

Short Stories

Crime

Queen's Pawn Gambit - The Canadian Security Intelligence Service coaxes a former secret agent out of retirement to perform one last job in Moscow.

Fair Swap - A woman with a boorish husband has an affair. If the husband finds out, he's likely to beat up her lover, unless, of course, the woman gets rid of the husband.

Critics Corner - A group of three authors meet regularly to critique each other's crime stories. However, in real life, one of the group is planning a perfect crime.

Thicker Than Water - A wealthy widower woos a frustrated housewife. To resolve the situation, she decides to make herself available by arranging an accident for her husband.

Not to be Trifled With - A divorced man receives a call from his ex-wife, who offers him the chance to get even with the guy who cuckolded him. She has the perfect plan of revenge – too perfect.

Fifth Target - A bomb explodes on a bus in Ottawa. After New York, Madrid, Bali, and London, is Canada the terrorist's fifth Target.

The Others

Curse - When his mother dies, a man's sister reveals to him the strange circumstances of his birth and the curse that has followed him from his mother's womb.

Plain Dane - A man falls in love with a woman who regards herself as plain and unremarkable. She's ends up finding out something about herself.

Pialou – A man goes in search of an African foster child he has supported for ten years but never seen.

Queen's Pawn Gambit

Andrew Cosgrove sat on a patio chair on the balcony of his twelfth floor apartment in Ottawa's west end, watching the sailboats on Lac Deschenes. Turning his attention away from the far distance, he picked up the daily paper lying beside him. "UK jails Russian assassin," the headline said. Before he could read the story, the phone rang. He'd brought the cordless onto the balcony, a bad habit from his pre-retirement days. That'll be Jim with tomorrow's tee-off time. No, the call display said otherwise, announcing a private number.

"Mr Cosgrove?"

"Yes."

"It's Ogilvie. We'd like you to come over this afternoon. One-thirty at the front desk. Ask for Taylor."

"Why?"

"Just passing on the message, sir. Please confirm you will be there."

"One-thirty, to see Taylor."

"Correct," the caller replied, and hung up.

Damn! What the hell do they want?

Now into his second month of retirement, Cosgrove lived alone, so no one heard the curse, and no one responded to the question. He looked at his watch—ten-thirty. He decided to have lunch in the market; it was on the way.

He showered and changed and headed out to the market. Finding a restaurant with an outdoor patio, he sat down to ponder the likely scenarios. While demolishing a chicken penne and Caesar salad, the best he could come up with was that there had been a leak of the design of the encrypted radios he'd been developing at the government communications research lab. Surely not?

For fuck's sake Andrew, get a grip, he told himself. It's probably routine follow-up stuff. He paid his bill and left.

Cosgrove did not need a map to find the location of the afternoon meeting place. He'd been there many times. 1941 Ogilvie Road is the address of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's headquarters.

Taylor's office looked north towards the river. "I report to the ADO AEA," Taylor said, as though this would make everything abundantly clear.

Assistant to the director of operations for Asia, Europe, and the Americas, Cosgrove deduced. Oh, perhaps it *is* something to do with encrypted radios. They were being used in Afghanistan.

"Cast your mind back to 1974."

“Yes, my last year at McGill. I was ...” Cosgrove’s voice trailed off.

“You were at a chess tournament in Moscow. You were representing Canada in some sort of goodwill games for students.” Taylor’s tone made the contest sound like a fraternity event for vodka-swilling youngsters.

“It was the World Student Chess Championship,” Cosgrove said. His heart-rate quickened. Definitely not the radios, he thought—worse.

Taylor ignored Cosgrove’s correction. “But your role wasn’t limited to playing chess was it?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me what it was?”

“No. I signed a document to say I’d keep it a secret.”

Taylor opened a file folder on his desk and handed Cosgrove the top sheet. Cosgrove read it.

“You’ll notice it’s signed by the minister,” Taylor said.

“I assume you have another document for me to sign to say I’ve read this one.”

Taylor smiled for the first time, and handed Cosgrove the next two sheets of paper in the file. “Sign at the bottom opposite your name, on both sheets, but read it first. Then I’ll witness them.”

With the formalities out of the way, Taylor visibly relaxed. “We want you to go back to Moscow and perform your magic again.”

Cosgrove noticed that Taylor no longer seemed interested in what he’d been doing at the chess tournament. He guessed it was probably in the file.

“You must be joking! For starters, I’m no longer a chess master. And unless it had escaped your attention, I’m fifty-five years old. The brain doesn’t work as fast as it did back then.”

“I’m sure you’re doing yourself an injustice. You’ve only just retired from that encryption job at communications research.”

The bugger has been doing his homework, Cosgrove thought. I bet he also knows I haven’t stopped playing chess in the intervening years. “Isn’t the cold war over? Why are we still spying on the Russians?” He realized as soon as he said it how naïve he must have sounded.

Taylor smiled again. “Let’s go grab some coffee and donuts to boost the brain cells and I’ll explain what we want you to do. To do for your country, that is. Both of them, we’ll be sharing this stuff with MI6.”

Is that supposed to make me feel better? Cosgrove thought.

They returned to Taylor’s office after their caffeine and sugar boost. “There’s one thing that isn’t in the file, Andrew”—in the break Taylor had become less formal—“and that’s the exact method of passing the information.”

“I never told anyone, and the director wanted it kept that way,” Cosgrove said.

“To protect the source?”

“Yes.”

“Can you explain it to me?”

“Do you have clearance?”

Taylor extracted the letter the minister had signed. “You’ll remember we stipulated that all tradecraft must be shared with us.” He pointed to the relevant paragraph.

“Why the change in policy?”

“We want to use it in a broader context.”

“So why don’t I just tell one of your more youthful agents how it’s done, and then he or she can go in my place?”

Taylor frowned. “This particular source has asked that it be you and nobody else, otherwise we would.”

Cosgrove recoiled a fraction and widened his eyes. “Vladimir?”

“Yes, Vladimir Kulchenko.”

“He must be...” Cosgrove did the math. “Sixty-five.”

“Yes. He would have died in a gulag somewhere if the old order had remained in place, but he spent only ten years in jail, and is a free man now.”

“How did they catch him?” Cosgrove asked, worried that it might have been a slip-up on his part.

“A double agent in Washington coughed up his name.”

“Poor Vlad.” Cosgrove paused and stared straight at Taylor. “How do you know he didn’t finger me?”

“You’ve been to Russia on vacation since then. You took your kids, I believe.”

“Oh, yes, of course. But getting back to the present, how would Kulchenko have access to secret information?”

“We don’t know. What we do know is that he is only willing to pass information through you. Basically, he doesn’t trust anyone else.”

“Yet he contacted CSIS somehow.”

“The CIA, actually. You know how it works.”

He did. If an agent has information he leaves a prearranged marker or passes on an innocuous message. Somehow Kulchenko must have worked Cosgrove’s name into the message, which would have been verbal, nothing written down.

“I’ll think about it.”

“We don’t expect you to do this as a charitable donation to offset your taxes. Your consultation fee starts the moment you say yes.” Taylor inserted air quotes around “consultation fee.”

“Can you wait twenty-four hours?”

“Of course. But you’ll be six-hundred bucks worse off in that time.”

“Is that the daily rate?” It was twice what he’d been earning before he retired.

“Yes, plus expenses.”

Cosgrove drove back home, grabbed a bottle of brandy and a glass from the liquor cabinet, and sat down. Taylor had told him the date was crucial—one week hence. There would be a big chess tournament in Moscow, and people would be playing the game in the parks in front of TV screens that showed the Grand Masters in action. It would be the ideal spot for a tourist to accept the offer of a game from a local man, without arousing suspicion.

Cosgrove had asked Taylor for a photograph. “Otherwise I won’t recognise him.” Taylor had produced one but wouldn’t let Cosgrove keep it. “I’ll show it to you again when you depart.”

