, impatient to inspect the interior properly and to make it welcoming. She laid the two large bunches of lilies on the worn stone step.

Struggling to disentangle the key from her handbag, she heard footsteps behind her. A man in his early forties was approaching, his hands deep in the pockets of his donkey jacket.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten yer,' he said, stroking his neatly-shaven grey hair.

Patrissia continued peering intently into the depths of her bag. 'Have you come for the meeting? Oh, I'm so sorry,' she said, collecting herself and flashing him a bright smile. 'I'm Patrissia. Pleased to meet you.'

'Er, yeah, I'm Roy. I'm a mate of Jamie's. He showed me the flyer an'—'

'How *is* Jamie?' Without giving him time to answer, she continued, 'But the meeting doesn't start till eight, you know, I was just—'

'I c'n give yer 'and settin' up, if yer like?'

'That's kind of you, but really—'

'I'll bring the flowers.' Roy lifted up the lilies in his arms and looked at her patiently.

'Oh, yes. Thank you.' Patrissia slid an arm into her bag, finally extracting the key from its nest of dysfunctional lighters and forgotten mementos, and gracelessly wiggled it into the massive lock. It was stiff, and she felt Roy's patience waning as she used both hands to turn it until with a grinding click she felt it give. As he relaxed, she pushed open the heavy door, and he followed her into the dim interior, his boots echoing on the stone slabs.

'I'll put the kettle on while you do the flowers, shall I?' he suggested when she'd found the lights.

'Thank you, Roy, that's very kind. Just put them down on that pew.' She sniffed, suddenly aware of an unpleasantly cold and damp smell.

'Bit musty in 'ere,' said Roy, opening a side window as though he had read her mind. He turned and swept his eyes over the ancient pews, nodding his head. 'Nice woodwork though.'



'So what's it all about then, this meetin'?'

Patrissia and Roy were once again standing on the front step, staring down the path at the front gate. She pulled a cigarette from her pack and offered him one, which he refused with a shake of his head.

'I can't really say what we'll be talking about, Roy. I'm just the organiser.'

They both looked up as a tall figure appeared.

'Hi Patrissia, and ...'

'Hello, Marc, this is Roy, our first guest,' said Patrissia. 'Roy, this is Marc. He's the one you need to ask.'

Roy held out his hand with an odd wariness, as if he wanted to ask a favour and was unsure of the response. Marc, too, seemed reluctant to entrust his hand to this stranger, and with a brief nod and a fleeting touch, he continued through the doorway.

'If you'll excuse me, Roy—It looks like I'm about to be enlightened,' Patrissia smiled reassuringly.

She followed Marc into the chapel. He'd stopped in the aisle, and she watched curiously as he genuflected and slowly and conscientiously made the sign of the cross, remaining on his knees for several minutes, murmuring under his breath.

Rising at last, he turned to her with a smile. 'Old habits.' He paused. 'I hope you don't mind but I've roughed out some rules.'

'Oh,' said Patrissia, feeling a faint draught brush the hairs on her neck. 'I'm not that fond of rules. That's rather more formal than I'd anticipated. I'd hoped—What kind of rules?'

'Nothing much, just so we don't descend into a free for all or turn it into a lecture. I think it would help if we had an explicit theme for each meeting,' he continued. 'Can you think of anything for today?'

Why wasn't he prepared? Patrissia wondered. She strongly suspected that there were few actual demands on his time, even though he had made himself available to her only twice since they had visited the chapel together the week before.

'We need something that everyone can relate to, don't you think? Doubt? Disillusion? Despair?' she giggled.

Marc nodded, his face serious. 'I guess that's basic enough, but I was thinking of something more uplifting for a first session. Perhaps something more entheogenic would—'

Patrissia frowned. 'What was that word?'

'Entheogenic? It means the manifestation of God in us—'

'OK,' Patrissia interrupted him, her eyes bright, 'then why don't we make *Love* the theme? Surely that's what most people would think of first?'

He stared at her blankly for several seconds before flicking his eyes towards the altar. 'OK, Patrissia.' He paused again, then added in a peculiarly empty voice, 'I suppose we might even find out what love might be.'

Turning away from her, he walked down the central aisle to peer at the lilies arranged on the top table, their perfume already permeating the dank air.

'Mmm,' he said, inhaling. Nice.'

*

Patrissia laughed and cleared her throat. 'Do excuse me if I seem nervous. Just to help us all to feel comfortable, why don't we take a moment to introduce ourselves. I'm Patrissia, and this is Marc.'

'Jamiel' called a floppy-haired figure in the front row. Patrissia acknowledged him with a smile, wondering briefly what Lucinda would make of her wayward husband's presence there.

He had kept his word and brought Siân, a mousy woman who was struggling with a strappy bag that kept falling off her shoulder. *Siân*, Patrissia repeated under her breath after the woman had mumbled her name. She looked like she might be pregnant, Patrissia thought.

‘I hope that that all who find our conversations here congenial will become friends. It’s a fond hope, but we have to have hope. There’s no plan except to be straightforward and honest and not to fear judgement, and in time I hope we can form a kind of fellowship of friends,’ she heard Marc say after the round of largely inaudible names had straggled to its conclusion.

‘That sounds a bit more high-minded than I mean,’ he continued, looking slightly worried. ‘Let’s just talk. I should say that despite the venue we are not a religious group. I just felt that its otherworldliness would provide an appropriate atmosphere. However, the things I hope we’ll discuss will often have a religious perspective, although discussions about the relative truth of them and so on are banned.

‘This isn’t about fighting for views, it’s about discussion of things we all take seriously but are often shanghaied into concealing. If you have strong views about opinions different from yours, please keep them to yourself. By all means discuss, but please, no soapboxing.

‘In fact, as far as possible I’d like to keep everything confined to the real and everyday, and to avoid any kind of ideological discussions except as they might illuminate a subject. As a symbol of this,’ he went on, lifting a slim black volume from his briefcase and placing it on the table, almost reverently, ‘I’ve had this book printed. You are all welcome to have a look at it: it may surprise you.’

With a smile, he turned to Patrissia, who was staring at him quizzically. He hadn’t discussed any of this with her—and hadn’t he said he hadn’t prepared anything?

‘So, Marc,’ she said in a neutral voice, ‘perhaps you’d like to explain to us what’s on the agenda tonight?’

‘Sure.’ Marc turned to the audience with a faint look of concern on his face. ‘The subject tonight is *Love*.’

Patrissia realised that she had been holding her breath, and let it out with an audible sigh. Flicking her eyes up, she was relieved to see that nobody seemed to have noticed.

He was so strange. One minute cool, in control and humorous, the next... what? Anxious, hesitant... She couldn’t make him out.

‘What do we mean by the word ‘love’?’

His voice was steady and clear, and Patrissia was suddenly reminded of their first meeting in front of the El Grecos, among those ridiculous Americans. She had loved it that he had been so knowledgeable, but somehow, try as she might, she couldn’t quite remember what he had said, neither then, nor later at the café. She looked at the notes she had made in her notebook, and circling ‘listen’ and ‘respond’, bowed her head and tried to concentrate.

‘In English we have only the word ‘love’, and that word has to make do for several different meanings,’ Marc was saying. ‘But in other languages... In Greek, for example, we have *eros*, that is, passionate or romantic love; *philia*, which can be rendered as deep friendship, and which the Greeks valued above *eros*; *agape*, charitable love; *pragma*, the deep understanding that develops between long-married couples...’

Such a beautiful voice, Patrissia was thinking, *but I doubt anyone is remotely interested in what he’s saying. I’m not.* Then for a fleeting moment, *What am I doing here?*

She closed her eyes, dreamily letting his smooth and resonant tones flow into her, filling her head with colour and light.

*

As soon as he had finished, a curious feeling came over Patrissia that *this* was the moment she had been waiting for, the reason she had been so enthusiastic about setting this up for him. Without thinking, she stood up.

‘We don’t need to examine the meaning of words to know what we *feel*, do we?’ she began. ‘And isn’t love really about that feeling of connection, of belonging, that we all yearn for? *I think so.*’

An immense sense of jumping off a cliff rose in her as she took a breath and continued, ‘But I can’t remember ever feeling a real sense of connection with anyone, so, as you can see, I’m at a disadvantage when people talk about loving, or being in love. I *think* I know what they mean, but how can I know? How could I tell if I really did love someone?’

‘You could always read a book!’

‘Yes, thank you, Jamie,’ said Patrissia, nodding and smiling at the sudden lightening of the atmosphere. ‘What book would you suggest? The Kama Sutra? The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock? The Bible? Romeo and Juliet? She was thirteen, you know.’

‘Good point,’ came a loud voice. ‘Let’s stick to real life, shall we?’

‘Yes indeed, thank you.’ She pursed her lips. ‘Hmm, although... real life... I’m not sure we won’t come up against the same problem. Who do we ask? The Pope? Actors *playing* Romeo and Juliet...?’ She had a thought. ‘Actually, if you don’t mind, can I ask if any of you thinks they’ve been in love?’

Several hands were raised, including Jamie’s, she saw with interest. But not Siân’s, and not Marc’s.

‘Thank you. It’s said that being in love is a kind of madness. What do we think?’

There was an epidemic of nodding and smiling.

Patrissia’s face turned serious. ‘So is that why we’re here tonight? Are we seeking madness? I have to say that I’m not sure that’s what *I’m* seeking. You only have to look at how people treat the ones they say they love, what they *do* to them—’

‘That’s certainly true.’ It was Jamie’s voice. She took the opportunity to glance sideways at Marc. He was sitting with eyes glazed, apparently oblivious to them.

She waited for Jamie to continue, but it seemed that he had said all he was going to.

‘But then, so *many* things are done in the name of love,’ Patrissia prompted. ‘Personally, I’ve always found it hard—’

‘You should mention The Bible,’ said a woman’s voice, interrupting her.

‘Yes, Siân?’ *Jamie’s* friend.

‘Well, surely, if you need an example, it’s God’s love you have to look to, isn’t it? You can’t say that isn’t the real thing.’ Her eyes behind her thick spectacles were wide and anxious.

Patrissia took a sip of water, and when she spoke again her voice was soft and almost apologetic.

‘I know what you’re saying, Siân, but for me anyway, there’s only one kind of love and that’s the human kind, because I’m only human and it’s the only kind of love I think I could understand.’

She paused, wondering where the words she had just spoken had come from. They seemed right, though, and judging by the silence in her audience, nobody could think of an objection—not even Marc, who was staring at her so intently she felt almost transparent.

‘But as I said, I’ve never been in love, so I’m not sure where that gets me to be honest, although I have to admit I’ve always thought that just being accepted counts for a lot. I can’t see God accepting me.’

‘Sorry,’ said another voice. ‘What’s this about God? I thought you said you weren’t going to talk about religion? That’s what it said in the flyer.’

‘I know,’ said Patrissia, splaying her hands, palms up, ‘but I don’t think we can avoid some mention, can we? All I’m saying is that I don’t know how to love a person, and I don’t know how to love God, either. It can’t be just about acceptance, can it? There has to be more to it than that.’

She paused, wishing that someone would help her out, but all she could hear was the shuffle and creak of people intent on keeping out of the action.

‘Perhaps this might be an appropriate point to tell you a little about myself,’ she said at last. ‘It’s not easy to understand someone properly when you don’t know anything about them, is it?’

She took a quick glance at Marc. He didn’t seem to have relaxed at all, and gave no indication that he was ready to speak again. Maybe he was listening.

Pausing briefly to collect her thoughts, she continued, ‘Well, let’s see. I was born in Italy, into a well-off, very devout Catholic family. I know Italians have a reputation for being excitable and romantic but I can assure you that while that may be true, it has very little to do with love. My father was the voice of God, and what God seemed to want most was that I obeyed his rules.’

In the front pew, Jamie nodded wearily. ‘I know what you mean.’

‘Yes, and I didn’t enjoy it one little bit. I never felt that he loved me, so I didn’t see why I had to obey his stupid rules.’

Jamie snorted in agreement. ‘Bloody right, Trish. You might not be able to love without rules, but you can certainly have bloody rules without bloody love, can’t you?’

‘Absolutely, Jamie,’ continued Patrissia. ‘I quite agree. So, anyway, I asked our family priest whether he thought my father was showing us love, and basically, he said that yes, God’s love was embedded in the commandments and in his gift of Jesus, and in my father’s rules and gift of devotion.’ She paused. ‘Well, I’m afraid that love on command isn’t what I’m looking for.’

There were several guffaws from the men in the audience, and Patrissia saw Jamie’s face crease up as he tried to hide a grin.

‘Needless to say, I left home as soon as I could,’ Patrissia continued, herself amused, ‘but having only just rid myself of one religion, I found myself swept up by another—Art. And, sure enough, I found another voice of God—my Art tutor.’

Jamie perked up. Lucinda had told him about Patrissia and Johnny’s affair. In fact, whenever she spoke of her time at college it always seemed to come up, and once or twice Jamie thought he detected a hint of jealousy.

‘But this time I thought it was different,’ Patrissia went on. ‘After all, wasn’t I a willing subject? I certainly had feelings and emotions that overwhelmed me, and so did he. We called ourselves lovers, and we told each other that we loved each other. We talked about love, and we talked about art, and truth, and what’s real...We talked about everything, and I thought I’d made a real, proper, connection with him. But looking back at what we did, to ourselves and to each other, I don’t think either of us had a clue. He certainly didn’t.’ Her voice turned thin and hard. ‘It was all just talk.’

There was a mutter of agreement from the women in the audience, who were looking at each other, nodding. The few men sat still, their heads down, waiting to hear if she had a clue now.

‘So I began to listen to what other people thought. I went to all sorts of meetings, and listened to all sorts of people. All those different paths! Magic, witchcraft, Buddhism, Sufism...It’s a bit like a faith supermarket, isn’t it? But I didn’t recognise the ‘love’ in any

of those faiths, just indifference to what I imagined was real life. Maybe I didn't want to.'

Jamie saw that the light in her eyes had faded, and just for a moment, under the spotlight of silence and attentive eyes, she looked genuinely regretful.

'So anyway,' she went on, still subdued, 'after I left art college, I told myself that my relationships would be on my terms, and my terms were that there would be no rules. Instead, I demanded acceptance, and I made every effort to accept the behaviour of others.

'Well, you can imagine how well that worked out. I know I just said that acceptance counts for a lot, but with no rules at all, no boundaries, I acted like a child, and I ended up crying like a child. But I learned two things about myself.

'The first thing I discovered was how selfish I was. I was treating my partners as if they were there for my convenience. You can always say goodbye to relationships that are just convenient, can't you? You can ignore how hurtful it is for your partner to realise that they're just sweets for you to suck and spit out.'

Siân, who had started to fidget with her bag, suddenly raised her head at this confession. *Is that it?* she was thinking. *Am I happy with convenience? Well, it beats inconvenience, doesn't it?*

'And the second thing was that I needed rules. And that was a bit of a shock, to say the least. I thought it was enough that I wanted love. It hadn't even occurred to me that love—the real love I was looking for—might only be possible if I exercised a bit of self-restraint. I don't know about anyone else, but that kind of thing doesn't come naturally to me.'

A smartly-dressed man stood up.

'I'd like to be clear about what we're discussing,' the man said irritably. 'If I have grasped what you are saying correctly, Patrissia, you believe that the *emotion* of love, while itself essential, is not enough if you are to experience *real* love.'

'I don't think I said that, did I?' said Patrissia, her eyes glinting.

'In so many words, yes, you did, I'm afraid.'

‘You’re misrepresenting me, I think,’ Patrissia replied, tartly. ‘What I’m saying is that real love doesn’t arise unless...’

‘...unless we agree in what circumstances a loving *relationship* might arise?’ the man interrupted with a questioning glance. ‘You said that you would have to exercise restraint, did you not? In other words, that you would have to take into account your partner’s feelings. And I think that you are right: the very essence of ideal love is that it is a shared joy, a mutual understanding—a mixture of what Marc might call *eros* and *pragma*.’

Patrissia felt the hairs on her arms prickling, and was about to reply when she glimpsed the notes she had made for the meeting. *Listen*. Dredging up a faint smile, she said in an accommodating tone, ‘Go on.’

‘Thank you.’ The man paused and then turning expansively to face the pews, he continued, ‘I realise how cold this might sound to some of you, but, in my experience, people rarely act under the influence of what we might call *ideals*. Many would even question the notion that ideals are anything but fantasy, and would certainly deny the possibility of living up to one. And yet, love is surely one of the most profound ideals of the human experience, is it not? Are we then to deny *its* possibility?’

‘Of course not.’ The words came out in a heap before Patrissia could stop herself. She coughed and took a sip of water, the man waiting until she had settled again.

‘And yet it seems that few of us manage to find it.’

There was a long silence. Patrissia felt slightly angry and guilty, as if he had accused her of not trying hard enough. She was also resentful that this stranger’s words could affect her so deeply. On top of that, he was objectionably sure of himself. It was infuriating—and worse, she wanted to hear if he had anything else to say.

‘It’s quite depressing when you think about it, isn’t it?’

The speaker, a serious-looking woman in her late thirties, continued, ‘I mean, where are we going wrong? It’s not as if we don’t try, is it? The things I’ve gone along with, just hoping—’

‘Can I stop you there?’ The smartly-dressed man interrupted smoothly.

‘Sorry?’ The woman looked offended.

‘I apologise, but I think you’ve put your finger on the problem,’ the man continued. ‘As Patrissia realised, the kind of love that I think we’re discussing is *not* just an emotion, and it can’t just happen.’

Now he spoke directly to the woman he had interrupted. ‘Patrissia said that she found selfishness and love to be incompatible bedfellows. Forgive me, but when you say you went along with your partner’s wishes, in effect you were encouraging selfishness in him, and as selfishness grows, so love must diminish, must it not?’

‘Her.’

‘What?’

‘It was a woman.’

‘Ah, well I think we can agree that gender doesn’t affect the argument.’ He smiled paternally before continuing, ‘Patrissia is entirely correct: without *some* self-denial, without giving up *some* freedoms, it is doubtful that real love can ever be achievable.’

He turned to Patrissia. ‘This is what a contract of marriage is designed to enforce, is it not? It symbolises a desire and determination to stick to the ideals of trust, fidelity and loving-kindness, and imposes rules that attempt to deal with the realities of human frailty. ‘And it demands honesty—without which there is no foundation in which to place trust. Otherwise, as you say, it’s all just talk.’

Jamie was leaning forward from the pew with an intense expression, absorbed in the argument in spite of himself.

‘Yes, but where does honesty begin?’ he interrupted. ‘I imagine most of us are in situations where we have to repair dishonest relationships. But it’s no good being honest if you’re not going to get any understanding from the other side, is it? You’d just be handing yourself over like a martyr. It’s got to be reciprocal, surely?’

The man looked at him searchingly. 'Well, if we are talking about human love, there's certainly an argument to be made for reciprocity, as Patrissia asserts, yes.'

Siân stood up, clearing her throat and giving a shy laugh. 'I'm sure I'm not following everything properly,' she said in the vague direction of the smartly-dressed man, 'but, well, Patrissia's been so open with us, I'm really glad I came. Can I say something?'

'Of course, Siân, please carry on.' Patrissia said gratefully.

'Maybe there are two sides to honesty?' Siân suggested with a tentative smile. 'Honesty with ourselves, and honesty with others. I reckon most of us fall down on both of those—I certainly do.' She paused. 'I mean, I know I tell myself that things are true when they're not.'

'Yeah, tell me about it,' said another voice. 'For years I told myself that I was happy with my husband, but I was kidding myself, and when it finally dawned on me—well, it was too late. I mean, you can't actually tell someone that you don't love them, can you? They just think you've been deceiving them all that time, and that's not it at all.'

'Well, that's it, isn't it? Maybe you have to,' said Siân, firmly, 'but that takes a lot of courage—more than I've got. It's too hard for most people, all that struggle. It's bad enough trying to keep yourself together, let alone thinking about whether you're doing the right thing, or who you're hurting.'

The smartly-dressed man smiled at her. 'The clue, I think, is to find the right people to be honest with, and to make a start.' He paused. 'Which I suppose is why I have come here. I have to say, Marc, this is a damned good idea. And actually, damned good fun. Dinner party without the under-table shenanigans.'

He pursed his lips, turning, and looked directly at Patrissia. 'I don't think I'm as ready as you appear to be to fully submit to the emotional life, Patrissia, but in most respects I think we are in agreement.'

'Is that what this is all about then? Being happy?' another voice interrupted derisively. 'Are you all happy-clappers?'

Before anyone else could respond, Roy lifted his head.

‘Actually, I’m not ’appy—an’ I’m not an ’appy clapper either.’

‘Neither am I, Roy,’ said Jamie, delighted to hear someone stem the flow of high-minded tosh. ‘It’s good to hear some real stuff.’ There were murmurs of agreement in the audience.

Roy turned to Jamie, his face red. ‘How do I start?’

Patrissia lowered her voice soothingly. ‘Don’t worry, Roy, just say what you feel. We might be from different places but I think we’re all looking for the same thing. Just to feel content, yes? To see if others can understand us better, and us them.’



As Roy, last to leave after washing up all the cups, ambled off down the path, Marc bent to kiss Patrissia’s cheek.

‘I thought what you said tonight was very interesting.’

‘Why?’

He looked at her, his face curious. ‘Because it sounded more like a confession than a discussion about love. It certainly worked—I think most people will come again. I thought it was great. I never imagined it could work. Very strange.’

‘Yes, it seemed to go down all right,’ she replied, pleased at his compliment. ‘We don’t want another talking shop, do we? It’s feelings that connect people, not words. We have to relate to real life.’

Marc snorted. ‘It’s all real life, but maybe we should remember TS Eliot’s comment on reality, and avoid rubbing our noses in the less comfortable aspects.’

Patrissia grunted. That was exactly what she was there for, she had realised, to force herself to reveal her less comfortable aspects and to rub her nose in it. It was serious, possibly the first serious thing she had ever done. She’d tried everything else: maybe this would work. But her motives weren’t clear, even to her. Was she still looking for herself in strangers, as Johnny had said? In Marc? Well, maybe they could tell her a thing or two. All she had to do was listen, apparently.

A matter of faith

The next day found Marc sitting in the back corner of a run-down café behind the high street. He had gone there the morning after the first time Patrissia had stayed overnight, seeking space to think. And here he was again, at the same table, on the same quest.

Patrissia. Fraught with anxiety though he was at the prospect of pursuing their relationship, he supposed he had to call it, he was irresistibly, fatefully, inevitably drawn to her.

What was it about her that made him so stupid? Stupid and, without her doing anything except be there, feeling such a heavy weight of expectation from her that he had to withdraw just to gain a measure of equilibrium.

As for living with her—which she had already hinted in various ways was on her mind—he doubted very much that she would let him continue using Sally as a model, especially if she suspected that he had been sleeping with her, which of course she would.

He couldn't imagine how he would cope without the simple care and solace that Sally gave him, and wondered why he didn't feel the same way about her as he did about Patrissia—it had never crossed his mind that they could live together. Yet Patrissia would be far more intrusive and demanding, and maybe that was it: he had retired from life for too long, and Sally, perfect as she was for him now, wasn't the kick he needed to rejoin it.

Sipping his third espresso, he pondered Patrissia's secrets, for surely she had many, and what, if anything, she might consider giving up for him?

He hated these thoughts and their complications—and that was something else: he had the distinct impression that vagueness and complication were Patrissia's native elements, and diversion by apparent frankness. But she was beyond his power to refuse.

He picked up his phone. Sally would be waiting for him to call her. All he could think to do was to keep busy.

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'Marc, you've cut your finger.'

‘Yes. I’m working on something...sharp.’

‘Let me.’ Sally made a movement towards him, but he stopped her with a look. ‘No, keep still. We’re almost there.’

With a grimace, he pressed down hard on the skin next to the cut, flicking at the edges with a broken nail and then watching the bright drops of blood ooze out again.

‘Ow, doesn’t that hurt?’

‘Yes.’ He kept his eyes on the cut and then, when the first drop fell, turned to her, his lips a tight line.

‘Are you going to sketch me?’

‘Not today. Just photographs.’

‘Marc?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Have you found someone else?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘You know.’

He stared into her eyes. ‘Maybe.’

‘Oh.’ Her face fell. ‘Then why—’

‘Why did I ask you to come?’ For answer, he placed his finger at her throat and slowly drew it down between her breasts, pausing to ensure the crimson trail was uninterrupted, continuing down to her navel. After squeezing out a drop, as if his finger were a tube of hot wax, he lifted his hand.

‘I need you for this. Keep still.’

Squeezing again, he began the cross-piece, completing the line from armpit to armpit, ending with a whole drop.

Making the sign of the cross, he intoned, ‘*Ego te absolvo.*’

‘You what?’

‘I’m not absolving you, I’m absolving her, forgiving her, making her pure.’

Sally shivered. ‘Who’s her? This is weird, Marc, even for you.’

Marc raised his black eyes to hers. 'It's not weird, Sally. People give each other absolution every day.'

'Not with blood, they don't!' she said sharply, 'and only if they're a priest.'

'Yes, well. It's a matter of faith.'

'Does she give you absolution like this?'

'No. She can't, because I don't have faith. Hold still.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to mask you with this.' He began to unwind a reel of black cotton, pushing his fingers beneath the silk scarf knotted tightly around her neck to loop it securely. Bunching her long hair in his fist, he lifted it out of the way, pulling it tight above her while he wound the thin cotton around her face and head.

'It's a bit tight.'

'Yes. I'm seeking stillness.' He stood back. 'Move your head back—not too far.'

'Mmm, it pulls—'

'Yes. Hold it there.' He went to the camera, adjusting it and setting it to automatic. He stood for a few seconds while it clicked at half-second intervals, then moved towards the figure spreadeagled over the chair, pausing for each click, and leaning over her, lightly traced the cross, first with his fingertips and then with his lips and tongue.

When she began to make small jerks and cries he held her down with a gentle 'shh...', and when she came he took close-ups of her face.

After he had taken four or five shots she opened her eyes. 'Can I see the photos?'

He gave her the camera.

'But Marc, these are horrible! I look trapped like an animal!'

Standing back, he shook his head. 'No, Sally, you look released.'



Later, in bed, she turned to him with tears in her eyes. 'Are you really going to finish with me, Marc? Nobody knows about us.'

There was the muted sound of the phone. They waited until it stopped. The answerphone cut in briefly.

'That's her, isn't it?'

'Probably.'

'Aren't you going to answer me?'

His forehead creased. 'I'm seeking stillness, Sally, but I'm seeking faith as well, and you can't give me that. But maybe she can.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know.'

He paused before continuing. 'For you, this is just fun, but for me...' He stopped and stared at the ceiling, '...and for Patrissia too, it's more serious. I sense in her...' he struggled again for the right words, his face clenched, but gave up. 'I wish I could explain, but I can't, not to you, and not to her.'

He turned his head and leaned over her on his elbow, stroking the now-invisible line between her breasts.

'We exist only through our senses, through sensation, through light and dark, shape and form, weight and lightness, but all this existence is in our heads. The photographs I just took are real, yet they tell a tale—'

'You're still not making any sense.' Sally put her hand on the back of his neck, pulling him down and kissing his lips and dark-ringed eyes. 'How can you give me up? I don't understand.' She began to cry again, forcing his head close so that her tears wet his cheeks. 'I love you, Marc—please don't do this.'

'Love?' He laughed harshly. 'We make love of a sort, yes, but only faith can engender love in us. It's a gift.'

'You mean religious faith? I didn't think you were into that?'

'No. I mean whatever instincts are left when our soul is purged by whatever means. How we feel when we feel pure, what instincts guide us.'

‘We’re people, Marc, not projects. Is that how you think of me, as a project?’ There was silence. Eventually, Sally spoke in a sad voice, ‘I’ll never understand you, Marc, never.’

‘I know. Understanding, too, is a gift. But it requires love, and—’

‘...love requires faith. I understand your words, Marc, it’s just that I don’t understand you. Why do you make everything so complicated?’

‘Because everything *is* complicated. You can choose to ignore the complications but that doesn’t make them go away... and then you and your lovers live a life of surprises. You say you love me, but it’s not love, it’s only desire and vanity. Weakness. If we lived together, it would be a disaster.’

Sally opened her mouth to speak, but he put his hand over her lips, gently. ‘Don’t say anything.’ He paused. ‘Patrissia thinks she’ll be redeemed by love, but she won’t, she can’t, because she’s looking for love to give her faith. She’s got it the wrong way around.’

‘That’s her name, then, Patrissia? You don’t love her, yet you’re dumping me for her? Does she love you?’

There was a long silence. ‘No.’

Sally stared at him, her eyes wild, tears running down her cheeks. ‘Well, fuck you!’ Throwing off the duvet, she picked up her clothes and carried them to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

Marc lay still on the cool sheet, not bothering to gather up the crumpled duvet, even when he began to shiver.

Why was Patrissia pursuing him so relentlessly? She reminded him of Claudia—both determined to ensnare him. Sally too, he thought, as he heard the bathroom door open and bare feet pause briefly outside the bedroom before continuing along the passage and down the stairs.

He listened, but there was no sound for a long time. His finger had begun to sting and going to the bathroom he ran freezing water over the cut.

She said she loves me, and I called her weak.

He turned off the tap and stood still, listening. Sally’s voice came questioningly from the bottom of the stairs.

‘Marc? Are you sure about this?’

He didn’t reply, and taking a dust-stained cloth from the window sill, wound it slowly around his finger. A few seconds later he heard the front door close softly.

What was he doing? Seemingly hundreds of thoughts were dashing around and merging and suggesting and denying and becoming parts of stories and fragmenting and rearranging—and amidst all this he was expected to somehow draw out coherent strands and turn them into answers? What had he done?

His phone rang again. When it stopped, he picked it up and saw that he now had two missed calls from a number that he didn’t recognise.

It could only be Ciara. Claudia’s daughter? Now?

Marc looked down at his pale, thin body, and lifted his hands, turning them this way and that, unwinding the cloth. There was swelling around the cut, but no pain, only a certain shiny tautness and heaviness, as though it were filled with some weighty purpose.

Love and understanding, he was thinking as he dried his hands, the two subjects about which there can be no discussion, yet the subjects that she chooses for the first topics in this little group of hers, and which she shimmies into a confession about the state of her heart—which, it seems, is not available. What a curious gift for a new lover.

He could feel his heart beating, and he put a hand on his ribs to feel the tiny flutter of skin.

*

Marc was still staring at the photos of Sally two hours later. He’d retreated to the old shed, fitted out as his studio, and had been unable to bring himself to abandon its dusty comfort.

Putting down the photos, he picked up a sketchbook and wiped dust off with his hand. He had three drawings of Patrissia now: two pencil sketches and a charcoal portrait. It would have been better if he’d had her sit properly for them, but he couldn’t trust himself to see her so naked. As it was, he could draw on the rough sketches of Claudia he had made.

But Patrissia was different from Claudia in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. While he was pleased with his drawings, there was something about the way she held herself that hinted at deep-buried secrets. Not so different then, except perhaps that Claudia had been given no time to fully develop the art of concealment.

He moved over to the block of rough stone waiting ready on the bench, and closing his eyes, let his hands absorb the coldness of its earth-coloured bulk, angular and hard, grateful for the distractions that Art provided, and not least for the romance of its language.

Picasso's Absinthe Glass appeared in his mind, with its rough sand-sprinkled bronze-and-iron teaspoon, faithful to its intent, he supposed you might say, honouring the properties of its materials. He should honour Patrissia's material too, he decided: that would be the only way to work with her.

Going back to the bench, he stared at the charcoal portrait. What were her properties? She reminded him of Claudia, yes, but it was more than that.

Shaking dust out of his eyes, he picked up his cold coffee and went outside into the garden, to sit in the shade of the willow.

What did he know about her? Almost nothing, he realised, nothing that wasn't apparent from her looks and behaviour. Poised, confident in many ways, *knowing*, apparently sincere, and yet hidden and unknown.

It was suspicious that Patrissia had chosen 'love' as the theme for the first meeting, he thought. Had he let slip something about Claudia? It was possible—his occasional fits, often barely noticeable to others, made him vague and vacant afterwards, and left blanks in his memory. He had become used to them, as he had to his inexplicable bouts of stiffness and unexplained bruising, but there was always a residual anxiety.

Then there was Secundus' letter, which had preyed more insistently on his mind as each day passed. How much had the old man told Ciara about him? What would she actually want from him? There was that blank message on his answerphone a few days ago. Thinking it was Patrissia, he had played it back, to hear only a disappointing click. Patrissia would have said something—could it have been the girl?

Girl? No—woman now. He tried to work out her age, and found himself tossed back to Rome, again. The heat of the night, the hotel, the rattle of Claudia's bracelets, her sharp moans and intakes of breath...His head ached with the effort it took to shut out the memory, and he leaned forward to cool it against the blessedly cold cup.

Flexing his fingers, he took a box of matches from his pocket to light a cigarette, but fumbling the match onto the grass, he stamped on it irritably, wishing it would all end.

He had willingly allowed Patrissia to seduce him into the meetings, he knew, and he was grateful to her. He spent an unhealthy amount of time alone, and he guessed that many of the people at the meetings did the same. Was that why Patrissia was so keen that he go? Did she pity him? It didn't seem likely. If she had impulses of kindness, there were plenty of more deserving candidates for her attention—Roy, for example. It wasn't hard to guess that he needed company.

There was another of the meetings that night. The fourth? fifth? He couldn't remember. They were doing well, and he was surprised. Older people, of course, mainly, and they gave it a gravity that he liked. They seemed to pay attention and take it all seriously. He couldn't why imagine anyone living a normal life would want to come to these meetings, but there was definitely an expectation of something, an expectation that hadn't yet been dampened, something almost mystical. Everyone wants some magic. He was tempted to credit the chapel, and the way voices were softened and carried equitably everywhere. Everyone said something, and that in itself was unusual. Even Roy.

Roy had been on his mind since the last meeting. There was something familiar about him, something that touched Marc deeply, and that made him feel ashamed. He wanted to help him, to give him succour.

Succour. Marc held the word in his head, comforting himself. Respite and succour—perhaps they were more important to people like Roy than faith and trust. Perhaps even to Marc himself.

He picked up one of the sketches of Patrissia and held it in front of him, lightly running his eyes beside and between the lines and

shading, searching. Her face showed a luminous desire—I Will is what he saw. And yet she comforted him.

Sighing, he struggled to his feet, the chair legs having sunk several inches into the soft ground. He would go to the meeting. He would be late, and it would give him no answers, but it would be a distraction.

Surrender

The meeting was more than half over when he arrived, and the chapel had an air of settled comfort. Moving quietly towards a dark pew near the door, he wondered what damage the people there had sustained to bring them here.

Sitting back on the hard seat, he saw that Patrissia had persuaded Jamie to join her at the head of the table. He was attempting to introduce a new subject for discussion. Marc shook his head. Why had she asked him of all people? He was a bumbling idiot and the last person Marc would have chosen.



‘I think what Jamie was trying to get at,’ Patrissia was saying in a slow reflective voice, ‘is that, left to our own devices, we can never be certain of anything. We can make plans in a small way, and given enough persistence we can make them work; but on a grander scale—a life, say—well, we all know how well that works out.’

There was a ripple of nods.

‘But we want to be certain,’ she laughed gently, ‘don’t we? Because we want our plans to work. And so we bully people and lie to them, or we comply with their wishes and then resent them, all the time barely touching their world: they’re just characters in our own drama. We don’t really make an effort to understand them, do we? We don’t even listen most of the time.’

Taking a sip of water, she continued, reflectively. ‘So what can we do? Do we want to do anything? Well, yes, because we’re all here.’ She smiled. ‘I guess we’ll have to accept that surrender is our only real option.’

The thought shocked her and she sat still for a moment; at last glancing around the room, it seemed like she wasn’t the only one. A middle-aged woman whose name she had forgotten had her hand over her mouth, staring at her. It was one thing to pay lip service to some spiritual practice or other, but when it just came out like that...

Once again, Patrissia couldn't be sure where the words had come from—and then suddenly she was back in Johnny's flat, naked and drunk, her body drenched in sensation, making love to his voice.

*Don't think of it as pain, Leila, don't think at all.
We're breaking the cathedrals and ziggurats of the
world, my love. From their ashes will arise the spirits of
the crushed souls within to dance with us in the holy
heights of imagination. We are the creators and
destroyers of worlds. We give birth to fate. This is life,
my heart, this is death, this is love.*

'Trish?'

'Oh, sorry.' She realised she was still holding the glass of water, and took another sip.

'Just a thought—I was wondering if it's possible to truly surrender to another person? Not to luck, or to fate, but actually to another human being? It sounds rather scary and maybe a little weird, doesn't it? But isn't mutual surrender exactly what we're talking about when we're talking about love?'

She slid a thin paperback out of her handbag. 'Let me read you something to show what I mean. This is a quotation from an Islamic mystical poet, a woman.

*I know how it will be when I die:
my beauty will be so extraordinary that God will
worship me.
He will not worship me from a distance, for our minds
will have wed
And our souls will have flowed into each other.
How to say this: God and I
Will forever cherish
Myself'*

There were a few murmurs of appreciation as Patrissia continued, 'Surely it's the feeling, the emotion that provides the truth of a connection, and I think I've mentioned before that for me there's only one kind of love. So if I were a believer, I don't see why I couldn't experience the love of God through communion with

another human being—another human being who is also part of God.

‘When Jamie speaks of luck, of making bad choices—I think we have to use these words while we’re in transit from our habitual ideas, but really there’s no such thing as luck, is there? Things just happen. We think we have choices, but how could that work? Are there on/off-buttons somewhere? Who pushes them?’

‘No, in reality there’s no luck, there are no choices, we need not bow. There’s only understanding and misunderstanding. And understanding is just making yourself comfortable with how things are.’

Marc had been listening intently and now spoke up suddenly, ‘You say we need not bow, but isn’t bowing the essence of humility? I’m not sure that comfort in itself is worth pursuing, but behaving in a way that satisfies whatever genuine beliefs we have... but then how do we know our beliefs are genuine except by our behaviour towards others?’

‘I agree, Marc,’ Patrissia said quietly. ‘And since our actions depend on our beliefs, we can believe what we like, and the world will mould itself to those beliefs.’

‘I suppose that’s one way of looking at it, said Marc, guardedly. ‘It’s a tough route to go though, and takes energy and determination: I imagine you’re comfortable with that.’

‘I, on the other hand, am more comfortable with the route of harmony: ultimately I seek stillness through recognition and subjection of myself in the world.’

Patrissia caught herself staring at him, mesmerised. ‘Well, Marc, that sounds rather god-like, and while I can appreciate your somewhat Eastern point of view, I admit I have trouble visualising what that might actually be like. What are you subjecting yourself to? What does it mean in real life?’

‘Well, that’s a good question. I guess it’s simply a combination of faith and trust that things are working out as they should and must. Maybe stopping ourselves judging people and events as if their sole function was to entertain or benefit us in some way. Stop pretending anything in particular is sacrosanct. Stop pretending that we understand people’s motives: we can’t, we can only classify their

behaviour according to our own beliefs. Stop telling ourselves we're not doing what we're doing...'

'That's a hell of a list,' a voice interrupted. 'Wouldn't it be better—as well as easier—to just let go and play our part in each other's pantomime we amusingly call life?'

'You're probably right,' Marc smiled briefly. 'It doesn't matter that much what we believe, I suspect, as long as we can persuade ourselves that our beliefs create a reality we can live with. Whether it's faith in our own natures, faith in some divine entity, or faith in—love for—another person, I imagine that such faith would always require us to accept humiliation at some point, as well as exultation. There are no paths to permanent pleasure, but acceptance and comfort are in our own power.'

There was an odd spaciness in the tone of his voice, and Patrissia sat for a moment, eyes shut, absorbing it. Then smiling, she turned towards him and started, 'Marc, are you really saying that love demands humiliation? I don't see the least reason why it should—'

But he had gone. The seat at the back was empty, and the glass doors to the vestibule were swinging in his wake.

'Well, something hit a nerve,' said Jamie.

'Yes, I think I did. I don't know quite where, though. He didn't even answer my question.' Patrissia tucked her papers into her bag. 'He's pretty tired at the moment,' she added, wondering why she felt she needed to excuse him.

'Shame he left, there were a few things I wanted to run past him. Are you seeing him tonight?'

Patrissia frowned. 'Hmm. Tell me, Jamie, you're a man. Why do you think he gets so angry with me?'

'Truth?'

'Of course. I want to know.'

'He thinks you're playing games with him. He's right, too, isn't he?'

'D'you think I am?'

'Oh come on, Trish, I wasn't born yesterday.'

'What d'you mean?'

‘Well, to start with, Lu says Theo’s still hanging around.’

‘He’s not important, Jamie.’

‘Yes, Trish, that’s what I always say.’ He pushed back his chair and yawned. ‘I think I’m going to surrender to my desire for a drink. D’you fancy one? Roy and Siân are coming.’

‘Well, there’s nothing waiting for me at home, so I suppose so, OK.’

‘At your service, ma’am.’ Jamie tipped the peak of an imaginary hat.

Patrissia smiled. ‘Sorry, Jamie, that was very rude of me. It was sweet of you to ask. Of course, I’d love to come.’

He’s right, I’ll have to do something about Theo.

*

Patrissia watched Roy remove the detritus left by the previous occupants of the table as Siân waddled round and scraped her chair back noisily.

‘Is Marc coming, then?’

Patrissia shrugged and dropped her phone back into her bag. ‘I doubt it, Siân. Voicemail. What’s that? Fizzy water?’

‘Got to think of the baby.’