The sixty-five year-old Kulchenko looked more like eighty-five. His heavily lined face bore the scars of a life of espionage and ten years hard labour. Would he be as nimble-minded as he’d been in his thirties?

In 1974, Kulchenko had passed Cosgrove messages while they had been playing chess. Warned of hidden microphones on the tables where Westerners were playing, Cosgrove had devised an infallible way of communicating with the Russian.

Kulchenko tapped out Morse code with his forefinger on the chess piece about to be moved. One letter per move, A through T. A represented 1, B represented 2, and so on to T, which was 20. Kulchenko and Cosgrove had identical copies of the book they used to code and decode the message. In order to determine where to start, the first two letters would be used for the page number. Thus BT would be page 220. The actual coded message started at the first letter of the designated page in the book, and then moved a variable number of characters down the page as determined by the next Morse code letter tapped on the chess piece. The code had a few more complications to handle spaces and punctuation characters, but fundamentally could not have been simpler.

Since nothing could be committed to paper, Cosgrove had to remember a sequence of thirty to forty random letters. One mistake and the whole message would be garbled.

After each game he’d decode the message into its abbreviated version of English. For example, BRZ was short for Chairman Brezhnev, while XMW meant a ten megaton nuclear warhead.

The book they had used was an English translation of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Cosgrove had bought it in a Moscow bookstore in 1974. He still had it, but would Kulchenko have managed to hang onto his identical copy? A reprint would be no use; the formatting would have changed.

When Cosgrove had described the mechanism to Taylor, he hadn't got past the Morse code part before the CSIS man stopped him. "You're gonna have to write this down." Cosgrove did so and when he'd finished, Taylor said, "I don't know how you kept all that information in your head and played chess at the same time." Cosgrove had noted the encouraging flattery. All part of the act, he figured. He didn't bother to tell Taylor he had an IQ of 148; it was in the personnel file.

Cosgrove poured himself a measure of brandy and downed it. He poured some more and took the beverage out onto the balcony. The sailing boats were heading home to their marinas, and the ruby sun had reached the point above the horizon where one could look directly at it.

It bothered him that no one knew what kind of information Kulchenko wanted to divulge. He could only guess that it might be military or industrial secrets, or an impending terrorist attack. In 1974, the cold war had limited the intelligence to mostly strategic military secrets. The small stuff came via the embassy in the pouch—General Kharkov is reviewing the troops in Manchuria.

What worried him most had nothing to do with the "intel." It was that he would inevitably have become rusty in the intervening years. He picked up the morning paper and randomly circled thirty letters from the front page, then committed them to memory. Tossing the paper on the floor he picked up the brandy glass again.

He waited until the sun slid into the endless forests of Québec on the far side of the river, and wrote down the memorized letters. Then he checked them. Yes!

That did it. He didn't need twenty-four hours to make up his mind. He called Taylor at his home.

* * * *

Taylor had told him to book the air and hotel arrangements through a regular travel agent, and they would organize his visa. "We don't want it coming via official channels," the CSIS officer had told him.

Cosgrove caught Air Canada's overnight flight to London, the town where he'd been born and lived until his parents had emigrated. He was sixteen at the time. Even after forty years he still regarded London as a second home. Indeed, it was tempting to stop right there. But he kept going and connected with the British Airways morning service to Moscow's Domodedovo airport.

"There's not much time, and you have to switch terminals," the travel agent had said. "I'm traveling business class and I only have carry-on baggage."

The cab dropped him at his hotel near Smolenskaya Metro station. The Metro is best way to get around Moscow, the travel agent had advised. Cosgrove hadn't told her he'd been there before. "And the Canadian Embassy is a stone's throw away." I hope I won't need it, he thought. Thanks for jinxing me.

The hotel looked as if it had been designed by a committee of Communist party members in the fifties, who'd been told it must look as utilitarian as possible. It resembled an apartment building in a housing project, but a twenty-first century entrance and lobby had been added. Cosgrove joined a short line at the reception desk, and almost bumped into a woman joining the queue. "Sorry," he said, in Russian. "Ladies first."

"From your accent and manners, I can tell you're a tourist," she said in English.

He smiled at the woman. "Yes."

She did not take up his offer to move ahead of him. "I'll register later," she said. "You'll find the travel guide in your room very useful." She returned the smile, turned and left.

Alexandrovsky Gardens was only two kilometres away—a pleasant stroll in the summer sunshine. "If you walk, it'll look as if you're trying to spot a tail," Taylor had said, so Cosgrove took the Metro.

He arrived at the park at noon, and recognized Vladimir Kulchenko immediately. The old man was watching a game in progress. Cosgrove sat down at an empty table with its inlaid chess board. Kulchenko wandered over to him. "Would you like a game? I have the pieces?" he said, holding up a felt bag and shaking it.

"*Da, spasiba,*" Cosgrove replied. You'll be watched, and they have sophisticated directional listening equipment, so speak only English or tourist Russian—more CSIS advice.

Kulchenko sat down, emptied the chess pieces onto the table, and they laid them out. He picked up a white and black pawn, cupped them in both hands then offered Cosgrove two clenched fists. Cosgrove tapped one of them—white, the pieces already in front of him.

They shook hands and the game began. Or rather, both games began.

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Cosgrove hadn't eaten since breakfast, so on the way up to his room he stopped at the front desk. Speaking English interspersed with a few Russian nouns and pointing at the menu he ordered fish, sauerkraut, and dumplings, and a sweet pie for dessert. Not because he particularly liked the selection, but he knew the clerk would have no problem recognising the typical Russian fare.

Forsaking a shower, although he stank from the fear and stress of the last four hours, he wrote down the code sequence on a sheet of hotel note paper. Then he opened the travel guide and began the tedious process of decoding Kulchenko's message. Ten minutes into it, there was a knock on the door. Hmm, room service has improved since the Communist regime departed, he thought.

He stuffed the notes and the guide under his pillow and opened the door. Two uniformed police officers stood there. “Cosgrove?” one of them asked, although it came out as “Cotsgroff.”

“Da.”

Shoving Cosgrove aside, the officers barged into the room. A third man in civilian clothing followed them. He spoke English. “You must come with us.”

“Why?”

“To answer some questions.”

“What questions?”

The man didn’t reply but signalled to the police officers. One of them produced a pair of handcuffs, the other held Cosgrove’s arms behind his back while the first officer secured him.

Cosgrove knew better than to struggle—the combined weight of the two goons he put at four-hundred-and-fifty pounds. And figured arguing with their leader wasn’t going to be much use either.

Watched by other tourists, the police officers guided Cosgrove through the lobby and bundled him into the back seat of their car. Cosgrove stared out of the window as they traveled south towards the river then followed it eastwards. The driver turned north at the Kremlin complex and, skirting Red Square, threaded through the side streets to Lubyanskaya Ploshchad. Cosgrove could not fail to recognize the building in front of him, once home of the KGB, now occupied by its successor, the Federal Security Service.

The Lubyanka used to be known as the transit stop on the way to Siberia. Assuming, of course, that one survived the torture chambers and furnace in the bowels of the building. Cosgrove was shown to slightly better accommodation: a windowless two-metre-square cell with no furniture and no facilities. The door slammed shut removing the only source of light, coming from the corridor. They could have removed the handcuffs, he thought, but no words had passed between him and his captors since his arrest at the hotel.

He curled up on the cold stone floor, trying to recall the rudimentary training he’d received when he’d undertaken the same task thirty-three years earlier. “You’re not a spy, and you can be certain they’ve got your source. Tell them as little as you can but no heroics. We’ll get you out.”

Cosgrove never had to test the ability of his government to rescue him. However, right at that moment, ahead of his desire to be rescued, to eat, and to drink, he wanted desperately to pee.

The sound of footsteps woke him from his shallow sleep. Two guards appeared at the door, pulled him to his feet and shoved him out into the corridor. One grabbed his arm and they headed towards the elevator, ascending one floor.