Patrissia’s face softened, and the usually crisp lines of her face blurred for a second. ‘Oh.’ Then her habitual smile returned. ‘How lovely! Did you enjoy the meeting tonight?’

‘Oh yes. I like it when Marc talks best—he’s so serious, and he knows so much.’

‘He has a lot of facts, but facts by themselves don’t say much,’ said Patrissia. ‘I’d prefer some opinions, but he doesn’t seem keen.’

‘Oh, I would, too,’ Siân giggled, ‘although really I just like hearing him talk. He knows such a lot, doesn’t he? He reminds me of Father Joseph—that was the priest at my local church when I was growing up. But there’s something else in his voice that gets to me. He seems so lonely.’

'You think so?'

'Don't you?' She peered shortsightedly into Patrissia's eyes. 'You spend a lot of time with him. I would've thought you'd know him pretty well by now.'

Patrissia looked away. 'He's a hard man to get to know.'

'Yeah,' said Roy, nodding. 'e don't give much away. 'e's 'ad a few 'ard times, like me, I reckon.' He sunk his head in his shoulders, his eyes for a moment starkly blank.

'Yes, you're probably right, Roy.'

Patrissia looked at him curiously. Jamie had said that he was only coming to the meetings because Siân was there, but he seemed to be one of the few who really wanted to understand what was going on. He always listened, and seemed particularly intense when Marc was speaking. One or two of the discussions had turned into quite heated debates, and she'd enjoyed watching him react to her questioning of Marc, eyes fixed on the speaker, his faced creased in concentration. Yet Jamie had told her that he didn't take in much at all, try as he might.

'I don't know, Trish. He just doesn't seem to be equipped to think about abstractions. He's not stupid, but when I asked him what he thought about what we discussed tonight, he just looked at me and frowned. Poor bugger's never had the chance to think about anything but where his next meal's coming from, I don't think.'

'What about you, Jamie? Are *you* enjoying the meetings?'

'Yeah, they're fun,' he grinned, 'I like a good argument.'

'I would have thought you got more than your fair share of them at home.'

'We don't argue, Trish. You know what she's like. There's no point, is there? I just do what I'm told. What's this all about, though?' he said, handing the black book to Patrissia. 'I take it having a book full of blank pages was Marc's idea? He's obviously not a big reader.'

'Let's see.' Siân turned the pages, and then glanced up at Patrissia, a smile creeping across her lips. 'So it's got no words at all? Not even a title?'

‘That’s what he wanted.’ Patrissia sniffed. ‘He says that once you start writing things down, you’re forced into the language of philosophy or religion.’ She sniffed again. ‘And then he wants to talk about *Aquinas* and wrinkle him out of his religious shell! He doesn’t really get it, I don’t think.’

‘I agree, our vicar’s a bit odd, if you ask me. He reminds me of Zara a bit.’

‘Why do you call him a vicar?’

‘Oh come on Trish. You know very well. It’s that detectable differencing for a start. You know, always slightly aloof.’

‘Zara’s the autistic one, isn’t she?’ Patrissia said after a moment. ‘Oh, I don’t know. As Roy says, I think Marc’s just had a hard time somewhere along the way and he’s having trouble letting it go.’

‘Why do we need a book at all?’ asked Siân, snapping it shut. ‘We’re only talking. It’s not as if we’re getting instruction or anything, is it?’

Patrissia laughed. ‘There you have me. Maybe he thought it’d be nice to have a bit of symbolism.’

‘But what’s a blank book a symbol of?’

‘I’d like to think of it as a receptacle for our stories,’ Patrissia said musingly. ‘Our lives are the words, they just never get written down.’

‘Good thing too.’ Jamie took a studied sip of beer. ‘Maybe a divine message will magically appear once we all become illuminated.’

‘When I get illuminated, I just fall asleep and wake up with a bad head,’ Siân grinned, swallowing the remains of her water. ‘Did you say you had kids, Jamie?’

‘Yes, Zara and Daisy—My pride and joy.’

‘How about you, Trisha? No secret brood locked away somewhere?’

Patrissia shook her head.

‘I know it’s none of my business, but are you and Marc...?’

‘No,’ Patrissia said with a frown. ‘I like Marc, but I get the impression that he needs everything to be tied down, and I’m not sure that I’m ready for that, yet.’

Jamie winked at her. ‘That’s not what Lu told me.’

She gave him a look. ‘Ignore him, Siân. Anyway, I’ve been seeing someone for a while, but there are no strings.’

‘No strings sounds great,’ Siân sighed. ‘I’m jealous!’

‘You shouldn’t be. I’m the one who’s jealous—look at you, you’re blooming.’ Patrissia looked away. ‘Excuse me, Roy, Did you say you do gardens?’

Roy turned from contemplation of the wooden benches.

‘Yeah, why? Yer got somethin’ yer need doin’?’

‘Maybe. My beds are in need of a bit of attention. A splash of colour wouldn’t go amiss.’

‘And her locks might need oiling,’ Siân giggled.

Jamie raised his eyebrows and tutted. ‘Now, now, ladies, don’t get the man too excited, eh?’ Roy looked blank, and Jamie hurriedly continued, ‘Well, Trish, if Marc pops round later—for a platonic, businesslike chat, of course,’ he added playfully, ‘you can give him back the book, ’cos if it comes home with me it might end up being used as a colouring pad.’

‘Are you sure you can’t persuade Lucinda to come along? I think she’d enjoy it.’

‘No, believe me, she wouldn’t. Anyway, it lets me off the leash.’

‘I hadn’t noticed you were on a leash, Jamie. If you are, it’s a pretty long one.’

Siân eyed the two of them with interest. ‘Lucinda’s your wife, is she, Jamie?’

‘Yes, my trouble and strife, my better half and all that.’

‘Lu and I were at college together,’ explained Patrissia. ‘Gosh, how time flies! One minute you’re twenty-one, the next you’re pushing forty.’

‘And you’re not getting hijacked by the old hormones yet?’ Siân smiled conspiratorially. ‘It’s now or never, Trisha!’

Patrissia ran her finger round the rim of her empty glass. 'Look, your knight in shining armour awaits!'

Siân turned to see Manu waving from the other side of the fence. 'Oh, well, that's my time up then,' she said with a long face. 'See you next week.'

'Wednesday at seven. Call me if Manu can't bring you. I could pick you up.'

Siân nodded and hurried away, her big bag bouncing against her hip.

'Another round?' suggested Jamie, tapping his pockets.

'I don't know. Maybe I'll leave you two boys to do some male bonding,' said Patrissia, picking up her bag. 'Who knows, you might even pull.'

Jamie nodded. 'I daresay we might. Care to take us on?' he grinned.

Roy looked uncomfortable. 'Don't worry, Roy, I won't tell Siân,' Patrissia said, smiling.

Scratching his chin, he stared down at the table. 'She wouldn't care.'

'And I won't tell Lucinda, Jamie,' Patrissia added, 'but I don't imagine she'd care, either. Anyway, I'm off. Be good!'

Jamie and Roy watched her slip through the gate and disappear from view.

'I'm pretty sure *she* won't be being good,' said Jamie, dejectedly.

Roy looked at him. 'Jamie, c'n I ask yer somethin?'

'Fire away.'

'Whadda *you* think of Marc?'

'I don't know, Roy, not a lot. Bat-shit fruitcake, if you ask me, but then, I'm not a woman. They have different tastes, don't they?' He threw back the last of his pint. 'Fancy your chances with Siân?'

Roy blushed. 'She's got a boyfriend. Anyway, she's pregnant.'

'But you do fancy her, don't you?'

He nodded. 'I s'pose so.'

Jamie prodded him on the shoulder. 'Hang in there, mate. Nothing's set in stone.'

He glanced at his watch and sighed. 'Well, I suppose I'd better go and face the music. Sorry, mate, love to stay, but she'll skin me if I tarry. Are you OK for Friday?

'Sure. Thanks, Jamie. See ya Friday.'

*

Lucinda was waiting for Jamie when he got home. She sat curled like a pretty Siamese, her blue eyes watchful as he put his head round the living room door.

All she needs is a saucer of milk and something to toy with before ripping it to shreds—And he thought, that'll be me...

'Goodness,' Lucinda murmured in mock surprise. 'Home so soon?'

'What're you reading?'

'Oh, this? I got it from the clinic. It's very enlightening, actually.'

'For Zara?'

'It's for us, Jamie. I somehow think a six-year-old would struggle to read a hundred autobiographical excerpts written by a group of Aspergers sufferers, don't you?'

'Why didn't you tell me she was seeing the specialist today? I'd have got the time off.'

'I know you would, but it was just another assessment, much like the previous one. Good meeting?'

'Hmm. Your friend Trish's a subtle operator. Everyone thinks she's all sweet and innocent, but a wilier wolf in shaggier sheepskin I never saw. She was a big hit tonight, anyway, unlike him. D'you know if they're having a thing?'

Lucinda looked up. 'Last time I spoke to her she hadn't quite got round to dumping Theo. So it's pastures new again, is it?'

'It's funny, they argue all the time, but they seem to be an item, somehow. Marc, his name is. You haven't met him yet, have you? He's quite a bit older than her, civilised enough, but washed-out,

weird. I get the impression he's a bit of a God-botherer, or in some cult or something.'

'Oh, Trisha's always had a thing for older men. She likes them odd, too. What kind of weird is this one? She must be struggling to find a new variety.'

Jamie grinned. 'Not *that* bad, I suppose. Bit abrupt, though.'

'Really? Hmm. What was she wearing? I'll never forget our awards ceremony at art school. You should have seen the state of her! But that catsuit must be pretty worn out by now. Not that she'd care—the more holes, the better.'

'She's certainly got a body on her, and doesn't she know it,' Jamie smirked. 'But sadly, no catsuit tonight. She was done up like a hippy-style nun, black skirt, headscarf, wittering on about how we should all love one another and listen to the inner voice. Anyone'd think she'd gone religious.'

'Trisha? Ha! Mind you, if her new chap's into religion, it won't be long before she'll start turning up at morning Mass,' Lucinda smiled. 'Such a shame. If only she could meet someone nice. It's high time she settled down.'

She studied him, quizzically. 'I have to say, Jamie, I never thought I'd see the day *you'd* attend a church meeting voluntarily.'

'Oh, it's not like that, it's just a place to go for a chat. Look, can't we talk about Zara's report?'

'It's the same as always, ASD.' Lucinda picked up her drink. 'They say it can be genetic.'

'Well, don't look at me!'

'Why not? I've often wondered about you.'

'Oh, please go on.'

'Your persistent preoccupation with particular objects. Mobile phones, for example.'

'Ah, a bit like your inflexible adherence to bizarre routines or rituals, like staying up till fucking midnight just to tell me what time I've got home, as if I didn't know, and as if you didn't know. That's pretty autistic!'

‘Perhaps.’

Jamie shook his head slowly. ‘Lucinda, what are we doing? We should be talking about Zara, not us. Can’t we discuss *her* needs and leave ours for another time, however pressing you think they might be?’

‘Yes, why not? That’s what we usually do.’

Lucinda left the room. Jamie sighed and picked up Zara’s assessment, which his wife had left poking out of the book. He would read it later, he decided, once he had figured out why he was feeling so angry.

*

Patrissia slammed her car door and put the key in the ignition. Was it worth calling him again?’ She stared at her phone for a second and pressing redial, laid it on the seat while she lit a cigarette.

The faint ringing tone suddenly stopped.

‘Marc?’ She had trouble keeping the surprise out of her voice. ‘I was just ringing to see if you’d got my message?’

‘Yes. Why don’t you come round?’

Unprepared for him answering at all, Patrissia wondered if she’d heard correctly. ‘Oh, OK.’

‘That’s why you rang, isn’t it?’

She felt her cheeks grow hot, and she could only say, ‘I’ll be ten minutes.’

She spent the journey to his house inventing various scenarios that might explain his resistance, but none satisfied her. When she arrived at his front door, it was ajar, which was very unusual. Kicking her shoes off on the doormat, she entered quietly and found Marc sitting on the sofa in his living room, cradling a glass of wine.

‘Patrissia.’ His voice seemed softer than usual, and slightly nervous.

She reached for the tulip-shaped glass that was balanced on the edge of his desk. ‘You came late and left early again, very rudely. We

started this little club, and now the chairman's got bored—it looks bad, Marc. I like being in a club for once, it's a new experience. '

'I'm not bored. It's just...well, sometimes I have episodes of... I suppose you could call them mental spasms. It happened at the meeting, and to be honest I don't remember anything. One minute I was talking away and then...I don't know. I was in the chair here when I came to. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to mess up the meeting.'

She waited for him to continue, but he was staring at the bookcase.

'I'm sorry for all that Marc, but you should have told me earlier. I was getting a bit worried about you.'

He sighed and leaned forward, rubbing his forehead. 'I know what you're getting at, and you're right, part of me doesn't want to know you, but another part of me wants nothing more.' He paused, and then added in a low voice, 'Please tell me I can trust you, Patrissia.'

Putting her hand on his arm, she murmured, 'You can trust me, Marc. I wish you nothing but good. I want to help you.'

His arms were stiff and unyielding as she hugged him, his heart beating against her breastbone. She would breathe a new spirit in him, one that might sustain them both. She didn't want to grow old alone.



Patrissia was woken during the night by the pressure of his hand on her belly, heavy and hot, its weight supported by the curve of her ribcage. She cupped her own small hand around his fingers and felt the hardness of his nails and the join where they blended into the softness of flesh.

Closing her eyes, she squeezed his hand hard against her, wanting to keep it there as long as she could, knowing that this moment of peace and stillness was a dream, but hoping it would never go away.

A bang on the door

The next morning, Patrissia sat watching Marc squinting at the computer screen, the coffee and croissants she had placed on the desk in front of him untouched. Their closeness the night before seemed to have vanished.

Sitting back, he twisted his long neck and ran his eyes along the bookcase.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘My copy of the book.’

‘I think I might have picked it up by mistake the other day.’ She rooted through her bag for the wordless volume. ‘Yes, here. Clever idea of yours, having a book with no words,’ she continued, handing it to him.

Marc raised his eyebrows. ‘I don’t think I can have been the first to think of it. It’s a joke and not a joke at the same time, isn’t it? No words means it’s anti-doctrine and anti-intermediary. If there are no words, there can be no misinterpretation.’

‘That’s quite Zen, isn’t it?’ she replied distractedly as she felt the emptiness of the room. It was as if the last traces of comfort and joy had been scarified out. ‘I’m not sure that a wordless relationship is quite so rewarding, though. Would a title be too daring?’

Her eye was suddenly captured by a large charcoal sketch that lay at an angle, taking up most of his desk. Curious, she went to pick it up. ‘Did you do this? It looks a bit like me.’

Looking up from the black book, which he was studying as if it really was a Zen text, Marc seemed to study her instead.

‘It is me, isn’t it?’ Patrissia insisted, slightly selfconscious now.

His eyes remained on her face. ‘It could be,’ he acknowledged, ‘if I capture enough of you.’

‘Capture?’

‘Yes. The spirit that informs the material.’

‘How do you go about that? It doesn’t seem possible. Surely everything comes from inside, and you interpret objects in the

world to fit your idea of how things should be? I'm sure that's what people do. So the search is for the most amenable objects.'

She gazed at the portrait in her hands, spare of line and more suggestive than precise. It soothed her to see how little she had revealed herself to him.

'It's good: I like it. You're very talented, Marc.'

'I like to think I'm dedicated rather than talented. I'm trying to expose, not impose. If I have chosen my subject and my medium well, the materials choose themselves and the work simply emerges. You might object that I'm always watching through my own lens, but I would reply that there is no lens.'

'I had no idea you were so mystically inclined, Marc,' Patrissia said, smiling.

'No, I don't suppose you would. I've studied it a fair bit, though, as I imagine you have.'

It sounded like a question, but before she could think how to reply, he stood abruptly.

'Sorry, I just have to go and see to something.'

As he left the room, Patrissia picked up a large Manila envelope that had caught her attention when she picked up the portrait, and glancing at the door she pulled out the contents.

Inside was a pile of black-and-white photographs, all similarly posed. Women sitting, standing, lying—all innocuous enough, except for their expressions, which were subdued, bored even. Some had scarves tied around their wrists or necks, not constricted, but restrained.

So that's his little secret.

Hearing steps in the passageway, Patrissia hastily shoved the photographs back into their hiding place and, lighting a cigarette, sat herself on the sofa, wondering who the women were. Was that what he meant by *captured*?

'Marc,' she said as he entered the room, 'come and sit next to me for a couple of minutes, then I'll let you get on.'

'We know very little about each other. Perhaps that's why we often seem to misunderstand one another. Tell me something about

yourself,' she invited with a neutral smile as he sank into the old cushions, 'anything at all. Have you ever been married?'

'No.'

'I was married for a short while. I was very young.'

Marc nodded with a terse smile. Patrissia waited for him to say something in reply, but in vain.

'What about your art? You've never said much about your training.'

'I went to a few classes early on, but I'm largely self-taught.'

'You have to feel *compelled*, don't you?' said Patrissia, thinking that it shouldn't be so difficult, but determined to extract something from him. 'I enjoyed it well enough at art college, but I didn't have that drive. Tell me, what drives *you*?'

'Not the usual aesthetic impulses, Patrissia, not the celebration of beauty, nor the desire to create beauty. I'm seeking the beauty and stillness of understanding.'

She was about to reply when, leaning across the gap between them, he lifted a wave of her dark hair and turned it gently between finger and thumb.

'*You* are beautiful, Patrissia,' he said, studying her profile, 'but, as I said, beauty for itself isn't my subject. I look for the inner spirit that makes it beautiful.' He teased out a long, smooth twist of hair. 'I wonder what I'd find in *you*?'

Patrissia remained still as he gently drew her hair across her shoulder and let his fingers brush her neck. Closing her eyes, she imagined him drawing her, the softness of the line, the pencil barely touching the paper, a feathery stroke.

The snap of the letterbox interrupted them.

'Was that your door?' His hand had fallen, and turning, she felt a sudden stiffness in his body. He didn't seem to have heard her. 'I'll answer it, shall I?'

Marc watched her as she left the room. His eyes went to her necklace, Claudia's necklace, that lay coiled on his desk from the night before. Picking it up, he kissed the tiny gems strung along the delicate gold strands.

The girl was young and unsettlingly pretty. Clearing her throat, she smiled at Patrissia, who was too busy studying her fresh, unlined skin and lustrous wavy blonde hair to even consider smiling back.

‘I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m sure I’ve got the right house.’ The girl dipped her hand into her bag and, bringing out a sheet of thin blue paper, waved it in front of her. ‘I’m looking for Marc Crowley.’

Patrissia looked her up and down, assimilating the shortness of her skirt and the flimsiness of the scarf unravelling from around her neck. ‘You must be one of his models. You’d better come in.’

‘Actually—’

‘He’s in his study.’

Patrissia stood aside, waving the girl in but making her edge past her. She inclined her head sharply. ‘Through there.’

Patrissia studied the girl’s long legs and the thick waves of hair swinging midway down her back until she disappeared in a rustle of silk around the living room door. A moment later it clicked shut.

She wondered how Marc greeted his models. Did they kiss, hug? He would be able to feel her warmth through the tailored silk... The thought made her cheeks sting, and she stood for a moment in the hallway trying not to picture them, her mouth set in a thin line, and then taking a deep breath she continued into the kitchen.

Automatically putting the kettle on, she stood distracted, holding her breath and listening. She could hear the muffled cadences of the girl’s voice, fast and enthusiastic, but the words were indistinguishable. She felt like a child again, standing outside her older sister’s door, excluded.

He hadn’t said he was expecting anyone. Had he forgotten, or had he hoped Patrissia would have left by the time she arrived? She waited tensely until the kettle crescendoed and clicked off, the wordless murmur of the girl’s voice making her heart thump in her chest.

Dumping the mugs she was holding back in the sink, she left the kitchen and, taking the three steps to the living room door, put her

head against the panels, listening intently, but the girl had stopped talking.

Twisting the doorknob, she pushed open the door. The girl was standing by the fireplace, cigarette in hand. She looked angry.

‘Sorry to interrupt. I just wondered if you’d like some tea?’

‘No, thank you,’ said the girl, flicking ash into the fireplace. There was an embarrassed pause.

‘Marc?’ He was just a silhouette against the bright window. ‘Marc?’ she repeated, moving to his desk and retrieving her necklace. He had asked her to take it off the previous evening, and then he’d held it like the rosary it was, turning and twisting the beads on the three strands, looking at her with curious eyes until she’d taken him in her arms.

As she stood by the desk, untangling and reclasping it around her neck, she took the opportunity to glance at him, inviting him to remember how they had been the night before. But his eyes were closed, and now that she could see him properly, she thought he looked even paler than usual.

Patrissia turned and frowned at the girl, who sniffed.

Has she been crying?

‘Is everything OK?’

‘I shouldn’t have come here,’ the girl said, throwing her cigarette in the fire, only half-smoked. ‘Could I use your bathroom before I leave?’

‘Yes, yes of course,’ said Patrissia, hoping that Marc would see that she was on his side, that she was defending him from this attacker. ‘It’s upstairs, to the left.’ But, searching his face for acknowledgement as the girl left the room, she could detect none.

She inclined her head toward the door. ‘Who is she, Marc?’

But he didn’t seem to hear her. He was talking to himself in a low murmur.

‘Oh Jesus! I asked for a sign, and you sent *her*.’

He sat down at the desk and put his head in his hands. They were covered in sweat.

Puzzled, she stared at him, her hands automatically reaching for the beads of her necklace. 'What sign? Who is she, Marc?'

At first she thought he was nodding, then she saw that his eyes were screwed shut, and that the rise and fall of his head was involuntary, his neck and shoulders in spasm. His head jerked backward and forwards more and more violently until his chin finally cracked down on the desk, his chair slid away from under him and with a soft thump he flopped into a heap on the floor.

Patrissia knelt down and tried to roll him onto his side. 'It's OK, Marc, I'm here,' she said, lifting his hair out of his eyes. 'Don't worry.' She felt another spasm ripple along his back.

'Oh! What's wrong? I heard a noise.' The girl had returned unnoticed and was standing in the doorway. 'Is he having a fit?'

Patrissia shook her head. 'I think so.'

'You should call an ambulance.'

Patrissia suddenly felt his arms go limp. Then he jerked again, but more weakly, and she held his head, gently lowering it to the floor, while his breathing slowed and steadied.

'He's passed out. Help me get him up to his bedroom.'

'Are you sure you don't want me to call an ambulance?'

'We'll see how he is in a minute.'

The girl stared at her, then shrugged. 'OK.' She dropped her bag onto the sofa. 'I hope you know what you're doing.'

It wasn't easy manoeuvring him through the house, and Patrissia could feel the heat of the girl's disapproval. But at last he was lying on his bed, asleep and perfectly still.

'Thank you for helping. Do you mind going down while I make him comfortable? I won't be long,' said Patrissia to the girl—woman, rather. At close quarters she realised that she must be in her late twenties, at least.

'OK.'

When she had gone, Patrissia sat beside Marc on the bed and leaned over him, stroking his brow.

'You're so fragile, Marc. What's wrong with you, I wonder? Is it the girl?' she murmured, tracing the lines across his forehead, the skin damp and cool. 'And if so, *why*?'

*

When she returned to the living room, the girl was by the fireplace again. Patrissia offered her a cigarette, which she took gratefully. 'Thank you for your help, er...?'

'Ciara. No problem. Is he all right?'

'He's fine. He's sleeping. I'm Trisha, by the way,' she said, taking out her lighter. They both lit up, breathing a cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling.

'Would you like a drink?'

The girl nodded. 'I think we could both do with one after that. Is he epileptic?'

Patrissia shrugged. 'I don't know. I don't know him that well.'

She's trying to figure out who I am. Are they having an affair?

'Actually, I couldn't help noticing your necklace,' said the girl. 'It's a rosary, isn't it? Did Marc give it to you?'

'No.'

'Oh.' The girl shook her head. 'Are you sure?' she said, looking puzzled.

The girl's tone was odd, and Patrissia could feel her eyes roaming over her face. 'Of course I'm sure. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but—'

'What did you say your name was again?'

'Trisha. Patrissia Vecchia.'

The girl was now staring her full in the face, her cheeks as white as Marc's had been.

'Not Claudia?'

'Why do you say that?'

'It's my mother's name.' She frowned at Patrissia's startled expression. 'I'm Marc's daughter.'

Patrissia put down her glass. ‘Marc and *Claudia*?’ It was all she could think of to say.

*

‘It’s a long story.’

‘I’m listening, Ciara.’ Patrissia turned the rosary over and over, stroking it with her fingers, remembering how it hung around Claudia’s neck all those years ago.

‘OK. Well, I wrote to your father a while ago telling him who I was and saying that I was looking for Claudia. He didn’t answer, so I wrote again. I didn’t really expect anything, but a few weeks later I got a reply, not from him but from someone called Guido Marelli.’

‘Guido, yes, he’s my father’s secretary.’

‘Anyway, he told me that nobody knew where Claudia was.’

‘Oh.’ Patrissia’s face gave nothing away.

‘I didn’t believe him though, so I wrote again—Anyway, to cut a long story short, it turned out that the man I needed to see was a priest called Secundus, who’s living in a monastery in the hills. So I flew out to visit him, but I couldn’t get further than the door. Roberto, one of the lay brothers, said Secundus was too ill to be disturbed. He asked me to wait, and eventually came back with a London address. He looked quite anxious when he gave it to me, and said, ‘*Your father’s house. Secundus sends you both God’s blessing.*’

That’s it, really. I didn’t know what else I could do except to contact Marc. So here I am.’

‘Oh, Ciara, I’m so sorry.’

Ciara lit another cigarette and took several short puffs to make sure it was alight, her hands shaking. ‘I have to say it wasn’t the welcome I would’ve expected from a priest.’

‘A *what*?’

‘Marc was a priest. Your father got him thrown out because of his affair with Claudia. Didn’t you know?’

'No.' Patrissia gazed blankly at the fireplace wall, the black smudges of candle-smoke, the peeling plaster, feeling nauseous, as if she had been poisoned. 'Marc's told me very little about his past. He said he lived in Italy for a while, but he didn't mention being a priest, or having a daughter—or knowing my sister.'

'No, I suppose he wouldn't, in the circumstances.' The girl looked at Patrissia, who was sitting very still on the edge of the sofa. 'Are you all right?'

'I don't know. I think so.' Patrissia forced a smile. 'But what a time *you've* had, Ciara!' She placed her hand over the girl's. 'I feel utterly ashamed of myself, treating you with such suspicion, but what was I to think? Marc—' She sighed. 'It doesn't matter. Could I have another cigarette?'

Ciara offered her the packet.

'It's so incredible! You're his daughter, my sister's daughter, my niece. I'm sorry, I need some time to take it in.'

Ciara sat back. 'And you're my aunt, apparently sleeping with my father. I certainly didn't expect *that*. It *is* pretty unbelievable, isn't it?'



'So, what happened? Where were you born?' Patrissia asked eventually.

'According to *Mamma*—my adoptive mother, that is—I was born in a convent. The adoption was already arranged.'

Patrissia let out her breath. 'Did you ask Marc if *he* knows where Claudia is?'

'Yes. He said he doesn't. That's when you came in.' She paused, taking quick drag of her cigarette. 'Do you think it's true?'

'I've no idea.' Patrissia was about to continue when a loud banging on the front door interrupted them.

'I'll see to it.' Patrissia rose, grateful for the diversion. The women looked at each other for a split second. 'I'll be right back.'

'Oh, it's you,' Ciara heard Patrissia say from the hall.

‘Trish! I had a feeling I might find you here.’ It was a man’s voice, cheery and amiable. ‘I just wanted to sort a few things about the next meeting.’

‘Now might not be such a good time—’

‘Wow!’ the man beamed as he entered the living room, trailing a flustered-looking Patrissia. ‘Who, might I ask, is this wondrous vision of loveliness?’

Ciara looked at Patrissia in bemusement.

‘My niece,’ Patrissia answered, regaining her cool.

‘Well, she certainly seems to have inherited the family looks! So, am I to be introduced?’

Patrissia sighed. Jamie didn’t hide his emotions, unsubtle as they were. ‘Ciara, this is Jamie. Jamie, Ciara.’

‘Lovely to meet you, Ciara! Patrissia never mentioned having a niece.’

‘Look, Jamie,’ Patrissia cut in, ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but we were in the middle of something. This isn’t the best of times.’

Jamie raised both hands. ‘Oh. I don’t want to intrude, Trish. I can go whenever,’ he said, admiring the delightful view afforded by these two gorgeous women. He wondered how Marc managed it.

Patrissia looked at Ciara, who was tidying some errant strands of hair that had fallen across her face, and looking somehow softer than she had a moment before.

‘Actually, Jamie,’ said Patrissia, thoughtfully, ‘now you’re here...’ She shot a questioning glance at Ciara. ‘Look, Marc’s not feeling well, and he’s gone to bed. I just need to see how he is. Why don’t you make Ciara a drink and take her into the garden? The kitchen’s through there. I’ll join you in a few minutes.’

Ciara’s eyes rested on Jamie a second, then she nodded almost imperceptibly. ‘I could do with some air. I’ll make the coffee.’

Jamie looked from one to the other. ‘I feel quite ambushed,’ he smiled. ‘How delightful!’

Patrissia gave him a weary smile, wondering if Marc had rested enough to talk. There were a few things she wanted to ask him.



Jamie led Ciara towards a small table in the far corner, half-hidden by the overhanging branches of a willow, the mugs in his hand clicking like castanets. Behind him, Ciara slid her sunglasses down from their perch in her hair. 'It's too cool in the shade,' she murmured. 'Will you help me move the table more into the sun?'

Jamie unstuck the legs of the old kitchen chairs where they had sunk into the ground, and pulled them clear as she swivelled the table around a leg.

'So, Jamie is it? You obviously have a magnificent sense of timing.'

He grinned. 'Any time is a good time for meeting someone as gorgeous as you, Ciara.'

'Do you know Patrissia and my father well?' she said after a pause.

'Your *father*? You mean Marc?'

'You sound surprised. Patrissia had no idea either.'

'I didn't expect—I mean, I don't know him that well, but I wouldn't have guessed. And Patrissia's your aunt?' he added thoughtfully, undeterred by the hint of bitterness in her voice. 'So they're more-or-less related?'

'Not really, not even in-laws.' Ciara shrugged noncommittally.

'It's a bit unusual, though, don't you think? It certainly puts Marc in a different light.'

'Mmm, *I* think so. Are they actually living together, d'you know?'

'No, I don't think so, but they're an odd pair. They definitely have some sort of arrangement.'

Ciara tilted her head and said lightly, 'You said you came here looking for Patrissia, didn't you?'

'Oh, I was passing, and I thought there was a good possibility that she'd be here, yes,' he said, watching Ciara lean forward to press the cafetiere's plunger. 'And I'm glad I followed my hunch. But sleeping together doesn't necessarily mean they're an item, does it?'

Ciara filled his cup to the brim with the steaming thick black liquid. 'That's what it normally means. At least, it does where I come from.'

Inside the house, Patrissia shifted the papers that lay strewn on Marc's desk, patting them into two neat piles. There was nothing of interest there, just bills, receipts, a paint chart and an empty padded envelope.

How could Secundus have known Marc's address? Had they kept in touch? Marc wasn't the type to throw letters away.

Feeling her heart beating, she turned to check the living room door before kneeling down and pulling open the top drawer. Reaching underneath a sketch book and the envelope full of photos, she found a box file with, inside, a pile of letters written on airmail paper.

She stared at them for a moment, and then carefully slid her hands under the letters and lifted them out gently, as if holding a wounded bird. Turning them over onto the desk, she picked up the top one, and began to read.

Dear Ignatius,

I received your letter with pleasure. In spite of all that has occurred I believe that there is yet hope, and that a simple willingness to trust in God and in those you love will eventually give you peace. But it is in God's hands.

You asked about your illness. You no doubt remember that when you arrived at St Sebastian's you were subjected to extensive medical tests. These were necessary because although you were considered academically gifted, and were obedient and studious, there was a question over your physical capacity and temperament.

I am happy to be able to say that no physical origin was found for your affliction. The report concluded that you were suffering from, in medical terms, 'Psychogenic non-epileptic seizures'.

We believed that St Sebastian's would provide a suitable environment in which your seizures and their

accompanying behavioural symptoms could be managed and contained, and that, with intensive instruction in meditation and prayer, their frequency and severity could be reduced.

Sadly, this turned out not to be the case, but I was persuaded that you had a true vocation, and I pursued it believing it to be in your best interests. Perhaps I acted out of pride, and if so, I am sorry for the hurt and distress that I have caused you, not least by introducing you to the Vecchias.

I wish you well in your search for a different path, and I believe that, by God's good grace, you may find it. But you must have faith, Ignatius: seeking is valueless without the willingness to accept what you find.

Secundus

She sat back. The letter was dated June 1970: the year Claudia was taken away from her. She refolded it and placed it carefully in the box before picking up the next.

The letters were all about him. There was no mention of Claudia by name, and nothing about what had happened to her, or to Ciara. And there were no letters from Claudia.

She'd skimmed twenty or thirty of them, all on the same theme—sin, guilt, expiation, forgiveness—when the sound of laughter coming from the garden startled her. Hastily replacing the letters and the box, she covered them with the folder and sketchbook, careful to leave everything exactly as she had found it. She wished she could see what Marc had confided to Secundus that had provoked such a depressing correspondence, and for so many years.

And he was a priest. That certainly altered things. She sat back in his chair, pulling a strand of hair over her ear and twisting the end, the way she had done as an eleven-year-old girl, listening to whispers she was never meant to hear.

‘So, when did you start looking for Marc?’

‘Only when I couldn’t find Claudia.’ Ciara shrugged. ‘I almost wish I hadn’t bothered, but I’m here now. God, families! A religious freak of a grandfather, a crazy mother, and,’ she flicked her head towards the house, ‘*those* two.’ Thank Christ I *was* adopted, is all I can say.’

Jamie paused and took a slow sip of his coffee. ‘Why do you say your mother was crazy?’

‘It’s just the impression I got. *Mamma*—my adoptive mother—said Claudia was ill. I got the feeling she was hinting at some kind of mental illness, but I don’t know for sure.’

‘That’s sad,’ said Jamie, clasping his hands and glancing quickly towards the house. You don’t think Patrissia...?’

‘She seems sane enough, although she wouldn’t let me call an ambulance for Marc.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘He had a sort of fit.’

‘No, sorry, I mean, you don’t seem that pleased to have found him.’

Ciara snorted and took a deep drag of her cigarette. ‘How would you fancy being an orphan and finding your real father, a defrocked priest who’d never bothered to contact you, living with your aunt?’

‘Gosh! But, hang on—You mean Marc was a priest?’

‘Yes, that’s why there was such a scandal.’

‘Wow!’ Jamie squinted his pale blue eyes at her, blinking in the bright sunshine. She was sitting relaxed and perfectly still except for a slim hand twirling corn-coloured hair around a finger.

‘So, tell me about yourself. You’re half-Italian, yes? Do you live in Italy? You don’t have much of an accent.’

‘Oh,’ said Ciara, pouting, ‘I was born in Rome, then when I was twelve we moved to a house in Surrey and I started boarding school.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘Oh yes! Some of the times we had!’ she giggled. ‘Yeah, it was good fun.’

Jamie watched the way her lips moved as she pronounced the word *fun*, enjoying the way her cheeks rose and fattened sensuously when she smiled.

‘How about you? Where are you from?’

‘Ireland, originally. Galway. My family came to England when I was a baby.’

‘Oh, so that’s where the blarney comes from,’ she smiled. ‘So how do you know them, the Terrible Twins?’

‘Marc and Trish? She was at the same conference as me in the city a while ago. We got talking.’ Jamie hoped that his lie would go undetected. He was definitely not going to mention Lucinda. ‘She and Marc run these weekly meetings and she persuaded me to come along.’ He looked up from under his long eyelashes, adding, ‘I’m very easily led.’

‘Hmm. So you’re more friends with Patrissia than with Marc?’

‘I’ve known her a little longer, that’s all,’ Jamie replied quickly. ‘We’re just friends.’ The mischievous twinkle in his eyes vanished instantly as his mobile phone beeped.

‘You’ve got a message.’

Jamie glanced at his mobile. ‘Just a client,’ he said, sliding the phone into his pocket. ‘He can wait.’

Ciara glanced towards the house. ‘I wonder what Patrissia’s doing in there that’s taking so long?’

‘Prising up the floorboards looking for more skeletons, I shouldn’t wonder.’

Her face creased into a grin. ‘Funny man.’ She lit the cigarette. ‘But it’s not really funny, is it?’

‘No, I suppose not.’ His phone beeped again. ‘Damn! It looks like I’ll have to leave you to your family stuff.’ Standing up, he bent to kiss her cheek. ‘It’s been a complete pleasure. You’re staying near here, are you?’

‘Yes, just a few minutes away.’

‘What a coincidence! I don’t live far either. Maybe we could meet again? I’d love to get to know you properly.’

*

Patrissia had just put the battered old kettle on the hob when she heard the sound of voices. Sneaking a glance through the kitchen window, she watched Ciara take something out of her bag and hand it to Jamie. He held it up for a moment, lifted it to his lips, kissed it, raised his eyebrows with exaggerated delight and finally slipped it into his pocket, smiling as Ciara giggled at the ridiculous display.

Her eyes dulling as she contemplated their comfortable intimacy, Patrissia turned away and went to sit at the kitchen table, making space for her empty cup between a small pile of rusty screws and a coil of copper wire.

‘Oh, Marc,’ she said aloud, ‘what a lot you had to hide from me.’

He’d sat every night in his creaky old leather chair, refusing to answer the phone, refusing to answer her questions. Instead he had been confessing to his priest, sketching religious pornography, and nurturing his shame. And now his bastard child had come to heap coals on his disgrace.

Not only his. How can I possibly face her? I abandoned her mother too.

A low whistle gradually intruded into her thoughts and she realised that the kettle had filled the room with steam. She went to open the window and just caught sight of Jamie disappearing round the corner of the house, waving down the garden at Ciara as he went. A minute later, Ciara herself appeared at the back door.

‘Oh, sorry, Ciara, I got distracted. I hope Jamie looked after you well? Has he gone?’

‘Yes. We had a nice chat. He said to say goodbye. How’s Marc?’

‘Resting. He needs to sleep. I’m sure he’ll be fine by morning.’

Ciara nodded solemnly, entering and flicking her eyes around the kitchen. She pulled out a pen and a business card from her bag.

‘I’m going now. I’ll write where I’m staying here on the back,’ she said, shuffling aside Patrissia’s still-empty cup and bending over the table. ‘There.’ She held out the card. ‘Are you going to help me find Claudia?’

‘Of course,’ said Patrissia quickly, ‘but we’re rather in the same boat. In fact, I probably know less than you do,’ she sighed. ‘I was only eleven when she disappeared—I was told that she’d been sent to boarding school in England, and that was it. If she tried to contact me, I never knew about it.’

‘Haven’t you ever tried to find her?’

Patrissia shook her head slowly, acutely aware of the accusation in Ciara’s eyes. ‘I kept asking, but my mother was too scared to say anything, I think—my father would fly into a rage at the very mention of her name. I gave up asking.’

Ciara continued to watch her, frowning. ‘If you *do* find anything out, you’ll tell me, won’t you?’ she asked, her voice suddenly thick.

‘Oh, Ciara, of course I will! We’ll be seeing a lot of each other now, won’t we? I know once Marc’s had a chance to recover, he’ll want that too. There’s so much to talk about, so much time to make up!’

‘I suppose so. I’m staying here in London for a couple of months. If you find out anything, anything at all...’

Patrissia patted her hand. ‘I’m so glad you made the effort to find Marc.’

Ciara smiled tightly. ‘Well, it was nice meeting you, Patrissia. I expect he’ll be fine as soon as he hears me go out the door.’



When Ciara had gone, Patrissia went to Marc’s desk and sat down in his chair, her hands pressed into her lap.

Ciara certainly resembled her mother, all silky hair and wide eyes, just as Patrissia remembered her. How could she not have recognised her?

Ciara must look just as Marc knew Claudia.

Was Marc still in love with Claudia? she wondered. It would explain a lot. She had been seventeen, and Ciara looked a lot younger than her age...

Opening the top drawer, she took the box file and turned the pile over onto the desk. If there were more secrets, she might as well know them all.

A tower of ash

The sun shining through the curtain woke her early the next morning and, having reassured herself that Marc was still breathing, Patrissia wasted no time in booking a flight to Rome.

The previous day's events had shaken her. Having been discreetly boxed up and secreted away for years like Secundus' letters, their past lives—hers, Marc's, Claudia's, and now Ciara's—had been reopened, one by one, all in a day. How intricately woven together they all were, how tortuously interlinked—how *fated* it all seemed.

Opening the French windows wide, she had just pushed back the cuffs of her blouse to welcome the heat of the warm sun onto her skin, when she felt Marc behind her.

'Thank you for looking after me yesterday,' he said as she turned, without preamble. 'I should have mentioned,' he coughed and reached into his dressing gown pocket for a cigarette, shielding his eyes from the glare, 'my seizures.'

Patrissia handed him her lighter. 'I'm glad you're feeling better.' She paused to blow a mouthful of smoke at the moss-covered paving stones. 'But, to be honest, it's not your seizures that bother me.'

Marc hovered uneasily on the step and squinted towards the studio. 'They're only a symptom.'

'Of what?'

'Something else entirely,' he said, still avoiding her eyes. 'Secundus called it a malaise. I'll tell you some time.'

'And this malaise—did it start when you were in Rome, sleeping with my sister?' She watched Marc flinch but insisted, 'Or was it before? I don't think you told me exactly why you were there, did you?'

'I'd been working at a mission in the East End, and things occurred... I was sent to Rome to recover,' he replied, distractedly

Patrissia laughed harshly. 'Where you seduced Claudia.'

He had closed his eyes, and didn't seem to hear her.

‘There’s no point playing dumb or trying to be evasive, Marc, I know everything,’ she said. ‘I know that you were a priest, and about your affair with my sister.’

Marc opened his eyes, but said nothing.

‘You knew right from the start who I was! Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘How could I?’

‘How *couldn’t* you?’

Marc bowed his head. ‘I tried, but...’

‘So, you were a priest, and Claudia was, what, seventeen?’ said Patrissia, finally understanding that this was the confession he had wanted to make at his club. She took a breath and continued more softly, ‘How did it happen, Marc? I want to know.’

She waited patiently but he was silent.

‘Then at least tell me how you met.’

The corners of his mouth turned down. ‘Secundus sent me to her. I was Claudia’s tutor.’

‘And you became lovers.’

Marc gave a brief nod, letting out his breath with a sigh. ‘Briefly. It was discovered by your father. And that was that. I was sent back to England, having been made to swear never to make contact with the Vecchia family again.’ He looked away. ‘I didn’t know that Claudia was pregnant. I knew nothing about a daughter until a few weeks ago when Secundus wrote to me and told me Ciara had tried to visit him.’

‘*Your* daughter.’

‘I thought it was fate—Claudia’s rosary around your neck.’

‘I’m not *Claudia*! I’m *not* my sister!’ Her voice rose. ‘Is that it, Marc? Is *that* what I am to you? A substitute? A second best?’

‘No, of course not. You don’t understand—’

‘I’m going to Rome tomorrow,’ Patrissia interrupted, not wanting to hear any more. ‘I need to see Secundus, who I’m quite sure knows where Claudia is. I *will* find her.’

‘I don’t think that’s wise.’

‘Wise? Wisdom’s not in the equation, Marc. I’m going to find my sister. *My sister*. The sister I haven’t seen since I was *eleven*!’ She stopped, feeling tears welling up, but determined to hold them at bay. ‘Come with me, if you like.’

‘I’ll never go back to Rome. And, as for seeking Claudia, what good will that do? Raking over old hurts—It’s needless.’

‘No, Marc. We have to make amends to those we have hurt, to *people*, that’s what matters most. And besides, Claudia isn’t only my sister, she’s Ciara’s mother. If I’d had a child I’d never known, and she came looking for me, I’d want to know about it. Wouldn’t you?’

Marc turned away to flick a tower of ash into the flowerbed.

Patrissia shook her head, feeling his absence. ‘I know it’s different for you.’ She rolled down her cuffs. ‘I’m leaving tomorrow.’

‘If that’s what you want,’ he said, distantly. ‘I hope you find her.’

‘Thank you.’ She took a deep drag of her cigarette. ‘Why don’t you give Ciara a ring while I’m away? Take her out somewhere, get to know her.’

‘I don’t think it’s me she wants to know.’

Patrissia fished out Ciara’s card, tired of his self-pity. ‘Well, it’s up to you. Here’s her number.’ She pressed it into his hand. ‘She’s only five minutes down the road.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, look, her address is on the back. Oh, I forgot to say, Jamie came round when you were sleeping yesterday.’

Marc grimaced.

‘He was actually very charming. I think he helped Ciara take her mind off the welcome she received from us.’

‘Did he?’ His mouth twitched.

Noting his expression, Patrissia said coolly, ‘I’m sure she wouldn’t have said anything to embarrass you. But talking of embarrassment—I thought she was one of your life models when she first turned up. I’m afraid I was quite rude.’

Marc stubbed out his cigarette in a plant pot and sat down at the garden table. 'What models? I don't use models.'

'Really? Don't all figurative artists use them? I modelled when I was at art school.'

He ran his hand over the chipped paintwork on the table top, picking at the loose patches. 'Do you really think you'll find Claudia?' he asked after a pause.

'Secundus knew how to contact *you*, so I expect he's in touch with her too. But I'm going to see Guido first—my father's secretary. Perhaps you met him?' She shot him a suspicious glance. 'He might know.'

'Maybe Claudia doesn't want to be found? Have you thought of that, Patrissia? Maybe she wanted to start afresh.' Marc smiled unexpectedly, but his smile was not a happy one. 'And if she has managed to do so, don't you think you should leave her be?' He turned his dark eyes on her. 'You're doing this for yourself, not for Claudia. Don't dig up the demons.'

Patrissia stood abruptly.

'I'll phone you when I get back. *Ciao*, Marc.'

He rose to his feet. Ignoring him, she brushed past and up the steps through the French doors. He watched as she gathered her jacket from the arm of a chair, and without looking back, disappeared from view.

Marc followed her inside just in time to hear the front door bang shut. Sighing to himself, he went to put the kettle on and sat to wait at the kitchen table.

Patrissia seemed willing to forgive him, yes, and he was grateful to her for that, but at the same time she seemed determined to resurrect these appalling hurts. What if the damned woman managed to find her sister? Did she expect them all to play happy families as if nothing had happened?

Making himself a mug of coffee, he returned to the garden, walking through damp grass to the willow, where he moved the table back into the shade and sat down, almost invisible from the house.

He picked up his steaming mug and cradled it in both hands. A thought occurred to him: had Patrissia and Ciara planned her appearance in order to test him? Unlikely as it was, he couldn't dismiss the idea, and he felt his heart start to beat more strongly. He realised he didn't trust her at all.

Chiaroscuro

Marc's words stayed with Patrissia all through the flight: '*You're doing this for yourself.*' And while that wasn't the whole story, he did have a point, although she couldn't quite work out what it was.

She wanted to see Claudia, yes, certainly, but that wasn't the source of the urgency she felt to do something. It was more to do with chopping away deadwood, simplifying: maybe revisiting the place of her memories would clarify things.

She made her way to the bus, and settling herself onto one of the hard wooden seats, she let her head rattle against the window as the familiar landscape rolled past. Irritation made way for fatigue as she gazed out at the hot blue sky, until the squat spire of Santa Maria del Popolo brought her back to earth.

The bus stopped, and she stepped heavily onto the pavement, head pounding. Ten minutes walk took her to the house she grew up in.

The same high forbidding front wall was freshly painted a glaring white, and its big dark doors were shut tight as ever. A solitary bougainvillea snaked valiantly up the wall, bent double with heavy crimson blooms.

She took one between her fingers, and remembered her mother's sadness at its lack of perfume. Patrissia had asked her why she wasn't satisfied with its beauty alone. Wasn't that enough?

And then she saw him, pulling back one of the doors just wide enough to slip out. Head up, dressed in black linen trousers, a white shirt and dark glasses, he had barely changed in twenty years, except for new deep-etched lines either side of his mouth.

'Guido!' she cried, waving and running towards him. He started and turned, only his shadow between them as she threw her arms around his neck. After a few moments he stepped back, a wide, uneven smile creasing his face.

'Patrissia!' he said, 'I'm lost for words!'

It was her turn to smile. 'Well, don't be, Guido! It's wonderful to see you again.'

‘And to see you, *Signora*. But I’m surprised.’ He searched her face. ‘Did Secundus write to you?’

‘Write to me? No. Why?’

‘Then how did you know about your father?’

She shook her head, confused.

‘You don’t know?’ Guido looked at her solemnly then took off his sunglasses. ‘Patrissia, your father is dying. I thought that’s why...’ he tailed off, resting his hand gently on her arm.

Patrissia felt her stomach heave, and she exhaled sharply, as surprised by the strength of her reaction as by the news itself.

‘No, I didn’t know he was ill. It’s you I came to see, Guido.’

He raised his eyebrows a fraction. ‘*Signora*?’

‘Ciara’s letter. You gave her Secundus’ address.’

His eyes showed a hint of suspicion. ‘How do *you* know that?’

‘Because, thanks to you, Ciara did manage to find one of her parents. But it wasn’t Claudia.’

‘Ah.’ He didn’t look pleased.

‘She found her father. Secundus refused to tell her where her mother is. Do *you* know?’ Patrissia grabbed at his shirt sleeve but he tugged his arm away, meeting her accusing eyes with his own.

‘You say Ciara found her father. Did *she* tell you that?’

Patrissia let out an impatient sigh. ‘I was at his house when she turned up.’

‘You *know* Ignatius? How is that possible?’

‘Yes. But he’s called Marc now, as I suppose you know. We met in London a couple of months ago, quite by chance. I had no idea who he was until Ciara knocked at his door a couple of days ago.’

She paused, composing herself: ‘Guido, I need you to tell me what happened. I want to know everything. Everything.’

He nodded, looking around to ensure the electric gates were fully closed. ‘It’s time you knew.’ He took her arm, heading towards the park. ‘Let’s walk.’

They skirted the edge of the cool green space until they came to a parapet overlooking the city. Guido bought them both ice-creams and they sat on the low wall staring at the domes and spires wrapped in a hazy smog while he spoke in a low voice of Claudia's wilfulness, her parents' plans for her, and the affair with the accursed Englishman.

'It was a catastrophe for everyone. Your mother sank into a depression from which she never recovered, as you know, and your father—well, you can imagine his rage. Had Ignatius not been a priest, and had not Secundus begged...' Guido's eyes were hard. 'Ignatius got off lightly, believe me.'

'He would have had him killed? Marc owes his *life* to Secundus?'

He stared directly into her eyes. 'God is sometimes merciful.'

'You were kept away from Claudia for your own good, Patrissia. Your father wanted to hide the scandal, of course, but also he did not want you to be influenced by your sister's poor judgement. We did what we thought was right. We couldn't possibly have imagined that she would attempt suicide when the child was taken from her. She was so young—too young for such grief.'

'I'm ashamed, Patrissia. I had no choice, but I'm ashamed to the depths of my soul that I collaborated in such an act. We are not gods that we should feel ourselves justified in doing such things.'

Patrissia put her hand on his and they sat silently watching a young couple taking pictures of each other. The girl wouldn't take off her floppy straw hat, whose brim kept flapping in the gusts of warm dusty wind, and the boy made her stay posed for several minutes until he was apparently satisfied with his shot.

'I need to find her, Guido. I've been so selfish—I abandoned her. I can't imagine how she felt, how lonely it must have been.' Patrissia's eyes overflowed, Guido's squeezing hand doing nothing to stem them. 'I know that you've risked a lot already by telling Ciara where Marc is, but please, Guido, *please*, I'm begging you, tell me where I can find Claudia.'

Guido's face fell and he took a deep breath, staring towards the shining dome of St Peter's, shaking his head. 'I'm old, and your father is dying. I'm not afraid of him any more, Patrissia, but nothing is ever simple.'

‘Guido!’ Patrissia’s tone harshened. ‘You *must* tell me where she is. Tell me now!’

He stared at the ground. ‘Claudia failed to die, but...she was never the same. Secundus blamed himself, and almost gave up the priesthood, but he knew he could do more for her if he remained.’

Patrissia took a cigarette from her bag. How she hated these people, their righteousness, their machinations and secrecy, and, above all, their exclusion of her. Even Guido, a *servant*, knew more than she did.

‘Secundus arranged to be sent with her to a village in the mountains, and used his influence to get her a job in the orphanage with him. He always hoped that she would adopt a child one day, but she never did.’

Patrissia hung her head. ‘Oh God.’

‘You must understand, Patrissia—It’s not your father or Secundus who has kept her hidden from you. Yes, it was their wish when you were young and in their care, but afterwards—when you deserted your father, deserted your husband—’ He stopped, looking at her with tired eyes filled with love and sorrow, ‘It was Claudia herself. They are *her* wishes.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ Patrissia said angrily, wiping her cheeks with her hand. ‘It can’t be true. I’m her *sister*.’

He flinched at her tone.

‘Guido, speak to me. Where is she? I’m not leaving until you tell me.’

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of traffic from the city below.

‘Patrissia, you give me a hard choice,’ he said at last with a deep sigh. ‘Either I betray the dying, or I betray the living. Such is life. You will find your sister in Morlupo. A bus goes there once a day. But prepare yourself: she is not well, and has become fragile and old before her time.’ He turned his head, and anticipating disappointment, asked. ‘Shall I tell your father you were here?’

‘No.’

'No words at all for him?'

'No.'

*

'You have had a visitor, *Signore*. Patrissia, your daughter, came to see you while you were asleep, but she couldn't stay.'

The old man opened his eyes. 'I have no daughters, Guido.' His voice was weak and hoarse. After a moment he added, 'Did she come for forgiveness?'

'*Si, Signore*. She wished for your blessing.'

'Ah.' The faded green eyes strayed to the ceiling. 'At last.' The cords in his thin grey hands tensed as he twisted the ebony beads of the rosary lying between them.

'If she comes again...' Guido bent over the bed to hear the low, panted words. 'Tell her that there is no forgiveness in me, and in any case I have not the power. It is God she has to answer to.'

Guido crossed himself. '*Si, Signore*.'

'Tell her...' the dying man closed his eyes, his lips thin and hard. 'Tell her that God sees into her soul and weeps. Tell her that.'

Unearthly summits

It had been a long journey and Patrissia was tired, but when the village came into view at last, she asked the driver to stop and let her out at the bottom of the hill.

As the bus clattered off, she took a deep breath and, adjusting her sun hat, began to walk up the steep path, her neck dripping with sweat, her mouth dry, her stomach in knots.

It's what I want, she told herself, and it's the right thing to do. I'm doing it for Ciara as well as myself. It's Claudia who's being selfish now.

The path got steeper, and Patrissia stopped half-way up to get her breath, the clicking of cicadas filling her head like a hundred rosaries.

She touched her neck where Claudia's necklace hung, wondering what she would say to her.

Another passenger had followed her off the bus, and, as he passed her, he smiled a greeting, his feet throwing up small clouds of dust, hot in her nostrils.

Wiping her face with a tissue, she contemplated the path meandering towards the summit, where it grew so steep that the rock had been hewn into three steps. Standing for a moment inhaling the dusty air, she continued, slightly breathless and lightheaded.

What would she find here? What had her confident, carefree, rebellious sister become? She tried to picture the worn-out recluse that Guido had described in the park, spitting the words angrily over the rich domes of the city, but it was impossible.

As she hauled herself onto the broken stone wall below the steps, a green lizard flopped off, grazing her arm as it fell, and ran away into the scrub. More scampered out from their hiding places, scabbling for cover as she finally stepped onto the ridge.

Dirty and sweaty, all she could think about was getting a drink.

The man who had passed her was sitting in the shade of an orange tree outside the village café, wiping his brow. Patrissia nodded a greeting to him and sat down at the next table, kicking off her shoes, thankful for rest. She didn't want to meet Claudia like a tourist on a day trip, but as a pilgrim and penitent. How else could she face her?

She stared out at the late afternoon sun over the scorched earth. In its glare the blotched and neglected facades of the houses around her seemed to crumble forlornly into their parched foundations. What purgatory it would have been for Claudia to move to such a place. The air of desertion, the dilapidated buildings—Patrissia couldn't accept that this was the way things should be for her sister.

It could easily have happened to me.

A vivid memory of the burnt-out Etruscan tombs she and Claudia had been taken to see as girls crept up on her—Dark, frightening holes in the ground where she had been petrified by fear and suffocated by the fierce stifling heat. Claudia had held her hand tightly and whispered in her ear, telling her not to be scared.

She felt the same fear now and, closing her eyes, tried to breathe it out, but she could not prevent everything come flooding back: the big car idling in the square outside the house, Claudia getting into the back seat, her mother crying; and finally the sound of scrabbling tyres and the unforgettable silence that followed. It was the last time she had seen her sister.

Her father had lost no time in moving her into Claudia's old room. It was a delightful room, spacious, light and airy: it was also the easiest for Guido's men to keep an eye on. From that day she was never left alone. The men were there whenever she emerged, day and night. They followed her to school, then university, even on her few dates. They vetted her friends. Only inside that room was there respite. How she hated them!

'Buongiorno, Signora. We don't often get such beautiful strangers here,' said the waiter, appearing at her side with a welcoming smile. 'What would you like?'

'Buongiorno. A mint cordial. Tell me, *Signore*, I'm looking for another beautiful woman—at least, she was so when last I saw her,' Patrissia said regretfully, and almost to herself. 'Her name is Claudia Vecchia. I was told she came to live in this village a long time ago, thirty years. She would have been in her teens, and truly very pretty. But perhaps she's not so pretty now. Do you know where I can find her?'

'I can't think of anyone like that. Have you tried the police?'

'It's personal. Are you sure? A village—everyone would know her.'

'Sì, Signora, everyone would know.' He shrugged. 'Perhaps she died. I will ask the mayor for you if you don't mind waiting.'

Patrissia shivered. 'That's very kind. *Grazie, Signore.*'

With a brief smile, he vanished inside the café, pausing only to talk to Patrissia's fellow passenger from the bus, who glanced in Patrissia's direction and left a few minutes later.

This bloody country, she thought. *Nothing is what it seems on the surface. Everything is conspiracy.*

*

'How are you, Claudia, *cara mia*? Are you rested?'

Claudia looked up from her old wooden chair, shading her eyes.

'Ciao, Roberto. Thank you, yes.'

He leaned over and kissed her cheek gently, looking into her eyes.

'Are you feeling up to a visitor? An Englishwoman arrived on the bus. She's at the café, asking for you.'

'English? How strange.' Claudia gazed out to the mountains behind him.

'Mario says she looks rich. Perhaps she is a friend from before? Certainly she has come far.'

'My only friends are here, Roberto.' She smiled weakly, then to his surprise, added, 'But the woman must be tired after such a long journey.'

'Sì,' he nodded, 'very tired.'

‘An Englishwoman would not like this heat,’ Claudia said, her faraway gaze intensifying.

He made a show of fanning his face. ‘No, indeed, Claudia. It’s too hot to breathe. I expect she’ll be exhausted after such a long journey.’

‘Bring her, then. We must give her somewhere to rest from the sun.’

Roberto nodded. ‘I’ll tell Mario.’

A visitor? the woman thought, *and from England? I know no-one from England, except...* for the thousandth time she strained her memory, trying to recall the details of the dreadful fantasy that had been her life. Her life...Where had it gone?

‘I can’t think why anyone would want to see me. Perhaps she brings news of my father’s death.’

She sat and waited patiently, twisting the worn bones of her rosary, and presently heard footsteps approach. Pushing herself up from the chair, she took the carafe of water to refill at the kitchen tap. The clatter of footsteps came closer and she saw a well-dressed woman come around the side of the house and pass the window where she was watching.

The Englishwoman looked familiar, and Claudia stood still, letting the carafe overflow, wondering why she seemed to know her. Turning off the tap and wiping the carafe dry on her thin cotton apron, she picked up another glass and went out onto the veranda.



Patrissia turned at the sound of glasses clinking and saw a hollow-eyed woman, plainly, almost shabbily dressed, staring at her. The woman’s expression was not friendly. As she put the glass and carafe down on the table, her eyes narrowed.

‘That’s *my* necklace,’ she said, pointing. ‘Why are *you* wearing it?’ The woman came a few steps closer. Suddenly her eyes widened and she put her hand to her mouth. ‘No, it can’t be...Patrissia?’ She sat down heavily, eyes closed. ‘Please, leave. I can’t see you. Please leave now, I don’t want this, leave me alone.’ She began to cry softly, head down, hands in her lap, the old chair creaking.

Patrissia knelt beside her, hardly believing that this haggard, angular woman was her sister. She tried to take her hand, but Claudia's thin, wasted fingers didn't stop moving, clasping and unclasping like the tendrils of an anemone. Her hair, that used to tumble down her back in a mass of waves, was now cut severely to her neck, and shuddered as she sobbed.



Claudia became gradually calmer as Patrissia spoke to her softly, telling her of her own solitary childhood after Claudia had disappeared, her failed marriage, the loss of their mother, and her own rift with their father. The two sisters had not touched, not a kiss—there was too much time between them.

At last Claudia began to speak. Her voice, like her body, was thin and strained.

'I was taken to a convent, Patrissia. They were kind. They looked after me, and I thought...but when my baby was born they took her away. I held her for an hour, and then she was gone. The labour had been long, and I was hurt, exhausted, but they couldn't stop me,' she said with sudden satisfaction. 'I screamed for three days, I tore the sheets, I bled, I attacked anyone who came near me. I almost died, Patrissia.

'They said I was mad, but I knew I wasn't. First I blamed Ignatius—' She stopped and her forehead wrinkled. 'Who's Ignatius?'

Patrissia stared at her in surprise and concern. 'Ignatius, *cara mia*? He was your lover—'

'Ah, Ignatius, yes I remember now. He was so passionate! So in love with me!' She paused. 'And I was so beautiful then.'

She began to cry, but pushed Patrissia's hand away when she tried to comfort her.

'Did you love him?'

'Of course not!' she said, banging the table with her fist. 'He was handsome, but the way Secundus and my father treated him—I pitied him!'

‘Did he hurt you?’

‘No, Patrissia, he couldn’t hurt me, it was the Sisters!’ Claudia said with sudden venom. ‘I hated them for taking my baby away. How I longed for my little girl! How I cried and tore myself!’

Claudia lifted her sleeve exposing rude red scars, and then her head jerked. ‘Where’s my baby?’ Her eyes closed, and, she began to sing very softly, cradling her empty arms and rocking gently.

There was a long silence as the last notes faded in the hot air. Claudia was breathing heavily, her lips apart, great tears running down her cheeks.

Patrissia kissed her sister’s forehead, stroking her hair, not knowing what else to do.

The man, Roberto, reappeared from the side of the house holding a basket of fruit. When he saw Claudia, he gently beckoned Patrissia away. ‘Don’t be alarmed, *Signora*. She won’t remember.’

‘You were on the bus with me, weren’t you? You passed me on the path.’

‘Yes, *Signora*. I came from the monastery. I am a friend.’

‘Oh. What’s wrong with her? I thought she worked in the orphanage?’

‘Ah, the orphanage. Yes, she plays with the children sometimes. She isn’t always like this. She has good days, and the children love her. It makes her happy. The nuns make sure she comes to no harm.’

Roberto offered her an orange from the basket. She took it, scraping her nail across the rough skin and inhaling its scent. ‘Mmm, it smells so fresh.’

He smiled. ‘Excuse me one moment.’

Patrissia bit into the fruit and automatically reached into her bag for a cigarette, watching as he put the basket on the table and took out a long knife. Deftly quartering two of the oranges, he placed them in a heap in front of Claudia and bent to kiss her forehead.

‘Is Secundus at the orphanage?’ asked Patrissia when he returned, exhaling a long plume of smoke that swirled and faded into the hot air.

‘No, he’s not there, *Signora*. He’s old now, and spends most of his time in the monastery.’ He waved vaguely in the direction of the mountains. ‘He won’t see anyone.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I live there too.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Patrissia’s eyes strayed back to Claudia.

Roberto followed her gaze. ‘She’ll be OK, *Signora*, but it would be best to leave her for a little while. It’s cool in the house. Or I could show you the village?’

‘Thank you, but I think I need a little time to myself.’

‘As you wish, *Signora*. I will be in the garden if you need anything. Just call, I will hear you.’

Patrissia watched as he emptied the rest of his fruit onto a pile of scorched white cloths in the far corner of the veranda and, humming softly to himself, took the basket back out into the lowering sun.



The house was small and old. Patrissia had forgotten how people lived in these hill villages. In the kitchen there was only a plain table, a gas stove with a battered gas bottle beside it—that must be another of Roberto’s jobs—and a sideboard. In the adjoining room there was a single armchair in front of an open fire, a large plain cross on the wall, and below it a small table with a candle. There were no photographs or pictures anywhere.

She stared through the window at the thin, ragged figure rocking back and forth. What had she done to her sister? A whole life wasted. Patrissia closed her eyes and prayed for forgiveness.

When she opened them again, Roberto was kneeling down by Claudia, raising a glass first to her lips then to his own. Patrissia stood still at the window, not moving, her reflection overlaid on the lovers as they touched foreheads, their eyes closed.



When Patrissia returned to the veranda, Claudia was alone and gazing out at the mountains again, her eyes clear, her hands quiet in her lap. Patrissia sat down in front of her on the slatted boards and crossed her legs, tugging off her shoes with relief.

Having prepared herself for more tears, she was surprised when Claudia spoke calmly, staring over her head.

‘Why now, Patrissia, after all these years?’

‘Because I wanted to see you.’ She watched her sister move her lips as if talking to herself.

‘How did you find me? Only Secundus knows I’m here.’

Patrissia nodded and took a slow sip of water. She thought about lying, but decided against it. ‘I had an unexpected visitor.’ She tried to smile but found herself too nervous. ‘It was your daughter.’

Everything went quiet. Even the chirp of the cicadas ebbed to a sporadic hum. All she could hear was Claudia’s faint breath.

‘I knew this would happen one day,’ she said at last.

Patrissia realised that she had been holding her breath, and let it out with relief. ‘She’s a beautiful woman, Claudia. She has your voice, your eyes, even your hair. She wants to meet you.’

Patrissia watched Claudia’s delicate features buckle and narrow.

‘Claudia, I never knew anything about what happened to you. They told me you’d gone to boarding school. I could never understand why I wasn’t allowed to visit you and why you never came home like the other girls. Then they said you’d gone abroad to university. Nobody *told* me! All I ever knew was that somehow it was *my* fault. I’m so sorry.’

Claudia’s eyes turned to her. They were no longer watery and vague, but intense, alive. She took Patrissia’s hand in hers.

‘You were my little sister,’ she said gently. ‘But that was a long time ago. You mustn’t be my little sister any more. We’re *women*. You’ve lived your life and I’ve lived mine—’ Her voice was low and soft now, ‘and we must judge ourselves as women.’

Patrissia squeezed Claudia's hand. 'I think I must have grown up a bit, in spite of myself.' She smiled. 'I'm here now.'

'And I'm glad you came.'

There was a long moment before Patrissia said softly, 'Ciara's desperate to find you.'

'Ciara? Is that what they called her?' Claudia shook her head. 'No. Look at me. You saw me earlier—sometimes I'm not really here.' She smiled and tapped her head. 'I've nothing to offer her. She mustn't find me—*You* never found me.' She slowly shook her head. 'Tell her that.'

'Oh, Claudia, I wish you'd give it some time. Just think about it for a few days.'

Patrissia saw her eyes flicker.

'How did she find *you*?'

Patrissia thumbed the necklace, turning it over and over. How to describe the events of the past months?

'By chance. She was looking for you—'

But Claudia wasn't listening. She had eased herself onto her feet, and was brushing the flimsy material of her dress.

'It doesn't matter now.'

'But—'

'I'm happy here. I don't want to know. Really, I don't. It's enough that I've seen *you*.' She took Patrissia's hand. 'My big little sister.'

They stared into each other's eyes. The distance between them had at last melted away and they clung softly, comforting each other.

'Do you remember how the sun used to make blobs on my bedroom wall in the evening, and you used to say they were a weird colour, like no colour on earth?'

'No. Did I?'

Claudia laughed. 'Yes, you did. Put your shoes on. I'm going to show you no colour on earth.'



After a few minutes walk the narrow street opened out onto a terraced hillside, tracks veering off at angles between tufts of scorched grass and slabs of yellow rock. The regular, tranquil monotony of stubby trees curved upwards across the mountains in wave after wave. Patrissia stood entranced, unmoving, while her eyes were drawn up and into the mauve sky, where a solitary bird wheeled.

‘It’s just like a painting,’ Claudia’s voice whispered. ‘You were always drawing and painting—You painted me lots of times, do you remember?’

‘I remember.’

The waning light turned the landscape from a painted thing into a colossal sculpture, immense and dark, just a few accents of colour remaining alive in the splintered contours.

Claudia turned and kissed her cheek. ‘I’m tired.’ But Patrissia was barely listening, and, distracted by the silence and vastness that rolled out ahead of her, she didn’t notice as Claudia’s head fell.

She felt entirely insignificant in the presence of these unearthly summits, their beauty unreachable except to the artist who would live there, and to the saint who would die there.

Part 3. Low life

Are you still there?

‘Hi, Marc, I’m back. How’re things?’

Phone clamped between ear and shoulder, Patrissia struggled to undo her sandals, hopping from one foot to the other. Her suitcase sat on the doormat where she had dropped it.

‘Patrissia?’

‘Yes, it’s me. I can’t tell you how glad I am to be home,’ she gabbled, kicking her sandals under the coat rack.

She heard the creak of his chair. ‘Marc—’ She hesitated, wondering what to say, and decided to be blunt. ‘—I found Claudia.’

‘Well done,’ he said, after a pause.

‘She’s living in a village in the mountains near Rome.’ Patrissia paused, but wasn’t surprised when he didn’t respond. ‘Ciara doesn’t know I went to see her, does she?’

‘Not from me, no.’

‘Good.’

There was another silence. Patrissia tried to imagine what was going through his mind, but drew a blank. How could he not respond *at all*? Could he really be so insensitive, so indifferent to such a revelation? But she was too tired to argue.

‘Have you spoken to Ciara?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

She felt his antagonism like a recurring toothache, and suppressing what had become a familiar irritation at how closed he was to her, took a deep breath before continuing, ‘Marc, it would be nice to see you—I really want to straighten things out between us. I know it’s a bit late, but I could come over, if you like?’

‘I’ve got to be up early tomorrow, so tonight probably isn’t a good idea.’

‘Oh?’

‘I’m going to Arundel—I’ll be leaving at around eight.’

She grasped the opportunity with relief. ‘Arundel sounds nice. I’ve never been. I could drive us both if you like?’

‘It’s work. I’ve already packed my drawings, and I’m delivering a finished piece on the way. There’s not much room, so maybe—’

‘I’m sure I’ll be able to squeeze in,’ she interrupted.

She could hear him breathing quite clearly, and then the click of a cigarette lighter and a long exhalation. ‘Of course. In that case you’d better wear something you don’t mind getting very dusty.’

‘I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow before eight, then.’

She had wandered into the kitchen during the call, and now found herself sitting at the bare table. Resting the phone on her bulging bag she put her chin in her hands, staring dully around the room, which somehow seemed unfamiliar. Even the squat red bulk of the Aga couldn’t reassure her.

Was she glad to be home?

And was Marc really worth this much effort? Rejecting the predictable future she foresaw with Theo wouldn’t be difficult, but when she thought of giving up on Marc, frustrating and hostile as he was, she felt only an intense feeling of loss. Incomprehensible as it was to her, she couldn’t give up yet.

Settling herself finally in the corner of the sofa, an indefinable sadness settled over her. She noticed it behind her, crouching in the shadows, and in front of her, transparent as a ghost, and then it was everywhere, even when she closed her eyes.

*

The next day, it was almost noon by the time Marc and Patrissia found themselves strolling up the gentle incline of Arundel’s old high street. Marc paused to extract his lighter, and they stood for a moment while he lit a cigarette.

He had listened without comment to an edited outline of her reunion with Claudia, only nodding when Patrissia said that Claudia’s life was one of peace and contentment.

She strongly suspected that his indifference was faked, and that he was clinging on to something he thought he had found with Claudia—and hadn't found with her. It made her feel that she was competing with her sister in a race she didn't want, and that she couldn't win.

It was a decidedly unfamiliar feeling, and she didn't know how to deal with it. It disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. If she had had the same feeling with Theo or any of the others, she would have walked out by now, but Marc seemed to have the same power over her as Johnny had had, and that disturbed her too. She didn't want that again, the feeling that she was being stupidly compliant, was demeaning herself, and the resentment that filled her then, the anger at herself.

But this wasn't the time to have an argument. She decided to change tack.

'Why don't you try to get to a few more meetings, Marc? They've really taken off now, you know—I'm amazed at the positive feedback I've had from people, considering we've only been going a couple of months. It's turning into a sort of group confession thing—people seem to find it therapeutic.'

'Hmm,' Marc grunted, his face dark. 'Contrition, confession, absolution—Who could resist? but it's Roy who interests me,' he went on in a quizzical voice. 'He reminds me of myself sometimes.'

'Roy?' repeated Patrissia, surprised. 'You're nothing like Roy!'

Marc was silent, his eyes dim. Patrissia wondered what he was thinking, reflecting at the same time that she spent more time in that frustrating pursuit than she did in *being* with him. Silence or lies, it doesn't matter, both hold you at arm's length.

'What have you come to see? It must be pretty compelling to bring you all the way down here.'

'A book of poetry that's being displayed in the FitzAlan Chapel. It contains some writings by St Catherine of Siena. She wrote some of the poems you've been quoting at the meetings. Look, why don't you take a stroll through the grounds while I take care of my work here? The gardens are magnificent.'

Reading poetry is work? And my presence would spoil it?

‘Oh,’ she said, unaccountably shocked. ‘Well, I suppose I can keep myself amused.’

Marc nodded and turned towards the chapel while Patrissia continued along the privet hedge and made her way to the other side of the castle. The path meandered along grassy avenues lined with trim flowerbeds, but their ‘magnificence’ was not enough to stop her wondering whether there was *anything* that she and Marc could share.

Patrissia was dejected at her own pessimism, but it matched her mood of the last week. If being with Marc—and he was only the latest in a succession of disappointments, she reminded herself—only exacerbated her loneliness, perhaps it was a sign. Maybe loneliness *was* her lot. How close was she to joining Claudia? The thought chilled her.

She found herself climbing a narrow spiral staircase into the castle, under a high arched walkway. Undaunted by the wind funnelling into her legs, she tucked her hair into the collar of her coat and let her eyes follow the curving parapet to the other side of the circular tower, gazing at the view beyond. Little by little, the wind calmed her.

It came to her for the thousandth time that it was only when she gave herself up to the elemental moment—to cold, rain, heat, painting, making love—that she felt connected to the world, which suggested that surrender was the key; but instead she had simply camouflaged the vapid creatures and landscapes that she surrounded herself with, and made them insignificant notes in the drama of her imagination.

Patrissia stood in the wind until her shivering began to attract glances from other people. She didn’t care, but looking at her watch she saw that it was probably time to descend. She had to persist with Marc. In a strange way, she felt their search was the same, just expressed differently, and only apparently opposed. Anything was possible, she sighed, gathering herself. She could at least try to make the day pleasant for them both.

Coming out of the castle, she saw Marc already sitting on a stone bench outside the chapel. He looked up as she approached.

‘I hope you enjoyed the gardens. They’re quite famous.’

‘Very nice—but the castle itself was far more interesting.’ Patrissia smiled, watching his face. He had no expression except for a kind of blank and joyless acceptance of the wind that whipped his hair into his unflinching eyes.

Two peas in a pod. Perhaps I can make it work. God knows how, though.



Once outside the grounds, Patrissia stopped to light a cigarette.

‘Marc,’ she said carefully, ‘I need to know you. You’re so serious—and I admire that, don’t get me wrong—but you seem to be serious about everything except me. I’ve no idea what you think or what you feel about me—well, us.’ Their pace dropped until they came to a standstill at the corner of the tobacconist that straddled the top of the hill. ‘Are we lovers? Partners? What? I want us to be friends, whatever else, to be easy with each other.’

She looked up into his eyes, partly hidden from her by his dark brows as he bowed his head. Up close, she thought she saw traces of dried tears. Had he really been reading poetry in the chapel?

‘We’re part of a whole new family now, Patrissia, that’s the important thing,’ Marc said suddenly.

‘Family?’ She said the word out loud in surprise, tasting its inflection. ‘Do you mean Ciara?’

Marc raised his head. ‘I mean our fellowship of lost souls,’ he said with an amused snort.

‘Oh,’ she said, disappointed. He clearly had no intention of answering. She wondered what she would say if he returned the question? What would she say? Obviously, neither lovers nor partners...

The sun had slipped behind the rooftops and the first waft of a chill ripped through the air. She pulled her coat closer around her, and watched as a skein of geese rose elegantly into the dusk and, with heavy wings, lifted their dark backs across the sky.

She wondered at the symmetry of their formation. They had certainly not made an explicit agreement to fly in such a perfect

pattern. Each propelled only itself, yet it seemed to her as if they were joined each to the other by an invisible string. None of them could be thinking about where they were going, it was just the moment, the flight, that they were concerned with. Perhaps that was beauty enough.

But they had surrendered their will, and were fated a sure direction, whereas Patrissia... Patrissia had no direction, and couldn't imagine herself surrendering. She would land where she would land.



Having carefully adjusted the seat to his satisfaction, Roy leaned out of the open window and twisted the side-mirror until he could see the trolley he'd put by the rear wheel. The trolley was yellow—nice and bright.

He still couldn't quite believe that Jamie had kept his word about getting him the van. It must be nice to know people who just happen to have a seven-and-a-half tonner lying about, he thought. Where did Jamie find them? He met a lot of people, Roy supposed, a sociable bloke like him.

But Roy was trying, wasn't he? He went to the meetings. But even at the meetings he only seemed to talk to Jamie and Siân, and then not for long. Patrissia and Marc ignored him, and as for the others, he didn't even know their names.

He'd have to stand up and say something, sort of introduce himself. The thought made his blood run cold. He'd have to start listening to what the others said a bit more, although when he did listen he couldn't really remember anything most of the time, so it was a bit pointless. He didn't really understand. It all sounded so divorced from his actual life.

'You've got to try, mate,' Jamie had told him. 'If you don't make a noise, nobody'll notice you.'

Roy had thought that Patrissia would talk to him more, but apart from the occasional 'How are you?' she was too busy with Marc and Siân to speak to anyone else, except Jamie, of course. And since

Marc always turned up late or left early she seemed to be talking to Siân all the time, and Roy hardly had a look-in.

With another glance in the mirror, he opened the door and wheeled the trolley round to the other side of the van so he could adjust the passenger side.

As soon as he'd picked it up Roy had put plastic covers on the seats, a strip of gaffer tape on the arm rest, and new rubber mats on the floor. Jamie'd probably want to check it from time to time, and Roy wanted to show him it was being looked after. Got to look after the van.

He looked at his watch. It was time for the meeting. Picking up the trolley, he put it in the back, tying it to the side bars. He didn't like things rattling about, you always found whatever it was had got damaged or had damaged something else. Tie whatever you could down, that was his motto.

That seemed to be how it worked with most people, too. You tie them down or they tie you down. He thought he remembered Marc talking about it in one of the meetings. Bullying and resentment, he'd called it, vanity and weakness. That was just the way it was.

It all seemed pretty stupid.

Forgive and forget

The little car stopped in the middle of the crowded car park.

‘Thanks, Manu, I’ll get a lift home.’

‘OK. Don’t be late, There’s a couple of frozen pizzas I can put in the oven. You sure you’re warm enough? It’s bloody cold out there. Think of the baby—You don’t want to get a chill. There’s a scarf in the back.’

‘Thanks, I’ll be OK. ’Bye.’

‘Love you.’

‘Yeah. See you later.’

Siân struggled out of the car and waddled towards the green double doors. She let out a long breath, relieved to be out of the car, out of the flat and away from Manu’s fussing. Slowly climbing the stairs, hand on belly, she cursed him for making her late.

Jamie had obviously just made a joke, and entering the hall, she was grateful for the flurry of light chuckles that greeted her, allowing her to take her seat anonymously at the back. The chair was cold and uncomfortable, making her shiver. She looked around to see if there was a thermostat she could turn up.

‘Anyway, joking aside, this week the theme is *Reconciliation*,’ Jamie was saying. ‘Er, Marc’s down to open, but it looks like he’s not coming. Does anyone know for sure?’ He leaned over to where Patrissia was writing something in a notebook. ‘Trish? D’you know whether Marc will be delighting us with his presence this evening?’

She didn’t look up. ‘He’s not answering his phone, so who knows?’

‘OK then,’ said Jamie, smiling encouragingly, ‘does anyone else feel like opening?’

There was a long silence before Roy slowly raised his hand.

‘Er, I’ll do it if no-one else wants to.’

‘Excellent. Thanks Roy,’ said Jamie, smiling at him without enthusiasm. ‘Come on up, mate. Trish’ll swap places with you. Take the hot seat, we’re all ears.’

Surprised, Patrissia watched Roy as he walked to the top table, a huge blush suffusing his face and neck.

‘Don’t be nervous,’ she whispered as she gave up her seat for him, ‘there’s no need. It’s just a story like all the other stories, Roy. Remember to breathe. Take your time.’

But he couldn’t concentrate on what she was saying. He couldn’t even remember what *he* was going to say. Where did you start? At the beginning, usually.

His memories of childhood were sparse and patchy—his most vivid recollection was of sitting in his room, listening to his parents argue downstairs. But even that was a hazy amalgam of feelings rather than an actual memory.

And now here he was in another room, this one full of strangers, all waiting for him to speak. He could already feel sweat breaking out on his forehead. But he had to tell them what it was like being him. He didn’t think they really understood.

‘Roy?’ prompted Patrissia, softly. ‘Are you ready? No hurry.’

‘Oh, yeah, sorry,’ he apologised, turning back his cuffs. ‘Yeah. My name’s Roy. I’ve bin to all the meetin’s, yeah.’

Jamie was idly stroking the cover of the blank book, a half-hearted smile on his face.

He’s bored already, thought Roy. *Well, sod ’im, I’m not doin’ it for ’im.*

‘Me mum an’ dad... yeah, well, they got married pretty young: Catholics. Dunno why they bothered ’avin’ kids really, don’t think they even liked each other. They were always shoutin’ and swearin’. Mum was the worst, pickin’ at everythin’—Nothin’ was right. She was always in a bad mood, except when she was laughin’ for no reason.’