Cosgrove looked for a clock but this floor had nothing but doors. They entered through one of them to a cell not unlike the one he'd left, except that it had a light and two chairs. A man in a suit and tie sat on one of them.

"Ah, Mr. Cosgrove. Welcome to the Lubyanka," he said in accented English. "Please sit down." When Cosgrove was seated, the man continued, "Vladimir Kulchenko has confessed to passing you state secrets."

"Who?"

"We believe you know him, and played chess with him yesterday."

"I did?"

His interrogator nodded to one of the guards. He stepped forward and punched Cosgrove in the face. The force knocked Cosgrove off the chair, and, still manacled, he was unable to break his fall, cracking his head on the floor. Two guards took an arm each and lifted him back onto the chair.

"We can play it like that all day. But to save time let me tell you what we know. First, you're British under contract to MI6. You have dual citizenship and use your Canadian passport as a cover to enter Russia. We also know you aren't a professional intelligence officer."

Cosgrove spat out one of his front teeth and bent over to wipe his bloody, broken nose on his knee.

"And we found the coded message in your hotel room. Not very sophisticated, was it?"

"Message?"

The guard crashed his fist into the side of Cosgrove's head, a blow that knocked him unconscious.

When he recovered, the interrogator was sipping coffee. He wafted the cup under Cosgrove's nose. "Smells good, does it not? Not like you. I am thinking you would prefer to be in your hotel, having a breakfast of eggs and bacon. We can arrange for you to wash and have breakfast, but you have committed a crime. A serious crime, so you will be staying with us for a while. However, our courts are not without compassion. They will read your confession and see that your government has duped you. I can promise you will receive a lighter sentence if you cooperate."

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Cosgrove arrived back in Canada three months later. He had been lucky. He could have been looking at fifteen years hard labour but had been swapped for the Russian assassin imprisoned in Britain.

Kulchenko disappeared, not to Siberia, but to his home town of Tbilisi. Tbilisi wasn't Moscow but he could live far more cheaply there. The caper had earned him a pardon for earlier crimes against the state. More importantly, the government reinstated his old-age pension.

By the time Cosgrove returned to Ottawa he'd racked up \$50,000 in expenses. However, offsetting his "good fortune," some of that money would need to be spent on expensive dental work and replacing all of his dead potted plants. He didn't bother to have his nose straightened out. It would be a reminder to avoid visiting 1941 Ogilvie Road, ever again. And Moscow.

Fair Swap

I locked the front door and sauntered toward the car. Even in my leather coat, collar pulled up, I could feel the miserable dampness of a cold, rainy January evening. But in England, what could one expect at this time of year?

As usual, on the way to parties, my husband John sat hunched over the steering wheel, engine running. He knew this “subtle” hint of his annoyed me, but did it anyway. I opened the door, plunked myself down, and slammed it shut. As I did so, the car moved off as though closing the door had released some invisible braking mechanism.

“What kept you, Lisa? I thought you were ready.”

“I wasn’t, but we’re not late,” I said, as he accelerated away, hitting fifty miles an hour before we’d reached the end of our street.

My definition of being early was to arrive at the time stated on the party invitation. Not that there had been one. Jeremy and Pam had invited us to dinner with two other friends – Rita and Mike.

In spite of the informality of this particular affair, I had indulged myself by buying a very expensive dress. This extravagant side of me peeved John. “Do our friends care if they see you wearing a dress more than once?” he’d argue. “I care,” I’d tell him, and that would shut him up.

We headed towards Harwich and then turned east towards the sea. The mud from farm vehicles had turned the B-roads, already slick with the rain, into narrow black skating rinks. Even so, John bombed along at seventy miles an hour.

“I thought I mentioned we’re not late,” I said.

I hated it when he drove like a lunatic, but behind the wheel I was just as reckless. A year earlier, we had joined a motor club, to participate in their car rallies. I drove and John navigated. We would tear around the winding country lanes on the Essex-Suffolk border at midnight, with John screaming instructions at me moments before every fork, crossroad or T-junction. Notably, the only time I permitted him to scream at me. In our marriage, screaming was my specialty.

Our motoring partnership had proved to be unbeatable in the last three events, and we were now in the lead for the club championship, just ahead of Jeremy and Mike who paired up because their wives thought car rallying was just plain stupid.

I should mention that the car rallying had produced a spin-off – my affair with Jeremy. The first time I shared a bed with him was at his place, on the occasion of his thirtieth birthday party. In a packed house, we managed to lose

ourselves for twenty minutes. That may seem difficult, but John had been preoccupied, rubbing himself up against Pam on the dance floor.

Even after that first “quickie”, I yearned for more of Jeremy. I fell for him, because in bed, he had a tender side to him that John lacked. So the affair started, and our liaisons took place at Jeremy’s house during lunch breaks. It had to be that way around, because of one incredibly nosy stay-at-home neighbor of mine. But even at Jeremy’s house, tucked away in the countryside, it was risky. Wives tend to get suspicious if they spot that the bed doesn’t look quite right. And back in November, Jeremy had mentioned that Pam asked him why, as he put it, his equipment wasn’t firing on all cylinders.

Our fears proved to be correct. A few weeks before Christmas, John came home and stormed straight into the kitchen where I was preparing supper. He told me Pam had phoned him at work. I listened wide-eyed to his version of Pam’s tale, trying to look as hurt as I could manage.

John ended his rant with, “Well, are you screwing him?”

“Of course not. When would I have time?” Not the best answer.

“You know I’d kill him, don’t you?”

“John, take your coat off and sit down. I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

He remained standing and glared at me. “Why would Pam say that, then?”

“I don’t know; perhaps he’s not fucking her as often as she’d like.” That much was true.

I knew my use of the F-word would make him back off. “Well, if you say you’re not, then I believe you.”

I could manipulate John with ease, most times. I’m sure this side of his character doomed his career at the Ministry of Defence. “Too soft on your subordinates,” his boss had told him at his year-end performance review. Ironic, considering John’s background.

We dropped the subject of Pam’s presumed paranoia, although Jeremy and I continued to see each other – the euphemism for our lovemaking. Jeremy didn’t care whether Pam knew or not, but I didn’t mention John’s threat just in case it made Jeremy droop.

Jeremy had already confessed to me that he’d had extra-marital sex a couple of times previously. Pam had forgiven him those dalliances and probably would this one, too, provided she thought it wasn’t going to lead anywhere.

After the frightening drive, we arrived at Jeremy’s house, without John having put the car into a ditch. Pam greeted us at the door. “New dress, Lisa?” she said in her usually cheery tone. “Can I ask where you got it?”

I simply wanted to answer “yes” and “no” respectively and leave it at that. Funny how I’d lost any respect I might have had for her. I sometimes wondered what Jeremy had seen in Pam when he proposed marriage. Her IQ must have

been twenty points below his, and she showed no interest in any of his other pursuits. However, this wasn't the night to antagonize dear Pam, so I replied, "In Bab's Boutique in the High Street."

"Next to the cinema?"

"Yes."

Before we'd left home, and somewhat out of character, John admitted that the dress looked positively stunning on me. It did – knee length in a pale pink, cotton knit, and tailored to fit my size six. At the front, the dress was cut in a V showing off my cleavage. "If I half close my eyes, you look naked," John commented. Good, that was the effect I hoped it would have on Jeremy.

Pam didn't ask any more questions about the dress, like how much it cost. John didn't ask either – I knew he'd figure it would trigger an argument.

Jeremy joined us as we unloaded our coats onto Pam. He made no attempt to help her. "Put them in the spare room," he said. It came out as a command.

"Mike and Rita here yet?" I asked, as Jeremy showed us into the living room.

He didn't need to answer. They were already seated, wine glasses in hand. Jeremy took our orders for drinks and dashed off to the kitchen.

"We'll beat you next time," Mike said.