He glanced at Jamie, whose smile had disappeared. Patrissia, sitting in Roy’s vacated seat, seemed to be listening too, her head to one side as if she was really concentrating.

‘Basically, I was left alone when I was a kid,’ Roy went on, encouraged. ‘We never ’ad no visitors an’ I wasn’t allowed friends round. Me dad used to go out all the time, an’ I can’t say I blamed him. Mum’d watch TV or phone ’er mates or whatever. Sometimes she’d heat up some rice pud for me an’ go out herself. I used to keep out of ’er way.’

Patrissia was now actually leaning forward, her eyes fixed on him. He felt sweat running down his ribs, and he ran his hand round the neck of his thick jumper, releasing a blast of heat that made his eyes blink.

‘Well,’ he managed to continue, exhaling another stream of hot air, ‘me mum went to the local convent school an’ that, an’ she sent me there too, but I can’t remember anythin’ else she did that was religious, unless takin’ the Lord’s name in vain counts. She used to tell me God was watchin’ me an’ I’d better not get up to anythin’, but I didn’t get up to much anyway, so ’e must’ve got pretty bored.’

Roy looked round at the sound of the vestibule doors closing. Marc was standing in the shadows near the entrance. Feeling obscurely that he had an ally now among these privileged and uncomprehending strangers, Roy relaxed his shoulders and stood a little more upright.

‘So, anyway, when I was fifteen, me dad just disappeared,’ he continued, still watching Marc out of the corner of his eye. ‘Never ’eard from him since. Dunno where ’e went. An’ then me mum, well, she ’ad a load of boyfriends an’ that, an’ I was just in the way, an’ she went to live with one of ’em when I was sixteen an’ that was that.’

Marc hadn’t moved, and Roy began to wonder if he had talked too long or if he wasn’t doing it properly, and swallowing elaborately in spite of his dry mouth, he tried to think about how he was going to stop.

‘I joined the army but I didn’t like it, an’ I just sorted of drifted around livin’ in various bedsits an’ went on the dole for a few months. Then me mate asked me to ’elp ’im move some furniture an’ it seemed pretty easy so I started doin’ that.’

The sweat had reached his waist and he felt his wet shirt pulling at his skin whenever he shifted position. But if he stopped now, he knew he probably wouldn’t be able to get the courage again.

‘But anyway, I know I’m s’posed to get to the point, but I never ’ad a chance to do any reconciliations, like, y’know, with me parents an’ that. Things just ’appened to me, an’ people just appeared an’ disappeared, an’ there was no talkin’ about anythin’ or sayin’ sorry. So I don’t know ’ow it works really. I mean, what’s s’posed to

'appen? Do people just get together again? Should I go look for me mum an' dad? 'Ello, mum, 'ello dad, let's all shake 'ands? I can't see that 'appenin' really, not unless someone 'its me over the 'ead or somethin' an' I lose me memory.'

He laughed nervously, wondering how much longer he could keep going. He could feel Marc's eyes boring into him.

'I mean, 'ow can memories go away? We're talkin' about reconciliation, but if yer've got no control over yer life, like me, an odd-job man who no-one takes no notice of, I mean, yer don' get much of a chance do yer? No-one explains anythin', so 'ow can yer understand what's goin' on? And, reconciliation—well, in one way, I probably wouldn't mind bein' reconciled with me mum and dad, but I don' know where they are. Maybe they're dead for all I know. I mean, you all talk like everyone 'as the choice, but some of us don't, do we?'

Patrissia was still watching him thoughtfully, but he could not make out her exact expression. He assumed it was pity.

'Yeah. So it ain't that I don't want to, but, well, 'ow? An' these days, I don't 'ave anyone to get reconciled with. I don' see too many folks, day to day. I keep meself to meself.'

He petered out, aware of Jamie's mobile phone flashing repeatedly up at him. He couldn't see Marc either. He wasn't surprised. In his experience, if you ever thought you were getting pally with someone they'd pretty soon find a reason to bugger off.

'An' as for girlfriends and stuff, well, when they've decided it's over, it's over whether yer like it or not, so what're yer supposed to do? They only tell yer to leave 'em alone if yer try to phone 'em, or don't even pick up.'

Roy stopped, looking like all the stuffing had been knocked out of him. He didn't enjoy talking about his girlfriends, or lack of them, to anyone, let alone a room full of strangers, but if they listened to Patrissia talking about her blokes, they could bloody well listen to him.

'Er, well, tha's it. I can't think of any more to say about reconciliation, 'cos I haven't had any. I gotta be 'onest, mate,' he said, looking across at Jamie, 'I don' really know what it means.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Thanks for lettin' me speak, though.'

‘Great. Thanks Roy,’ said Jamie. ‘It’s good to hear it from the other side. I’m sure all the men here will identify with that—Us blokes never get a say, do we?’ He winked at Marc, then turned to the room, his customary grin widening.

‘So, what about it? Can anyone tell Roy what reconciliation means?’ His head twitched from side to side. There was dead quiet. ‘Come on, don’t be shy. We’ve all made a quick detour to the petrol station for flowers to pacify the better half, haven’t we?’

Bloody hell, he was thinking, *we’ve ages to get through yet*. Reluctantly, he raised his eyebrows at Patrissia. ‘Trish, can you help us out?’

‘Well, I would have thought reconciliation is a bigger subject than where to get a cheap bunch of daffs,’ Patrissia responded tartly. She clasped her hands together on the shelf that ran the length of the pew. ‘Although, truth to tell, I’m no expert, either.’ She glanced around the room. Nobody was smiling. It seemed that none of them were experts.

‘I suppose,’ she went on, ‘when we talk about reconciliation, we’re thinking about a family reunion, or lovers getting back together, aren’t we? Well, those of you who were at the last meeting know my story. It’s all very well being pious about forgiving and forgetting, but first you need one side to want to forgive and forget and then you need the other side to listen and respond. You need communication if you want reconciliation, don’t you?’

There was a murmur of agreement, and some slow, considered nods. Patrissia had noticed Marc’s entrance: he was now seated, apparently examining something on his coat sleeve. If he was going to be late all the time, he could at least pay attention while he was there, couldn’t he?

‘As Roy so rightly said, reconciliation takes two,’ she continued, ‘and *both* sides have to want to either preserve something or revive something. But if either of you thinks there’s no relationship to go back to, or more likely, that there’s nothing worth preserving—well, I don’t know. I suppose you just have to get on with your life, be reconciled with yourself, and let bygones be bygones.’

‘Yes, forgiveness...You don’t get much of that in the real world,’ Jamie mused aloud, tapping his fingernails on the black book.

Patrissia waited for him to go on, but he had sunk his head into his shoulders like a tortoise.

‘Anyway, like I said, it’s not just family,’ she continued, glancing at Marc, who still seemed to be preoccupied. ‘I don’t know about anyone else, but when I’m close to someone, you know, in a relationship, well, it’s like being on a mountain-top: one minute I’m on the upward slope with the sun shining and the birds singing, and I get to the highest ridge and I balance on it a while and it’s exhilarating—and then I slip off. And being on the ridge is so *gorgeous*, and it’s such a contrast when I’m sliding down the slope and having to make an effort to get back up...Well, it’s tempting to let myself go and take the downhill run.’

She seemed to have caught Marc’s attention now, and he was listening with an intense expression.

‘It’s only when you’ve tumbled off a few ridges that you realise that the sun doesn’t shine on every one, and that if only you’d made that *little* bit of an effort, you could have had that sunshine all the time that you’d wasted sliding down the shady slope.’

She hoped not to accidentally catch Marc’s eye, and was relieved that his face was no longer visible, hidden behind the bulky woman in front of him.

‘It’s been like that with all my partners, and I have to admit I’ve always been a downhill racer. One minute, there we are, holding on to each other on the ridge and laughing in the sun and thinking we’ll die if we let go, and the next, I’m pushing and pushing till whoever I’m with *has* to let go, and then that’s it: no going back. It’s like a switch, on or off.’

She knew she was taking a risk, that Marc might take what she had said as some kind of oblique warning. She knew how he would respond—she could hear him saying it now, ‘Well, if that’s how you want it, Patrissia’. And there would be no going back.

Suddenly feeling stifled by the stillness of her audience, she coughed and took a sip of water. Siân was staring straight at her.

‘On or off—well, that’s the best way really, isn’t it?’ cut in Jamie, automatically. ‘No point hanging on.’ And then glancing at her, Jamie saw she was biting her lip, her face rigid.

‘Well, thanks Trish, painful stuff.’ Jamie was grateful to see Siân wriggling for his attention. ‘Er, Siân. Have you got something to add?’

‘I know what you mean about the ridges, Trisha. You’re not the only one. I’ve always found it all too much of an effort. I mean,’ she said, holding her big woollen coat close around her, ‘who wants to climb the same mountain twice anyway? It’s not natural.’

‘No, it’s not.’ The voice was Marc’s. ‘But what’s even less natural is what we’re doing here tonight. I’m beginning to wonder how helpful it is to hear how lazy, weak and selfish we all are? Doesn’t it just tell us we might as well not bother trying to fix ourselves, because, well, look at what other people do.’

Siân’s face coloured, and Patrissia was just opening her mouth to defend her, when she began to speak again.

‘Actually, I was just about to agree with you, Marc. I mean, how do we know what’s appropriate to confess here in front of all these people? I’m not getting at you, Trisha, it takes guts to say what you just said, but it doesn’t seem right, somehow. Why are we doing it? For exculpation?’

‘When we prepared for confession at school it was a really big deal, you know—you didn’t just turn up at church ready to splurge the first thing that came into your head to the whole congregation, like we seem to do here.’

Marc was nodding furiously.

‘We prayed for days beforehand. We lit candles. The nuns talked to us about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We wrote down what we were ashamed of, and prayed that God would help us to identify the element of the grace that he might make available to us so that we could be reconciled with him. We had to pray for a truly contrite heart—*That* was the important bit, the bit that began the process of conversion, the willingness to change.’

*Oh, right, Siân. It’s alright for them, isn’t it, pontificating from the judging side of the confessional? They don’t have to live with people who couldn’t care less about changing themselves, who’ve never tried and who never will try. Why should **we** suffer?*

Patrissia turned in her seat to address her directly. ‘But Siân, don’t we come here because the Catholic-style confession that you describe didn’t work for us?’ She paused. ‘Look at me. I’ve never felt like this in a confession box. How could I when I knew that on the other side of the curtain was a priest who couldn’t have the slightest idea what I was talking about, what I *felt*? Who didn’t even *have* a personal life?’

Siân eyes were blinking rapidly. ‘I just think it’s really personal stuff.’

Patrissia nodded, feeling an urge to confess something. ‘Exactly. I had something of a crisis recently, and it made me think how important it is that I show other people the *real* me, because I’ve lived with myself for forty years but I still don’t know what I’m like. I’m hoping to find out from other people—including my friends here—what I need to attend to, what’s missing.’

She turned and looked directly at Marc. ‘Whether or not this is a confessional.’

‘You’re right, Trisha,’ came a small voice from the audience. ‘It’s hard to be yourself when you’re being judged all the time.’

Patrissia, having made her point, was feeling a little lightheaded and was grateful when Siân continued, ‘Sometimes I feel like I need permission to breathe.’

Patrissia laughed, slightly hysterically. ‘Well, you certainly don’t need my permission. I love what you say, Siân. Honestly.’

Siân felt her cheeks colouring. This time the silence lasted several seconds before an irascible voice interrupted.

‘Can we get back to the subject, which I believe is *Reconciliation*?’

Jamie had been listening spellbound to Patrissia’s outpouring, and was irritated to hear the voice of the man who had preached so pompously about honesty at the first meeting. Jamie hadn’t noticed him since, and had hoped it was the last he’d see of him.

‘Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?’

‘Philip.’

Jamie felt that he needed to display some authority, and decided, reluctantly, to put on his glasses. He took them from his inside pocket and perched them uncomfortably on his nose.

‘Well, Philip, you don’t need my permission. Let’s hear what you have to say.’

‘Yes, well, I doubt any of us here gives a damn about reconciliation, because there are always better things ahead, eh?’ the man began. ‘Easier slopes, sunnier ridges. But let me tell you, there aren’t that many sunny ridges. Like me, you’ve probably all got jobs, money, opportunity—yes, you’ve been lucky—but what you haven’t got is anyone left on your side, because you’ve given them nothing, and left them all behind. You might think that the others here are on your side, but they’re just like you—’

‘Oh, hang on!’ interrupted Jamie. ‘Look, I don’t think you know us very well. I think I speak for most of us here when I say that *of course* we have others on our side. We have loving relationships, wives, husbands, children... They’re right behind us, and we, them.’

There was an eruption of nodding, but the man continued unperturbed.

‘Is that right? So why are we *here*? Why aren’t we at home talking to our *dear* husbands and wives? Because they’re sick of our selfishness, that’s why! It’s always *they* who have to give in, isn’t it, who have to go along with our changes, our *growth*? It’s always *they* who have to put up with our secrecy, with our unspoken demands, with our choices—Do we ever consult them? Warn them even? No! They just have to put up with the way *we* want things to be. What do we ever give *them* except ultimatums and grief?’

Siân thought of Manu. Did he have to put up with her? She’d always thought it was *her* putting up with *him*.

‘And of course we lie to them and deceive them. It’s our life, right? No-one’s going to tell us what to do! We’re not going to budge, are we? Oh no, not us! If they get hurt, well, that’s tough. We don’t have responsibility for *their* feelings, do we?’

‘Thank you,’ said Patrissia quickly as the man paused. She had now recovered her poise, although Jamie, glancing at her, thought she still looked washed-out. ‘I think you have a point, although I’m not sure you’re being entirely fair.’

But the man refused to be deflected by Patrissia's studied politeness.

'Fair?' he said heatedly. 'You can only get fairness when everyone is treated equally under the rules. And when,' he continued with a quick glance at Roy, 'everyone is *told* the rules. This is the second meeting I've come to, and, though I grant you they're very interesting, from what I've heard the whole point of them seems to be to justify getting what we want, yet again, only this time with a clear conscience!

'Well, now I've owned up, someone knows, so my conscience is clear, oh yes, beautiful, no answer to that, eh? No, if we do the same old stuff then we're doing the same old stuff, end of story, and we can't just palm off the responsibility as easily as that. Yes, we can do things that make us feel we're nicer people now: do a little charitable work, help out in a soup kitchen. But we still don't give much away, do we?

'As long as we don't really connect with people, as long as we don't talk to them, give them something of ourselves—as long as we hold on to that little teddy bear of an on/off switch—well, nothing significant *has* changed in us, we're *still* as selfish, and we're still going through the same old routine.

'And then there can never be reconciliation, because that depends on honesty. And forgive me, but I don't see many signs of real honesty here.'

Siân didn't concern herself with honesty. She just went with the flow, usually ending up as part of someone else's plan, or lack of plan. But did she really want that any more? More lousy rounds of giving up and getting out, again and again? Even those rare times, no, that *one* time she'd allowed herself to follow her heart, it had been a disaster. Probably worse than that. It had been a catastrophe.

She looked round for Patrissia, and was surprised to see that Roy had swapped seats with her again. She was back beside Jamie at the top table. How could Siân have missed that? Jamie had his hand on Patrissia's shoulder, saying something in her ear. She nodded a couple of times before patting her eyes with a handkerchief.

Siân looked for signs that she was putting it on, but it seemed genuine. She wasn't sure what was so painful to her, but she was full of admiration—it was obviously a confession of *something*.

Disguising a sigh, Patrissia was looking for Marc's reaction, but he still didn't appear to be paying attention, staring instead at the thinly-curtained window, which was suffused with a foggy yellow light from the lamp-post outside.

To Patrissia's relief, Jamie brought the meeting to a close with tact and diplomacy. Grateful for his consideration, she rose and kissed his cheek before gathering her things and heading for the door.

*

'Are you OK, Trisha?' Siân asked, as Patrissia drew alongside her. 'I thought you handled that bloke really well. He was ever so rude.'

Patrissia shrugged resignedly. 'We're bound to attract the odd lectern-basher from time to time.'

'What he was saying though—He did get me thinking.'

'Oh?'

'That bit about how we don't give much of ourselves, or make enough of an effort.'

You too, eh, Siân? Patrissia was thinking. She shook her head. Why did it take a gathering of strangers to get to the core of things? Why hadn't she been able to see these things in herself before?

I did see them, I did already know. But it was too hard, and I was too scared to face them. I might still be too scared.

'Siân,' said Patrissia, 'I don't want to be rude but I can't think about it any more.' She put her hand on Siân's arm. 'Do you feel like a bite to eat? We could nip down to Gordolino's, it's only five minutes away. Maybe some food will help.'

Siân blushed. 'D'you mean just the two of us?'

'Oh God, yes. I really have had it with men. They're so *barsh*.'

'I know what you mean. Why are they like that?'

Patrissia snorted. 'They don't understand, Siân. They don't listen, and they can't change. What do you say to the pasta?'

‘Sounds good. I’ve just got to use the loo. Back in a sec.’

‘Blimey, what was all that about?’ asked Jamie as he came up to her. ‘Are you OK, Trish? That Philip bloke seemed to be having a real go at you, the cheeky rascal. Brave man, rather!’

She smiled. ‘Thank you, Jamie.’ She kissed his cheek, suddenly thankful for his uncomplicated concern. ‘Actually, Marc mentioned that he wanted us to stop asking new people. I was surprised when he said that he thought the atmosphere’s got a bit too stiff with strangers appearing all the time—and most don’t stay long.’

‘I’m all for that, Trish,’ said Jamie, companionably. He looked around at the small groups of people shuffling their belongings and otherwise ignoring the call of their homes. ‘Has he gone already? I wanted to ask him something.’

‘Yes, he went before the end, as usual.’

Jamie looked at her cloudy eyes. ‘You look like you could do with a drink. Fancy a quick one?’

Patrissia showed her teeth. ‘That sounds inviting, but I’ve already promised Siân. Girls only, I’m afraid.’

‘Can I watch?’ He winked.

‘Only if you keep quiet.’

Jamie laughed happily. ‘Actually, we’re throwing a dinner party next Saturday. Just a few people. Roy’ll be there, and Marc, I hope, and a couple of old friends. You’ll come, won’t you?’

‘Delighted. Dress up or down?’ She half-closed her eyes.

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘You’ll never change, will you, Jamie? Sorry, I have to go,’ she said, spotting Siân hovering by the door. ‘See you Saturday. Give Lucinda my love.’

She was already regretting inviting Siân to eat. The meeting had exhausted her, and now all she wanted to do was talk to Marc quietly, be held by him, and go to sleep in his arms.

*

Gordolino's was busy when Patrissia and Siân arrived, and they were lucky to get a table wedged into a tiny space by the kitchen door. It was too noisy to talk easily, and Siân seemed very nervous, clumsily spilling the salt and knocking a knife onto the floor as she tried to read the menu in the poor light.

Patrissia felt herself becoming impatient, and by the time their tagliatelli was dumped on the table by the hassled-looking waitress, she wanted to scream. They had barely exchanged a word.

'How's the baby?' she asked, attempting interest.

Siân was eager, raising her voice to pierce the din. 'I think I felt it moving yesterday.'

'That must be nice.'

'Yes. I finally feel like something's happening that isn't just being sick.'

Unable to concentrate, Patrissia smiled. 'Excuse me, Siân, I need the loo. Do start without me, I'll only be a tick.'

*

Marc struggled to sit up. He gradually realised that he was at home. He held his watch under the softly glowing lamp—it was nine thirty. He must have fallen asleep on the sofa. The last thing he remembered was being at the meeting. How had he got here?

The phone rang, startling him.

'Hello?'

'Oh, you're home,' said a familiar voice.

'Patrissia?'

'Yes. I'm sorry to call this late. I was just a little concerned—You left the meeting so quickly again tonight. You didn't even say hello.'

'No. I wasn't feeling very well.'

Patrissia leaned against the basin in the Ladies, switching her mobile to her other hand.

'I could come over if you'd like?'

There was a pause. Patrissia stared at her reflection in the mirror. She didn't look happy. Silence.

'Oh well. So, tomorrow, then?'

'That would be better, yes.'

'OK Marc, try to get a good night's sleep.'

There were tears in Patrissia's eyes as she stuffed the phone back into her bag.

*

'I'm glad you started without me, Siân. Sorry I was so long, there was a bit of a queue.'

'Yeah, I'm eating for two now. Tuck in, it's really good.'

Patrissia took a sip of wine.

'You look really knackered—Was it that Philip bloke?' Siân asked with her mouth full. 'Is he one of Marc's friends?'

'Yes, I believe he is.'

'Well, what he was saying, it made me think.'

'About what?'

'About everything really. I mean, look at me—I'm seven months pregnant and I know it's probably just my hormones, but I feel as if life's passing me by.'

'I know what you mean.' Patrissia prodded the tagliatelli with her fork, her appetite dwindling.

'I look back at my life and think, is that all there is?'

'Mmm.' Patrissia took another sip of wine.

'If I died tomorrow, would anyone even notice? Well, Manu would. But that's the problem really—Do I actually want to be with Manu for the rest of my days?' She gave a hollow laugh.

'And *do* you?' Patrissia asked. What if *she* gave in? Did she want to be with Marc for the rest of *her* days?

'I don't know. Sometimes I think that I'm only staying with him because I can't think of anything else to do.'

Patrissia was shaken by a sudden despair. She wanted to throw her plate of food at the wall, jump on the table and shout to Marc at the top of her voice, 'Why can't you be less of a *bastard*? Why can't we just fucking *do* it?'

Siân was still talking. 'But with the baby coming, I've started to think.'

Patrissia looked at her across the table. 'It's supposed to help you, isn't it, being with someone? Not exhaust you, and take what you have away.'

A thought occurred to her as she glanced at Siân's bump. 'The baby's *yours*, Siân—That's how you feel, am I right? You don't want to share it with someone you don't love?'

Siân's lower lip was trembling. 'I don't think I can love anyone.'

'Don't say that. You just haven't met the right person.'

'I'm not likely to now, am I?'

Patrissia took her hand. 'Why did you say you can't love anyone?'

Siân stared down at the table. 'I've done some terrible things, Trisha, and I can't really talk about them. I think I need to start again somehow, but look at me—I can't start anything now. I'm stuck for the next twenty years.'

'If you've got a guilty conscience, why not let it out at a meeting? You've heard us when someone lets it all out. People are interested and sympathetic.' Patrissia squeezed Siân's hand.

'I can't, it's too personal. I need to tell someone who doesn't care.'

'You could always try Marc,' Patrissia said with more sincerity than she had intended.

Siân looked up. 'Why Marc?'

Patrissia couldn't think why she'd suggested something so ridiculous, and laughed. 'I was only joking. Mind you, if I wanted to unload something, he'd probably be top of my list. He certainly seems to think he knows what's right.'

'Mmm, he does, doesn't he?'

‘Of course he does, he’s a *man*.’ The two women smiled at each other. ‘And therefore completely unempathetic, but maybe in this case, that would be a good thing.’

Siân dabbed away a tear and sniffed. ‘Maybe you’re right.’

Patrissia, suddenly oppressed by the weight of unresolved yearning in her voice, heard herself say, ‘Actually, what’s the time?’

Siân looked at her watch. ‘Only nine forty-five. Why?’

‘Oh, I said I’d call in on Marc on my way back, but you’re right, I’m too knackered. I think I’ll go home and have a hot bath and an early night.’

‘That sounds nice.’

‘D’you need a lift?’

‘No thanks, Trish. It’s still light and it’s a lovely evening, I’ll waddle home,’ she smiled. ‘I can always get Manu to pick me up if I run out of steam.’

Patrissia stood up. ‘OK, if you’re sure you’ll be all right. Look, why don’t you come round to my place one evening and we’ll have a proper girls night in when we’re not so tired?’

‘Lovely.’

‘I’ll get the bill on my way out.’ She bent and kissed Siân on the cheek. ‘It’ll be all right, Siân, you’ll see.’



What a strange evening, Siân thought, as she watched Patrissia manoeuvre herself between the tables. Something had certainly happened at the meeting.

There had been far too much talk about being honest for her liking, and she had been glad to leave, but she couldn’t shake off the feeling that maybe it was time to have done with the past, and get her guilty secret off her chest once and for all.

Patrissia had obviously been affected too, Siân could tell. It was funny that she’d brought Marc up, though. The more Siân thought about it, the more she felt that she wanted to call him.

It was odd: if she and Patrissia were going to be friends, shouldn't it be Patrissia that she should want to turn to? She sat for a moment imagining the conversation. No, she didn't want a friend hearing this. She didn't want sympathy.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and tried to ignore the insistent thump of her heartbeat. It was now or never.

She took out her phone and dialled. She let the phone ring itself out, but there was no answer.

The unbroken hum

It hadn't been in Ciara's mind to actually sleep with Jamie, and she was annoyed at herself for letting it happen so fast. But he'd been amusing and kind and made her feel wanted, and it had just happened, even though she really didn't need things to get complicated again quite yet—Marc and Patrissia were complication enough.

Fetching herself another glass of wine, she sat by the window and stared out at the dirty grey street and the unkempt gardens and filthy overgrown drives of the houses opposite. She was stuck in this hole for another couple of months. How she missed her real family, the welcome, the love, the easy, unbroken hum of connection!

She lit a cigarette. So this was what it was like to find your father. He hadn't even called her. There was Patrissia, of course, the biggest complication, who made Ciara feel uneasy about what kind of person Claudia would turn out to be. Patrissia seemed almost sinister, the way she wanted to organise everything, suggesting coffee, drinks—just the two of them, usually, but her last call had been about dinner at Marc's. She seemed to be sure he'd agree.

But whenever Ciara brought up the subject of finding Claudia, and although Patrissia had assured her of her help, Ciara had the impression she wasn't that interested, which made her suspicious. Claudia was Patrissia's *sister*, for heaven's sake. Surely she wanted to do something?

Was it worth wasting more time on any of them? Marc didn't seem to be at all interested in her, and she was probably as close to him now as she would ever be.

The thought depressed her. But Patrissia had said he was ill, and Ciara had seen his seizure for herself. He needed help, she decided—and he wasn't getting it from her aunt. She hadn't even called an ambulance when he'd keeled over on the floor.

She suddenly felt a rush of sympathy for him, and abruptly retrieving her phone, she pressed his number. Hearing his answerphone click in, she waited until the end of the message and, draining her glass, spoke quickly.

‘Hello, Marc. It’s Ciara. I’m coming round—I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.’

*

Marc had been watching for her, opening the door as she mounted his front steps.

‘Hello, Marc.’

He stepped back as if he’d been slapped.

‘Ciara? I tried to call you back, but—’

‘I’m sorry, Marc, but we have to talk. I didn’t want you to put me off again. Don’t worry, I’ve not come to make a scene, and I won’t stay long.’

‘A scene? Why would you?’ Marc’s eyes were wide with fear. ‘Patrissia’s not here—’

‘Good. It’s not Patrissia I want to see. Please, Marc.’ She pushed past him into the house. As he closed the door, she kept moving along the passageway. ‘Let’s sit in the kitchen.’

Behind her, she heard a muffled, ‘It’s more comfortable—’

‘The kitchen’s better.’

Ciara hugged her coat around her as they entered the dimly-lit space where Marc made tea and coffee. The kitchen looked like no-one had set foot in it for fifty years, and had been left to slowly accumulate dust and grease like an old net curtain. She remembered Jamie saying that he’d never seen anywhere so gloomy and uninviting, and she had to agree.

She sat down on a hard chair, pulling it out from beneath the big table and dusting the crumbs off it. ‘I can see that you find talking to me very hard, Marc, and I’m sorry to put you through this, but I need resolution.’ She pointed to the chair on the other side. ‘Come on,’ she said, forcing a bright tone, ‘Sit down. Speak to me.’

Marc obeyed, awkwardly sitting and manoeuvring his long legs under the table as if in an unfamiliar place. ‘Resolution? What do you mean?’

‘Marc, I need to know whether we’re going to have any kind of relationship. You’re my father and I need to know. We’ve hardly spoken.’ She looked at him with her clear green eyes. ‘Tell me why I’m such a problem for you. Come on, we can be adult about this, can’t we? Just tell me what you’re thinking right now. I’m your daughter, I’ll understand.’

Marc’s face opposite her was rigid with fear.

‘Is it that you committed a mortal sin with my mother? Is that it? Or that you were a priest?’ She smiled. ‘Don’t think I’m excusing you, but really, are those sins of much consequence in the scheme of things? They’re old sins, Marc. Isn’t it more important to deal...’ she struggled to find the suitably bland yet harmonious words that would show willing, ‘respectfully and appropriately with the present?’

He was sitting completely still, listening, but making no sign that he had anything to say. She stared at him. ‘You’re making this hard work, you know.’

Still there was no response. ‘I mean, even if you *are* living in sin with Patrissia, so what? What makes you so special? You were a priest, yes, but the operative word is *were*, isn’t it? You *were* a priest who had an affair. Big deal. I bet half the priests in Rome have done the same.’

Marc’s eyes were wide, but Ciara couldn’t decide whether he was angry, surprised, or just baffled. She knew she must seem a bit drunk, but her head was clear.

‘Come on, Marc, live in the real world for once, if only for a moment. What you did with Claudia, it happens all the time, to lots of people, and they don’t carry it around on their backs for the rest of their lives as you have. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not trivialising what you did to Claudia and to me, how you acted, but it’s in the past, it’s gone. You must have partly accepted it since you’re living with Patrissia.’

There was a pause, then Marc leaned forward with hooded eyes, ‘We’re not living together, Ciara. It was coincidence you found her here. And it wasn’t my doing that we have a kind of relationship. Neither of us knew who the other was until you arrived.’

‘Maybe you’re not together formally, but you sleep with her, and *she* certainly acts like you’re together.’

‘She does, yes, but her acting might be just that. I don’t know her well enough to judge. I wouldn’t take anything for granted.’

Ciara exhaled sharply.

‘Well, she must like you, mustn’t she? And if you’re worried about what I might think of you sleeping with my mother’s sister, don’t be.’

Ciara felt her breath coming more quickly. This wasn’t what she had come to say, but she couldn’t stop herself.

‘I’m not here to judge you, Marc. In fact, I’m having trouble seeing why there’s a problem between us at all. I’m not expecting anything from you, and I don’t want anything except to know you, but you’re not even giving me that.’

His hand jerked on the table, and Ciara reached across to cover it with her own. It felt cold and sinewy.

‘You needn’t be worried, Marc. This is nothing to do with Claudia. I *will* find her, but that’s *my* choice, and *my* problem. Patrissia says you don’t know where she is. Is that actually true?’

He nodded slowly. ‘Yes, I have no idea where she is, and I don’t want to know. It could only bring trouble.’

‘OK, I respect that.’ Ciara paused. ‘I don’t think it’s the same for Patrissia though. Sooner or later she’ll want Claudia back in her life, and that *will* involve you.’ She squeezed his still-cool hand, which twitched involuntarily against her own. ‘What then?’

‘I don’t know.’ He looked beaten.

Ciara dropped his hand and reached in her bag for the pack of cigarettes. She took two out and lit them both, passing one over the table. They both inhaled greedily.

‘I’m sorry to be so blunt. I’m a bit drunk.’

‘Yes.’

She banged her hand on the table. ‘Is that all I’m going to get out of you? *Yes*?’

‘What do you want me to say, Ciara?’ Marc was now leaning back in his chair, his black eyes steady. ‘You’re not so different from Patrissia. How can you sit there and say that a mortal sin is of no consequence? You clearly have no conception of right and wrong—especially of wrong. Not to mention that my relations with Patrissia are none of your business. I can’t imagine why you thought they were.’

Ciara sat back in the uncomfortable chair, and nodded to herself.

‘Because I’m trying to help you, you dumb, unhappy fuck. OK,’ she snapped, ignoring the voice telling her to stop, ‘you think I’m like Patrissia, just another interfering woman? Well, maybe I am, but I’m also your *daughter*—does that mean *nothing* to you? Can’t you see how frustrating this is for me? How distressing it is that you are being so impenetrable? Well, impenetrable—you’re not even touchable, reachable. You’re so cold. You’re impossible.’

Marc stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette, his expression hard.

‘I was seduced by your mother, pursued and ruined by your grandfather, seduced again by your aunt, and then *you* turn up on my doorstep. How do you think I should feel? My association with the Vecchia family destroyed my life.’

‘Jesus, Marc, do you take *no* responsibility for your mistakes? *You* destroyed your life! *You* had the affair! Secundus went completely beyond the call of duty for you. I’ve spent months finding you. Patrissia, for whatever reason, wants to help you. Yet you seem to have no gratitude at all, *none*, only grievances and disdain. How much more help do you *want*?’

She scraped back her chair.

‘You’re a lost fucking cause, Marc, you know that? You’re *pitiful*. Don’t bother seeing me out.’

Marc sat and listened to the uneven clatter of her heels as she made her way down the passageway to the front door, and then to the rattle of the coloured glass as she slammed it shut.

No responsibility. No gratitude. Pitiful.

His face darkened. How easy it was for these privileged, free souls to lecture others on gratitude. If they were grateful, it was for

having a life that, if not particularly easy, had been determined by their own choices.

What choices had he been given? None, until he found himself cut off from the life he had been provided with and, alone in an unfamiliar place, facing the need to make life-determining choices for which he was scarcely equipped.

They wanted him to be grateful that he was taken account of by them at all, that they chose to give him attention. Ciara had clearly decided that he was now of no account to her, which was a relief. How long would he have to wait for Patrissia to decide the same?

He couldn't work her out at all. What did he represent to her? It must be something she felt deeply about, or she would have given up on him by now. Perhaps it was simple curiosity about her sister's lover, or jealousy of the drama their affair had generated?

In any case, he didn't think she was interested in him personally, and that both hurt and soothed him. Perhaps they could negotiate a kind of truce before the end.

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When Ciara arrived back at her flat, she threw her coat on the hall table and almost ran to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine.

Emptying the last of the bottle into her dirty glass, she put it in the sink and leaned over the taps, her eyes closed. Well, that was that. Marc was no use to her in finding her mother, and really, wasn't that all she needed him for? It wasn't his fault, and he certainly didn't deserve some pissed woman barging in to his house and attacking him. She shook her head.

Oh well.

She looked at the glass of wine in her hand and poured it down the sink.

May God forgive you

Siân knew it was only a few minutes walk to Marc's house. Patrissia had pointed it out to her. It was the ornate one with the columns, big wide steps and straggly box trees almost obscuring the front door.

And here she was, standing outside. It was late, he wouldn't want to be disturbed, and he would probably refuse. But the meeting had been a definite sign, she was sure of it.

She closed her eyes, and muttering a quick Hail Mary under her breath, lifted the door knocker and rapped it three times. There was a long wait before she heard footsteps, and then Marc was peering out at her from a long, dark hallway.

'Hello? Ciara? Is that you?'

'I'm sorry to bother you so late, Marc. It's me, Siân, you know, from the meetings? I wondered if you had a moment?'

He looked utterly perplexed.

'Can I come in?'

He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it. 'Oh, er, I suppose so.'

The house smelled of stale cigarette smoke. His living room was huge—great high ceilings, a Victorian fireplace, old fashioned chairs, a rug that looked positively medieval—and Siân found herself wondering how a sculptor who did a bit of decorating to make ends meet could afford such a grand pile.

'What can I do for you?'

She stood watching him put some paperwork into neat stacks on his desk, before answering, 'It's actually a favour I've come for.'

He glanced up. 'Oh?'

'I know it's a bit of a liberty, but there's something I just have to get off my chest. I should've done it years ago, and after the meeting tonight, I don't know, but tonight just seems to be the right time.'

Marc looked at her blankly.

'You used to be a priest, didn't you?' Siân asked.

He grimaced at the hope in her voice. 'Who told you that?'

'Trisha. Is it true?'

'Yes, but it was a very long time ago. I'm not a priest any more.'

'It doesn't matter, I still want to do this.'

'Do what?'

'Make a confession.'

'What?' he laughed. 'I can't take your confession now, I've no authority. It wouldn't mean anything. Go to your priest.'

But she was ready for the refusal and didn't react, except to say, 'I really need this. I've been waiting a long time. It'll only take a minute.'

Marc recognised the look of determination on her face and averted his eyes.

'Please, Marc. You must understand how important it is to me. I don't care if it's not official, I just think you're the right person. I know you. I trust you.'

She watched as his face underwent a series of changes. It was like an actor changing masks—he wasn't making a decision, he was waiting to see which of the masks fitted.

At last he raised his head, and sweeping aside the piles of paper he had just been busy arranging, he sat down at his desk, opened the drawer and took out the big crucifix Secundus had given him when he had been hounded from Rome.

He kissed it and held it gently, turning it between his hands, finally allowing himself to look at Siân, who held his gaze, unflinching.

'All right,' he said, 'I'll hear your confession.'

Siân's lips parted in a grateful smile, then she frowned. 'This is just between us, isn't it? It won't go any further?'

'No, of course not.'

She bowed her head, waiting.

'You may begin.'

'It was a long time ago.'

Marc nodded. Siân looked at him nervously, her big eyes blinking.

‘What is the nature of your sin?’

‘Lust,’ she said softly. ‘I was just out of secretarial college and I started a new job in a little town near Luton. I didn’t know anyone so I joined a couple of evening classes and—’

Marc had his eyes fixed on the crucifix, as if daring it to reveal some magic quality that would fix him.

‘I started going to the parish church Sunday mornings, just for something to do, you know...’ she petered out, looking at him for permission to continue. He nodded.

‘Anyway.’ She cleared her throat. ‘Not to beat about the bush, it ended up with me and Father Joseph... It was all my fault really. It was *me* who seduced *him*.’

Marc closed his eyes. *Claudia*.

‘I’m sorry, I’ve shocked you, haven’t I?’ she apologised, concerned at his reaction.

‘No, no, sorry. Is that your confession?’

Siân nodded. She tried to remember the right words. ‘Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. Will you bless me now?’

She raised her face to him, closed her eyes and felt his cool, damp finger trace the sign of the cross on her forehead.

*

After Siân had left, repeatedly thanking him as he followed her to the door, Marc returned to his desk, where he sat staring at the crucifix. Was this Patrissia’s revenge? If so, she would be disappointed.

He felt lightheaded and restless, and needing to distract himself, headed for his studio.

*

Siân stayed on the top step of Marc’s house for a few seconds after he’d shut the door, breathing deeply. Her confession had taken

barely five minutes. All those years! She felt light, holy even, which was silly, she knew, but somehow she felt she deserved it.

She could see into the living room of the house opposite. They were watching TV just as she would have been if she hadn't gone to Marc's. She kept her eyes on them as she slowly descended the steps, wondering what program was on. They didn't seem to be enjoying it, whatever it was. The bloke was asleep with his mouth open, and the woman was reading a magazine, only glancing up occasionally.

I know he's not a priest any more, she was thinking, but it worked anyway. I gave him the power, didn't I?

She looked down and patted her belly. *It's me, it's mine. It's my choice.*

Now that it was over, her thoughts turned to Patrissia, and how nice she'd been at the café. She'd said that getting absolution from Marc was a joke, hadn't she? But Siân had managed it.

It's me, isn't it? she told herself again, *me. Patrissia can't get forgiveness from him, but I can. Why is that, I wonder?*

Vetiver and sunglasses

Jamie came to a dead stop when he saw Ciara. She was sitting at a café table in headscarf, big sunglasses and floaty dress, cool and composed. He felt his breath quicken as she bent forward, and he considered texting her to make an excuse, but his hand remained in his pocket, clamped around his phone.

She had suggested they meet here—it was convenient for the Tate, where she said she was going to spend the morning—and although it was a bit too near the private gallery where Lucinda was showing her ceramics that day, Jamie had agreed. She'd been so enthusiastic, he didn't want to spoil her mood.

He stood for a minute watching her, scanning the crowd and the other tables. It seemed safe enough.

*

'Just in time! I'd almost given up on you.'

'Sorry, Ciara. Lunchtimes take a bit of organisation. You're looking great.'

'Thank you. Busy morning?'

'No more than usual—That's to say busy, busy, busy.' He bent and kissed her cheek. It was cool and smooth, with a lingering scent of vetiver.

'How about you? Seen anything of Patrissia or Marc?'

Her ankle brushed his knee as she stretched to cross her legs, and he was suddenly shaken by the seriousness of his desire for her. With another glance round, he sat down.

Ciara's tone was businesslike. 'I had coffee with Patrissia yesterday at her place. It's very smart—She obviously does all right for herself.'

'Oh? I've never been inside, although I've stood outside in the rain once or twice. What's it like?'

'Tasteful, tidy, as you'd expect,' she sniffed. 'A little too minimalist for my liking.'

'Hmm, do I detect a whiff of antipathy?'

Ciara shook her head. 'No, I'm only joking. To be fair, she's the perfect aunt. She's been in touch a lot since I arrived, which is more than can be said for Marc.'

'Ah, well, he's a bit of a recluse—holes up in his studio for days on end, according to Trish. I can't imagine why she's so interested in him.'

Ciara pushed her hair off her face and made a wry smile. 'He does seem quite odd. I'm sure they're seriously involved with each other, though.'

'Really? Did she tell you?'

Ciara shook her head. 'No, of course not. But I'll tell you what she did say—'

He leaned forward, expectant. 'Go on.'

'She said you were bad news...'

'Really? Jamie's forehead creased. 'I wonder why?'

'She didn't say.' Ciara sniffed and took out a cigarette, lighting it with an efficient-sounding click. 'She was in a funny mood. She was telling me about when she was growing up, how strict her father was, and how Claudia was her mother's favourite. I mean, it was said in a jokey way but you could tell there was some bitterness there. And when she talked about her and Claudia—you know when someone's trying to persuade themselves that something's true? Everything's a bit too perfect?'

'Like old flames, you mean? Angels or demons?'

'Yes, exactly. It explains why she might not be that keen on a reunion, I suppose. And actually, if Claudia fell for Marc, what can she be *like*?'

'Hmm, good point. She *is* Trish's sister, after all. Did she say anything about your father?'

'Not much, she was apologetic, mostly. A hint of resentment. I think he reminds her of *her* father.'

'Oh? What could she resent Marc for?'

Ciara snorted. 'I get the definite impression that she likes being naughty, shall we say, and he won't just laugh it off. I don't blame him—you know that Theo's not out of the picture yet, don't you?'

'She mentioned something about him at the pub, yes.'

Ciara's voice was condescending. 'She wants to do exactly what she wants, when she wants. I don't think she cares about being punished—it's all part of the game. But he won't play, and that pisses her off. She's still a bit of a kid, really.'

'What did she expect?' Jamie said, sympathetically. 'I mean, look at him: Saint fucking Ignatius or what? Sorry, Ciara, I know he's your dad and all that, but—'

'It's OK, Jamie, I agree with you.'

They sat looking at the crowds around them. 'God, so many people! And what *is* that woman wearing?' Ciara flicked her head. 'I'd die of embarrassment. Good on her, though, eh?'

'Absolutely,' said Jamie, recoiling.

'Speaking of Marc, I went to see him last night, and I wish I hadn't.'

Jamie gave a wry smile. 'Blood out of stone, sort of thing?'

'Pretty much, but at least I tried, and I said a few things that needed to be said. I don't know, I just feel *so* lucky he wasn't around when I was growing up.' She stopped and smiled. 'Anyway, enough of that.'

It was pleasant sitting in the sunshine, and she felt an unaccountable lightness, perhaps at the thought that her outburst the night before had put a definitive end to this part of her search and to any further involvement with her father.

'I've just been to the 'Tate Modern,' she said, lighting another cigarette, 'and it was so disappointing. They seem to have an obsession with size and soul-lessness. So different from the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome—I was there last year, and they have some beautiful pieces. Going to the Tate is like being hit with a mallet in comparison.'

Jamie wiped his brow with a handkerchief, which Ciara saw was monogrammed. Didn't people only buy those for husbands and partners?

'I don't get much time to visit galleries, unfortunately. It was hard enough getting a whole hour for lunch. But completely worth it,' Jamie said, crinkling his eyes and blowing her a kiss.

She smiled. 'What do you do? You didn't say.'

'Account director at C&R. Some of our clients are very demanding.'

'I'm impressed! Even I've heard of them, and I don't really keep up as much as I should.'

Jamie leaned back and took a sip of coffee and they sat companionably, watching and commenting when someone in the crowds of people around them caught their eye. He felt at ease with her, she already seemed familiar. There was none of the tense acquiescence or cool negotiation that he was used to. She was just there, all of her, tranquil and open and available.

*

'Ciara! and Jamie, no less. Well, hello, what a surprise!'

Jamie began to rise automatically, but Patrissia, coming up behind him, put a hand on his shoulder and, bending to kiss his cheek, whispered, 'Relax, I won't tell.'

'What a lovely day! We've just been to a show—an old friend of mine is exhibiting nearby.'

'We? You mean Marc's with you?' said Jamie, starting to rise again.

'No, Jamie, it's Siân. My, you are jumpy!' She moved around the table to kiss Ciara.

'Oh well, you know, meeting her father,' said Jamie, recovering with a laugh.

'We were passing, and Siân needed the loo. She's just popped inside. I'm taking her to lunch at Fortnums.'

‘Mmm, how lovely,’ said Ciara. Was the damned woman keeping tabs on her movements now? Had Marc already told her about last night?

‘So, what are *you* doing here? Showing Ciara the sights, Jamie? That’s kind of you.’

‘Just doing my bit to stop her dying of neglect, Trish.’

Ciara was sitting with a slightly less sunny expression. ‘Have you seen Marc at all, Patrissia?’

Patrissia shook her head.

‘I saw him last night, and I thought he might have mentioned it...?’

‘You talked with him?’ Patrissia smiled brightly. She was intrigued. ‘That’s great! But no, I’ve not heard from him today. No doubt he’ll tell me all about it when I see him.’ She paused. ‘Actually, I was going to call you. D’you fancy coming to dinner with us one day next week? You must think very badly of us.’

‘Next week? Does Marc know that you’re asking me?’

Patrissia looked at Ciara enquiringly. ‘No, but I’m sure he’ll want to.’ She looked around. ‘Oh, it looks like Siân’s waiting for me,’ she said, nodding towards her pregnant friend who was peering around shortsightedly from the edge of the crowd. ‘I’ll have to go. ’Bye, darling, ’bye, Jamie. Be good.’

As she turned away, she took a camera out of her bag, and shouted ‘Smile!’

‘What are you doing?’ Jamie barked as he half-rose automatically, turning his face away. Then he caught himself, and without a break turned to brush some imagined crumbs from his lap. Patrissia ignored him, threading her way back through the tables to take Siân’s arm, both moving slowly off in the direction of a taxi rank.

Jamie was preparing to explain himself, but when he turned back to Ciara, she was looking thoughtful, only saying, ‘Who was that with Patrissia?’

‘A woman from the meetings: Siân. Why?’

‘Just curious. By the way, you’re the second person to mention these meetings—what kind of thing are they?’

‘Oh, they’re just a bit of fun. You get to talk without people wondering if you’re getting at them. Stuff you’d like to tell disinterested people so you can get some kind of perspective. It’s actually very interesting. All sorts of people, and Big Themes!’ he laughed, spreading his arms. ‘This big!’

Ciara giggled. ‘Patrissia asked me if I wanted to go, and I did think about it. But it sounds too much like group therapy—maybe I’ll give them a miss.’

‘Trish needs a bit of support. I really just go as a favour to her. She’s quite serious about them—bit of a mid-life crisis, I’d say. I swear she was on the verge of a breakdown at the last one.’

‘You sound quite concerned, Jamie.’ Ciara’s tone was light, but pointed. ‘You don’t fancy her, do you?’

He laughed. ‘No, no, she’s not my type—we’ve a bit too much in common. I can tell you what my type *is*, though, if you’d care to know. She’d probably wear vetiver and sunglasses, and spend her time looking cool and elegant on sunlit terraces...’

They smiled at each other, and Jamie took her hand, kissing it lightly. ‘It’s so easy being with you, Ciara.’

‘Mmm, I feel like that, too. It’s lovely, isn’t it?’

*

‘Hello, Jamie? Can you hear me? God, this bloody signal.’

‘Hi, Trish, yes, I can hear you. I imagine you called to tell me to stay away from Ciara. What are you going to do with that photo?’

‘Nothing, Jamie, I wanted a photo of Ciara, not you. Listen, what you do is none of my business. She’s a grown woman, and you, well, you’re a man. But if I thought she or Lucinda were going to get hurt by this, I might *make* it my business, d’you understand?’

‘I understand. Thanks, Trish, I owe you. And get rid of the photo, eh? It makes me nervous.’

‘Yes, Jamie, I’ll cut your ugly mug out of it.’ She paused, remembering his concern for her at the meeting. ‘Don’t hurt her, Jamie, I mean it.’

‘I’ve no intention of hurting her, Trish. We’re having fun. Just fun.’

There was a silence.

‘Trish? Are you still there?’

‘Oh yes, sorry. You just reminded me of something. It’s not important.’

Part 4. High life

The portrait

Marc stood contemplating the room. A tall sash window let in the ash-grey London light—the kind of light that illuminates the dry flesh of a Lucian Freud but sucks the heart out of a Rembrandt.

He'd come to the Portrait Gallery not quite by chance, and he wasn't sure whether he'd just needed a change of scenery and some fresh air. Anyway, here he was.

Patrissia had phoned him earlier and had left an exasperated message when he hadn't answered. Her voice had sounded harsh, and he had erased the message after a few seconds. There were too many harsh tones here as well amongst these modern portraits. There seemed no escape from life's rough edges today. Maybe he needed those rough edges to shake something in himself that needed to be shaken.

He now stood face to face with the stark, depressing portrait of an old man wearing a faded blue beach hat, every vein over his porcine nose picked out in stark relief with a kind of malevolent enjoyment. Even the mole on his chin sprouted a single meticulously drawn hair.

He was subtly reassured that the art world still saw fit to comfort itself by embracing the ugliness of the world, and wondered whether his statue of Patrissia fell into the dubious category of modern art now that the stone was hacked and jagged. He'd anticipated a Salomé, perhaps, something subtle and hidden, but it had turned into something else, something deformed, an Emilio Mogilner, and he hadn't been able to stop himself.

*

A bespectacled curator was watching Marc with curiosity, following his gaze.

‘It’s an amazing painting, isn’t it? It won the Portrait Prize in 1997,’ he commented. When there was no response, he went on, ‘The artist died last year. A heart attack.’

‘It’s a self-portrait, is it?’ Marc queried, peering at the lace-like filigree of thread veins and crepey folds on the old man’s neck.

‘Goodness me, no—didn’t you read the plaque? It’s by Meriel Billington, and the dear old man on the beach was her husband.’

‘She must have hated him. So much malice in those details.’

‘Malice? Why d’you say that, sir? I think it’s a study in adoration. Look at the understanding, the tenderness in each brushstroke!’

‘But—’ Marc began, then stopped, gesturing at the painting. ‘But it’s glorifying the banal, the plain and ugly, the rotting of the flesh,’ he said, his voice scathing.

‘Like a Rembrandt, it is,’ the curator asserted. ‘A modern one, I’ll grant you, but just look at it and tell me you can’t see the oceans of love that old man had poured into him. Why, he positively shines with it.’

Marc let his eyes simply look, nodding gently as his mind emptied for a moment, until a memory intruded. Suddenly he was thinking of the Pietà he’d admired at the El Greco exhibition, of the two women comforting the dying God. *Claudia and Patrissia*. Perhaps, if he could tear out his fear of Patrissia and somehow bury it in the figure he had created, he might find peace, even love?

‘Love embodied is love transfixed, wouldn’t you say, or even *embalmed*?’ he replied to the waiting curator. ‘Is your restaurant on this floor?’

The curator smiled coolly. ‘It is, sir, but you might want to visit this year’s portrait exhibition on your way—it’s just through the double-doors. Perhaps you’ll agree with me that the winning portraits at least were painted with love. It’s essential, isn’t it?’

‘Painted with love? Love is open to much interpretation—perhaps painted with feeling, with attention?’ Marc grunted, seeming to consider the question. ‘So much is ambiguous, tenuous, changeable. The moment seized is perhaps true only for that moment.’ He smiled. ‘Thank you for reminding me.’

Making his way into a much larger and busier gallery, Marc headed towards the clusters of visitors around the far wall where the winning paintings had been hung.

Of the three, Marc could see only one, a depiction of a young woman standing in three-quarter profile, her arm relaxed in front of her, holding a brush in her fist. She had obviously just been using the brush to measure an object that was itself out of view. Her face was clear and calm—she had done the calculation and was now filling herself with the image, allowing the parts to flow into something that would become an amalgamation of forms, intuitions and expressions, a subject and an object.

Just as the figure was standing in the portrait, just as her portraitist had stood before her, so Marc now stood, contemplating the substance of the connection between an artist and their art. There was no hint of text or narrative here, the artist had drawn honestly and with care and skill both an image and an ideal.

And the image was beautiful, the ideal was pure, without conflict or tension, and the result, an assembly of parts made whole in the memory of desire.

Patrissia?

He stood back to view the plaque bearing the artist's name. It was unknown to him, yet the painting assured him that this man knew what he was doing and what he wanted to say—to say about Patrissia, for the portrait was unmistakably of her. She was even wearing the necklace, the delicate strings of which shimmered against her smooth young skin.

He stood lost in the brooding moment. She hadn't mentioned having modelled recently. Who was her Rembrandt?

How many more secrets was she hiding from him?

*

Marc was barely through his front door when he noticed the red light flashing on his answer machine. He pressed the button.

'You didn't come again, Marc. People are beginning to wonder. I tried phoning you but you didn't answer.'

What's the matter? I'm at the Royal Oak if you want to talk.'

'I was tired,' he said under his breath. 'Not that it's any business of yours, Patrissia. But it is my damned business who you've been sleeping with!'

He'd have to see her. Glancing in the mirror at his dirty, unwashed hair, he ran his hand through it impatiently, then, irked that he didn't have time to walk and would have to take the car, he left the house.

*

She looked up expectantly as he approached. 'Hi Marc, I hoped you'd come,' she said with a faint smile, handing him a glass full to the brim as he sat down opposite her.

'I've just got back. I've been to the Portrait Gallery.'

'Oh,' said Patrissia in a disappointed voice, 'Never too busy for art, but always too busy for me? Couldn't we have gone together?'

'I don't know. I didn't think.'

Patrissia suddenly noticed the hardness of his stare, and continued in a more conciliatory tone, 'I don't understand what's going on, Marc. One minute everything's fine and then you blank me. We sleep together and in the morning you can't wait to be gone. You rush off, pretending to have a hundred and one things to do—We have to sort this out, Marc. You're still in love with her, aren't you?'

They sat looking at each other until Marc broke the silence with a sigh. 'No.'

Patrissia nodded slowly. 'Are you in love with *me*?'

'It appears that I am.'

Patrissia lit herself a cigarette before saying, 'Appearances can be deceptive.'

'Yes, they can. I was at the Portrait Gallery today.'

'So you said. Is there a show on?'

‘Yes, the annual Portrait Award. I didn’t think the winner was particularly interesting, but the second prize—It looked like you.’

Patrissia tilted her head. ‘In what way?’

‘In every way, even down to the necklace she was wearing.’

Patrissia instinctively touched Claudia’s rosary, lifting it and feeling the tiny stones, warm from her skin. ‘How odd.’

‘It was a very intimate portrait.’

‘Well, it’s obviously not me. I haven’t sat for anyone since art college.’

‘I rather got the impression that you did more than sit for him.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘The artist’s name is Jonathan Apsley. Perhaps this will jog your memory.’ He put the programme from the gallery on the table between them, crumpled from his pocket.

‘Johnny! Goodness me!’ Patrissia laughed, a little too loudly. ‘He was my tutor at art school, but he didn’t paint portraits, he was a landscape artist.’

‘Most artists have more than one string to their bow.’

‘Well, if it *is* me, he must have dug out an old photo for some reason.’ She reached for the programme.

‘Don’t try to make light of it, Patrissia,’ Marc said harshly, ‘this is a recent work. You didn’t tell me you were still sleeping with other people.’

She stared at him furiously.

‘Marc, don’t be ridiculous, of course I’m not sleeping with him!’

‘You tell me to trust you, but how can I when you keep lying to me?’

‘You’re not listening, are you? I have not sat for any portraits, and I have not been sleeping with anyone else. Is that clear enough?’

Marc said nothing.

‘What’s this so-called bloody intimate portrait like?’ she muttered, leafing through the programme.

‘Go and see for yourself—you obviously know about it already. How you could imagine that I wouldn’t recognise you, I don’t know.’

‘You’ve got this all wrong. I know nothing about the exhibition, or about the painting, and that’s the truth.’

‘Do you expect me to believe that?’

Stubbing out her half-smoked cigarette, Patrissia stood up.

‘I asked you to come tonight because I wanted to see you, to be with you, because I want us to be together, and look what you’ve done! You’ve already found another damned excuse to undermine me and push me away. What’s wrong with you? I don’t bloody understand.’

‘You said you wanted to talk, Patrissia. Talking means you have to *listen* sometimes. Sit down.’

She glared at him, and with a sharp sigh, sat down, crossing her arms. ‘OK, talk.’

‘You don’t understand me because you have no idea what honesty is, Patrissia,’ Marc replied coldly. ‘The world for you simply consists of things that fit your scheme and things that don’t. But actually, there *is* a difference between what you want to be the truth, and what the truth is. You are just not interested in the distinction.’

‘I see. So I’m a liar now, am I?’

‘Only you know that.’ He let his words sink in, then as she lifted her glass to her lips, said, ‘Tell me about your *friend*, Mr Apsley.’

Patrissia sighed, and intoned, ‘He was my tutor at art school, and yes, we were lovers.’ Her voice changed, ‘But that was fifteen years ago! I haven’t seen him since.’

‘He seems to have retained his...*appreciation* of you for quite some time, in that case. Even if you’re telling the truth, I’m not sure that it makes me feel any better.’

‘I *am* telling you the truth! You’ve no reason to be jealous, I swear it.’ She paused, her eyes steadily on his. ‘But I think *I* have. I’ve seen your photographic *studies*.’

Marc’s face darkened. ‘You’ve been going through my desk?’

‘So you tie them up, take pictures, and then screw them, is that it?’

‘They’re models. They’re outsiders, like us. They play the game. But I’ve used no models since we met, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

Patrissia shook her head in disdain, and standing abruptly, grabbed her bag. ‘OK, well I suppose I’ll see you at Jamie’s on Saturday—If you can spare the time, of course.’ She could feel herself shaking. She stuffed the exhibition guide into her bag with a scowl. ‘I’m going home.’

‘Don’t forget to go and see the painting, will you?’

‘I might just do that,’ she called over her shoulder as she headed for the gate. ‘Don’t be late for the party, Marc. You could even bring your *studies*—I believe one of the other guests is an art dealer.’

She almost ran down the steps to the car park. As she hunted for her keys, wrenching a wad of tissues from the recesses of her bag, the slim blue and white box she had bought that morning fell out and landed on its end by the wheel of her car. Kneeling down to retrieve it, she stared at the little fan of blue petals that adorned the logo—or were they tears?

Well, she thought, I might as well do it when I get back. The day can hardly get any worse.

The doldrums

Patrissia checked her answer machine and mobile phone for messages one more time. There were none. Why did it always have to be her who made contact? It was two days since they had spoken at the pub and he was leaving it to her to get in touch, as usual, but she steeled herself to hold out until Jamie's party.

Why couldn't the damn party be tonight? She was desperately in need of diversion, and bursting to confide her news to someone. How could she have let this happen? At least it couldn't be Theo's. They hadn't had sex for months, he was always too tired.

On a whim, she called Siân and invited her round for coffee, not really knowing why. It was only once she had slid her phone back into her bag that she realised that her choice of confidante was anything but random. It was obvious that Siân, of all people, would reassure her that her news, just like her test, was positive.



Patrissia settled herself on the sofa, arranging the folds of her baggy trousers over her knees.

'You said the other night that you were thinking of having a heart to heart with Marc,' Patrissia teased. 'Did you do it?'

'Oh, I was a bit in the doldrums—hormones, anxiety, Manu, wondering if it's right to have a baby with someone you're not in love with—you know.'

Patrissia nodded. 'And wondering whether to be honest about it, or just sit tight and keep quiet.' Patrissia shrugged. 'Why is it so hard? I suppose because honesty is usually hurtful—most of the time we only think about being honest when we've been dishonest, don't we?'

Siân gave her a sharp look. 'But what's best, convenient deception or painful honesty?' she said slowly. 'I don't know. I'm usually too scared to rock the boat when everything seems OK, but how can you go on being with someone when you're always irritated or bored?'

Patrissia smiled encouragingly. 'I know. Work, food, ailments, arguments—there's more to life than that, isn't there?'

'Have *you* ever been in love? I mean, you know, *really* in love?' Siân said suddenly. 'In the meeting you said you hadn't.'

Patrissia studied the cup in her hand. 'Hmm, well—'

'I have,' Siân interrupted, her face serious. 'It was catastrophic.' She began to laugh.

'Yes, it always is,' Patrissia smiled. 'It's so much easier to do the Buddhist thing and stay unattached, isn't it?' She took a biscuit off the plate and snapped it in half. 'You seem to have survived the catastrophe though.'

Siân nodded. 'After a lot of guilt and shame and sleepless nights—maybe that's why Roy gave me that flyer for the meetings. Maybe he could see I needed to talk to someone, or—'

'Confess?' Patrissia interrupted, intrigued that Siân had managed to avoid saying whether or not she had spoken to Marc. 'But that probably isn't why he gave you the flyer, is it?'

'Oh well, of course, I know he fancies me, but that's just background, isn't it? It's not important.'

'It probably is to him,' teased Patrissia. 'Poor Roy!'

'Yes, but—I mean, he's nice and all that, but he doesn't really have much potential, does he? He's always so nervous and serious!'

'Oh, I don't know, he just needs bringing out, I think.'

'Well, someone else can try if they like. He'll need a good scrub first, though.'

Patrissia patted Siân's hand playfully. 'So hard-hearted! Tell you what, come with me a minute, I've got something to show you,' she said, taking her hand. Leading her back through the kitchen to what Siân had supposed was a cupboard door, Patrissia eased it open and flicked a switch.

'Oh, a hot tub!'

'Yes, do you like it? I had it installed last winter, it's very relaxing. You can put your things on the chair over there.' She took some candles out of a box and began to place them carefully on the tub's

wooden surround. She flicked another switch and the water was suffused with a cool blue light.

Siân was still standing by the door.

‘Come on,’ said Patrissia, ‘it’s nice and warm—you’ll love it,’ and pulling off her clothes, she climbed in. ‘There’s a box of matches on the shelf over there,’ she pointed. ‘Light the candles, would you?’

Siân took a quick peek at Patrissia. She was sitting, eyes closed, head back, black hair spread on the warm wood. She looked utterly beautiful, but Siân didn’t want to be caught staring, so she turned away to find the box of household matches. Shaking one out, she moved behind Patrissia’s head and, gathering courage, she took off her heavy cardigan, then, fumbling, the rest of her clothes.

Moving to a candle, she inhaled deeply, lit it, and then slowly moved round the tub, concentrating, carefully lighting them all. Finally, closing her eyes, her head filled with the sensual scent of patchouli, she sat and lowered herself into the warm blue water.



“You know, I couldn’t make you out at first” said Patrissia, eyes still closed, and looking comfortably relaxed, idly swirling the water with her fingers. “You always arrived late at the meetings and left straight away afterwards. I thought maybe you were sneaking out behind Manu’s back, that he disapproved... does he?”

“I don’t know,” Siân answered slowly, “but I don’t really care... no, we’re not that close... I’m going to leave him—Oh! I’ve never admitted it to myself before... oh well. Things have to change, don’t they? We’ve been together for years—two years now I think. He’s nice, in a way... but what about love? I never loved him, I don’t think. And we talk so much in the meetings about honesty...” she sighed. “Why is it so hard?”

“I don’t know. Once you get used to the kinds of things people say in the meetings... it’s so disappointing when you go home and all you get is... well, nothing really, you might as well not open your mouth, it only makes them angry. Questions, answers, gossip, fibs... it doesn’t get you anywhere.

“I had a week in Cornwall last year—Manu couldn’t come for some reason—and I was going to cancel but then I thought... anyway, I went with my sister, Jane. We didn’t do much, a lot of sitting around... it was lovely. Manu was ringing every day but I borrowed Jane’s phone and texted him that I’d lost my charger... I don’t know, when it’s not right you find yourself lying all the time, don’t you?”

“I mean, you don’t want to be cruel, but you can’t be bothered to be kind: you don’t care what he’s doing, but you don’t want him to know what you’re doing, even if it’s nothing. Nothing sinister anyway, you just don’t want him to know. But then he starts to want to know everything, that’s how it seems anyway, and you get claustrophobic. I suppose you stop telling him anything then, you just can’t be bothered.”

“I know what you mean,” Patrissia’s voice startled Siân, who’d forgotten where she was. “Yes, I certainly know. Either you can’t be bothered, or he can’t, or neither of you can. You’ve got more or less what you wanted, but you don’t want it any more. Not because it isn’t what you thought you wanted, it is, but somehow it’s not special, and you want things to be special.

“Because you know yourself after a while, and the things you like, and somehow you start wanting things you don’t like, just for a change, just for a bit of fresh air. Then you go looking for things you really quite dislike and of course it’s pretty painful, but you get to prefer the pain and drama—oh, I don’t know, you’re bored with yourself, you know yourself too well, that’s all it is. Then you hook up with some dreadful man... the trouble is, being hurt gets to be a habit, doesn’t it?”

“Everybody says that you have to know yourself, but really, how does that help? It’s just like knowing someone else too well, there are no surprises. No, at some point everything has to change, and you have to be ignorant in that new place, just give yourself up and let it wash over you, see what happens.”

She stopped. “But that’s where religion and all those things we talk about at the meetings comes in, isn’t it?” She sighed, “Trust us ridiculous Catholics to organise such meetings, turning horrible personal angst into a recruitment strategy!

“But really, it’s not about belief, but disbelief, at first anyway. You can’t believe that what you wanted was so worthless, so unsatisfying: your job, love, everything. It’s an itch, you want stuff and you get stuff; you want love and you get love, of a dry and cloying sort; a house; and then you want novelty, and then even get tired of that. It’s just you isn’t it? You’ve got to be some kind of egotist to be satisfied with yourself—and even more of one to be unsatisfied!”

Patrissia opened her eyes, smiling, and shifted position, lazily floating her legs towards Siân.

“Sorry, I got a bit carried away there, didn’t I? My Catholic upbringing again. Are you religious at all, Siân?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Siân answered, slightly irritated that Patrissia hadn’t gone into more detail about the dreadful men. “Well, of course, yes, I mean you have to be, don’t you, to understand? That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?”

“I only went because Roy asked me, and I’d just come back from the holiday, and I’d done a bit of thinking, and... what I said about Manu, I mean it, I just wanted somewhere to go, and Roy’d seen something about this new meeting and gave me your pamphlet—oh, Jamie, that’s right, it was Jamie. Roy’d got the impression it was Jamie’s idea, so he felt obliged, and asked me along, I don’t know why.”

Patrissia laughed “Oh, come on Siân, you know why he asked you! Men only even *talk* to women they fancy, you must know that! And if they actually ask you to go somewhere with them they’re in the bag.” She giggled, and Siân, to her own surprise, joined in.

‘How many months are you now? It must be, what, seven?’ Patrissia murmured, moving her legs closer, resting a foot on the softness of Siân’s thigh for a moment, delicate, floating. Siân’s breasts were suspended opposite her, full and hard-looking, the tips dark.

Siân began to stroke her belly automatically. “Yes. It’s lovely. I wake every morning and look down to make sure the bump’s still there, to see if it’s bigger. Manu likes stroking it too... do you want to?” Siân closed her eyes, waiting.

She felt Patrissia move towards her, making small ripples in the water that washed against her breasts, her skin supersensitive. Her lips parted and she quickly closed them, not quite shut, feeling Patrissia's warm hand gently touch her belly and move over it in soft circles.

"Mmm, that does feel good," said Patrissia, "so soft and yet so firm..." She moved her hand gently into the crease of the overhanging breast and raised it. "These too... mmm, it must be such a sensual time for you, Siân," and drifting alongside, she lightly kissed the bump, and then moved her hand to Siân's face. She made soft outlines of her cheeks, running slowly to her neck, now stretched and waiting for the caress; and finally the fingertips drifting back down over her breasts, smoothly, softly, feinting towards the reddening tips. Patrissia kissed them, and then the dark surround, gently, lightly.

At last the real test, Siân thought, as she felt the soft tip of Patrissia's tongue flip over her nipple and move up, until there was a gentle pressure on her lips, a soft yielding firmness, her first kiss. Terrified, she reached for Patrissia's face, trembling as she smoothed the soft skin while the kiss lingered.

Patrissia drew back slowly "It looks like we're OK with the kissing—such a relief!" she smiled, and bent back to Siân's lips. Slowly they moved through the water together, close and familiar.

Oh God Siân was thinking; but in Patrissia's head nothing remained but the sweet touch of flesh and the warmth and pleasure of being invited to the intimacy of a lover's body.



'Siân, I did a test this morning—It was positive.'

'I knew it! Oh, I'm really pleased! Whose is it, Trisha? Not Jamie's, surely?'

They both laughed.

'Heavens, no! I doubt he could fit me into his busy schedule.'

'He's certainly got the hots for you though, and you know it!' Siân giggled. 'But if it's not Jamie, who is it? Marc?'

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Oh, come on, you know.’

Patrissia pressed her hand gently against her flat stomach. ‘I can’t wait until I’m as big as you, Siân. ‘I’ll only be able to believe it when I see it. It just seems so—’

‘I know. I felt that too in the first few months—that weird *‘it can’t be real’* feeling.’

‘Yes.’

But it is real.

They sat in the water together, close and familiar, while Siân continued to talk and Patrissia felt herself sinking under the bleak prospect of breaking the news to Marc.

*

Siân was long gone when Patrissia folded herself into the sofa and pushed her still-wet hair off her face, weighing up the pros and cons of a last cigarette and an early night. Her thoughts turned to Marc and the portrait that had so upset him, and then to Johnny, wondering if she would ever see him again—no, of course she wouldn’t. But why had he entered that portrait of her in the competition? He must have known how good it was, and that it would be displayed. Was it a message to her?

Marc obviously thought so. His reaction to the portrait had seemed irrational to her at the time, but now she saw that it was perfectly understandable.

She wanted to talk to Marc again, soon, preferably before the party, to reassure him—but of what? What was she offering him? An unexpected child?

The remains of Siân’s wine was in reach and Patrissia lifted it and held it to her chest before taking a delicate sip.

She contemplated phoning him but she couldn’t think of a pretext—and that made her wonder why she needed one. He probably wouldn’t answer anyway, and if she asked later, he would no doubt tell her he’d been working. Working at what, though? What were all those ghastly photos for?

Patrissia blew a cloud of smoke at the hissing embers of the fire, but none caught and, with the room turning decidedly cool, she pulled her bathrobe tight over her belly. She would have been his model, once, just like Claudia had been—but not now.

But is it art?

‘Trish, red or white?’

‘Thanks Jamie. Red please, definitely. I need blood.’

‘You should talk to Giles. Eh Giles? He can get blood from a stone, believe me.’

When he had first suggested having a party, Jamie had hoped that Lucinda would view it as his way of welcoming her into his other life. It seemed to have worked too. She had gone to great pains to bring the dining room up to tonight’s standard of homely exquisiteness, Jamie noted approvingly, and he felt a warm glow of satisfaction. On the other hand, it made him mildly anxious to see how much trouble she had gone to for him.

She was now sitting at the opposite end of the long limed-oak table beside Marc, Father Ignatius, founder of the meetings! A man to reassure Lucinda that he was associating with intelligent, spiritually-minded folk nowadays: good, decent people who were in quite a different league to his old mate, Giles.

Or his new mate, Roy, for that matter, he thought, glancing at both and hoping they would pass Lucinda’s behaviour checkpoint, which was unlikely, he considered, given that none yet had.

‘Top up, old man?’

Giles perked up. ‘What’s that Jamie? Oh, yes,’ he poked his pudgy face towards Patrissia. ‘I’ll say! Bottoms up, darling!’

Jamie continued round the table. He was concerned about Patrissia. She looked quite unlike her usual vivacious self tonight, he thought, almost sullen, and not at all attractive. ‘Plenty more over there,’ he said, completing the circuit and pointing her to the trolley behind Roy. ‘Roy’ll do the honours.’

‘So what’s the occasion then, Jamie? Getting divorced from the lovely Lucinda? I say, Lucinda, about time too—definitely the right decision. Should have done it years ago!’ Giles grinned affectionately.

‘Hello Giles, nice to see you again,’ said Lucinda. ‘It’s been far too long. But actually no—no divorcing a Catholic, you know. It’s too late for him to enter the priesthood.’

'Jamie and the life celibate? That'll be the day,' said Giles. 'Unless your tastes are turning to altar boys, Jamie? That's more your style, eh, old chap?'

'Very funny Giles. At least I've outgrown the sheep, which gossip insists, you seem not to have. Trish, your glass seems depleted—Roy, would you mind? Behind you.'

Roy turned warily and retrieved another bottle. Patrissia took it with a serious smile. 'Thank you Roy. You might as well get a few more while you're there.'

'That's the spirit, 'Trish!' said Jamie, draining his glass. 'We'll all be on our knees by the end of the evening, I dare say! Marc, red or white?'

'Red, thanks.' Marc turned over the delicate crystal, sparkling in the superfluous candle-light. 'Where did you get these, Lucinda? They're rather fine.'

'Thank you Marc. They were a wedding present from Jamie's father. Special occasions only, until now. What *is* the occasion Jamie? I forgot to ask.'

'Oh, you know, I just thought we should use them more often. I thought the Montrachet deserved something special, don't you agree? But I can swap them for the breakfast tumblers if you'd prefer?'

'Now, now,' grinned Giles. 'If she wasn't thinking of divorce before, you might be giving her food for thought.'

'Oh, do be quiet Giles!' said Lucinda.



Roy was listening closely but he couldn't follow most of the banter, or think of anything to say.

He felt left out, spending most of the evening wondering when someone would talk to him. Apart from the initial greeting and a quick babble of names that Roy was already having trouble remembering, Jamie had ignored him. And Marc had looked away when Roy had tried to catch his eye. Not only that, but Patrissia

hadn't said two words to him, even though she was sitting next to him.

He took a quick glance at her. *She looks sad*, he thought. *She looks angry too*.

Actually, apart from requests for wine, nobody had even looked at him apart from the woman sitting next to Lucinda—Antonia, he thought she was called—and then it was just a casual glance while she was refilling her glass.

It wasn't much better than being in the pub, thought Roy, as he tried to get comfortable in his chair, acutely aware of the hostess trolley full of breakable bottles that had been parked behind him.

The food came with only a slight lull in the conversation, and went uncomplimented, which surprised him. They seemed to have no manners.

*

Roy was roused from his reflections by Jamie uncorking yet another bottle.

'Giles, a little bird tells me you're buying a new pad?'

'Yes! House-warming imminent, just as soon as all the papers are signed. But I have to tell you, I'm far more excited about what I may have moving in with me!' he announced grandly.

'Ah ha!' Jamie shouted, clapping a hand on Giles' broad slab of a shoulder. 'And is *this* what all your excitement's about?' he enquired, grinning, angling his head towards the woman beside him.

The woman, Magda, smiled back. 'Oh no, not me. He's talking about a painting. It's at the auction tomorrow.'

'Blimey, mate, I didn't know you were getting into art now as well. Where d'you get the energy?' Jamie said. 'What are you buying?'

'It's a monster of a painting! Fucking huge!' Giles' arms spread out to full span to depict the enormity of his potential purchase. 'It's by a chap called Ed Knippers, an American. All his stuff's pretty massive—big, brassy, in-your-face and, believe me, if you saw the jugs on this little beauty!'

'A nude, is it?' Jamie grinned.

Giles rubbed his hands together. 'Absolutely right, mate.'

'What's the name of this painting?'

'*The Prize*, or should I say, *The Prizes*?' he chuckled. 'The size of her—'

'Yes, thank you, Giles. Do you even know what the painting is *about*?' Patrissia interrupted, raising her head.

'Yes, I do. It's Salomé with John the Baptist's head on a plate.'

'That's right,' smiled Patrissia, patronisingly. '*Not* a nude. And Herodias is all dressed to kill, getting legless behind her darling daughter. And Herod's nose is so red he's probably just snorted several lines of coke.'

'Yes, you've *got* it, that's the one!' cried Giles, proprietorially.

'Salomé herself, of course, is hardly what you'd call an irresistible seductress, is she? More like an also-ran in a Miss Wet T-Shirt contest.'

'Yeah, well, old Eddie obviously liked a bit of sex with his violence, eh? What d'you reckon, Jamie?'

Jamie shrugged. 'I can't say I know the painting, Giles.'

'I know it,' Patrissia interrupted. 'And *no*, it's *not* particularly famous. Mind you, perhaps in the Christian art scene it might have a certain following.'

'Why?' asked Giles, crestfallen. 'Knippers wasn't some kind of born-again dude, was he?'

'Oh yes, very much so. He was an evangelical Christian, church of the Nazarene, to be precise. Makes you wonder, doesn't it, how such a religious man could paint such smut? I suppose it's just possible that he was trying to convey the pressures of spiritual conflict and its effect on the human body?' she added sniffily.

'You mean her bloody juicy great hooters!' Giles agreed, smacking his lips.

Antonia giggled and clapped her hands in delight.

'So, in truth, Giles, far from joining the ranks of the serious art collector, you're actually buying this repulsive, oversized monstrosity as a kind of floor to ceiling porno mural? D'you know

that the picture is twelve feet wide? Where're you going to hang it, on the washing line?

'Have you actually ever *seen* the painting, Patrissia?' Marc interjected.

She turned her head to the top end of the table where Lucinda and Marc sat watching her.

'Not in the flesh, thankfully, no.'

'Hmm, well, I'm aggrieved to hear Edward Knippers' portrayal of the unholy execution likened to pornography. You're quite missing the point, Patrissia.'

She half-closed her eyes at him, then turned to Magda when she found that a ready riposte eluded her.

'Do *you* like the picture?'

'It's very big I suppose,' Magda replied even-handedly. 'I can't say I would buy it, but it *is* exciting.'

'Yes, it is,' Marc nodded seriously. 'Knippers was a cultured, courteous, spiritually civilised Christian, whose relationship to the rather insistent physicality of his paintings is actually very *interesting*.'

'Oh, *do* tell us more,' Patrissia goaded, pouring herself and Magda each another glass of the Montrachet. '*Spiritually civilised*? What in God's name does that even *mean*?'

Marc placed his own glass firmly on the starched linen napkin and sighed wearily.

'The painting, with which you claim to be familiar, is a superb dichotomy. Its success can be measured by the inherent tensions within it. For example, all three of them, mother, father, and daughter, are inebriated, engorged with, yet oddly anaesthetised to, what they have done.'

'Ha ha! Just like me!' Antonia sniggered, raising her glass.

'So as a result, they are able to accept the unacceptable.'

'I see,' Patrissia answered, ignoring Antonia. 'So that makes it a good painting, does it?'

‘Possibly, yes. Certainly the picture manages to juxtapose comic and absurd images within what is a very harrowing and highly-charged scene.’

‘Ah, you mean the rolls of flab and pointy nipples? The flesh and sweat and deformity? That’s *comic*, is it? I think it’s just *vulgar*. Compare it to Caravaggio’s painting of the same subject. It’s his ability to expose the human condition without the need to deface the canvas with ugliness, which makes it great. Caravaggio’s Salomé can’t look at what she has done: she’s staring right out of the picture, unlike Knippers’ stripper—she’s full-frontal and loving every minute of it.’

‘I disagree,’ Marc responded firmly. ‘Knippers directly relates the Baroque concerns for our moral condition, which you spoke of. He details the grotesque folds of flesh you so disparage *specifically* to show how our physical excesses mirror our moral condition.’

‘Oh, it’s *our* moral condition now, is it?’

‘Yes, it *is*. The horror and the conscience you see in the Caravaggio is so *expected*. It plays the game in chiaroscuro—Good versus Evil. Wrong-doing followed by guilt and shame. All very tidy. But what Knippers gives us is something *far* more challenging, which is why you recoil from it. He’s painted these glazed, gigantic puppets, on whom it’s only just dawning what they have done. Their emotions are stupefied. There’s a vacancy in them all. No moral compass. No way out.’

‘I don’t think Marc or Patrissia will be out-bidding you at the auction tomorrow, Giles,’ Magda laughed.

‘What do you think, Marc?’ Patrissia interrupted. ‘D’you like Salomé’s tits or d’you prefer her alcoholic mummy, all dressed up in her party frock?’

‘Oh stop now, Trisha!’ Lucinda urged gently.

Marc raised his eyebrows. ‘Knippers’ Salomé is openly sexually available, yet she is repulsive at the same time. This is the stuff that disturbs us. It’s like witnessing yourself salivating over rancid food. Caravaggio’s Salomé looks like a saint, except for a subtle gleam in her eye, a hint of manipulative womanliness that warns us what she is capable of. I know which I find the more frightening.’ He looked accusingly at Patrissia.

‘Thank you for your *ob-so-detached* appraisal, Marc. Nice to hear how we womenfolk retain our roles as deranged, deluded whores and devious madonnas while man’s basic instincts whiz into the twenty-first century!’ she laughed, acidly. A headache was gnawing at the back of her skull. She emptied her glass.

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‘If you need a hand hanging the painting, I’ve got an extendable ladder,’ offered Roy, who had been marvelling at the dimensions of the work of art for some time. ‘If it’s twelve foot, it’ll need a couple of strong blokes!’

‘Thanks, Roy,’ Giles grinned. ‘I’d appreciate that.’

‘You’re *such* a sweetie,’ gushed Antonia, sweeping her sticky hand over his trousers. Roy coloured and lifted his glass to distract himself.

‘We women are not *all* saints or sinners you know, Marc,’ Lucinda chuckled, patting his arm lightly. ‘I’m surprised you hold such a dim view of the gentler sex.’

He paused as both women regarded him patiently.

‘I just observed that both Salomé’s committed the same deed. One is brazen, yet oblivious to what she has done. The other is far more knowing—she feigns remorse, but her penitence is a lie. So I simply suggested that Caravaggio’s Salomé is the more insidious.’

‘Quite right,’ Lucinda agreed. ‘I love the painting and I’ve always thought that her expression is rather suspicious—She’s anything but sorry.’

‘Well, Giles,’ said Patrissia finally, ‘let’s hope Roy’s extendable ladder is as long as he says it is or the repulsive Salomé may never get erected to her satisfaction.’

‘Patrissia, dear, would you like a glass of water? I’m rather thirsty after that pickled herring,’ Lucinda offered, passing the carafe down to Magda.

‘Do you paint at all, Magda?’