He was referring to the fact that John and I had pipped him and Jeremy by a mere two points in the last car rally.

"Maybe you were unlucky," I replied. "Or maybe you need an ace navigator like John." I hoped the audience would interpret the compliment to my husband as confirmation that I couldn't possibly be screwing Jeremy; I guessed Pam had almost certainly shared her suspicions with Rita – they were close friends.

Jeremy returned with our drinks. As he did so, Mike laughed out loud. "Hey Jeremy, Lisa said they beat us because you're a lousy navigator."

Jeremy opened his mouth, but before he could say anything I winked at him. He changed the subject, something else I liked about him – the ability to hold a conversation on topics other than football and cars. And, unlike John, Jeremy wasn't the kind of guy who would fall asleep in the middle of a ballet at Covent Garden.

Mike and John had managed to steer the chat back to rallying when Pam arrived to announce that dinner was ready. "There's two types of sauce for the salmon – white wine in butter, or lemon and parsley for those who want to stay relatively sober."

"White wine in butter for me," John said. "But don't serve up too much; I want to leave some space for your delicious desserts."

John was right about Pam's culinary skills, and I knew he'd be happy if she'd served up just desserts. He never seemed to gain weight on them, but that

was hardly surprising as he still followed an exercise regimen left over from his days in the Special Air Services.

The rest of us made our sauce selections.

Pam made eye contact with her husband and nodded her head in the direction of the kitchen. "Can you help me, dear?" With the emphasis on "dear" it didn't sound like a question, and she wandered off. Jeremy followed behind.

"I'll give you a hand," Rita said, and she disappeared, too.

I felt duty bound to join them, leaving John and Mike to take their places at the dining room table, no doubt pleased to have nothing to do except be waited upon.

Pam had placed six plates on the counter. They were already full except for the sauce.

"This one's yours Lisa," Pam said, pouring sauce on the fish. "Lemon and parsley, right?"

I picked it up and hovered, holding it in my right hand. "Shall I take John's as well?"

Jeremy handed her a different jug, and she poured the sauce onto the salmon. I carried both plates through to the dining room.

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Back in September, I had broached the topic of what to do about John. At first, Jeremy entertained the silly notion that I could simply leave my husband and then divorce him. But I had no grounds for divorcing John, although the converse was not true, of course. The only way open to me was to legally separate from him. Then, two years later I could file for divorce, citing the separation as the reason.

"Why don't we go the separation route?" Jeremy had asked.

"Because, dearest, I want you in one piece. John is likely to rearrange your face so that I'd barely be able to recognize you, and then there would be the fortune we'd have to spend on your dental bills."

"Come on, now. He could be arrested for that."

"Maybe, but that might not bother him. He's ex-SAS remember, a hero of the Northern Ireland conflict. What judge is going to send him to jail for beating up a guy who's cuckolded him?"

Jeremy digested this tidbit. John's army history wasn't new information for him, but he hadn't extrapolated it far enough to reach the same conclusion as me. Nor had I related John's various SAS tales about how he'd been trained to kill people with everyday objects like a shoelace, and make it look like an accident. Well, okay, that's a slight exaggeration.

"I'll think about it," Jeremy said.

For a moment, I thought he meant he wanted to reconsider our relationship. “Think about it?”

“How to get rid of him. If you’re sure.”

“I’m open to ideas,” I said.

And I was. John was definitely a pain in the ass. Ever since we’d got married, he’d always preferred getting drunk with his ex-army pals rather than spending time with me. He only agreed to the motor rallying because I threatened to leave him if he didn’t take up something we could do together. Naturally, he wanted to drive but quickly realized I couldn’t read a map. He used to give me the rolling-eyes look when I turned the map upside down to align it with the road. Nor had I any idea how to navigate – expertise he’d acquired in the SAS. If I was honest, the only reason we won those rallies was because of his mental agility under pressure in determining the fastest route between two points.

Why then did I marry him in the first place? Good question if you’d never met him. Absolutely charming, multi-lingual, and my girlfriends all swooned when I introduced him.

“It’s not that easy to kill someone and get away with it,” Jeremy said.

“Yeah, I’m with you so far.”

“I suppose it would be a bit too obvious if I tinkered with the brakes on his car.”

I sighed. “I don’t think it would take the police too long to discover that you have an advanced mechanic’s certificate.”

He smiled. “We need to sleep on it.”

I wasn’t in the mood for sleep right then. We were at his place enjoying a long lunch break, one that didn’t include the partaking of any food.

* * * *

The police didn’t show any interest in John until he died in hospital a day after the dinner party. Rat poison, the autopsy report said. Rat poison wasn’t something that is normally found in salmon, and besides, the rest of us were okay.

The detectives at the station must have held a lottery to see who would get the juicy case. House party, cold, dark, rainy night, one dead man, five suspects, no butler to blame it on: it came straight out of an Agatha Christie novel.

The day after John died, Detective Robinson called round to our house – actually, my house now. He didn’t at all look like the stereotypical BBC detective I’d expected. Blond hair, no mustache, baby face, although he did wear the standard raincoat and refused to take it off. A uniformed policewoman accompanied him, but Detective Robinson didn’t introduce her. He extracted his notebook and pencil from the raincoat pocket. Ah, that’s why he’d not parted with it.

I showed them into the living room, and we sat down. After offering me his “sincere condolences” Detective Robinson waded in. “Take me through the events of last Saturday evening,” he said.

“Well, there’s not much to tell. Pam and Jeremy invited us over for dinner, along with two other friends, Rita and Mike. We’d just finished the main course when John complained that he didn’t feel well.”

“And the rest of you? No one else was sick?”

“We were fine. I drove John straight to the hospital. I remember joking with him that Pam had boxed up the dessert for him. She knew he liked her sweets.”

Detective Robinson exchanged glances with the uniformed officer, who, lips pushed tightly together, seemed to be suppressing a smile. “What had you all eaten that evening?”

“Salmon. We thought John must have got a bad portion.”

“And you’re sure everyone ate the same?”

“Er... yes, apart from the sauces. Pam had made two types.”

“Who put the sauces on the salmon?”

I blew out my cheeks to indicate that I was making every effort to plumb the depths of my memory. At length, I said, “Pam. Yes, I was in the kitchen and can picture her holding the jug.”

“Did John collect his own plate from the kitchen or did someone serve it to him?”

“No, I mean yes. I took both plates into the dining room, mine and his. He was already seated at the table with Mike.”

“Is there any chance you might have mixed up the two plates?”

“Er...” I paused, closed my eyes and pressed my knuckles into them.

“Take your time,” he said, as though he was prepared to stay all day.

I opened my eyes, hoping they were now bloodshot. “Actually, yes, when I started eating, I did realize that I’d given him the wrong one, but by that time John had already started on the salmon.”

“He didn’t notice the difference?”

“John? Not a chance. He wouldn’t have mentioned it even if there’d been tomato ketchup on his salmon.”

“And you didn’t say anything either.”

“God, no. I didn’t want to upset Pam. To be honest, either sauce was okay with me.”

“Now about Pam. Were you good friends?”

Oh, oh, he’s finally getting there. “I met Pam because John and I knew Jeremy through the motor club. In the last year or so, we’d socialized with them quite a bit.”

“And with Rita and Mike Smith?”

“Yes, them too.”

“Rita Smith told us that Pam had confided in her that you and Jeremy were having an affair. Were you?” He made eye contact – a copper’s most reliable lie detector.

“Yes.”

My bluntness seemed to throw him off. He paused for a moment as though I’d negated his follow-up question. “Did your husband know about it?”

“Pam phoned John at work and told him.”

“And I assume he told you?”

“Yes.”

“What was his reaction?”

I made a face, to indicate this was excruciatingly painful for me. “He thought she was making it up,” I said.

Detective Robinson exchanged glances with his colleague. “Why would he think that?”