‘No, I don’t paint.’

Marc got up abruptly and walked around the table. As he passed Patrissia, he leaned against her shoulder and whispered, 'You're drunk. And you won't be getting *my* head on a plate,' he added, before taking her earlobe between his teeth.

She jerked her head away in surprise and glanced up to where he had just stood, only to find him gone. Anyone noticing Marc's parting gesture would assume it to be a reconciliatory intimacy, a lover's kiss.



'You look a bit tired—Can I get you anythin?'' Roy directed his question at the tablecloth, afraid to catch Patrissia's eye. She slowly turned her head towards him, glancing over his shoulder momentarily at the gleeful expression on Antonia's face.

She shrugged. 'Thank you Roy, but no, I'm fine. Anyway, I think Antonia wants to speak to you.' She resumed her dark meditation, leaving Roy to whatever it was that was going on in his head.

'Roy! What a manly name!' said a loud voice. Roy reluctantly turned to Antonia, her cheeks pink and her lipstick smudged. She was smiling brightly at him and he smelled her delicate scent surround him as she slid to his side.

'Er, thanks Antonia. It *is* Antonia, isn't it? Sorry, I'm not good at names.'

Her smile grew sweeter. 'What do you do, Roy? Only I thought Jamie said you were good with your hands.'

'Oh, lay off him, Antonia,' said Jamie.

'I, er, I suppose I'm sort of an odd-job man,' Roy mumbled. 'That's how I know Jamie and, er, Lucinda. Deliveries, furniture, gardenin', that sort of thing. You're Lucinda's friend?'

Antonia took a sip of her wine. 'Oh, gosh, yes, we go back absolutely ages! Odd jobs eh? I don't suppose you know anything about boxes, do you? Only I've this pretty little bush, you see. Someone told me it's a box—I believe you can tell by the smell, is that right? Would you like to take a look? I'd be very grateful.' Her disarming smile was still there, her eyes still bright.

‘Oh. I don’t know, I ’aven’t done much with bushes apart from the odd bit of tyin’ up and prunin’, not really my thing. I could look it up though.’

Lucinda stifled a gasp. ‘That would be perfect,’ said Antonia, edging nearer, and letting her long hair swing, releasing a new burst of the delicate scented net in which Roy found himself. ‘Let’s see, I have to get my hair cut tomorrow—Why don’t you pop round and give me your advice about my nice little bush on Sunday?’

She suddenly turned to the table, scraping her chair legs on the bare boards. ‘Isn’t that nice, everybody? Roy’s coming to smell my box. And I’ll have my new haircut! He’ll be able to have a good sniff around. Thank you, Roy!’ And she gave him a peck on his blushing cheek.

‘No problem, ’appy to, er, ’elp. How will I know where to find it?’

‘Left at the church, and straight on till doomsday!’ Antonia said, losing interest. ‘Oh, you can get my address from Lucinda. Well, darling,’ she said, turning back to Lucinda, who was filling their glasses, ‘it looks like my weekend’s sorted out. Let’s drink to it, Lu!’ They both suppressed giggles as they took delicate sips. ‘Oops, reminds me, need the loo.’ She got to her feet carefully and touched Roy’s shoulder as she passed him. ‘Don’t forget!’

Jamie winked at him. ‘Take no notice, mate, she’s a bit drunk.’



Marc had watched this exchange with disgust. Roy, of all people, didn’t deserve to be the target of such careless nastiness, and feeling an obscure responsibility for his discomfort, Marc moved around the table to Antonia’s vacated chair.

‘How are you, Roy? I’ve been meaning to ask you how you’re enjoying the meetings?’

Roy’s face went rigid, then with flickering eyes he stammered, ‘Er, well, I dunno. It’s sort of like a proper family.’

A proper family? Marc thought. ‘Seriously? What kind of family?’

‘You know, a family of, er, friends. I ’aven’t got many friends an’ it’s nice—I mean, it’s nice at the meetin’s. I can’t really follow most

of the stuff you talk about, but it don't matter 'cos you're my friends. I'm really grateful Jamie invited me tonight, but to be 'onest, I feel a bit like the odd one out. Everyone's talkin' about their stuff, an' I 'aven't got any stuff. That's why I like the meetin's, I reckon, 'cos even though I don't understand much, we're tryin' to 'elp each other, right? It ain't the same in real life.'

Marc nodded. *Real life*. Yes, these rude, self-absorbed, spiteful drunks were definitely more like real life.

'I know what you mean about the meetings, at least they're *mostly* fairly civilised. People do try anyway. Unlike Antonia,' he said with a grimace, 'who I fear is not civilised in any useful sense. Don't mind me, but I think she was teasing you.'

'Whadda'ya mean?' Roy was blushing now, and continued, 'What gets me is, when you try to understand, people all say different things, don' they? I mean, who d'you believe?'

'You mean, whose opinion overrides all the other opinions? Who *knows*? The answer has got to be that nobody knows, Roy. It's a question of faith.'

'But what if you 'aven't *got* any opinions? I *want* to 'ave opinions and talk about stuff, but I don't know 'ow to. What's *wrong* with me, Marc?'

Marc looked at him directly for the first time. 'Nothing, Roy. I don't think you're quite as dedicated to your own desires as most people, that's all. Usually, the thing that people have most faith in, is something that will give them what they as an individual lack—community, safety, shared desires. The stronger their desire, the stronger their faith.'

'That's probably why you don't have *stuff*, as you put it, and don't spout rubbish like you've heard tonight, and why it makes no sense to you when you hear it. You're listening to a foreign tribe.'

He glanced at Patrissia, who was giving out not-listening waves. She'd pushed her chair back from the table and was sitting, glass in hand and chin up, eyes hooded, staring through the window opposite into the conservatory. She looked like she had more stuff than most. He wondered what plan she was hatching that was taking so much calculation. At least Johnny hadn't made an appearance.

‘Tell me, Roy, what do you make of Patrissia?’

Roy was panicking now. What *did* he think of Patrissia? And was she listening? ‘Er, I dunno really, but she looks a bit sad,’ he ventured, almost in a whisper. ‘It don’t look like she’s ’avin’ much fun.’

‘No.’ Marc looked past Roy at Patrissia, now into the dregs of the bottle. ‘No, it doesn’t.’

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‘Marc, *darling*!’

Antonia, returning from the toilet, sat down heavily on his lap. ‘Patrissia *will* be jealous.’

Marc grimaced, ‘I doubt she’d mind, Antonia—unless you’re offering to model for me.’

Retreating from Patrissia’s weary glance, Marc tipped Antonia firmly off his lap.

‘Talk about being dumped!’ Antonia cried. ‘Marc, you’ll certainly spend your life alone unless you mend your ways, you heartless Romeo! Giles! You seem to be the only gentleman here: would you escort me to a place of safety away from these puritans? I feel a trifle nauseous.’

Giles turned with a glistening grin. ‘Glad to be of service my dear—You’re safe with me, I’m an atheist through and through. Allow me to take a turn with you *en plein air*. It *is* a bit stuffy in here.’

Marc turned to Lucinda, who was sitting with a detached smile playing around her lips, her slim hands cradling her glass.

‘I could do with a cigarette. Will the garden be all right, Lucinda?’

‘Of course, Marc, I’ll come with you. I need some air too,’ she said, glancing down the table to where Giles was leant back on two legs of his chair, hands tucked into his red braces. As Antonia swung huffily past Marc, Giles let his chair fall onto its feet and stood unsteadily, following her out.

‘Oh dear, I fear vomit collection might be on the menu,’ sighed Lucinda. ‘Close the door, Jamie, please, I don’t think anyone wishes to hear your estimable friend lose his brains.’

‘Easy on, darling,’ said Jamie, placatingly, ‘it’s only fun, eh? Anyway, it’s *your* friend who can’t handle her drink, not Giles.’

Lucinda stood up. ‘I’ll just get a jacket from upstairs, Marc. Won’t be long.’

*

In the hall, Giles bumped into Antonia’s back as she suddenly stopped in front of him, groping in her handbag.

‘Do be careful, Giles! I feel a headache coming on. That horrid man pushed me off his lap. Did you see him?’

‘He must be mad!’ laughed Giles. ‘Who could resist you?’

‘Who *are* those two, anyway? Surely they can’t be Jamie’s friends? That Patrissia woman’s so rude! If she’d carried on I’d have given her a slap, you know. Mind you, her boyfriend shut her up—Did you see what he did?’

‘No, what?’

‘He bit her!’ She closed her bag with a snap. ‘Have you anything on you, Giles? I appear to have come ill-equipped.’

‘Only the tools of the trade, Antonia,’ said Giles, sniffing.

‘Try the kitchen cupboard, darling,’ said Lucinda as she squeezed past them. ‘You go on,’ she said to Marc, who had followed her, ‘I’ll be right with you.’

As Lucinda made her way upstairs, she saw Giles slowly edge behind Antonia and take a handful of her sleek rear. ‘I must say, you’re looking rather sexy tonight.’

‘Hmm, well you’re not,’ she replied, giving up her fruitless search, ‘but the competition is less than sin...scintillating,’ and grabbing at the toilet door, she stumbled inside, pulling him after her.



Marc lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, savouring the cool, crisp air laden with its scent of freshly-mown grass.

‘Well, Marc, the party seems to be going with a bang,’ Lucinda said, appearing at his shoulder. ‘It’s nice to meet you at last, although I have to say you’re not quite as described. I almost ordered a crate of communion wine, but then again, I know Jamie tends to exaggerate. And Giles, unfortunately,’ she said, as the back door slammed shut and a stooped figure weaved its way towards the far side of the lawn.

‘If you don’t mind me saying, you’re not what I was expecting either. How did you and Jamie end up together?’

‘Oh, he was quite fun in the beginning, and fun was at rather a premium in the circles I inhabited,’ Lucinda answered seriously. ‘Speaking of fun, Patrissia seems rather low tonight. I’ve never seen her so wrapped-up in all the years I’ve known her.’

‘Art school, wasn’t it?’ said Marc. ‘She mentioned that you and she knew each other. You had the same tutor, didn’t you? She seems to rate him very highly.’

‘You mean Johnny? Oh yes, he was the only one who could keep her in line, and she respected him for that. She was pretty wild—quite talented and madly attractive, but rather inclined to shred the ego of anyone who got too close.’

‘Respect, was that all it was?’

‘Surely she told you?’ Lucinda laughed. ‘Their affair was legendary—he was quite spellbound. But then, so were most of the men—and some of the women too. I think it’s fair to say she enjoyed herself. Anyway, the rest of us had to make do with her leftovers, duly tattered and torn. We patched them up as best we could.’

Marc was watching Patrissia through the conservatory window. She was half-slumped in her chair, picking at the napkin on the table, and ignoring Jamie’s repeated attempts to include her in his conversation with Magda.

‘Jamie doesn’t come across as a leftover.’

Lucinda followed his eyes. 'Oh no—In his dreams! No, Jamie wasn't part of that set. His father was one of daddy's city friends. In fact it was all rather set up—not that I objected. I'm afraid I found all that kind of thing quite draining—the fending-off and so on. I'm boring like that. I'm not the artist type, all bang and crash. Art school was daddy's idea. I'm grateful to him for taking the effort out of it all.'

Lucinda turned her back to the window. 'But what about you? How did you meet Patrissia?'

'At the El Greco exhibition.' Marc lifted his head.

'The one at the National Gallery? I meant to go.'

'You should have, Lucinda, once in a lifetime opportunity. Seize the day!'

She smiled coolly. 'To be honest, El Greco's rather too melodramatic for my taste. I'm much fonder of Sisley, Seurat and that gentle out-of-focus vagueness of the Impressionists. Terribly sweet and middle-class, I know, but that's what I like.'

'Well, there's something to be said for restraint, in art as in life. Odd to think that they were considered young Turks at the time.'

'I suppose we all have to grow up,' said Lucinda, unsmiling.

Patrissia seemed to have left the table, and Marc watched as Jamie rose and, bending to whisper in Magda's ear, followed her out.

'You're a bit of a mystery man, Marc. Jamie says you're good friends, but he doesn't seem to know much about you.'

'There's not much to know,' Marc replied, flicking his cigarette butt into a flowerbed. 'I lost my parents and was brought up by the Church. At one point they thought I had a vocation, but ill-health intervened and I couldn't continue. Luckily I had the good fortune to inherit a house from a maiden aunt, so at least I had a refuge.'

'So you fell on your feet. Lucky you! And then what?'

'Life outside was rather different from what I was used to, and my health...It was difficult to know what to do. I'd been trained as a priest ...' His eyes clouded over. 'I wasn't really equipped to function in the world.'

'Who is?'

He didn't seem to hear her. 'Eventually I began to go to classes of various kinds. I knew that I had some aptitude for drawing, but then I came across some hammers and chisels, which seemed much more my kind of thing,' he smiled, 'so I learned how to be a sculptor. Virgins, centaurs, grotesques, that kind of thing. I get small commissions, do the odd show, but mostly I decorate houses to earn my keep.'

'Hmm, I detect concealment!' said Lucinda archly. 'But another time perhaps. Are you working on anything particularly grotesque at the moment?'

Marc gave a short laugh. 'Grotesque doesn't do it justice.'

She gave him a sharp look. 'It sounds fascinating. What is it?'

'An exorcism of sorts, I suppose. A repository for *nasty* stuff. All voodoo'd out,' he replied with a bitter laugh.

Lucinda inclined her head. 'Does your voodoo doll have a title?'

'*Lachesis*. Are you familiar with Greek myth, Lucinda?'

'A little. Lachesis is one of the three Fates, isn't she? A nasty piece of work, as I recall.'

'Yes, the nastiest. She gave her name to a species of viper.'

'Goodness! But tell me, what are these mysterious meetings you run? Jamie doesn't say much about what you all talk about, but he seems to spend any spare time he's got going to them.'

'Oh, the meetings—what are they? Well, it's hard to say, except that there's a great deal of misunderstanding.'

'Jamie says he finds them very interesting.'

Both their gazes drifted towards the dining room, where only Roy and Magda were visible.

'Perhaps I should come along some time.'

'You would be very welcome. Patrissia says you're a practising Catholic?'

'Upholding one's good intentions in the face of this depressingly unholy world takes more determination than I can usually spare, unfortunately, and I'm afraid I'm relying on tolerance rather than good works to get me into heaven.'

'It's certainly one of the more useful virtues, yes,' Marc snorted.

'Well,' said Lucinda with a shiver, 'I'm getting chilly. Shall we return to the fray? With luck, the loutish Giles will be snoring under the table, and if not, I feel duty-bound to rescue poor Magda.' She peered theatrically through the conservatory windows, and turned back. 'No such luck. Magda it is. Are you coming?'

'No, I think I'll stay here a few minutes longer. I doubt Patrissia is missing my company.'

She touched his hand lightly. 'I hope you don't mind me saying, but I'd be wary of getting too involved with Patrissia.' She stopped, looking abashed. 'Sorry, it's not my place. Ignore me, I hardly know you.' She shook her head. 'No, look, I'm sorry, I do apologise—I think I've had a little too much to drink—please forget what I said, I had no right. Oh dear, I'd better go in.'

Leaving Marc staring at her back, she turned and hurried into the house.



'So, Roy is it?' said Magda, across the littered table. 'We are sober while all around us civilisation falls, yes? Is it correct to get drunk in these circumstances? I suspect that it is,' she said, eyeing the scattered empty bottles. 'Have they left us anything?'

Roy, now practised, reached behind him and grasped the last bottle of red, handing it to her. She filled his glass and then her own. 'Bottoms up, I suppose.' She took a long swig. 'I don't think much of their manners, do you?' she said, waving her arm vaguely. 'They seem to think they're still at boarding school.'

She took another swig, then handed it over the table to Roy, who half-filled his glass. 'But I suppose for them the world *is* just a big boarding school, filled with pals, bounders and plebs.' She laughed. 'I don't think they really have any idea how ordinary people have to live. They don't care, either. They invite us here, and then they ignore us. We either learn how to fit in with *them*, or we don't exist.'

Roy felt anger rising. 'Bloody right.'

'Of course I'm right.' Magda looked serious for a second, then giggled. 'But *we* know there's another world, don't we? A much

harsher one.' She tipped her head towards Marc, now alone in the garden. 'I get the feeling that he does, too.'

'Dunno, if 'e does, 'e don't show it much. But yer could be right. At least 'e tries, sometimes.'

'She nodded. 'Yes, some of them do, occasionally. What do you do for a living, Roy?'

'Odd-job man. I've got a van. What about you?'

'I get temporary jobs here and there. I've been helping Giles with his wine business.'

'Oh, so yer not 'is girlfriend, then?'

She laughed. 'You're joking, aren't you? No, strictly business. I'm only here to make up the numbers.'

'Don't yer mind?'

'Why should I? I didn't have anything better to do, and it was a chance to meet some new people.' She smiled as the door opened and Lucinda came in.

'Where is everybody?' Lucinda put a tray of cheese and biscuits on the table. 'Roy, can you see if there's a dessert wine behind you?'

'I don't think there is,' Magda said quickly. 'I looked earlier—I've rather a sweet tooth.' She smiled at Roy's look of relieved gratitude.

'Oh, I thought Jamie told me... never mind. I don't suppose you know where Trisha's got to? I wanted to ask her something.'

'I think she went for a cigarette.'

'She's not in the garden. Maybe she went to the loo.'

The door opened and Giles reappeared.

'Feeling better?' asked Lucinda, brightly.

'Don't know what you mean, darling, I've been enjoying the night air. I left Antonia feeling rather delicate though, I fear.'

'Hmm, yes, I heard,' she replied, glancing at Magda. 'Perhaps I'll go and see how she is.'

The door clicked open and Antonia tottered in before she got any further.

‘Wake up, everyone! Can we play games now?’ Pausing at Giles’ shoulder, she whispered loudly, ‘Perhaps you should button your fly—little boy mustn’t catch cold now, must he?’

‘Oh, Antonia, you’re the only one in the mood for games, I think,’ said Lucinda, as Antonia slipped around the back of Magda’s chair. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen Jamie?’

‘Gone to get more drinks, the little darling.’

‘Oh good. He must have remembered about the Sauternes.’

Antonia smiled sympathetically. ‘Probably,’ she said, sitting and patting the chair next to her. ‘Come and talk to me, Lu, I’ve some juicy news.’ Leaning close, she whispered. ‘Do you think he’s dallying again?’

‘He’s always dallying or attempting to dally,’ Lucinda replied quietly. ‘I do wonder who it is this time, though. Do *you* know?’ She smiled nervously, searching Antonia’s face.

‘Well, it’s not me.’

‘Of course it isn’t, darling.’ She looked towards Patrissia’s empty seat. ‘Oh well, I suppose I’ll find out soon enough. Actually, I think I’ll go and text Jamie in case he forgets what he’s gone for. Excuse me a moment.’



She found Patrissia standing in the hall, tapping her phone.

‘Late-night messages? Don’t let Marc catch you, or he’ll think you’re up to no good.’

‘It’s Ciara.’

‘Hmm.’ The two women looked at each other.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Lucinda. I’ve changed, really I have.’

‘So you’ve told Theo?’

‘Not exactly, but—’

‘Oh well, I suppose you know what you’re doing. Although, well, forgive me for speaking my mind, dear, but maybe you shouldn’t be

too hasty. I don't like to interfere, but is Marc an improvement? He doesn't seem to be making you very happy.'

'He isn't. He won't let me in.'

'Well, it's hardly surprising the way you were needling him at the dinner table. Seriously, why can't you just be nice, Trisha? If you're going to have an affair with the poor man, at least try to have some fun.' She shook her head. 'Sorry, I have to text Jamie now. Goodness knows where he's got to.'

*

'Welcome back old chap, we were starting to miss you! Antonia especially has a void waiting to be filled, so she says,' Giles sniggered as Jamie strolled in and dumped a clinking bag on the table. 'If you can oblige her—and I'm sure a chap of your reputed abilities would have little trouble in that area—I think you might save your worthless soul. Come on! Dish it out old man, there's fun to be had!'

Giles leaned back contentedly, beaming and sweating, and drained his glass noisily.

'You took your time, Jamie.'

'Sorry, Lu,' said Jamie, noting her set jaw and pinched cheeks. 'Traffic, and the shop was mobbed.'

'Oh, come on, pop the corks somebody,' interrupted Antonia, 'or there'll be blood!' She waved her glass. 'Fill me again Giles, you porky pervert, and not the toilet this time, so undignified!' She stopped, putting her hand to her mouth. 'Oops, probably shouldn't have mentioned. Sorry, pissed. Carry on regardless.'

Magda was staring at her with amused contempt. 'Are you familiar with dignity, Antonia? You surprise me.'

But Antonia wasn't listening. She was leant over Giles, cradling his head between her breasts and kissing him on his bald patch. 'At least he's got spunk, unlike the rest of you, *pace* Jamie. Look at you! What's your name? Roy? I've seen more go in a wheelchair. And you, Marc is it? You obviously haven't been getting any, seeing as how you've almost got your nose in Lu's cleavage.'

She paused and refilled her glass with a flourish. 'What? What have I said? For God's sake!'

'Probably time to take a break darling. Do sit down for a moment.' Lucinda raised her glass and took a studied sip. 'Here's to harmony! Where's the other bottle? Roy, do the honours, would you? Thanks.'

Roy, now groggily aware that he had had more than was good for him, reached for the bottle. They all watched as he clumsily dinged the glasses.

'Hurry up, Roy! Winter's on it's way!' cried Antonia, pulling her hair out of her face. 'Your turn! Bottoms up!'

Bemused and feeling faintly sick, Roy raised his glass obediently. 'Er, right. Just wanna say thanks for a great party, er, kind of you...can't think of anythin' except, er, well...'

'Get on with it, Roy! Oh, hang on.' Antonia slid drunkenly into his lap. 'Roy would like to say, 'Bollocks to miserable sods, and serve 'em right!' She threw her hair back over her shoulders, squirming her tight silk skirt over his thighs. 'Ho, ho! Christmas is it, you desperate man? Got your logs in early, eh Roy?'

She grinned and tried to get up, snagging her watch on Roy's belt.

'Let go now, darling, or you'll spoil my blouse,' she giggled as she tried to tug it free.

Magda scraped her chair back from the table. 'I think Roy would like some fresh air, wouldn't you, Roy?'

'Yeah, should get some air,' he said gratefully.

Magda waited patiently by the door as he struggled to his feet and made his way towards her. She took his hand. 'Come on, there's a nice garden outside.'

Antonia looked woozily at Giles, who was sat in his chair, braces hanging and eyes closed. 'Think I'll join you,' she murmured, and slumping into Magda's vacated seat, leaned sideways to put her head on his shoulder. Half asleep, he grunted and put an arm round her. 'I'll look after you, darling,' he murmured.

*

Jamie was watching them, still drinking. He sighed and turned to Patrissia, who had returned silently to her seat, her glass nearly empty. 'Trish? Time for a toast. Not much of an audience, I'm afraid.'

Patrissia stared at him coldly. 'OK,' she said, draining her drink. She refilled it and raised it towards Marc.

'To families, sacred and profane! And to our gallant host!' She took a long draught of the wine. 'I can't be bothered to take the piss out of your fat friend there and his trollop.'

'Trisha, maybe you should stop now,' Lucinda intervened. 'Does anyone want a cup of tea? I'll go and see if Magda and Roy are all right.'

'I think I'm going to make a move,' said Marc, rising quietly. 'Are you coming, Patrissia?'

'Why not?' Patrissia poured the remains of the bottle into her glass, and staring into his eyes, slowly drained it. 'I'm ready.'

*

'Well, I hope *you* enjoyed tonight, Jamie. What a circus! And what *is* Patrissia doing with that *bizarre* man? He's obviously doing her no good. Pass me those plates, would you?'

Jamie took the stack of porcelain over to the dishwasher, where Lucinda carefully arranged them in the racks. 'And as for your friend Roy—Really, why did you invite him? It was cruel, Jamie. I've never seen anyone look so uncomfortable. Did you do it deliberately?'

'Don't be nasty, Lu, my head feels like it's been rammed down a toilet. Of course it wasn't deliberate. I was hoping he'd enjoy meeting some people. I didn't expect things to go the way they did. Thank God Peter and Gabriella couldn't come, I would've got a pretty frosty reception at work on Monday. What do you want me to do with these?' He held up some stained napkins.

'Oh, put them in the laundry basket. It's in the scullery.'

'I know where it is. I agree with you about Trish and Marc—at least, that it's bizarre they're an item.'

Lucinda snorted. 'He's just her type—Twenty years older, difficult, opinionated, and secretive.'

'Did you hear him talking about Giles' picture? Talk about sanctimonious!'

'Absolutely. He's hiding something, too. We had a chat in the garden and you would have thought he'd spent his life in a monastery.'

'Well, he *was* a priest, Lu.'

'Yes, and that's another thing. When I said he was Trisha's type—I've known her for twenty years, and she's had painters, gardeners, architects, garage mechanics, even a bisexual hairdresser. But a *priest*? I would never have expected it of her. She wrote to me, you know, after we left college. Her letters were full of her men and their opinions—mostly so she could ridicule them, as far as I could make out. She's certainly met her match in Marc, though. Not that she doesn't deserve it.'

She watched Jamie carefully, but there was no reaction.

'I wonder why she didn't bring her niece? You *did* remember to invite her, didn't you?'

'Marc and Ciara don't get on, so Trish told me.'

'She'd have felt quite at home then, I would have thought,' she sniffed. 'Trisha seemed awfully down tonight, though, didn't she?'

'I'm not surprised, the way they were getting at each other,' Jamie replied, ramming the napkin rings into the drawer. 'I don't know what she sees in him.'

'He's unavailable,' Lucinda said, blinking girlishly. 'That's always attractive to women like her.'

Jamie picked up the bulging bin-bag and hoisted it over his shoulder.

'Whose is this?' Lucinda held out a silver-coloured lighter, running her finger over the metal.

'Not got my glasses on, sorry.'

‘It feels expensive. Ah, here’s a monogram: it looks like a *J* and a *P* all curled up together.’

Jamie peered at it on his way past. ‘Looks old—it’s probably second-hand.’

‘Hmm, probably.’

*

Marc paid off the taxi and followed Patrissia through her front door. He paused when he saw the green light of her answer machine flashing.

‘You’ve got a message.’

Without thinking, she stopped and pressed playback. Straight away came Theo’s disembodied voice. ‘*I know what you’re up to, you bitch. Don’t contact me again.*’

The clattery chink of a phone hanging up echoed out and the green light went off.

‘Sorry about that, I didn’t think. That was my ex, Theo.’ She suddenly felt quite sober.

‘He didn’t sound very ex. What did you do to *him*?’

‘Oh,’ Patrissia shrugged, ‘we weren’t that close. It was just a casual thing.’

‘It might have been to you: it obviously wasn’t to him. Were you double-timing him too? Do you have another portrait in the attic?’

She sighed. ‘It’s over, Marc. It’s history.’

‘We are the result of our history, Patrissia.’

They stood facing each other, their eyes locked. She blinked and looked away.

‘Tonight—’ she began.

‘Tonight, you behaved like a child, Patrissia. You were rude, unpleasant, unkind, and drunk.’

Patrissia, feeling tears prick her eyes, turned to face him.

‘It’s you. I’m sick of being pushed away, sick of being in love with you and getting nothing back!’

‘And I’m sick of being played. First Apsley and now *him*.’ He nodded at the answerphone.

‘What about *you*? Models, weird photos, a secret past, an affair with my sister—Jesus! You can talk! I’m tempted to say it’s all just history, yours and mine, and that we could put the lid on it, but—’

‘But people don’t change, Patrissia. Some things get woven into our bones early, and everything else is built over that. You can scrape away, but it would feel like losing your essence. No-one’s strong enough for that. He shook his head. ‘Why did we have to meet? You said you didn’t believe in coincidence, so why?’

‘It’s not that we met, but that our meeting meant something to us both. Of course, there’s always the physical attraction, but beyond that... I think we were both looking for something.’ She turned her luminous eyes towards him. ‘And maybe we’ve found it. But we’re pulling in opposite directions, and that could be good or bad.’

‘Sorry Patrissia, I have to go now.’

‘Marc? Patrissia’s voice had a shrill edge.

‘Sorry, but—’. His face darkened and he took a breath. ‘Siân came to see me.’

‘Siân? What has she got to do with it?’

‘Oh, come on, you must have known what she wanted to confess—What’s wrong with you, Patrissia? Did you think it was some kind of joke sending her to me?’

‘What do you mean? She didn’t tell me anything.’

‘More lies. I’m going now.’

The front door banged shut. Patrissia threw her phone into her bag and cursed extensively and fluently in her native tongue.

The connection

'I don't know, Jamie, I can't afford to hang around for much longer. I've taken a two-month break already.'

'I know that. The thing is...' Jamie was, unusually, at a loss for words. They were sitting in the garden of The Royal Oak. It was pleasant by the river, and they were watching the swans perform their evening promenade.

Jamie leaned on the wall. 'The thing is, I'm getting a bit fond of you. Don't take it to heart, though,' he laughed. 'I'm not about to go down on my knees.'

Ciara giggled. 'I've got a bit fond of you too. Which is pretty amazing since we've hardly spent any time together. What is it, six weeks? I barely know you. It's obviously just a schoolgirl crush. I've not even seen your house.'

'Oh, I'm having some building work done. It's a mess.'

'I wouldn't mind. Presumably you still have furniture of some kind? A bed at least? I'd like to see your house, Jamie.'

'Of course. But why slum it when your place is perfectly fine?'

Ciara grimaced. 'How can you say that? It's just a rented flat and it's pretty tatty. But I suppose you're right.'

'Don't worry, we can spend time at mine as soon as it's finished—it'll only be a month or so. They're taking a wall down. But more importantly—about finding work: I could probably help you out. I know a few people.'

Ciara took a sip of wine. She looked wonderful tonight, Jamie thought. It had been blowy most of the day, and her hair wasn't its usual immaculate self. He liked it, and her, slightly disarranged—it gave him the feeling that she was letting down the drawbridge a little.

'I don't know. I've never worked in central London, and I definitely wouldn't want to live here. I need open fields and quiet. And the thought of a two-hour commute—I couldn't stand that.'

'You could work from home. And we could spend weekends in the country. It's not that far.'

‘It’s not just that, Jamie, you know it isn’t. It’s a big decision for me, and it hadn’t even crossed my mind that it would be on the agenda so soon. I took time off to chill—and to find my mother, of course. I haven’t done a lot of chilling, and I haven’t found my mother, so it hasn’t been much of a success. I have to say that, although Patrissia told me that she doesn’t know where my mother is, I’m not sure I believe her. I think she’s hiding something.’

‘Hiding something? That’s her forte: don’t take it personally.’ He shook his head, ‘It could just be that she simply doesn’t know.’ He shrugged. ‘Maybe your mother doesn’t want to be found.’

Ciara pursed her lips, lifting her chin. ‘I get the feeling you’re hiding things too, Jamie. I’m sorry, but I’d need to feel less...uninformed before I can think about us getting more serious.’

‘More serious? It’s not possible—I’m already head-over-heels with you. I have trouble not doing handstands, I’ve ordered a new clown outfit—’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ she interrupted, smiling, ‘but that’s just it—you’re never serious. I know we have fun, but I think that’s really all it is for you. We go to cafés, we go to bed, we have a laugh. But that’s only part of what it should be, isn’t it?’

Jamie put his glass on the wall. He hadn’t expected this heart-to-heart at all. He ran his fingers through his hair, studying the table.

‘But it’s the biggest part, Ciara. The rest of it—the daily stuff, the normal stuff—it comes as it comes. You don’t have to invite it, do you? It’s just life. The important thing is the connection, don’t you think? The love? How do you feel when you’re with me? If it’s anything like the way I feel, then...the other stuff should follow naturally, as a consequence of what we feel for each other.’ His lips tightened.

‘Don’t get me wrong, Jamie. I love being with you, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. It’s just that I’ve had some bad experiences. You know. Don’t get funny on me for being straight with you.’

‘Everybody has bad experiences, Ciara, and everybody thinks they’re worse than everybody else’s. There are no guarantees in life. If you want something badly enough you have to work at it.’

He turned to her, taking her hand. 'Seriously. Things change all the time, but if we both want to be with each other and we want more or less the same things, then we're going in the right direction. Here and now, here and now, and a direction—that's all there is.'

Ciara tossed her head. 'That's easy for you to say, Jamie. And it might even be true, but it's a matter of trust, isn't it?'

Jamie went still. 'Don't you trust me? What have I done?'

'It's just a feeling I have, Jamie. You're not very available, are you? We only meet when *you* want, and then it's not for long—and you never stay the night. I mean, if your place is such a mess I would've thought you'd jump at the chance to stay over at mine.'

'That's mainly work—it's a twenty-four hour job, and you know what creatives are like, calling you at four in the morning to cry on your shoulder,' he laughed. 'OK, I exaggerate, but really, I don't get much free time. I try to get some exercise, and then I chair the meetings. There's not a lot of time left.'

'They all sound like excuses, I'm afraid, Jamie. Oh, I don't know—I suppose you don't really get to know anyone until you live with them, do you? There are always surprises. I've always been quite,' she coloured slightly, and her hair fell forward, veiling her face, 'quite *spontaneous*, is one way of putting it.' She laughed, and Jamie joined in, relaxing, his mouth soft and his eyes bright. 'And it hasn't always turned out well.'

'As I said, there are no guarantees.'

'Maybe not, but you should be able to trust the people you love not to hurt you, shouldn't you?'

'Of course, but sometimes things just happen before you realise it. But that's no reason to stop being yourself, is it?'

'That's just silly nonsense, Jamie, and you know it. You can't *be* anything but yourself. But you *can* try to be better, and if you fail so be it, but you have to *try*.'

'OK, I take your point.'

They were standing close together, and although Ciara had turned her head away from him, Jamie knew that she was still listening.

‘Look, cards on the table. I imagine you’ve reached that point when you’re thinking, *What now?* I know I have. When you begin to think, just a little, about, well, let’s be blunt and call it ‘*settling down*’. Am I right? And you feel less like letting yourself go and a bit more like reining yourself in. Not in a restrictive way, but—I’m sure you know what I mean. It’s not to do with age or anything, it’s just a feeling, and we shouldn’t invent obstacles if we feel that settling down is the right thing to do.’

He poured them both another glass of wine and swirled the dregs around the bottle while she took a pack of cigarettes out of her bag and lit up, exhaling sharply.

‘You surprise me, Jamie, I didn’t expect you to say that. Yes, you’re right. I hate to admit it, but I’m looking for some stability. It’s been coming for a while. But do you *mean* what you said?’

It was Jamie’s turn to look away. He fondled his glass as if it contained the blood of his children, then slowly raised his eyes.

‘I don’t want some casual thing with you, Ciara. You asked me to be serious, and I am. But I don’t want to rush into anything. As I said, I can get you work, that shouldn’t be a problem, and we can find you a nicer place to live.’ He smiled. ‘Then we can see how it goes. You say you don’t have any plans, so why not go with that? I mean, unless there’s somebody else...?’

‘There’s no-one else.’

He smiled and put his hand over hers. It was big and warm.

‘I want children, Jamie, before I’m too old.’

He looked around furtively. ‘It’s rather public, but I’m game. I suppose if you sit on my lap...’

‘I wouldn’t dare me to, if I were you,’ she laughed.

He looked at his wrist. ‘Bugger, I have to go. I’ll call you later.’ He paused. ‘Let’s meet at the boating lake tomorrow. Can you make it at ten?’

‘OK, that sounds lovely.’

He leaned down and cupped her cheek. They kissed softly, lingering until his phone beeped. They held the kiss unhurriedly, then with a sigh, Jamie picked up his briefcase. ‘OK, then. Don’t

worry, Ciara, we'll sort it out. I want to be with you.' He blew her a kiss, and with a last wave, disappeared into the car park.

*

'How's it going, Roy? Bit of luck you being free this morning. We're off to the boating lake with the girls.' Lucinda smiled her big toothy smile.

Roy carefully removed the large wrench from under the sink. 'All done. If that's everythin', I've got another job at eleven.'

'Oh. There were some other little things,' said Lucinda, glancing at the knob on the kitchen drawer. It was hanging loose again—Zara had adopted it as her latest sensory toy. 'They can wait, though. Thank you for coming. The macerator's always going wrong and nobody seems to be able to fix it properly.'

'What's this about a boating lake?' Jamie asked from the door.

'Oh, hello, Jamie. I thought it would be nice, since you've got the day off.'

Jamie wondered how she knew about his day off. She must have been checking his laptop again. 'Don't you think it's a bit dangerous for the girls? Zara always gets so excited and wanders off. Why don't we go to the heath instead?'

'But it's a beautiful day, and they're looking forward to getting a pedalo.'

'No, I don't think so.'

Roy listened to them bicker as he packed up his tools. Jamie was always joking about how often they argued, but it wasn't really a joke, Roy could see that. He felt sorry for him, but on the other hand, it seemed to be pretty normal. He shook his head. He wouldn't like that. If you can't find someone you get on with, it's best to be alone. The thought made him feel cold.

This time it was Lucinda who gave in. 'All right, Jamie, have it your own way. I suppose we can take a picnic to the heath. I'll go and get the girls ready.'

*

‘Hey, Roy,’ said Jamie, as soon as Lucinda had left the room, ‘could you do me a favour? I was supposed to be meeting someone at ten,’ he looked at his watch, ‘and my phone battery’s dead.’ He winked. ‘She’ll be waiting at the boating lake.’

‘Oh, sure, no problem. It’s on me way.’

‘Thanks, old chap,’ Jamie said, glancing into the hallway. ‘Her name’s Ciara. You can’t miss her—gorgeous, but probably looking pissed-off. She’ll be sitting in the café by the lake. Just tell her that something came up on the job front and that I’ll come over to her place later to explain.’

He took a wad of notes from his wallet and pressed them into Roy’s hand. ‘Here’s fifty quid for the sink and another twenty for helping me out. You’re a good mate.’

‘Oh, right, ta, Jamie,’ said Roy, collecting his tools. ‘I would’ve done that loose knob.’

‘Don’t worry, Roy, I’ll take care of it.’

*

Ciara swung her legs to and fro, the boating lake in front of her shimmering in the late morning sunshine. A man paddled a canoe through the ripples. A woman with two young children sat in a rowing boat, laughing happily as she watched her children unwrap their sandwiches and toss pellets of bread into the water for the ducks.

Ciara turned her mobile phone over slowly in her hand. It was nearly eleven. She pressed redial, lifting the phone to her ear. There was no answer. It rang and rang.

‘Er, Ciara?’

She looked up suspiciously. She’d been watching the man watch her from the path. He looked like a workman, and she wasn’t in the mood to be pestered. ‘Who are you?’

‘Roy, friend of Jamie’s.’

‘Oh?’ she said, sitting back in her chair. ‘Where is he? Why hasn’t he called? I’ve been waiting for over an hour.’

‘E says ‘e can’t make it this mornin’, an’ ‘e’ll come over to your place later. Somethin’ to do with work, ‘e said.’ Roy looked away, embarrassed at displeasing her.

‘What’s your name again?’

‘Roy.’

‘So he sent you to make his excuses, did he?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, blushing. ‘I’d be a bit fed up too.’

‘It’s not the first time, Roy.’ She shook her head.

Roy looked at her, wanting to make her feel better. ‘Is Jamie an old mate?’

Ciara snorted. ‘Is that what he told you? No, we’re not old mates—we only met a few weeks ago.’ She fiddled with her handbag, extracting a pack of cigarettes. ‘Sit down and have a cup of tea.’

‘Er, I’m late already...’

‘Nonsense, it’s a lovely day. It’ll wait, whatever it is.’

Roy sat down, unable to think of a way of extricating himself, and fearful of upsetting her further. What would he say if she asked him if Jamie was married? He’d have to lie.

‘So, Roy, how well do you know Jamie?’

‘Er, ‘e’s a good mate. We ‘ave a drink now an’ then, an’ I do odd jobs for ‘im. I’ve just been fixin’ ‘is macerator.’

‘That sounds like fun.’

‘It gets clogged up all the time. The kids put plasticene down the plughole.’

‘Oh, he’s got children, has he?’

‘Ah, er, yeah. Since, er, ‘is wife left him they, er, play up a bit.’

‘How long have he and his wife been separated?’

‘Dunno, I’ve never met ‘er.’

Roy was shocked at how easily the lie had come out. Their tea came, and he was careful only to put two sugars in, stirring it for what seemed like ages before he took a minute sip.

‘Can I ask, like, I mean, it’s none of my business,’ he began, to fill the awkward silence, ‘but are you ’is girlfriend then? ’E didn’t exactly say.’

‘Doesn’t he ever mention me?’ Ciara looked at him sharply.

‘Course ’e does, but ’e don’t say much except that ’e likes you.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Oh, you know, the usual.’

‘What, nice tits and big smile?’ She saw him blanch, and checked herself. ‘Sorry, just a joke.’ She studied him as he was taking pains not to slurp his tea. ‘What do *you* think of him, Roy?’

‘E’s a good bloke, he’s a really good bloke. Er, what d’yer do?’ he asked, desperately.

‘I’m a graphic artist, but I’m taking some time out. I split up with someone a couple of months ago and I needed a change of scene, so I’m renting a flat for a while, trying to have some fun.’

‘Yeah, Jamie’s a laugh, isn’t ’e? ’Course, most of what ’e says goes over me ’ead, but ’e’s a funny bloke.’

‘Oh, funny? Yes, he is that.’ Ciara stirred her tea, and looked away over the lake.