“Perhaps John thought Pam had the hots for him.”

“And you didn’t put your husband straight about your affair with Jeremy?”

“No, but he later told me that if it was true about me and Jeremy he’d divorce me.” I avoided embellishing the lie. He was the detective; he’d deduce the implication of my mentioning divorce.

He closed his notebook. “Well, that’s all the questions I have at the moment. Once again, I’m very sorry about your husband.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll let you know if I need to speak to you again.”

“Of course.”

The two officers stood up, and I showed them to the door. The policewoman strode off to their car, but Detective Robinson turned as though he’d forgotten something. “You had a lucky escape, ma’am.”

“Oh?”

“The poisoned food might have been intended for you.”

I hoped my expression transmitted shock and fear, and a look that said: Poisoned food? Who could possibly want to kill me? But I said nothing.

He seemed satisfied that he’d made his point. Or had he wanted to see my reaction to his zinger?

* * * *

Poor Pam, but things weren’t as bad for her as they might have been. The charge of murder was later reduced to manslaughter. I guess the prosecutor couldn’t prove that she hadn’t simply intended to scare me in an attempt to warn me off, but had overdone the dosage. Ten years was pretty stiff for manslaughter

but, as the judge said, “Here’s a man who’s served his country...” Blah, blah, blah.

Adding to Pam’s woes, the court ruled that her crime was sufficient grounds for Jeremy’s divorce action – I should hope so. I don’t feel too sorry for her, though; she’ll be out in five years or less, and still has half the proceeds of their house with which to start afresh.

I’m married to Jeremy, now. My clever man had devised the brilliant scheme. Especially ingenious was the third jug containing the rat-poison sauce. It would be washed and cleared away with the rest of the dishes while John and I were on our way to the hospital. And I marveled at his legerdemain in being able to switch the jugs without Pam noticing. I lost the bet with Jeremy she’d get life, but you can’t have everything.

Critics Corner

The babysitter arrived late, which meant I would be, too. I set off for the ten-minute walk to the pub, passing Larry's car at the end of my street. He always parked there. After seven o'clock the parking meter spaces were free, but closer to our venue, he'd have to pay for off-street parking.

Located adjacent to the University of Toronto, our regular haunt catered to the student and young graduate demographic, in that the food was cheap but not laden with trans-fats. With our manuscripts spread out on the table, we didn't look out of place, even though we were older than most of the customers.

I glanced in through the window and spotted my fellow writers; Carol and Larry had arrived ahead of me, as usual. I never knew what time they got there because I was always late, courtesy of my babysitter, by now reading a bedtime story to my seven-year-old daughter. Carol and Larry were the other two members of our critiquing group, all of us members of the Tee-Oh Mystery Writers Club. Larry, an office manager for the provincial government, was sleeping with Carol, a translator with the Ontario legislature. Not that it was any of my business, except that Larry's wife, Michelle, was a longtime friend of mine.

I completed the unlikely trio. A single mother, I held a position as a technical writer at a semiconductor company in Mississauga. I knew Larry socially through Michelle, and had introduced him to the writers' club. Later, he had persuaded Carol to join. According to Michelle, Larry and Carol had cooked up this arrangement to give them a plausible excuse to be together outside of work. I knew Larry welcomed my presence at these meetings, as a chaperone of sorts, because it reinforced the illusion that his relationship with Carol was strictly platonic.

Larry had self-published a couple of passably readable adventure novels, but aimed to crack the big time with "a fiendishly clever murder mystery." Those were his words, the arrogant prick. We'd started critiquing his masterpiece two meetings ago. In my opinion, his epic would fall well short of winning any prizes.

In spite of my lack of enthusiasm for his work, Larry valued my criticisms, for he had incorporated a few of my previous suggestions into his latest revision. And, such is the protocol of critiquing groups, that he, too, cast a sharp eye over my literary gems, and Carol's. Excelled at it, even, which was why I tolerated him.

Carol had the extra-small dress size of a fashion model, and Larry's attraction to the thirty-year-old bag of bones was obvious. She possessed

natural blonde hair, cute face, and was smart enough to be able to translate four thousand words a day from English into French, her mother tongue.

“Hi folks,” I said. “Started already?” They were both holding manuscripts, but probably the only plot they’d been discussing was the alibi he’d need to cover his next assignation with carnal Carol.

“No, just recapping my story so far,” Larry replied. He was quite attractive himself, as long as he kept his braggadocio under control. I knew he was forty because Michelle had mentioned it, but he showed no sign of the onset of middle age in the places where men are usually vulnerable: on top and round the waist.

The waiter came over the moment I sat down. I asked for a double vodka rather than my usual light beer. On this night, I’d need it.

“I’ve nothing ready for tonight, Julie, so let’s go through yours first,” Carol said.

“And then I want to use the rest of the time to brainstorm my perpetrator’s modus operandi,” Larry said.

“Okay,” I replied. “You both have my next fifteen pages?”

Carol pulled a copy from her purse; Larry already had it in front of him. “Ladies first,” he said, smiling at Carol.

She had found numerous grammatical errors in my manuscript and some passages that were just plain awkward. She’d also spotted a plot flaw where I had the female protagonist entering a bar ahead of the suspect, whom she was supposedly tailing. It was easy to fix.

Larry’s comments were always at a higher, structural level, no minor typos from him. “The premise that your protagonist is an amateur sleuth doesn’t work for me.”

“How do you mean?”

“She’s got too much police knowledge. How would she have acquired it?”

I drained the rest of my vodka. “I suppose I could invent a father or a brother who’s feeding her with the insider stuff.”

“Bit contrived,” Larry said.

I felt like saying: “Okay smart ass, what would you do?” But it would be like admitting that I relied on him for ideas. Instead, I said, “I’ll give it some thought.” Secretly, I knew he was right.

The waiter appeared and asked if we wanted a refill. We all nodded, but then Carol wanted to know what desserts they had. He rattled off the choices, and she ordered apple and pecan crumble, with ice cream. Where did she put it?

“Is it my turn now?” Larry said. Neither Carol nor I responded to the rhetorical question. His novel was about a man who wanted to rid himself of his rich wife. The couple was childless, and the husband wanted to start afresh with

all of her money and a younger, more fertile woman. The woman just happened to be blonde, beautiful and skinny. Pretty transparent and close to home, I thought.

“I’m okay with the motive,” he said. “And I can manufacture a suitable opportunity, but I’m having trouble with the method. The murderer has to be able to get away with it.”

Obviously, otherwise it wouldn’t be the blockbuster Larry was hoping to write. “It helps set the scene if we know what the motive is,” I said.

“She’s a nag and hopeless in the sack.”

“Too trite,” I said. “You want to think of something more exciting, like: she’s a lesbian and she’s having an affair with his secretary.”

“I could revisit that. Let’s get back to the method,” he said, as though he’d seen through my attempt to pry into his fragile relationship with his wife.

“He’d hire a hit-man,” Carol suggested.

Larry beamed at Carol. “Yes, that’ll work.”

“Where’s he going to find one – the yellow pages?” I enjoyed getting back at him for his criticism of my work. The fictional husband was, of course, a government worker like Larry. The real Larry didn’t reply, so I continued to twist the knife. “He has no contact with the criminal world.”

“His girlfriend has a brother who’s been in jail,” Carol said.

Have you, Carol? I thought. But then remembered that, unlike Larry, she possessed the ability to visualize characters and plots beyond her actual experience.

“Good idea,” Larry said, writing it down.

I thought the idea sucked. It was just as contrived as the one in my story Larry had criticized earlier.

“How is the hit-man going to be paid?” I said.

“Huh?”

“Is the husband going to write a cheque, or draw fifteen thousand dollars from his bank account and pay the man in cash?”

“Is that all it costs?” Carol asked.

“Yes, I believe so,” I said.

“How do you know?”