Roy was glad she wasn’t seriously involved with Jamie—it made him feel better about not telling her he was married.

‘Sorry to ’ear about your split-up.’

‘Don’t be. He messed me around big-time.’ Ciara looked at him, her eyes hard. ‘And I don’t like being messed around.’

‘No,’ course you don’t. Jamie’s been a good mate to me. ’E got me the van. ’E’s really generous, an’ always laughin’. Mind you, I s’pose ’e’s got plenty to be ’appy about, goin’ out with someone as pretty as you.’ Roy felt his cheeks burning as Ciara smiled at him. ‘You look a bit foreign—Are you in films or somethin’?’

‘No, I design DVD covers. And you’re right, Roy, I’m half Italian, but I’ve got an English father. Actually, that was another reason for

taking some time off from work. I wanted to find my real father. I'm adopted, you see. It's a long story.'

'Did you find 'im?'

Ciara looked at the table, taking a long sip of tea before answering.

'Yes, unfortunately. I wish I hadn't bothered. We didn't exactly hit it off, but on the other hand, that's how I met Jamie. My father's a friend of his, Marc. Do you know him?'

Roy stared at her. 'You mean Marc who runs the meetings?'

'That's right.'

'Blimey.' Roy was sitting with the empty cup in his hand. He didn't know what else to say.

Ciara shrugged. 'Goodness knows why I'm telling you all this,' she smiled. 'Passes the time though, doesn't it? Though God knows, I've wasted enough of my time this morning. And yours.'

'Er, yeah. I better get goin' or I'll be late for me next job. Thanks for the tea, Ciara.'

'My pleasure, Roy, it was nice talking to you.'

'Nice meetin' you, too. I 'ope things turn out all right with yer dad. See ya.'

Roy walked back to his van feeling slightly lightheaded. Ciara struck him as a nice person, very open and honest. That Magda at the party had been nice, too, they'd had a nice chat. He wondered if Jamie had got her phone number.

Blissful moments

Patrissia stared at herself. She had been beautiful, no doubt about it. The smoothness of her forehead, the softness of her skin—she was radiant. But finally, beneath these fleshly signs, it was the sense of acquiescence, of willingness, of openness to delight that captured the heart—who could not desire her?

She felt a frisson of satisfaction knowing that the small group of people surrounding her thought the same.

She had woken that morning with a bad head, unable to decide whether it was the wine or Marc's indifference that hurt most, and going to the bathroom, had winced at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. And then, reaching into her bag for a comb, she had found the crumpled exhibition guide from the Portrait Gallery.

She pulled a pamphlet from the plastic holder below the painting. There he was: *Johnny*, older, sterner, more lined and ragged, but still with the same wise eyes.

Skimming the brief biography, she learned that he now lived in Cornwall, in Zennor, amid the bleak seascapes that they had painted together. She remembered his tireless ranting, the endless biting winds, the gloomy fogs—and the sudden blissful moments.

Tears came to her eyes, and the woman standing next to her touched her hand. 'I know, it gets to you, doesn't it? It's so beautiful. Are you the model?' She was smiling.

'Yes, I am.'

Glancing back at the portrait, the woman squeezed her hand. 'He's obviously in love with you.'

Patrissia laughed nervously. 'Do you think so? I haven't seen him for fifteen years.'

'Really? Well maybe it's time you gave him a call.'

'Maybe you're right.'

Folding the pamphlet carefully into her purse, Patrissia headed for the exit.



She was glad to get home that evening, and discarding her coat on the corridor floor, she went straight to the hot tub and turned on the submerged lights.

As she lit a couple of candles, she remembered Siân's visit the week before, and how happy she had looked.

It can't be real. Patrisia almost wished it wasn't.

Throwing off her clothes and stepping gratefully into the warm water, she lay back, watching the reflections on the ceiling flicker and swirl.

Her head gradually emptied and, moving her hands in circles, she watched the ripples quiver like the tips of waves under an evening sky, remembering how it felt to paint the sea from Zennor Point, greyer than it was blue, soaked in a delicate mist—and behind it, the feeling of light, blissful light.

Closing her eyes, she let it fill her, hold her, until she was suspended in the light, until she *was* the light.

The trickle and pop of water lapping in her ears jerked her awake, and with an enormous sigh she raised her head. Daydreaming was all very well, but far from helping, it had made her feel more acutely the need to do something decisive.

She had a few days of holiday left, and a trip to Cornwall might be the answer. If nothing else—and if she could persuade Marc to come with her—it could be the right place to tell him about the baby.

The baby. It changed everything.

But it might be the one thing that Marc wouldn't be able to ignore—and at least it might take his mind off Johnny.

A clock with no hands

Patrissia tugged idly at a silver thread dangling from the lining of her sleeve before removing her coat and patting it smoothly down over the back of Marc's sofa.

'Did you get your work done?' she asked as pleasantly as she could, considering how hard her heart was hammering.

The hot tub hadn't done its job, in fact she'd felt more tense afterwards, and she had driven to Marc's house much too fast. The baby, Johnny, the seemingly endemic hostility between Marc and her—none of it would go away.

He nodded.

'Good,' she smiled. 'So, you wanted to talk about the meetings?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, I'm listening.'

He turned his back to her and walked towards the window. 'We seem to have got stuck on confessing our sins. Of course, it's a fascinating pursuit but I was hoping these discussions would be more about experience and imagination of all kinds, not just soul-searching.'

'Then why don't you say something?'

'I spoke to Jamie last night. He's going to bring it up tonight.'

There was a stiff silence. Unable to stand still, and finding herself beside him at the French window, Patrissia tried to dredge up something to say that might ease the tension between them.

'When will your latest piece be finished?'

'It's almost done,' he answered quietly, moving away from her and sitting down behind his desk. Glancing at a sheet of paper, he placed it carefully on top of a neat pile and pushed it to one side. Then, leaning forward, he rested his forearms in the newly-cleared space and clasped his hands as if he was preparing to interview her.

'What do you want, Patrissia?'

She felt the shock of his animosity like a blow.

She smiled. 'A holiday would be nice. I'm exhausted. Why don't we go down to Cornwall for a few days? Maybe rent a nice cottage by the sea?'

'You know that's not what I was asking.' He sniffed dismissively. 'I'm asking you what you think you're doing, Patrissia? I feel as if I'm continually being tested.'

She shook her head. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'As if I'm being drawn into the intricacy of your selfishness.'

'Oh, for God's sake, Marc, lighten up! Where's all this coming from?' Patrissia said, more sharply than she had intended.

'I think you know where it's coming from.' He was sitting quite still. 'When you speak softly and seem to share yourself, when you give me your special smile, the kiss on the cheek, the doe eyes, the eyelashes, it seems to be about us, but it's not really about us, is it? It's always about you and your plans. This sudden trip to Cornwall, for example.'

'What are you talking about?' Patrissia stared at him. 'I thought it would help, that's all. We both need a break, and I thought maybe you'd get some inspiration for your work. Or that I would—I've been thinking about taking up painting again.'

'Have you, indeed? And I suppose it's nothing to do with the portrait, nothing to do with the fact that he lives there?'

'You see what I mean? Can you drop it, please, Marc, you're getting tiresome. I'm just feeling jaded, and you don't look too good yourself. A few days away by the sea will do us good.'

He put down the pencil he had been fiddling with. 'You may be right, Patrissia, although I strongly suspect that you have other motives. And there's something else too, something I can't quite put my finger on.' His voice softened. 'I've been feeling such an emotional pull from you lately. It's almost as if you had a magnet in your belly.'

Patrissia froze, feeling a cold current of fear bubbling up in her. Was it possible that he knew? Even he only suspected, or had somehow guessed it or smelled it in the air, now was certainly not the moment to break the news to him.

‘Well, you’ve lost me, I just don’t understand,’ she replied.

‘No you don’t, do you? Or, more likely, you won’t,’ he said, angry now. ‘You think you can trap me, deceive me, suck the soul out of me—’

Patrissia shook her head, feeling that it was her own soul that was being sucked out.

‘Look, if you feel like beating me up, go ahead. I’m a big strong girl, I can take it. Though I fail to see what I’ve done to deserve all these accusations of—what? What have I done to make you be like this?’

‘You’ve been yourself, Patrissia—at least, you’ve been the Patrissia you want me to see. That Patrissia has been most tolerant and welcoming, but when I try to get a sense of who’s behind the tolerance and welcome...everything dissolves. I can’t find anyone.’

‘Why are you always like this, always criticising? Has it occurred to you that you don’t find anything because you don’t have the capacity to see? I can assure you there’s someone here, and she’s on the same mission as you.

‘I’m who you see, this is who I am, but what are you, Marc? Does anyone know?’ Patrissia snorted. ‘I’ll tell you what you are! You’re a shadow, a clock with no hands, a blank book. Yes, we see you, and we see pretence at play.’

He shrugged, his face hard.

‘I thought the way to connect with you would be to get to know you, to find out what you think, what you feel, what you believe—and now you’re accusing me of trying to manipulate you and control you in some way, and that’s not what I’m doing at all! I’m just trying to get close to you, don’t you understand?’

She waited for Marc to say something, but he was silent.

‘You said we all needed understanding. You said that’s what you wanted.’ Her voice was rising with each moment, until at last she screamed, ‘How am I supposed to understand a blank page? You’re making yourself invisible to me!’

He didn’t flinch. ‘And what do you hope to find?’

‘A man, a lover, a father. You!’

‘And then what will you do with me?’ he replied harshly. ‘Scribble pretty verses all over my blank pages? Make me a part of your story, your history, your plan?’

Patrissia shook her head. ‘No, you’ve got it all wrong. What’s got into you, Marc? You seem to find everything about me unpalatable all of a sudden.’

He wasn’t looking at her now, but was gazing at his desk.

‘Marc, look at me. What have I done to offend you?’

‘What a ghastly mistake!’

‘Are you being serious?’

‘Yes, I am. And so are you, about one thing.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘What’s that?’

He got up and stood facing her, his face expressionless. ‘Yourself. Your ends. Your plans.’

‘But I don’t have any plans, Marc, none at all.’ She started to move towards him, but he turned his back on her again.

‘I think you’d better go.’

The silence lasted only a second or two, but Patrissia felt it expanding and choking her like poisonous fog.

‘OK, if that’s what you want.’

Marc listened to her clatter out of the room and down the passageway. The front door banged shut.

He picked up a pad containing sketches for his figure of her. The later ones were rather different from the one she’d admired on his desk, with its soft shading and delicacy of line. They were now all sharp edges and spiky wire, the charcoal smudged and the paper gouged. Wasn’t it Picasso who said that we kill the things we love?

Blowing dust off the pad, he opened the French window and walked unhurriedly to the studio. Thank God it was almost finished.

A dusting of rust

‘Where did you vanish to?’

‘Just a walk,’ said Jamie, stamping his feet on the doormat. ‘The country air must have got me going, I worked up quite a sweat. I’ll be going out later on—I’d better have a shower.’

‘Another meeting? Wasn’t there one of those a couple of days ago?’

‘Yep,’ replied Jamie. ‘But he wants to discuss some suggestions he thinks might stop it getting stale. Hmm,’ he frowned, fiddling with a kitchen drawer knob,’ this needs adjusting methinks.’ He ambled over to the larder where Lucinda kept screwdrivers and spanners in an old cake tin.

She watched him as he emptied the tin onto the clean worktop and picked up a large pair of pliers from the heap, bending over the open drawer.

‘You’d be better off using a spanner, Jamie.’

He ignored her, focusing intently on the slipping pliers while twisting the errant knob into the drawer front. When the job was done, he scraped the pile of dirty tools back into the tin with a clatter. Banging the lid back on, he smiled companionably at her before rinsing his hands under the tap and wiping them on a clean dishcloth.

‘Seen the Telegraph, Lu?’

She put down her cup and followed him into the living room.

‘You’re in a good mood. Work going well?’

‘Like a dream,’ he said, looking up from the paper. ‘How about you?’

‘Mmm, good. The show went really well—in fact I signed a new contract with Bizet’s today.’

‘Marvellous. Well done you!’ Jamie nodded with what he hoped passed as interest.

‘And I had lunch with Antonia,’ she went on, determined to extract some reaction, ‘and she was full of beans, as ever. She’s got

a new man, apparently, a recording engineer with the BBC. Tough luck on Giles, eh?’

Jamie stretched dramatically. ‘I think I’ll have that shower now.’

‘So where’s the meeting tonight. The chapel?’

‘Don’t know, actually. I’ll have to call Trish. She was having trouble booking somewhere at such short notice, apparently.’

‘Hmm. What *are* they all about, these meetings?’

‘Oh, all sorts. Spiritual and philosophical debate, a bit of religion, beliefs, ideas, problems, solutions. You know how I enjoy a meaty debate.’

‘Do you? I can’t say I’d noticed. They sound quite unusual.’

‘Yeah, I suppose so,’ Jamie shrugged, and left the room before she could come up with any more stalling tactics.

How funny that Jamie had described his projected evening’s entertainment as a discussion about matters of the spirit, Lucinda was thinking, when very little discussion and plenty of pressing matters of the flesh were more his cup of tea.

She wondered where these ‘matters’ might take place tonight. Would it be a seedy B&B, or perhaps the back seat of his 4x4? She was sure Patrissia wouldn’t put up with such indignities. On the other hand, Lucinda considered, she might find it quite exciting.

Returning to the kitchen she stared at the tin of spanners still sitting where he had left it in its dusting of rust.

She would take the Polo tonight, and find out what was so compelling about Patrissia’s meetings.

Part 5. Love

As soon as Marc reached the river path, he felt his anger begin to dissolve. He slowed and began to breathe in the earthy and faintly sour vegetative smells of the riverbank.

A faint brr-brr interrupted him, and cursing, he dug for his phone, extracting it from beneath the tight pile of lighters and tissues in his bulging pocket.

‘Hi, Marc, it’s Ciara. I just wanted to apologise for the other night. I’m really sorry—I don’t know what came over me. I’d really like to see you—’ Her voice went up an octave. ‘Can you hear me? You sound muffled. Where are you?’

‘Walking by the river. I’m actually on my way to the pub.’

‘What pub? Is it far?’

‘The Royal Oak—’

‘Big place, down by the river? I was there the other day.’

Marc was watching the water bubbling and gurgling in little eddies around the submerged tree roots, regretting that he’d told her he was going to the pub, but unable to respond when he heard her say, ‘OK. I hope you can hear me—I’ll meet you there in fifteen minutes.’

The line went dead.

A beautiful evening

Siân and Patrissia walked from the car park into the pub garden arm in arm, and sat down on one of the slatted benches grouped haphazardly around a large table in the garden.

It promised to be a beautiful evening. In the twilight, the first evening star began to materialise from behind a gauze of pink cloud.

Patrissia wondered if anyone else would turn up. Roy would, she thought, and Jamie, but whether Marc would materialise, she doubted, and if he did he’d probably bring rain.

‘Look, there’s Roy with Magda,’ Siân said, pointing to the river gate.

Patrissia turned her head. They were standing together, laughing. She’d never heard him really laugh before. As she watched them, Magda touched Roy’s arm, and he nodded before ambling up the garden towards Patrissia’s table, head up and hands distending the pockets of his donkey jacket.

‘I’m just goin’ to the bar,’ he said, smiling. ‘Magda’s payin’. What can I get yer? Siân?’

‘Fizzy water, please.’

‘And a glass of Sauvignon for me,’ Patrissia added.

‘Righty O.’

They watched him as he headed purposefully for the bar.

‘He looks happy.’ Patrissia said.

‘He does, doesn’t he?’

‘And Magda seems to like him. She seems nice and straightforward, just what he needs. Who’s that?’

‘I think it’s that man who upset Marc in the meeting,’ said Siân, following Patrissia’s gaze and eyeing them with interest.

‘So it is: it’s Philip. And doesn’t Lucinda look like the cat that’s got the cream? I can’t remember the last time I saw her looking so pleased with herself.’

*

‘Hello Patrissia, and hello Siân—it is Siân, isn’t it? Such a lovely evening,’ Lucinda purred as she came over. ‘Is this where you’re meeting tonight? May we join you?’

‘Take a seat. Good to see you two aren’t still at loggerheads.’

They both laughed as Philip dusted down the bench.

‘No, we agree on some things, it seems,’ said Lucinda, smiling companionably at him. ‘I think Philip may have made himself out to be more of an ogre than he actually is.’

‘Just as well, Lu. I happen to have a larder chock full of beanstalks.’

There was a pause before Philip chuckled. ‘Ah! Patrissia, very good! Do you fancy yourself as a butcher? No match for a lawyer, I can assure you.’

‘Oh, so you’re a lawyer? I should have guessed.’

‘We were just talking about the meetings, Patrissia, and how quickly one’s ideals get tossed aside when real life threatens.’

Patrissia tore her eyes away from a tall man who had just appeared at the river gate. It wasn’t Marc.

‘Well, ideals don’t belong in everyday life, do they?’ she sighed. ‘They’re fine in theory but, sadly, practicalities always seize the day. It’s obvious when you see how most relationships lose their shine when the going gets tough—if they last at all.’

Lucinda’s smile had all but disappeared now. ‘Yes, it’s all very well being starry-eyed at the outset, but after that you just have to get on with things and hope that there’ll be enough starry nights to make it worthwhile, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I suppose you do.’

Lucinda patted Patrissia’s hand with satisfaction. ‘You’ve changed your tune, Trisha. Do you remember telling me at college that the inconveniences that love brings should be ignored? That love was the most important thing?’

‘Yes, I do. I’m surprised you remember.’

Patrissia was watching Philip, whose eyes were fixed on Lucinda’s. Nodding to him, she said, ‘You certainly stirred things up a bit tonight, Philip. Will you be a regular?’

‘Everything I said came straight from the heart, Patrissia, if you can believe a lawyer can have a heart. As for being a regular, it’s unlikely—In fact, I shouldn’t be here now.’

He turned to Lucinda, whose face had more colour than her usual pale English Rose. ‘It’s been delightful talking to you. Here’s my card. Do call if you’re in the area. Sorry, I really must be making a move. Goodbye Patrissia: and Siân, nice meeting you.’

Lucinda seemed to be too preoccupied with the contents of her handbag to notice his backward glance as he made his way to the car park.

‘He seems quite taken with you, Lucinda,’ said Siân. ‘It was Marc who invited him to the meetings, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, he’s one of Marc’s clients. He said he only started coming as a gesture of support, but he became interested. He didn’t say why.’

Patrissia edged closer to Lucinda and lowered her voice. ‘Lu, do you mind if I ask you something? You talked to Marc at the party—What did you think?’

‘Well,’ Lucinda said carefully, ‘Philip told me a little about him. He thinks Marc’s quite mad, and I have to say that I got a very odd feeling about him. I think I’d run for the hills if it were me.’

Patrissia cradled the wineglass in her hand. ‘I was afraid you’d say that.’

‘Jamie thinks he’s strange, too.’ Lucinda continued, ‘quite *damaged*, was the way he put it.’ She ran her eyes from Patrissia’s glass to the deep-drawn lines on her face. ‘And I’d say that you’re the last person he needs to try to fix him.’

‘Sorry to be so frank, but really, you’re like two drowning sailors clinging to each other—it’s just a question of who’ll sink first. I’m sure you didn’t want to hear that, but you wanted my opinion. Just let go and save yourself, would be my advice.’ She looked away, scanning the garden.

‘You may be right. If you’re looking for Jamie, I don’t think he’s arrived yet,’ said Patrissia, distractedly, mulling over Lucinda’s words, ‘although he promised he’d come.’

‘Actually, he’s getting drinks.’ Lucinda paused, a faint twist to her lips. ‘But I’m still wondering who his latest fling might be? Tell me,’ she said slowly, her eyes still on the door to the bar, ‘has he made a pass at *you* yet?’

‘Me? Good heavens, no!’

‘Odd,’ said Lucinda, neutrally. ‘You must have done something to keep him on his best behaviour—he normally chats up anything in

a skirt. Not that I mind particularly: they never last long, and his guilt is useful.' She suddenly smiled. 'Well, speak of the devil.'

Patrissia jerked, and twisted her head to look over her shoulder.

'He's smiling,' Lucinda went on, noting her reaction, 'although I can't think why.' She paused, watching Jamie and Patrissia in turn as Jamie weaved his way towards them. 'I can see that you wouldn't be attracted to his type though, Trisha—not your cup of poison at all. Not wild and dishevelled enough.'

'What a pity Philip couldn't stay longer, Lucinda. He's amusing, isn't he? Quite anodyne, though, in spite of his cleverness.'

Lucinda looked at her sharply. 'I expect Jamie's latest fling will turn out to be another one of my less discriminating girlfriends, though whoever it is, she must have something—he's been acting rather more like an adult for the last few weeks. It's laughable really.'



Jamie stopped half-way across the lawn and turned his head, first towards the river gate, and then towards Patrissia, his eyes widening.

'Sorry, Lu, I've just seen someone I need to speak to,' said Patrissia, rising and touching her arm. 'Back in a minute.'

Jamie arrived at the table a moment later, half-dropping the metal tray onto it. Some of the beer slopped over.

'Bugger! Sorry about that—I'll get a cloth,' he muttered, heading back towards the pub door.

'No worries, mate, I can get it!' Roy called after him, but he had gone. Roy started digging in his pockets.

'Oh, use this!' hissed Lucinda, pushing a handkerchief onto his lap. She was watching Patrissia embrace a younger woman in the far corner of the garden. They seemed to be chatting amiably enough when suddenly the woman turned on her heel and headed away down the path.

Lucinda's arm jerked involuntarily backwards, glancing against Siân's leg. 'Tell me, Siân, dear, who's that woman with Trisha? Is she from your meetings?'

Siân squinted across the garden, shielding the sun from her eyes. 'I'm not sure. I don't recognise her. It could be her niece.'

'Oh?' Lucinda sounded deflated. 'I wonder why she didn't bring her over and introduce her to us?'

'Won't be a tick,' Roy said, jumping up. 'Just goin' to rinse out your hanky, Lucinda,' he said, disappearing up the garden.

'I expect she'll bring her over in a moment,' Siân said, losing interest as she watched Roy push his way through the small crowd of smokers surrounding the door to the bar.

'Oh! It looks like the niece is leaving. I wonder why she bothered to come. And where's Patrissia going now?'

'She probably needs the loo again. It's a pain in the arse, being pregnant.'

'Pregnant? Is she?'

*

'Jesus, Roy, what am I going to do? Do you know if there's a back door?'

Roy looked up from the sink. 'They'll see yer, mate, there's only one way outta this place. Looks like yer in for it.'

'There's always another way out, Roy.'

'Don't look like it to me. Lucinda's scannin' the garden an' Ciara's in the car park. Yer bugged as far as I can see.' He finished soaking the handkerchief and started twisting the water out. 'Yer don't often see proper hankies like this any more.'

Jamie rolled his eyes. 'Lucinda's always prepared. Probably got splints and a stretcher in the car. But never mind the sodding hanky, Roy, she followed me tonight, she's on the lookout.'

Roy turned off the tap and started kneading the handkerchief in cold water. 'I don' blame 'er, mate. Dunno 'ow you managed to get away with it fer so long. I mean, everybody knows what yer up to.'

‘You don’t understand, Roy. Lucinda’s always known about the other women. It gives her an excuse to be a bitch.’ He let out a long sigh. ‘But this is different. Christ, I hope Trish hasn’t told her—she swore she wouldn’t dump me in it. Is she trying to get me killed? For fuck’s sake! Women! You just can’t trust them, can you?’

‘Jamie, mate, it’s not them, it’s you. Yer can’t rely on people to be dishonest for yer, that’s stupid.’

Jamie grinned at him. ‘You’re not as dumb as you make out, are you, Roy? You’re right about me and Ciara. It’s serious. We’re talking about living together.’

‘What? You gonna leave yer family?’ Roy frowned. ‘What about yer kids?’

‘I know, I know. But no-one has to get hurt. Lucinda couldn’t give a shit about me, you know that, and she’ll take good care of Zara and Daisy.’

‘Dunno about that, mate.’ Roy finished squeezing the handkerchief and smoothed it out. ‘I couldn’t do it meself.’

‘OK, OK, I’m a bastard, I know. But it’s life, Roy. You’ve got to make the most of it, and me and Ciara—I’ve really fallen for her. I can’t just let her go.’

‘Well, on yer ’ead be it.’

‘Can you go and see what’s going on?’

‘Dunno, mate.’ Roy took a moment to check the handkerchief for stains, and then stared Jamie in the eye. ‘I s’pose I could go an’ ’ave a look-see. I ain’t ’appy about it though.’

‘Thanks, Roy. You’re right, and I’m going to do the right thing—but this isn’t the time. Just help me out, will you?’

‘Last time, Jamie. Yer shouldn’t piss people about like yer do. But yer’ve been a good mate to me and I owe yer. OK. Back in a minute.’

*

Spotting Roy emerging from the Gents, Patrissia grabbed him as he went past.

‘Where’s Jamie? I need to talk to him.’

‘E’s in the toilet.’

‘Look, do me a favour and get him for me, will you? I have to speak to him.’

Roy frowned at her. ‘Dunno that he’s in the mood to talk to yer.’

‘Just get him, would you Roy? Quickly please.’

He looked at her steadily. ‘Yer two of a kind, aren’t yer? OK, I’ll get ’im.’

A moment later, Jamie appeared, looking wary.

‘Trish, what the fuck?’ he whispered.

‘I didn’t invite her, you idiot!’ Patrissia snapped. ‘She said she came to meet Marc. Apparently he told her he was on his way here.’

Jamie shook his head. ‘I can’t go out there.’

‘It’s OK. I told her that Marc wasn’t feeling well and had gone home to bed. I don’t think she was convinced, but she’s gone.’ She looked around and pulled him into a corner, fixing her eyes on his. ‘I’ve got something to say to you too. Listen to me, because this is important.’

‘You know that I found her mother.’ She grabbed his arm and squeezed hard. ‘But she must never know, is that clear? I’ll kill you if you tell her.’

He nodded. ‘I won’t tell her, Trish.’ He let out a long breath. ‘I’m thinking of leaving Lucinda.’

‘What? Why are you telling me now?’

‘I need to know how to get out of the mess I’m in. I want to be honest, but I just don’t know what to say. I don’t want to lose Ciara.’

‘Are you sure it’s Ciara you want, and not just an escape route?’

‘Absolutely. I have to be with her. I know how it sounds, but I’ve never felt like this before. I’m completely hooked, lined and sunk.’

‘You’d better not be messing her about. I warn you, Jamie, if you are, I’ll be all over you like a swarm of rats, believe me.’

'I'm not messing her about, Trish, I swear. I've told her I want us to be together—It's just that I haven't told her I'm married yet.' He grimaced. 'What if Lu saw her? What if *she* knows? I've got to put Ciara in the picture before Lu has a chance to—'

Patrissia took a deep breath, reminding herself it wasn't Jamie she was angry with.

'You poor old sausage, that's not your problem any more. I told Ciara the truth.'

'What?'

'You needn't thank me, Jamie. It had to happen sometime. In the meantime, just get out there and act normal. Lucinda's got her antennae out. Up to a few minutes ago I swear she was thinking *I* was your bit on the side!'

Jamie reddened, then raised his eyebrows with a nervous laugh. 'It's funny, I hoped at one point you might be.' Then his eyes turned serious again. 'Until I met Ciara, of course.'

Patrissia smiled. 'It had crossed my mind too, briefly. But enough of this crap.' She slapped him on the back. 'Get your sorry arse out there and face the music.'

'Oh, Jesus.' He ruffled his hair. 'You're helping me. Why?'

Patrissia looked at him. 'I'm helping Ciara. God knows, the last thing she needs is a showdown in public.'

'Meaning?'

'Well, you saw what Marc was like when she turned up at his house. Nothing's changed, Jamie. She must feel as welcome as a tart in a convent.'



Lucinda watched Roy making his way back, frowning when she caught sight of Patrissia and Jamie following at a distance behind him.

'Sorry I was so long,' Roy apologised, 'I was tryin' to get the stink out.' He flattened the handkerchief onto the table to dry.

‘Sorry about that, folks,’ said Jamie as he sat down. He lifted his pint. ‘Here’s to our happy little fellowship!’

‘Well, it’s certainly little,’ said Siân. ‘I can’t believe nobody else came.’

‘I think it got a bit too personal at the last meeting,’ Jamie said, shrugging.

Patrissia patted Lucinda on the arm. ‘That was my niece,’ she explained. ‘She just came to drop off some money I lent her. She couldn’t stay—she said she was in a hurry to meet some girlfriends.’

‘We were looking forward to meeting her,’ Lucinda replied, ‘weren’t we, Siân? Oh well, some other time, perhaps. So is Marc not joining our little gathering this evening?’

‘I don’t know,’ Patrissia said. ‘I really don’t know.’ She took out her phone. ‘No messages. I’ll text him.’

*

Marc noticed that it had become noisier, and he realised that he had reached the weir. *It’s doing a good honest job*, he thought, as the smooth grey sheet poured down the toy waterfall. It made him feel strangely peaceful watching the newly-aerated liquid tranquilly dissolving into the calm pool below with barely a splash.

He was jerked out of his mood by the sound of his phone, this time beeping irritatingly from inside his jacket pocket. He took it out. It was a message from Patrissia. ‘*Are you coming or not?*’

He quickened his pace, readying himself for the lights and noise of the pub. He wanted to see Patrissia’s face again, if only to watch her guard her secrets.

*

As Lucinda casually dropped a fusillade of barbed questions into the conversation, reassuringly parried by Patrissia, Jamie’s eyes flicked furtively from face to face. The air had cooled, the sun having sunk into the cluster of trees across the river, and he pulled up his collar as the strengthening breeze swept its chilly fingers up the nape of his neck.

Suddenly the conversation lulled and he saw Patrissia's mouth turn into the shape of an 'O'. Lucinda and Roy had stopped talking too, and were looking over his head.

Siân put her hand across her eyes just as Jamie felt an icy sensation spreading over his scalp, soaking through his hair like a cap of melting snow, and trickling over his collar and down his neck. He stood up, shaking himself, and turned, wiping water out of his eyes. 'Eh?'

Ciara was backing away from him holding an empty glass, her face tight and her mouth contorted. 'You lying, cheating bastard!' she was shouting, her voice thick.

Jamie stared at her, his wet shirt clinging to his back and drips cooling his sides. Fighting the urge to follow her as she ran off towards the gate, he turned to Lucinda, whose eyes were the brightest and bluest he had ever seen.

'I'm sorry,' he said, simply. 'What can I say? I was going to tell you.'

'I see,' said Lucinda. 'So that was the slut you're not having an affair with, was it? Actually, don't answer that—I don't care. Clean yourself up, we're going.' Her customary poise abandoning her for a moment, she cried, 'Oh, this is just too much! You're a disgrace! I can't imagine what your father would say!'

'It's not—'

'Come on, we're going.' She started towards the car park, shooting a glance at Patrissia on her way past.

'As for you—you knew about this, didn't you? Some friend you are! I don't know why I should have expected any better. We all know about your twisted sense of loyalty. You even threw your own sister to the dogs! Does it get any worse than that? You haven't changed. You're still the same selfish, callous, arrogant, destructive woman you always were.'

*

'Is there anythin' I c'n do?' asked Roy as soon as Jamie and Lucinda had gone.

Siân shook her head as she stroked Patrissia's arm. 'It's OK, Roy, she'll be all right, won't you, Trisha? Don't take it to heart. She's just pissed off. I mean, who wouldn't be?'

Roy nodded. 'Yeah, it ain't *you* she's mad at.'

'Did *you* know about all this?' Siân asked him.

He nodded again. 'Yeah, 'fraid so.'

'Seems like I'm the last to know anything around here.' She unzipped her bag in search of a tissue.' Look, Trisha—'

'I'm fine, Siân, really.'

'No, I mean look over there. It's Marc. You've got to talk to him.'

'He's here?' Patrissia closed her eyes. 'Oh, perfect.'

Siân eased herself to her feet and lifted her bag. 'I think we'd better go, Roy.' She kissed Patrissia's cheek, tasting the salty wetness of tears. 'Don't take it to heart, Trisha. What's done is done. No turning back the clock.' Patrissia nodded. 'Be nice to Marc. And tell him about the baby.'

Patrissia squeezed her arm. 'I don't know about nice, Siân, but I'm going to be honest.'

'Good.' Siân stood for a moment as she re-zipped her bag. 'If we were as honest in real life as we say we want to be in the meetings, well...' She raised her eyebrows and shook her head.

'I know,' Patrissia sniffed, staring at her empty glass.

'Well, here he comes. He'll be over the moon, you'll see.'

*

'Hello Patrissia. I've brought another bottle.' Marc was standing over her, holding an uncorked bottle of Sauvignon. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'Everyone's gone, but hey, why not?'

Marc moved around the table and sitting on the bench opposite, refilled her glass before pouring one for himself.

'And sorry for my behaviour at the meeting, and earlier this evening.'

Patrissia stared at him across the dirty table. 'Well, that makes a nice change.'

The optimism Marc had felt earlier drained away.

Patrissia lifted her wet glass and watched the drips as they gathered at the base and fell unpredictably onto the table. She let her chin drop into her hand, too tired to respond. His apology seemed irrelevant, like everything else between them. Why was he sorry now? She slowly lifted her gaze from the little pool of spilt wine and stared at him.

'So, you're sorry you've been an absolute bastard to me,' she hissed, 'and you want me to forgive you because you're in *love* with me? Well, Marc, d'you know what? I'm sorry too. You can't just say that. It's actions that count, isn't it? Isn't that what it's all about? *Actions?*

He shifted uneasily.

'It's no good saying one thing and acting another. Behaviour always trumps apologies. It's no good being...'

'A suspicious idiot?' Marc cut in, wondering if it was even worth continuing. 'I *do* love you,' he insisted. 'And what you see is fear, Patrissia, like it always is.'

Patrissia refilled her empty glass and sat back, interrupting him. 'What *is* this crap, Marc? Listen, if I thought you were serious, then I'd listen. But it's just *you*, and they're just words. You have no real feelings, Marc, not for other people, not for me, not even for your own daughter. Lucinda was right, I'm wasting my time.'

Marc reached across the table to try to take her hand. 'No, Lucinda is *wrong*. You *know* we have to stay together, Patrissia. Perhaps fitting in with your plans *will* bring us both peace. I don't know. What else can I offer you? What do you *want*?'

He looked into her eyes. 'Come on, Patrissia, everybody needs a chance, and not many people get one, but this is ours.'

'*Ours*, Marc? No, it's not.' She looked at him, incredulous. 'It's *your* chance to continue to scourge yourself—and punish me. Look around you. Who do you have left? Your daughter tries to get to know her *father—you*—and what do you do? *Ignore* her! She made all that effort to find you, and you did *nothing* to make her welcome!

Your own daughter! And now she's here, do you even know what she's doing, or where she is? No.

'So you have nobody but *me*, and look how you treat me. What will you do to me if I take this *chance*, as you put it? Tie me up like a whore and then abandon me without conscience like you did Claudia?

'You're very good at placing blame, Marc—nothing is ever your fault, is it? You've had every opportunity to live a decent, useful life, have a family, enjoy loving relationships, do the right thing, and you've screwed them all up. You've used and then rebuffed everyone who's tried to help you. You're a bloody disaster. And you're telling me that *I* have another chance to be with *you*? Are you out of your *mind*?

Marc stared at her, his mouth moving but no words emerging. His eyes flicked upwards and then down to where his hands were clasped together. Patrissia, thinking he was going to have one of his seizures, half-rose before realising he was praying.

'Tell me, Patrissia, do you think you've done anything better with your life?' he asked at last, in a quiet voice.

Her mouth hung open for a moment.

'Well, do you?'

'Don't try that, Marc. I'm through playing games, with you or anyone else,' she said, folding her arms. 'There's something you need to know.'

He studied her face. 'I'm listening,' he said.

'I'm pregnant with your child.'

His eyes barely moved, but she saw him swallow.

'I expect that means as little to you as it did when Claudia was pregnant with Ciara, but it means something to *me*. I'm going to have our child, and I'm going to make damned sure that you take your share of the responsibility for its care and upbringing. So, although it sounds incredible to me even as I say it, I'm going to take your chance.'

He tried to reach for her hand but she pulled it away.

‘And I’m going to make it work. In spite of all the things you’ve said to me, the hurtful, spiteful things, and the appalling way you’ve treated me, meeting you has actually woken me up. It’s because of you that I can see it all clearly, and because of you that I can be honest with you now. I owe you for that.

‘All the crap you just came out with about love, all your lies and deceptions, your endless self-pity—I’m going to forget it all, and I’m going to pretend that the last few months never happened. It’s *gone*, Marc. I’m going to pretend that you’re still the interesting stranger I met in the gallery. Do you remember him?’

Marc shook his head. ‘How can I, Patrissia? If I knew that man, I would be him. All I know now is that your path has led you to me, and mine to you, and that I’m asking you to accept me.’ He tried to take her hand again, but she shook it off.

‘Are you sure you’re pregnant?’

‘Of course I’m fucking sure I’m pregnant!’ Patrissia exploded. ‘Do you think I’d make it up? It’s why I’m taking your chance. It’s why I can bring myself to start again. It’s life, Marc, life! and I’m going to go with it.’

She sat back, exhausted.

‘So that’s it. I won’t mention it again after tonight—but we both needed to know what the agreement is.’

‘Agreement?’

‘Yes. So it can work,’ Patrissia continued, looking at him steadily. ‘It’s unfortunate that I can’t trust you to make any effort towards it, but as I said before, I’m a big, strong girl, and I’ll make the effort for both of us.

‘I’m going to have the baby,’ she said, her voice very clear. ‘It’s probably my last chance. And this is *your* last chance to show that you’re a human being, Marc, that you’re capable of feeling love—for your child, if not for me. *That’s* the agreement.

‘That’s me done, so if you’ve nothing to say, when I’ve finished this drink,’ She lifted the glass to her lips, ‘we can go home and begin our new life.’

He reached across the table and breathed out as he felt her fingers wrap instinctively around his own.

‘That would make me very happy, Patrissia, and we *will* go home together.’

‘Marc—’

‘But please listen to *me* now. I understand your frustration with me, and I understand your anger. Can I ask if you understand mine with you?’

‘Marc—’

‘No, let me finish. I listened to you and now it’s your turn. I’m not the only one with secrets, am I? It’s just that you have discovered mine and I have confessed.’ His voice was low and calm. ‘I might be evasive, Patrissia, but I don’t lie, and you *do*.’

He spoke slowly and carefully, and Patrissia could feel her insides cool and freeze as he continued. ‘There must be no more secrets on either side. Do you agree?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘No, Patrissia, don’t evade the question. Do you agree?’

Apologies and returns

Patrissia was woken by muffled snores, sunlight pouring through a crack in the thick velvet curtains. Wriggling out quietly from under the duvet, she pulled them closed, eager for Marc to sleep on and afford her a few moments of peace before the day had to begin.

She felt nauseous from the night before, but it was less the gnawing in her guts than the insistent whirring of her head that caused her to pause on the landing to brace herself before going downstairs.



Taking a deep breath, Patrissia tapped in the number. Lucinda's crisp, clear voice answered on the third ring.

'Lucinda? It's me.'

'I thought it might be.'

Patrissia flinched at her tone. 'I rang to see how you are. What can I say to make it all right?'

'*Sorry* would be a start.'

'I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Lucinda, I really am. I don't know what to say except I've been in a kind of madness. Really, I can't explain it.'

'I can. You've been a selfish, manipulative bitch, Trisha. What goes on in that head of yours is a mystery to me, but it's gratifying, at least, that you do actually sound genuinely sorry. And so you should be, I might add! Although,' Lucinda continued slowly, her voice gentler now, 'what happened yesterday finally woke me up. I'm not thanking you for your part in it—obviously I can see that you didn't *make* your niece have an affair with my apology for a husband, that was her own doing. But you should have warned her off, even if you couldn't bring yourself to put *me* in the picture.'

'I know.'

'I'll be putting Jamie in the picture as soon as he's up. I should have done it a long time ago.'

'I'm sorry. This is all my fault.'

Lucinda let out an exasperated breath. 'No it isn't, but I'd have appreciated a little more loyalty from an old friend. To be honest, Trisha, I feel sorry for you.'

There was the sound of children's voices and a brief pause while Lucinda hushed them. 'Thank you for your apology, but I'm ringing off now. I need to get the girls organised for the zoo, and my mother will be here any minute.'

Patrissia heard the clatter of drawers being banged and a confusion of shrill voices shouting before Lucinda's hurried voice came back on the line.

'Oh, by the way, you left your silver lighter here last week. I assume it's yours—it has the initials *J* and *P* engraved together on one side.' She paused for a moment as if waiting, before continuing, 'Jamie will return it when he sees you next.'

'Thank you.'

There was another pause, as if Lucinda was giving her another chance to continue, then a terse 'Goodbye Trisha'. Patrissia could hear her releasing her breath. 'Now ring your niece and apologise to *her*. Do the right thing for once in your life.'



Patrissia dialled Ciara's number, threading the cord through her fingers, waiting. It was a relief when she finally heard her niece's quiet voice.

'Hello, Ciara. Are you OK? I meant to call you last night, but—'

'Oh, it's you. Why didn't you tell me before that he was married?'

'I don't know. I'm sorry, Ciara.'

'Well, I'd have appreciated the tip-off, but then again, I probably wouldn't have taken any notice, truth be told.'

'I honestly didn't think it was more than a bit of fun for you. And I *did* try to warn you.'

'Yes, you did. And it *was* only a bit of fun, but it got out of hand.' She sighed. 'How many more bastards are there?'

'He was going to come clean. He's really fallen for you, you know.'

‘That doesn’t excuse all his lies. Mind you, I was an idiot not to see through them—it was so obvious! Children he never talked about, that vile monogrammed hanky, the weird times of day he’d call me—’

It was all so obvious. But you do lie, Patrissia, and people aren’t as blind as you’d like to think.

‘Jamie made a mistake with his marriage,’ said Patrissia, shaking the thought out of her head. ‘He and his wife are a total mismatch, anyone can see that, and now he wants to do the right thing. Don’t punish him for being human.’

‘Why are you so keen for me to excuse him?’

‘Don’t we all deserve forgiveness sometimes? I’m genuinely sorry, and I think he is, too. Have you never needed to be forgiven? You probably feel that you’ve been mugged, and I know it’s hard, but at least listen to him, hear him out. It was circumstances that made him lie to you.’

There was a long silence. ‘OK, Patrissia, I see your point, but do I really need the complication of another married man? They never leave their wives, they just keep you hanging on.’

Patrissia gave a rueful laugh. ‘True enough. Love’s often not very convenient, but look at it this way—if you’re lucky enough to get a glimpse of it, isn’t it worth putting up with a bit of hassle?’

‘You sound as if you speak from experience.’

‘Perhaps I do,’ Patrissia said quietly. ‘Look, Ciara, I know that this might not be quite the right moment, but I wanted to come clean about something else.’

There was no reply, so she continued, ‘I’m pregnant, and it’s Marc’s.’ She thought for a moment that Ciara had hung up, but she could still hear faint breathing. ‘Maybe you’ll have a half-sister.’

‘Or a half-brother. And it’ll be the same age as my own children.’ Ciara’s voice suddenly sounded very clear. ‘Forgive me for asking, but are you happy with him? You don’t seem to have much fun.’

‘Fun? I don’t think fun really features in his world.’

‘It doesn’t sound like much of a relationship, or much of a setting in which to bring up a child.’

‘No, it doesn’t, does it? But is a relationship just about being happy?’

‘Isn’t that the point?’

Patrissia breathed in deeply, finding herself momentarily lost for words, then continued, ‘Actually, we’re going down to Cornwall for a few days. Maybe that will lighten things up a bit.’

‘Well, I wish you luck.’

‘Are *we* OK, Ciara?’ I do hope so. You have no idea how—’

‘We’re fine. I appreciate your apology, and your advice too, actually. You’re right, I have had a glimpse of *it*, whatever *it* might be. Sorry, I have to go now.’

Patrissia heard Marc’s footsteps on the stairs and murmured a quick goodbye. Then turning, she smiled up at him where he leaned on the banister, pausing to button his shirt.

‘So when are we off on our little holiday?’ he asked.

Patrissia braced herself.

He laughed. ‘It’s OK, I don’t mind where we go. In fact, a few days away from here would be good. I’ll even drive, if you like.’

‘Thank you,’ Patrissia said, surprised and relieved. ‘I think I slept funny, my back feels really stiff.’ She pressed the heel of her hand into her lower spine and winced. ‘No time like the present—let’s leave today.’

‘I have to go to my studio first, there’s something I need to do.’

‘Marc, this is a new start, put us first for once. Whatever masterpiece you’re working on, it can wait.’

‘Masterpiece?’ He gave a grim laugh, took a cigarette stub from his trouser pocket and stuck it in his mouth.

‘Start packing. There’s a cottage I looked up last week. I’ll ring the woman now and see if it’s still available.’

Null and void

Jamie pushed the duvet off his head and squinted into the morning sun.

What a godawful mess.

The spare room smelled of Imperial Leather, his father's, from the last time he'd stayed overnight after Zara's birthday.

He heard the front door click shut and sat up, the duvet still tangled over his knees. Had Lucinda just come in or gone out?

He went to the window. His mother-in-law's Volvo was just turning out of the drive. He tried to see if Lucinda and the girls had gone with her, but it disappeared before he could get his glasses.

He dressed hurriedly and went out onto the landing. Both bedroom doors were wide open—Zara and Daisy had gone. He listened for a long minute but heard no sound.

*

As he headed downstairs, Lucinda appeared.

'Nice lie-in?'

'Lu, please, let's talk—'

'Oh we shall certainly do that, Jamie. I've just made some tea.'

'Where have the girls gone?'

'My mother's taken them to the zoo.'

'Oh.'

He followed her to the kitchen and they sat down at the table. Jamie's head was bowed, resignation permeating his features, hands clenched in his lap.

Lucinda looked at him, the skin on her cheekbones tight and pink.

'At least your silence proves that you know how serious this is,' she said. 'I had a call from Patrissia earlier. An apology, no less.'

'I—'

'No, Jamie, let me finish. I advised her to call her niece to make a similar apology. I still can't understand why she didn't warn her off, or warn you off, or just tip *me* off. It beggars belief.

'However,' Jamie looked up as she continued, 'Patrissia lives in a different world from you and I. Our world is here,' she glanced up at the ceiling, her eyes drawn to the crack over the cooker, 'and within it we do what we're programmed to do. We wake, we eat, we work, we sleep—we function,' she said, and shrugged. 'But even that's a lie. *We're* a lie and I have to share the responsibility for our lie.'

'So it's divorce, right?'

Lucinda smiled coldly. 'No, Jamie, divorce hadn't even crossed my mind. I'm not going to punish the girls because of your stupidity. Why should they suffer? They love you.'

'So, what are you saying?'

'I'm not divorcing you, but I'm amending our contract.'

'Contract?' He looked puzzled.

'You broke our agreement, our contract of marriage. The bit where it says *'forsaking all others'*—remember that? That contract is null and void. I now declare our marriage open.' She steepled her fingers, watching him. 'You won't have to think up any more lazy little lies about where you've been and who you've been with—and neither will I. Because my life begins today, Jamie.'

'Are you serious?'

Lucinda took a sip of tea, placing the lemon carefully by the side of her cup.

'Deadly,' she said.

Jamie folded his arms. 'OK, so you've obviously found someone. Good, I'm glad. But be honest, Lu, I mean, you've always known about—'

'Your affairs?'

'Yes. And you've never really cared, have you? It's only this past few weeks that you've started to take any notice of anything I do. You never have before.'

Lucinda sniffed. 'You really are a child, Jamie. It's a good job your father can't hear you. He must never know about this shambles—and don't you dare breathe a word about it to him, it would break his heart.' She paused.

'I'm sorry,' Jamie was firm. 'I'm afraid he'll have to know. I want a divorce, a proper end. Resolution.'

For answer, Lucinda scraped back her chair, padded across the kitchen tiles and tipped the remains of her tea down the sink.

'Where are you going?' said Jamie.'

'Out.'

'You can't go out yet, Lu, we haven't finished!'

'Yes, we have.' She turned to face him, her face hard and her body tense.

'So you want a divorce? Despite all your infidelities and all your lies, we've managed not to break the most important agreement of all, and that is our responsibility to Zara and Daisy. And now, after all I've put up with, you say you want to leave me? You think you deserve resolution?'

'Yes. I'm sorry if you think it'll harm the girls, but I'll do everything I can for that not to happen. It's up to you, Lu. You can make it hard or you can make it easy. What do you think would harm them the most?'

Lucinda buttoned her jacket as she returned to the table, hesitating for a moment before she collected the teapot, Jamie's cup and her saucer and placed them by the sink. Remembering that the macerator was working again, she emptied the pot and, turning the tap on, she watched the tea leaves disappear with a quiet whirr.

Something for the pain

Patrissia shovelled the contents of her suitcase into the wardrobe, her nostrils narrowing at the aggressive aroma of damp.

It had been a long journey, and although Marc had done most of the driving, Patrissia's body ached for movement and her lungs ached for fresh air. She stretched up to the low-beamed ceiling, twisting her arms out wide above her head, then bent to touch the bare floorboards, feeling a twinge in the small of her back.

Digging her thumbs into her spine, she massaged the tired muscles as she stared out of the small, square, west-facing window, trying to ignore a wedge of peeling soffit that had been hastily dusted with magnolia paint by an unsteady hand. The cobwebby light that filtered in under the overhang was sour and unappetising—much like her own mood, she thought sadly.

Unzipping her make-up bag, she noticed that she only had two Paracetamol tablets left, and felt a quiver of panic.

'Bugger!' she said aloud, pouring the pills into her mouth and wandering over to the basin. The tap juddered with the promise of water, but none emerged. She turned it off, gagging on the tablets stuck to the back of her throat.

She could hear the kettle boiling downstairs, and sighed.



As she had supposed, Marc had not seen fit to respond to the whine of the kettle, but was still sitting at the kitchen table reading the pile of tourist information that had been thoughtfully left on the mouldy windowsill to mop up any stray spores.

'Not feeling well?' she remarked, lifting the pot to make the tea.

'I've got a bit of a headache.'

She sat down gratefully on the dining chair, placing the two earthenware mugs in the middle of the table. 'Mmm. It seemed to take ages to get here. I don't recall it being so far. My back's killing me, and I've run out of painkillers.'

'We'll go for a stroll after tea, shall we? It'll help us both to loosen up a bit.'

Patrissia grimaced. 'I need some Paracetamol.'

'I'll get some later. I was just reading about Zennor.'

Patrissia smiled, the twinges in her back easing as her memories of long, beautiful summers in Cornwall flooded back. 'Does it mention the Zennor mermaid?'

'No, why?'

'Ah,' she said, taking a sip of tea. 'There's a story about a mysterious woman who keeps turning up at St Senara's Church in Zennor. She appears several times a year over many years, always looking the same and never getting any older.'

'The local parish singer, Mathey Trewella, sees her one night and is so captivated by her beauty that after the service he follows her down to the cove, and guess what?'

'Neither of them are ever seen again?'

Patrissia laughed. 'Exactly. But that's not the end of it. One Sunday, years later, a captain sails by a mermaid in the cove. Obviously, he can't believe his eyes! She asks him to talk to her, so he does. Later that night, when he describes her to the local villagers, they realise that the mermaid is the same beautiful lady who'd enticed Mathey Trewella away.'

'Hmm. I see. What about the captain? Why didn't she entice him away too?'

'I've no idea,' Patrissia smiled. 'Maybe we should take a boat out tomorrow and see if we can find her and ask her?' She put her mug down and moved her hand on top of his. 'I'm going for a lie down.' She stood stiffly and took a few tentative steps towards the stairs. Then, stopping abruptly, she bent forward, crouching by the bottom tread before turning and sitting down on it.

Marc stared at her. 'What is it? Can I do anything?'

She shook her head. 'It's nothing. Just my back.'

'I'll get those painkillers.'

She nodded vigorously. 'Please.'

'OK. I'll buy a couple of bottles of wine while I'm out, shall I?'

'Yes, please be quick. Don't forget the Paracetamol, will you?'

'I'll be ten minutes,' he promised, throwing on his jacket and giving her a peck on the cheek. 'There has to be a shop nearby.'

Marc started down the muddy path to the car. He wasn't worried. Patrissia knew how to take care of herself. He stopped and looked back at the cottage, but he couldn't see her through the small front room window.

It was misty again, and it took a while for the car to start. The headache had begun its pounding in his temples, but he was used to that.

When he came to the village, the chemist was shut. There was a list of duty chemists in the window and he was irritated to see that he would have to drive to St. Buryan, fifteen minutes away. He groped in his pocket for his phone to warn Patrissia that he'd be a bit longer, but couldn't find it.

Cursing, he jumped back in the car and started the engine. Tyres screeching, he pulled out, narrowly missing an old man who shouted something he couldn't understand.



Patrissia remained crouched on the stairs, her face buried in her hands, her eyes closed tight. It was all coming back—memories of Rome and her first pregnancy, the heat and sweat and pain, and how, curled in a ball, she had lain on the bed afterwards...

The cycle of low cramps resumed, gnawing and sharp, fluttering in waves, receding, ebbing only for a few brief moments before flooding in again.

She crawled up the stairs and turned on the bath tap. The face in the mirror looked unfamiliar. Grey circles darkened the vaults of her eyes and a sweaty strand of hair clung to her forehead like a sprig of seaweed draped over a chalk-white boulder.

This was penance, but for her sins, or Marc's? She had taken on the responsibility for his happiness, but had she somehow become responsible for his sins, too? He should be with her.

As the intermittent twinges clumped together to form an insistent ache, she listened to the water chugging into the bath, urging it to

fill quickly, dipping her hand into the steaming tub, grateful for the heat that sparked into her fingertips.

Slowly, she eased off her jeans and pulled her jumper up over her head just as she began to feel the first ooze of blood trickle out of her. She clambered into the bath and let the tap run on noisily to drown out her thoughts. A hazy image of Siân's engorged breasts floated into her head.

A crunching lump of pain surged through her and the water between her thighs swarmed with straggles of blood, rising to the surface, pooling, dissolving. She trailed her hands in the reddening effluence, her mouth wide with horror.

'Oh please God, don't let me lose it!'

Amid the moult of crimson blood she saw a kidney-sized clot, darker and browner, like a mermaid's purse. She scooped it up with her hand, holding it just above the surface of the water, staring for what seemed like minutes. She stroked its fibrous, ungiving form, kneading it tenderly, revolving this piece of her own body through interlocked fingers, cradling its mass to her breast.

The bath was cooling quickly and, trembling with cold, she peered at the sinewy mass in her cupped hand before letting it sink back beneath the surface. What if it wouldn't disintegrate on its own? Would she need to mash it down through the plughole when she let out the water? Should she fish it out and flush it down the toilet, or wrap it up in a cloth and take it out to the garden? Her head swam with nausea.

'Marc?' she shouted. 'Marc! Are you back? *Marc!*'

Standing, she lowered one leg over the edge of the bath onto the mat and, naked and shivering, she leaned over to tug off a wad of toilet paper to wipe away the worst of the blood-smeared water that had formed a glossy film on her thighs.

She rubbed herself dry as she stared into the bath, unable to give a name to either what she felt or what she saw. The house was swaddled in a saturating silence. She strained to hear the banister creaking, the clatter of a chair, a padding of feet, the rattle of pills in a plastic jar, hardly daring to draw breath.

Lowering the toilet seat, she folded the towel and sat on it, rubbing her belly, rocking forwards to anchor each tug of pain. Flesh-flecked fluid soaked into the puddle of syrupy, glutinous jelly already congealing on the fibres of the towel.

Patrissia sat motionless with grief.

*

Squealing the car to a stop outside the chemist, Marc looked in vain for somewhere to park. He decided to squeeze behind a giant delivery truck that was taking up half the road, but his eyes felt as if they were covered in sand, and the manoeuvre was frustratingly difficult. His head was thick with pain and his eyes half-closed as he left the car skewed against the kerb.

A couple of old women were queueing in the chemist, taking their time, talking to the young shop assistant.

‘Excuse me,’ Marc interrupted, ‘I’ve got a really bad headache—would you mind if I jumped the queue?’

They smiled at him pleasantly, nodding at one another. ‘You go on, my lover, we’ve all the time in the world.’

‘Thank you.’

The assistant was looking at him suspiciously. ‘You don’t look too good. Have you got a prescription?’

‘No. Look, just give me the strongest stuff you have. Codeine and Ibuprofen usually works.’

‘Well, I can only give you these. Have you used them before? You need to dissolve them in water and you shouldn’t drive if you take them.’

‘I know. We’re staying nearby—I’ll wait till I get back. Thanks.’

Marc handed over the money, taking the fat tube out of the paper bag as he walked to the door. Once outside he pushed one of the tablets onto the back of his tongue and attempted to swallow it but it was huge and his throat was too dry.

Spotting an off-licence over the road, he bought a can of beer and, with relief, tossed three of the big tablets into his mouth and took a large swallow. He could feel his shoulders relax.

He looked around for a pub—He needed a proper drink.

*

Marc was on his third pint when he remembered that Patrissia was waiting for him. She had probably tried to call him. It didn't matter, she was only fifteen minutes away.

At least he had managed to get rid of the young Italian. Marc had been ready enough to exchange a few pleasantries, but within seconds he had regretted that he had responded to him, already feeling the latter's insistent questioning to be more than a passing interest.

When his frozen politeness had eventually forced the stranger to give up, he had sat for a minute thinking about Patrissia. He loved looking at her, talking to her, hearing her opinions, being with her—for the first time in many years, Marc smiled to himself, a genuine feeling of well-being rising in him at the thought of Patrissia waiting at the cottage.

It was getting dark as he left the pub, rubbing his eyes fiercely, his head still hurting. The truck was still there. Reversing, Marc cursed as he felt his rear bumper hit a lamppost. He still couldn't see around the truck. He waited for a moment for his head to stop buzzing, rubbed his eyes, and pulled out.

The van had no chance, smashing into his bonnet and crushing his car back into the lamppost. The last thing he saw was a great dazzling light.

*

Patrissia woke the next morning, sweating. A fresh anxiety, as sharp and supple as a whip, forced her to get up. Where was Marc? Surely he hadn't run away?

As she threaded each arm into the sleeves of her jumper and heaved herself into her jeans, she marvelled that she had not been sick when she had scooped the curdled embryonic sac out of the dirty bathwater in the early hours of the morning. She had watched the fresh water rush into the toilet pan and encircle the glistening sides, the bubbles tumbling it over and over, willing it to disappear.

She gazed at Marc's phone lying on the table, wondering where he could be. But she couldn't waste time. Hastily scribbling a note on the back of the pamphlet he'd left on the table, she gathered together a few things and left the house.

Her reluctant feet carried her to the end of the drive where the lane twisted away in two directions, both indecipherable. Not a glimmer of sun could be detected through the enveloping bank of mist. Not knowing which way to go, she turned left and started to walk.

After ten minutes or so, she saw approaching foglamps and began to wave her arms, frantically gyrating her hands and shouting out as the lights came closer. The lorry decelerated as it passed and pulled up in a layby behind her. She turned and ran back to it, waving up at the driver, who had already opened the passenger door and was leaning over towards her.

'I'm so sorry,' she panted, 'but I need to get to a hospital.'

'Jump in, my lover,' he reassured her. 'I'll take you to Truro. It's fifteen miles, but it's the closest to here.'

'Oh thank you. I'm so grateful. Thank you.'

'It's OK, no problem. Relax, we'll get you there in no time. Jump in.'

*

'Big deep breath. I'm going to have a feel around. It won't hurt. It'll be a bit like someone fishing about for change in a purse—painless, but maybe a little bit weird,' explained the doctor.

'It's looking good,' she said after a minute. 'You have no discharge and I can feel no other retentions of matter. Everything looks fine. I'm very sorry for your loss,' her voice soft with warm concern. 'Do you have anyone at home to look after you? You need to rest.'

'No, my partner was with me yesterday afternoon but he went out to get me some pain relief and...and he didn't come back.'

The doctor frowned. 'Yesterday afternoon? You haven't heard from him since then? Have you tried calling him?'

'He forgot his phone. I...'

‘You’d better come with me. Get up slowly, mind. Careful.’

Patrissia accepted the doctor’s hand and walked with her down the long brightly lit corridor to the hospital admissions area.

‘I don’t mean to alarm you, dear, but we’d better check.’ The doctor paused. ‘If he’s been involved in an accident or been taken ill, he would have been brought here.’

Patrissia nodded. ‘Of course. His name’s Marc Crowley.’

The admissions nurse peered at the screen, her fingers scrolling at speed. Patrissia saw them stop suddenly. ‘Doctor Parmiter, a Marc Crowley was admitted yesterday.’

The doctor bent over the screen to see for herself.

Patrissia went still. ‘What is it? Is he here? Can I see him?’

The doctor took Patrissia’s hands in her own and drew her towards an empty row of chairs. ‘Sit down, my love. I’m afraid I have some very bad news.’

‘Is he OK? What’s happened?’

‘He was brought in yesterday evening, by ambulance. He’d been involved in a road traffic accident...He didn’t make it.’

Moving on

Up since four, Patrissia was jittery and tired, and sat in her car for nearly an hour before mustering the energy to get out and do what she had come to do.

The heavy gate swung slowly open to reveal the familiar walled garden. Walking over the long grass to the statue of Pan, Patrissia stopped to stroke it for a moment, wondering who Marc had persuaded to model for *that*.

‘Marc...’

Just speaking his name gave her an eerie sensation, as if his presence scentlessly and soundlessly surrounded her.

She stood back with a sigh. What had she been thinking? *Pan* was far too big for her house. She would have to leave it. But there had to be sketches in the studio.

The door to the studio was locked, but the side window was slightly ajar. She tried to wedge her fingers into the gap between the frames but it was too small. She looked about for a stone, then, after shattering the window and pushing in the shards, she took off her sweater, laid it over the frame, and heaved herself up, squeezing carefully through the gap onto the work bench below.

What a dismal place, she thought, scrambling down onto the floor and dusting herself off. She tugged at a white cord dangling from the ceiling above the workbench, and a light flickered on, illuminating the studio with a cool glow.

There was a vice, a bucket of stagnant water, a basket of chisels, a thick pile of sketchbooks, wedges of charcoal but, most of all, there was dust—so much dust! She could imagine Marc here, hunched over a drawing, his hair flopping into his eyes, or standing stiffly upright, chipping away relentlessly at a block of hard stone.

As her eyes took in the clutter, her attention was captured by something shrouded in the corner of the studio. Edging closer, she drew off the cloth and saw that it was a figure of a woman.

Her head had been exquisitely hewn, her eyes blank and unknowable, her mouth arched up into a deliciously perverse smile. Patrissia moved her fingers down the slender neck onto broad, solid

shoulders, where they snagged against the ridges of what seemed to be a robe.

The folds were sharp, ruttled, hardly resembling the fabric they impersonated except where the cloth draped over the uptilted breasts, smooth as water. One breast was ensnared in what felt like copper wire. She followed the wire's twisting length to the figure's right hand, which held a dagger. More wires looped around the blade and coiled about her wrists.

Patrissia squinted at the woman's left hand, expecting a shield or another weapon, but this hand was stained, and held a small bowl or basket filled with a nest of threadlike wires. In the red dust that had settled around the rim of the plinth, she thought she could make out a pattern, or was it writing?

Opening the sketchbook at the top of the pile on the workbench, she turned the pages until she reached an earthy pastel and graphite drawing. Yes, this was it.

She saw that the bowl in the woman's hand was a sewing basket, and that the dagger was, in the sketch, a simple kitchen knife, its blade whisker-thin. The woman rose out of the pearlescent spume of Ionian waves like Aphrodite...but this was no Aphrodite. Patrissia's blood froze. In the undulations of the sea, her name had been inscribed: *Patrissia*. And under that the words *My devotion: my Lachesis*.

She stared at the drawing. It bore no resemblance to the portrait that she had so admired on Marc's desk just a few weeks before, yet it was her. When had he murdered the goddess and resurrected a Fury in her place?

She stayed for a long time in the studio, chilled by the thought that this was really how he had come to see her.

Johnny

Patrissia took a sip of tea as she leafed through Marc's sketchbook for the hundredth time, then picking up Johnny's booklet, she went out into the hallway, where Roy had helped her place Marc's *Lachesis* figure on a corner cupboard by the door.

She held up Johnny's portrait of her beside it. She couldn't reconcile the image of herself she saw in the mirror every morning with either of these fantasies. Both were a record of their maker's obsessions, obsessions betrayed by the impossible beauty of one, and the equally impossible morbidity of the other.

If anything, the portrait should have been more disturbing, but at least there was a detachment there. She read Johnny's biography again, smiling as she saw the word Zennor, visualising the misty landscape—a landscape that stimulated imagination and increased expectancy like a veiled dancer. It was just like him to settle there, she thought. He had always valued imagination above all other things, above all the inconveniences of living the imaginative life.

But why had he painted her portrait? Her curiosity had reached the point where she would have to call him. She lifted the receiver, then replaced it and went back to the kitchen to make another pot of tea.



Five minutes later, she sat watching the steam rise from her mug as she listened to the slow echoes of the ring tone. At last she heard a voice, thin and disembodied, sounding as sharp and strained as she remembered.

'Johnny?'

'Patrissia,' he said without hesitation. 'I wondered when you'd call.'

'I love your painting.'

'Good. I hoped it wouldn't pass you by.'

'But why now?'

'I don't know. I was as surprised as you must be.'

'But you never painted people. When did that start?'

'It didn't, this is a one-off.'

‘Well, I’m glad you painted your one-off, and I’m honoured to have been the subject.’

He laughed. ‘You were the *object*, Patrissia—the subject, as ever, was myself. I know you understand that, we discussed it so many times. The subject always remains the same—our own obsessions.’

Patrissia had to put her hand over the phone for a second while she quietened her breath. ‘You were always telling me how you wanted to defy nature, to overcome her—and that included me. Yes, I remember.’

‘Memories are all we have, Patrissia. I know I hurt you, but it was necessary. You had been given everything—talent, beauty, opportunity, *love*—but you had no gratitude, and you valued none of it, not even me.

‘But I don’t imagine you called to dig up all that, so let’s assume that’s done, and we can talk about you. How has your work developed? You do still paint, I hope?’

Patrissia glanced around the four walls of her living room and felt a sudden pang at their barrenness.

‘No? Is that why you rang?’

Patrissia relaxed. ‘You were always able to read me, Johnny. But no, that’s not why I’m calling. I just wanted to talk to you one last time, to tell you what it was like for me, and to end it properly. I know it’s a bit late, but, well.

‘You were always so defiant, and that pleased and impressed me at the time.’ She paused. ‘But defiance isn’t *my* obsession. You’ve come to know yourself, but I couldn’t while I was with you, and afterwards...I lost the thread. Then, when I saw the portrait, I recognised what you had always seen in me.’

‘You always had the talent, Patrissia, but you were too wayward to capitalise on your strengths, which were many. For someone so seemingly assured, you never truly believed in yourself, did you?’

‘But I did, Johnny. It was just that I fell in love, and I sacrificed my belief in myself to belief in *you*. I thought that you had absorbed me, ‘*to become one with that joyous spirit in all its chaos and beauty*’, as you used to say. It’s taken me all this time to realise that it wasn’t absorption but acceptance—and now I can thank you for accepting

me, just as I am. 'Thank you. You've shown me myself, and now I can accept myself back.'

She paused. 'How odd all this sounds! Still, what matters isn't its oddness but its truth—you used to say that, too.'

He laughed. 'Well, I'm sorry that I held you back.'

'There's no need to apologise. I'd ignored what I'd learned from you. Do you remember?

'We live in the present,' you told us, 'yet we can't perceive it. All we can see is our imagined world, and all that imagination has to work on, is memories. All our apparent choices are illusory—things happen, and all we can do is hope that what happens is worth remembering.'

The phone lay heavy in her hand, and she longed to put it down and give herself up to the sudden panicky exhaustion she felt.

'So you're going to try again for the elusive, infinite, eternal connection?' He laughed. 'What rubbish it all sounds, doesn't it? But rubbish-sounding or not, it's real, and it is discoverable. We had that connection, Patrissia: you, me, and the timeless beauty of the imagination.'

'Don't give me that, Johnny. When I said I was in love with you, you said it was just fun—I've never forgotten that, never.'

She heard a quieter sound from him, neither a laugh nor a sigh. 'They were just words, Patrissia, the words of a drowning man. It was my duty to set you free, not my desire. You vanished off the face of the earth. Did you pause to wonder how I must have felt? Did it escape you that you did to me what your sister did to you?' His tone was soft and calm, not admonishing.

Her head was suddenly filled with tears, but they didn't seem to be able to find their way to her eyes, instead they choked her thoughts, her breath.

Many seconds passed in silence before she heard him say softly, 'Well, Patrissia, thank you for ringing, but I'll say goodbye now. Paint something you love, and paint it with love, and whatever the result, all will be well. It's always worked for me.'

Dusty chairs

Patrissia sat down on one of the dusty chairs, doubtful that anyone would turn up. She checked her watch: fifteen minutes to go.

She'd paid for the hire of the chapel before they'd left for Cornwall. It had been meant as a gesture of reconciliation towards Marc, and she'd had to come, she didn't know why. Not out of respect—Marc had missed so many of the meetings himself, and she thought it almost appropriate that he couldn't make this one. She didn't feel his absence any more strongly now than any of the other times he hadn't turned up. No, it just had to be done, she had to be sure that everything had been tidied up, that the snip was clean. There would be no more loose threads.

*

'Hello, Trisha, I thought you might want a hand?' Patrissia's head jerked up as a voice came softly from the door. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you.'

'Oh, hello, Lu. How kind of you to come.' She glanced at her watch again. 'And thank you, but it looks like no-one else's going to bother. By the way, I enjoyed your show. Did anything come of it?'

'Oh, that: no, not really. Good thing too—I had to do it when they offered me the space, but I couldn't handle any more commissions—too much going on.' She glanced at Patrissia's belly. 'You'll be busy yourself in a few months, won't you? How's the baby?'

Patrissia had prepared herself for the question. 'I lost it the night Marc died.'

Lucinda put a hand to her lips. 'Oh, my dear, you poor thing! Why on earth didn't you say anything? I had no idea.'

'Procreation doesn't seem to be my forte.'

'I'm so sorry.' Lucinda's eyes were brimming with tears.

'It's for the best,' Patrissia shrugged. 'Can you imagine what atrocious parents we'd have made? Anyway, now it's just me.'

The two women sat together looking into the twilit shadows.

‘Is that a Duchamp over there?’ said Lucinda at last, screwing up her eyes. ‘What an odd thing to put in a church.’ She paused. ‘I always wondered why you’d stopped painting, Trisha. You had more talent than I did.’ She sighed. ‘And if nothing else, art always helps take your mind off your life.’

Patrissia touched her hand. ‘It can’t have been much fun with Jamie.’

‘Oh, Jamie and his nonsense wasn’t the problem. It was just the—I suppose *everyday grind* sums it up. No, he was just a minor irritation. To be honest, we should have called it a day before the girls were born. Ciara turned out to be the bombshell I needed. I wish them luck. Not that I’m going to let him get off lightly.’

‘No, I can understand that. What you said about art—actually, I *am* thinking of painting again.’ Patrissia hesitated. ‘Do you remember Johnny, our tutor at college? I saw one of his paintings the other day.’

Lucinda looked at her. ‘Of course I remember him! Is he still doing those overblown landscapes and maniacal seas?’ She winked. ‘Or has his passion waned?’

‘I expect so, but this wasn’t a seascape, but a portrait—it won second prize in the Portrait Awards. When I saw it I must confess I was intrigued, and actually, I phoned him this morning.’

Lucinda laughed. ‘I don’t know whether I believe that you’re over him completely, Trisha, you have that look in your eye. But it’s your life, and you’ll have a good contact if you do start again.’

‘Start painting you mean? I *am* going to, but not with Johnny or anyone else. This time, I’m on my own.’ She paused. ‘Lu, will you stay for five minutes?’

‘Of course. As long as you want.’ Patrissia covered Lucinda’s hand with her own, and they sat in silence.

‘My father died recently. Did I tell you?’

‘Oh, my dear, what dreadful timing.’ Lucinda put her hand to her mouth. ‘I’m sorry, that sounds terrible.’

Patrissia squeezed her hand. 'It was perfect timing. I feel utterly free for the first time in my life,' she added with a sigh. 'How's Philip, by the way? You're seeing him, aren't you?'

Lucinda lowered her eyes. 'Philip and I...we'll just be friends.'

'Seriously?' Patrissia sounded slightly shocked. 'Oh, I see what you mean. He's married, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is,' Lucinda laughed, colouring, 'and maybe, if we were free... but we're not.'

There was another long silence before Lucinda indicated the Duchamp. 'I'm like that girl there, all composed, but that's only because she has her Philip waiting up in the attic. Tonight she'll return discreetly after a day in the sun, and bring her warmth to him. What will you paint when you start again? Landscapes were your thing too, weren't they?'

'That's what I painted, but they were Johnny's thing. I was always more interested in people. Now I feel like getting my hands dirty—no more symbols, no more torturing nature, I'm going for the real thing: real objects, real people, real life.'

'Is that Marc's influence? I never saw his work, but I imagine it would be pretty naturalistic.'

Patrissia looked in her bag and brought out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one with a match. 'No, quite the opposite. He couldn't get to grips with reality at all. He always wanted to contaminate it with his own interpretation and significance—the *spirit within*, he called it, but it was only himself turned inside out.'

'Are you allowed to smoke in here? This is a *church*, Patrissia.'

They both burst out laughing.

'Oh, Lu, we don't change, do we?' said Patrissia as she walked to the door to stub out the cigarette.

'Do you miss him terribly?' said Lucinda gently, as Patrissia returned and sat back down.

'No, not really. I'll never forget him, and I'll always be grateful to him, but I didn't love him. Johnny used to talk about the *elusive connection*, d'you remember? The love that remains when you strip

away the gap between the artist and the work, when the subject and the object are one and the same.'

'Yes, I remember. Didn't he call it the *eternal spirit*?'

Patrissia smiled. 'Yes. And he showed me that it was real, and that it was possible. But I confused the medium with the message.'

She laughed. 'I forgot that the spirit was elusive, that I had to hunt it down. Instead, I took the easy route, and I convinced myself that I was in love with *him*. And when that didn't work out, I blamed him. It was the same with Marc. I just hadn't been listening. Marc didn't love me. Had I died, he wouldn't have come to the chapel. He would have cancelled the meeting and gone to the pub.'

Lucinda put her hand on her arm.

Patrissia looked at her watch. 'No-one's coming—no point in hanging around. Thank you for staying with me, Lu, I really appreciate it, especially after everything.'

'Never mind that. You shouldn't be alone, Trisha. Why don't you come back with me, you poor darling?'

Patrissia smiled. 'You're very kind, but I think I'll go home. Can I ring you tomorrow?'

'Any time. Just call.'

'I will.'

Patrissia touched her throat as she started to rise from the chair.

'I've never seen you make the sign of the cross before,' said Lucinda, surprised.

Patrissia laughed. 'No, and you never will. I was feeling for the necklace I used to wear.'

'You mean that beautiful rosary? What happened to it?'

'I said goodbye to it at Marc's funeral. As I stood at the grave it suddenly felt wrong on me, and before I knew it I'd unclasped it and thrown it on the coffin. Don't ask me why. It seemed right. I feel like a weight has gone.'

'Good for you.' Lucinda squeezed her arm. 'You needed closure.'

'Yes, I know.'

‘Call me if you need anything, won’t you? Anything at all.’

‘I will.’

‘I almost forgot.’ Lucinda put a small, finely-engraved silver cylinder in her hand. ‘Your lighter.’

‘Johnny gave me this,’ said Patrissia, stroking the intertwined initials.

‘Oh, of course!’

‘You look surprised.’

‘I—well I had assumed it was a present from Jamie.’ Lucinda smiled almost guiltily. ‘I’ve been so silly.’

Patrissia kissed her cheek. ‘Me too.’

*

Patrissia lingered by the door, watching Lucinda as she drove off, and then turned for a last look at the chapel.

She jumped at a loud voice behind her.

‘Anybody ’ere?’

It was Roy. ‘Hello, Trish, I didn’t mean to startle yer. Sorry I’m late, the last job went on a bit.’ He peered round her into the chapel. ‘Nobody turned up?’

Patrissia smiled. ‘Hello, Roy. Lucinda left just a minute ago. I was just about to lock up.’ He looked disappointed. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye to you and Magda at the funeral.’

‘S’OK Trish, you ’ad yer mind on more important things,’ he said. Then he jerked his head towards the chapel. ‘Tha’s it then, is it?’

‘I’m afraid so, Roy.’

He stood nodding his head for a few seconds, then, perking up, ‘I saw Jamie and Ciara yesterday. They’re movin’ to Sevenoaks. I’ll be doin’ the job. I ’ope the van’s big enough.’

‘Oh yes. Ciara told me they might be.’

‘Yeah, she’s definitely in charge if you ask me. They’re off on ’oliday next week—some place near Rome. Sounds romantic.’

‘Very,’ Patrissia agreed.

‘Er, Trish, can I say somethin’?’

Patrissia locked the door, and patted her bag. ‘Of course, Roy. What is it?’

‘I just wanted to say ’ow grateful I am for the meetin’s an’ everythin’. I never really got the chance to say anythin’ before and...well, I just wanted to say thanks.’

Touched, Patrissia smiled and kissed his cheek. ‘That’s nice of you, Roy. I’m glad we met. The meetings made me realise that that I’m a painter, not a story-teller. I know you’ll understand what I mean.’

Roy’s brow furrowed for a moment, then he let out a quiet laugh. ‘Yeah, Trish, I think so. You gotta keep yer eyes open, take things as they come and don’t worry too much about where they’re goin’. See, I did listen a bit.’

Patrissia joined in his laughter. ‘You’ll do all right, Roy.’

He shook her hand and turned to go. ‘Yeah, I reckon so. I’m meetin’ Magda tonight. We’re gonna see—what’s-it-called? Fitzcarraldo.’

‘Romance seems to be the order of the day,’ she smiled. ‘Have fun.’

‘Thanks, Trish, I’ll try. Er, can I ask you a favour?’

‘Of course.’

‘Can I keep the book?’

‘What book?’

‘This one.’ He pulled a dusty copy of the blank book from his pocket. ‘I found it on the floor after the last meetin’. I think it was Marc’s.’

Patrissia hesitated for a moment, then smiled. ‘With pleasure. It’s all yours, Roy. What’re you going to do with it?’

‘It’s jus’ to remind me. I might write some thoughts in it, if I ever ’ave any worth writin’. It might take a while, though.’ He smiled.

*

As she closed her front door and turned towards the stairs, Patrissia saw Marc's *Lachesis* figure, as she did every day, and as was becoming her ritual, she stood for a few seconds in front of it, meditating.

What would Roy say about it? He wouldn't bother trying to *understand* the figure: no, no symbolism for him. He would simply appreciate what he *saw*. '*Nice bit of limestone*', he would have said. '*Pity that seam's a bit wonky*'.

Her clothes suddenly felt too tight, and, continuing on to the kitchen, she undid the top button of her blouse. Putting the heavy bag of paints and materials on the big farmhouse table she flopped into a chair, her eyes fixed on the large oval mirror that filled the space between the two windows. She'd hung it the evening before, after climbing up into her attic to dust off her battered old easel, which she'd unfolded with difficulty and put in the light next to the mirror.

Absentmindedly, she continued to unbutton her blouse to the waist then unzipped her skirt, standing up to let it fall to her feet. She stepped out of it and circled the table towards the waiting canvas.

*

*'We all know that art is not truth: art is a lie that
makes us realise the truth.'*

Picasso', she said aloud, smiling to herself as she recalled Johnny's emphatic quotation, reiterated many times in tutorials.

What truth had Picasso learned by painting Marie Thérèse beside her mirror? That she would commit suicide? Maybe, but what had he gained from that knowledge? He'd had no remedy for the pain he'd seen in her.

She wondered whether Marc had realised any truth when he was sculpting her. If he had, he'd kept it to himself.

Yet every portrait Picasso painted of himself, every hour he spent knowing himself, revealed more of his own truth, a truth that

informed his life. *That* was what Marc should have done, what Patrissia now had to do: to know herself as she truly was, without diffidence, without airs and graces, without interpretation. She would paint that ineradicable truth. Each defect, each beauty, no matter how slight, would be captured and defined.

Pouring some turps into a mug, she peeled the plastic off the heads of the brushes, spread dots of pigment indiscriminately over her palette and immediately began to daub the canvas, accenting the lean angles of her shoulders and weightless arms, her sharp elbows, and the curved small of her back. Then she started to indicate the weave of her skin, the gap between the jut of her nose as it overhung the curve of her upper lip, and the dark coil of her ear, half hidden under her hair.

Stepping back, she examined herself in the oval mirror through half-closed eyes, inspecting the smooth wrapping of light that evened out the tones of her skin, reading her own expression as if dowsing for a natural seam of water under impermeable rock, looking for the wave rising out of her. She studied her neck like a surgeon gloving up to make a difficult incision on a dying patient. The skin was not so much loose as loosening, not so much rough as not-quite-smooth.

She painted it as she would a familiar mountain whose solidity had been redistributed by the light of sunrise on its twisting paths, observing and replicating every miniscule crease with a mixture of awe and incomprehension. She felt like a spring pouring upwards from the earth, bringing with it the long-buried essences of the bedrock below. This wasn't speaking from her heart, this *was* her heart.

As she worked, the planes of her face began to tighten, a mesmerising tornado of angles and sharp curves. Bright slashes of light straggled over a high cheekbone, and traversing an eyelid, swooped around the socket of her eye, then traced her lip and caressed the bolstered roundness of her left breast. Her bra strap had slipped half way down her arm: she painted it in, a loose elastic line, the torn petal of a ragged bloom.

At last she laid her palette and brush carefully aside. There she was, looking defiantly over her shoulder into the mirror and, behind her, her unflinching reflection stared back at her, eye to eye.

But the reflection was of Claudia's face—Claudia, the one person she knew who had accepted the necessary pain and loneliness and had found that magnificently incomprehensible connection. And around her neck was the rosary, the symbol of all her prayers. At Patrissia's throat there was only her hand, remembering.

'You are the object of this glorious endeavour, Patrissia, but what is your subject? All subjects are immaterial. Examine the object with your spiritual eye, and the subject will appear. The last look, the last touch, the last whisper...In the end the veil will lift, the memories will no longer be needed, and we will be at one with the unconquerable spirit.'

She moved forward and crouched in front of the canvas, tilting her head to follow the intricate paths and shadowed ridges that criss-crossed and wrapped themselves like necklaces of stars around the slender forms she had painted, figure and reflection entwined in waves of light.

The End.

A novel by Vonny Thenasten and Carrienne Moore

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