Larry must have thought I was making it up, so I referred him to a non-fiction book on Ontario’s biker gangs then continued to hammer the point home. “The victim in your story isn’t armed, nor does she have any bodyguards. A bullet in the brain would be easy and cheap.”

A woman at the next table must have tuned-in to my last remark. She turned to make eye contact with me. I smiled at her. She quickly turned back and whispered something to her companion.

Larry didn't notice her. He had his head down, capturing my observations in his notebook. Very flattering.

The waiter arrived with the drinks and Carol's dessert, which she attacked as though she hadn't eaten all day. I paused for a moment and downed half of my vodka in one gulp. "Plus," I said. "A hit-man is an unreliable conspirator. Say the guy is later caught for some other murder. He might blab to the police regarding this murder as a way of negotiating a lighter sentence on the other hit."

"Is that how it works?" Carol said. She sounded incredulous.

"It happens all the time," I said. I'd gleaned that useful info-bite from the biker book, too, although I'd embellished it slightly.

"Okay, girls, let's put aside the idea of a hit-man. What other methods are there?"

"I recently read a story about a woman who murdered her husband by getting him to overdose on a prescription drug," I said. "You could concoct a variation on that."

I couldn't help but notice that both Carol and Larry simultaneously raised eyebrows. "Go on," Larry said.

"Well, the guy had a heart problem and was on blood thinners."

"Hmm" Carol looked thoughtful. "I see."

Clever girl, she'd worked it out ahead of Larry. "Clue me in." He smiled. "No pun intended."

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked.

"I meant, how would she get him to take extra pills?"

Carol was still ahead of him. "I believe they're tasteless."

"That's right."

Carol turned to Larry. "So it's got to be something your victim is taking anyway and the overdose has to be explainable. She might get drunk, one evening, and accidentally take too many pills."

More jotting of notes by Larry. "I'll go with that."

"I assume you've exhausted the other staple means of killing someone," I said. "Well, two actually. Number one: a boating accident at the cottage." Larry and Michelle owned a cottage on Lake Simcoe. I knew Michelle was a good swimmer and wondered if Larry's victim was, too.

"And the other one?" Larry said.

"Number two, she's driving along a lonely road and her car gets forced into a tree by the husband in a stolen truck."

"How would I steal a truck?"

Oops, Freudian slip, Larry? But I didn't correct him.

Carol rushed to his aid. "You can probably find out on the Internet," she said. She finished off the rest of her drink. "I have to go now."

Carol often made a point of leaving our meetings half an hour early, usually on the pretext of having to drop in on her widowed mother who lived a couple of blocks away. In my suspicious mind, I assumed it was a deliberate attempt to throw off any suggestion that she and Larry were going back to her place after the meeting. I had good reason to think these evil thoughts because, on some occasions, Larry would follow shortly after her. His favorite excuse was: "I've left some unfinished business at work and I have to pick it up on the way home." It was plausible, provided he didn't overuse it.

"See you at work, tomorrow," Larry said. He made no attempt to get up or kiss her goodbye. Also part of the charade.

Because he hadn't followed her this particular evening, I concluded that satisfying each other's sexual needs wasn't on the agenda. We continued for a while, returning to the prescription drugs scenario.

He showed some interest in most of my suggestions. Was it feigned? I thought my last one was good: "Look at the side effects on the packet. You may get some ideas there."

He wrote that down, too.

While he was busily scribbling notes, I made a theatrical gesture of bringing my arm up to consult my watch. "Oh, is that the time?" I pulled my cell phone from my purse and dialed. It was answered immediately. "I'm just leaving," I said.

"Right, I'm ready to go," the voice at the other end replied.

I hung up. "Babysitter," I said. "Must go, but if you walk me home, we can finish the conversation on the way. Where are you parked?" As if I didn't know.

"On your street."

We wandered off towards my apartment. "Don't forget that when the wife is murdered, the police automatically suspect the husband. You're going to have to devise a good reason why it can't be him."

"I know, but thanks for mentioning it."

I managed to walk slowly enough to ensure the lights were changing against us just as we reached the corner of my street. We stopped and waited to cross to the far side.

"Where did I park my car?" Larry said, looking up and down the street, and scratching his head. "I was sure I left it close to the intersection on the other side of the road."

"We can cross now," I whispered. I looked behind me, no one around. I gave him a hard shove in the back.

* * * *

The police came to my apartment the following morning, Detectives Appleton and Tremblay. I'd barely had time to get my daughter off to school and phone my boss. "I witnessed a traffic accident last night," I told him. "I'll be late in."

The two detectives parked themselves on my living room sofa. I sat opposite them on the recliner, but leant forward to give the impression my attention was focused on them.

Detective Appleton, held a notepad and pen. The other one took the lead in the questioning. "Take us through the events leading up to the accident," he said.

"We'd been at the pub for our regular critiquing meeting."

"What's that?"

I had given a uniformed constable a statement the previous night. The officer had written it all down and made me sign it. I assumed these two had read my statement and were checking for consistency. I repeated my explanation of what a critiquing group did.

"I understand; carry on."

"So we left the meeting, and Larry was walking me home. Just before we left the pub, he phoned his wife to come and pick him up."

"Why didn't she come to the pub?"

"To save time. I had to leave because I'd promised my babysitter I'd be home by ten. She's only fourteen. Larry figured his wife could get there by the time we reached my apartment."

"How did he get to the pub?"

"His wife dropped him off, I guess."

"Your friend Carol thought he'd taken his own car."

"He did sometimes. Perhaps Michelle had a problem with hers. She'd been complaining that it wouldn't start very easily."

Detective Appleton wrote this down. I knew they'd be talking to Michelle to corroborate my story. Maybe they'd seen the grieving widow already. I hoped I'd been suitably vague.

"Didn't he see her coming?"

"No, and neither did I. We were looking the other way, but then he suddenly crossed the street."

"After she hit him, what then?"

"He sort of bounced forward and then the car was still moving and it drove over him. I screamed; it was horrible." I had avoided saying, "She drove over him." Neat touch, I thought, and so too, was getting out of my chair to fetch a box of tissues.

“Wouldn’t she have seen you both?”

I blew hard into the tissue, testing its advertised strength. “We were half hidden behind a hydro pole. Michelle expected us to be outside my apartment. That’s three hundred metres further up the street. She may have been looking into the distance for us.” Don’t get carried away, I thought. Let them do the detective work.

Detective Tremblay grunted. I wondered if he thought the story made sense. “Was there any reason why his wife would want to kill him?”

So he’s finally got there. Or was he just asking the question to see what my reaction would be? “Not that I know of. And I’ve been friends with Larry and Michelle quite a long time.”

“What was his relationship with Carol DesJardins?”

“She worked with him and they’re both in the same writers’ club as me.”

“Yes, you mentioned that.”

Michelle had assured me that she’d told no one of her husband’s transgressions. No one but me, that is. The police would hit a brick wall on that one; we were sure of it.

Detective Tremblay let it go. “Why did Larry use your cell phone to call his wife? He was carrying one of his own.”

Ah, he’d looked at the phone logs. Did he think I was unprepared for the sneaky question? “Larry said the battery was dead in his phone.”

Michelle had put a dud one in before Larry had left home. She’d also taken a bus to my place and used her spare key to depart with Larry’s car. The same car she’d used to kill him.

* * * *

The police must have checked Larry’s cell phone for a dead battery and Michelle’s car for a malfunction. They grilled her for a couple of hours, but she stuck to the story. After that they didn’t bother us again. Larry had not seen the oncoming car, the news release said. An unfortunate accident. And tragic that he’d be killed by his own wife. A reasonable conclusion, I thought.

That pretty well nixed our critiquing group. I wondered if I could use the experience in my novel. No, not believable, I argued. Nor in good taste, and might cause me to be drummed out of the writers’ club.

At the funeral, a tearful Carol blamed herself. “I shouldn’t have left so early. I could have given you both a ride back to Larry’s car.”

I didn’t bother to explain to her that the car wasn’t where Larry had left it. That would have given the game away.

Later, my daughter and I vacated our rented apartment and moved in with Michelle. Larry had died unaware that his wife also had a lover.

Thicker Than Water

There it was: a first for Henry. My husband had been mentioned in Ottawa's local newspaper. Unfortunately, his name appeared on the obituaries page.

Henry had been a keen sportsman and therefore fitter than most men his age. So if a fortuneteller had said, three months ago, that I'd now be a widow, I wouldn't have believed it.

And that is where I should start the story, three short months earlier, at the beginning of June.

* * * *

"The trouble with men is..."

Gordon piped in. "Excuse me! Is that all men?"

The eight of us sat around two tables pushed together in the Mulberry Bush pub, the regular meeting place for our monthly office reunion. We were all retirees from the federal government. Although none of us had reached sixty, we had opted to take the department's generous early retirement package instead of grinding away for a few more years of office politics and BS. Gordon was the youngest of our group – only fifty-one. The remaining seven comprised four women and three men. I wondered why Gordon had taken the golden handshake so early. He'd worked only twenty-five years for the government, and even with the extra incentive it would be hardly enough on which to travel the world, which was my personal fantasy.

I tried again. "The trouble with *some* men is that they like pursuits that exclude women."

"Mine doesn't," Maggie said. She knew that I was talking about my husband because it was a constant refrain of mine. "We golf together."

"My wife and I did, too," Gordon said.

Better get off this topic I thought. Gordon's wife had died the previous summer. Her death made him an eligible bachelor again. Well, that was my opinion; I saw him as too young and too good looking to be classified a widower.

Some of us had assumed Gordon's wife's death was the reason he'd got out of the rat race as early as possible. He had mentioned many times that he thought the stress on her at work was the main cause of her breast cancer. "I meant pursuits like, ice-fishing," I said, congratulating myself on rescuing Maggie from her faux pas. "How many women would want to spend the day with their feet on a block of ice?"

Maggie chuckled. "There were times during menopause when I might have entertained the idea. But talking of golf, why don't we organize a tournament?"

I cringed. She seemed to be insensitive to the possibility that the subject might remind Gordon of happier times. But the topic didn't appear to bother him, and so we spent the rest of the evening debating the logistics of a day's outing on the links. Half of our group committed their spouses; the others had to pair off. Gordon drew me as his partner for the day.

"You have your own clubs?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you're sure your husband doesn't want to come along?"

"Golf's not on his list of sporting activities," I said. I could have added, "Because I play it."

"What does he do?"

"He's retired, too."

"No, I meant as a hobby."

"Oh, fishing, mountain biking, poker."

Gordon was too polite to ask why I didn't participate in any of those activities. I would have told him. To me, fishing was all worms and waiting; I couldn't keep up with my husband on a bike, and he wouldn't slow down; and poker, well, it was beyond the pale. Do women even play it?

* * * *

"You remembered I'm playing golf all day with the my office friends," I said, intonating it as a statement rather than a question. We were having breakfast, and Henry hadn't noticed that I was in my golfing attire.

"Yeah, that's great because I want to put in some extra miles on the bike. Big race on Sunday," he said.

Henry was no casual mountain biker; he raced competitively in the fifty-to-sixty age category. On alternate Tuesday evenings, he'd be up at Camp Fortune participating in their summer series of events. The coming Sunday's race, however, was an Ontario-level event. For Henry it was the big time. I had to admit he was quite good at the sport. I went to watch him once; he finished in about tenth place out of fifty or so riders. But he was never going to make the Olympic team, even if they had one for old farts.

Good, he had the distraction of training for The Big Race, so that meant we were both happy. I switched topics before he could ask: "Who are you playing a round with?" It was the kind of corny joke I knew he'd crack, and I was pretty sure I'd turn scarlet if he did so.

I decided to quickly change the subject. "I had my blood work back." He wasn't likely to be very interested in the results of my annual check-up, and it was a convenient diversion from golf-with-Gordon. Why did I feel so guilty about it?

"Oh, did they find anything?"

“My hematocrit is low, that’s all,” I said.

“What’s the doctor prescribed for it?”

Huh? I had expected his eyes to glaze over if I went any deeper into the details of the checkup, not have him ask sensible questions about it. I recovered from the shock. “I can’t remember. It was a long name, like Erythro-something, I think.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What time will you be back from the golf?”

“Late. We’re having dinner afterwards at the club. Can you get yourself a take-out?”

“Sure.”

* * * *

There were twelve of us for the day of golfing, although it looked like eleven, because Gordon had not arrived. On the assumption that my partner was merely late, Maggie, our organizer for the day, shifted our foursome into the last position. The juggling worked; Gordon did show up, tires squealing as he turned into the parking lot just as the second foursome was teeing off. I didn’t think it was him at first because he wasn’t driving his five-year-old Honda Accord.

Gordon parked and jogged over. “Phew, sorry,” he said, flushed.

“What’s with the new car?” I asked.

“It’s not mine. Just test driving it.”

“But it’s going to be parked here all day,” I said.

“The dealer is right behind me in my car. He’s taking this one back to the showroom. This is as far as he’d let me go in it. Here he comes.”

Sure enough, Gordon’s car drove up, too. The car salesman must have been sure of a sale, for he retrieved Gordon’s clubs and cart from the trunk of the Honda and brought them over.

Maggie’s husband, Ted, made up our foursome. “We should be getting going,” he said.

We strolled towards the first tee. Gordon swapped keys with the salesman, grabbed the handle of his cart, and caught up with us again. We were off.

Ted and Gordon sliced into the rough on the right but Maggie and I found the fairway ahead of them, mainly because we played off the forward red tees. Maggie and I took our second shots. No Tiger Woods stuff here but at least we could see where our balls landed, both still a hundred yards from the green on this par 4 hole. The men used their number 9 scythes to extricate themselves from the long grass and we were all on the green for three.

I didn’t get a chance to have a quiet chat with Gordon until the fifth hole. Ted had put his ball into the creek while attempting to carry it. Maggie had played hers conservatively short of the same creek and went with him to help locate the submerged ball.

“Are you thinking of buying it?” I said. The black, 5-Series BMW had certainly piqued my curiosity. Perhaps he planned to purchase it from the proceeds of a life insurance policy on his wife.

“Possibly. Do you think it’s a bit extravagant?”

Not if you’re looking for a chick magnet. I could hardly say that. Instead a more politically correct: “It’ll be a head turner.”

“Got to do something with the money.” He pointed down at my feet. “There’s your ball.” I’d almost stepped on it.

Not to be diverted, I seized the opportunity. Indeed, *carpe diem* was my motto, although I was sure that, to the ancient Romans, it simply meant have a nice day. “Thanks. The insurance money?” I let the question drift off my tongue as though it somehow it was related to the lie of my golf ball.

“We hadn’t any life insurance. Or rather we’d cashed in the policies to help pay for the kids’ university tuition.”

Well what money, then? “Downsizing the house?” Christ, what a nosey bitch I am.

“Yeah, sort of. I’m thinking of getting a condo.”

Ah, that explains that. I whacked the ball another hundred and thirty yards nearer the hole, a good shot for me. I found it helped me focus if I imagined the ball was one of my husband’s pair.

After the round, we sat down to dinner in the clubhouse. I managed to seat Gordon and me at one end of the table. It meant I could more easily corral him for a semi-private conversation. Through the first course, the men, predictably, bragged about their shot-making excellence. When the testosterone-fuelled conversation had run its course, and not before, I decided to get back into inquisitorial mode with Gordon. “Where’s the condo?” I asked.

“Er... I’m looking for one in Rockcliffe.”

Not exclusive million-dollar-minimum Rockcliffe? “Wow. With that kind of money, I can see why you’d want a BMW.”

I’d made a statement that clearly demanded an answer, but wasn’t gauche enough to be terminated with a question mark. *Very clever of you, girl.*

Too clever, he didn’t answer it. “I’ve got one in mind, but I need a second opinion. Your husband wouldn’t object if you came and looked it over with me?”

“No.” My answer came out of my mouth too quickly, but I didn’t think he noticed. I covered it by saying, “The BMW or the condo?”

He laughed. He looked even more handsome with a smile spread across his face. “Both, if you’ve got time.”

“When?”

“Oh next week, say Monday?”

“Yes, that’ll be fine,” I said, also too quickly. Did Gordon wonder what kind of relationship I had with my husband? One in which I could commit to a meeting with a member of the opposite sex without first consulting my nearest and dearest?

* * * *

“I’m going to look at a condo that one of my retirement group is buying.”

Henry looked up from the newspaper. At breakfast he preferred reading the paper to having a conversation. “Okay. I’m going to the marina to make sure the boat is gassed up for our next trip.”

When he said “our next trip” he meant the one with his two fishing companions, not one with his darling wife. It would have been nice to go for a ride in the boat once in a while. A romantic cruise, that is, not one with all of his fishing gear, or, heaven forbid, his two buddies.

Gordon had asked me to meet him at the dealership. I left my car in their lot and we drove to Rockcliffe in the black BMW.

“Don’t they mind you using their expensive machinery for free car rentals?” I said, sinking back into the tan leather seat.

“It’s a continuation of the test drive. This one has different options.”

It sort of made sense, but enough of the small talk, I wanted to get onto serious matters. And since we were alone, and I was married, I figured there was really no harm in asking: “Jesus, Gordon, where are you getting the money for the BMW and the condo?” There, I said it. “Were you involved in one of those government phony-invoice scams?” It seemed like a good idea to soften a very personal question by making a joke of it.

“If I had, then the condo would be on a Caribbean island that doesn’t have an extradition treaty with Canada. No, sorry to disappoint you but it’s dot-com money. Heather and I cashed in at the peak. She wanted to keep it quiet. ‘It’s not anyone’s business,’ she used to say. But she might have wanted to keep it quiet because some of her relatives had lost their life savings on the stock market.”

I knew what he meant. This was 2001. Henry and I had held on too long when the bubble burst. “We lost money, too,” I said. I could hear my whining tone. I was still mad about it.

“But Henry has a respectable pension doesn’t he?”

Where’s that question leading? “Yes, he does.

* * * *

I considered the BMW luxurious but the condo more so. Its floor area was about the same as our house, and it came with an underground parking garage and a security gate. Inside, it would have looked better had it been furnished, but I have a good imagination. I valued it at over a mil, easily.

BMW, exclusive condo, good looking, and bags of cash: if you ignored the fact that his wife had just died, Gordon was a lucky man. I wondered if Henry would think about giving me a divorce? Steady on, girl, Gordon may be looking for someone younger, say thirty-five, with big boobs, and a voracious sexual appetite.

On the way back to the BMW dealership he said, “Want to come back for coffee?”

I giggled.

“What’s funny?”

“It’s been a long time since a man has asked me that.”

“I’ll help then. The answer begins with the letter Y.”

“Well if you insist. I’d love to.”

We picked up our respective cars and I followed him to his house at the west end of the city. It was a bigger house than ours but I estimated that selling it wouldn’t pay for half of the condo. We parked ourselves in the kitchen, all granite surfaces, oak woodwork, and stainless steel European appliances. He loaded up the coffee percolator and switched it on.

“Why do you want to move?” I said, admiring his kitchen.

“Too many memories and too much maintenance. I’d rather spend my time golfing and traveling.”

“I see.” I did see, because I wanted to do the same.

“Want the guided tour?”

I didn’t query why he’d made the offer. I guess people assume that women like to look over other people’s houses. However, the only room I’d be shown, apart from the kitchen, was the master bedroom, with the emphasis on master.

“It hasn’t seen much use lately,” he said.

“Oh, where do you sleep, then?” I said, deliberately missing the innuendo. You’re going to have to spell it out, buddy.

It was true what they said about younger men – definitely preferable. Okay, so he was only four years younger than I am but he didn’t look his age. I, on the other hand, was convinced that I showed every one of my fifty-five years. However, for all but sixteen of those years I’d been practicing the art of making the male organ large enough to be a very tight fit.

* * * *

I drove back home on autopilot, reliving the scene from a Harlequin romance novel that Gordon and I had reenacted. Gordon possessed all of the attributes that the romance publishing house demands of the “male interest” in their guide to writers. Including the one that says the guy doesn’t fall asleep after sex.

Henry wasn’t in when I returned home. I’d made a diversion via the mall to buy a few items of underwear and some food just in case it was necessary to

explain what I'd been doing all day. Henry was well used to the fact that I could spend three hours at the mall and come back with nothing. Ergo, if I actually purchased something then the expedition would have required at least twice that.

I needed a shower – not because I wanted to wash Gordon from my skin but to cover my tracks. Luckily, I could have three showers a day, and Henry wouldn't bat an eyelid. This would be my second today.

I closed the bathroom door and opened the medicine cabinet. I reached for the pills. They were supposed to boost my hematocrit level, my red blood cell count, and after the love-making with Gordon I felt sure they were really working.

I noticed that some of the pills seemed to be missing. They were fairly large, so removing just four of them was immediately obvious.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Henry was in the garage, lubricating his mountain bike for an upcoming race. I sometimes wished he'd spend a similar amount of time oiling and then riding me, but all his energies were diverted elsewhere. Half an hour later, he joined me in the kitchen where I had returned to domestic normality by starting to peel the potatoes for the evening meal.

"There are some pills missing from the medicine cabinet," I said.

He reddened. "Sorry, I didn't think you'd notice if I took a few."

"You're not anemic, too, are you?"

"No, I was hoping they'd enhance my performance."

"Sounds exciting," I said, but left out, "Ooh, twice in one day!"

"I meant for the bike race," he replied, sounding annoyed at my flippancy.

Of course, the bike race. "Couldn't you get the doctor to prescribe some?"

"I tried, but he wouldn't. My red blood count is normal – about forty-four percent."

"So what effect were the pills going to have on that?"

"Increase it to forty-eight percent, I hope."

He was nuts but I didn't say so. I returned to the potatoes and thoughts of Gordon's enhanced performance, rather than my husband's.

* * * *

Henry actually won his next bike race. I was flabbergasted, and he was over the moon. The extra red blood cells had done the trick, although they didn't seem to have any effect on the supply of blood to his penis. Not that this bothered me because I'd spent the week helping Gordon get his new abode straight, a woman's touch with the decorating. In exchange, he'd paid me in kind. I felt cherished.

The following week, I was at the doctor's. "I mislaid the pills somewhere," I told him. It was the only reasonable excuse I could think of to get a supply for

Henry. My husband did not want to slip off the podium, and there were two more races remaining before the end of the season. I must point out, however, that I wasn't being entirely unselfish; I was keen to have my husband happy and preoccupied.

"Be more careful," the doctor said, writing the prescription. "They're very expensive."

But worth every penny.

* * * *

Gordon was the first to phone. "I'm dreadfully sorry," he said.

"Thanks. Henry died doing what he liked best. Perhaps we should all pass away like that."

"Yes, I suppose so. Are you okay with the funeral arrangements? I can take charge of them if you want."

"That would be nice of you," I said. It was true, and would mean I'd have Gordon around to comfort me in my time of need.

"When should I come over to discuss things?" he asked, sounding self-conscious.

Right away. "As soon as you have the time. I could really use the company."

"I understand. I'll be there straight after lunch. Or how about lunch out? You don't want the bother of cooking. About noon?"

"Yes, that would be perfect."

Noon was two hours away. Plenty of time to get showered and dressed. I also needed to expunge, from my hard drive, an article I'd found on the Internet. I discovered it while researching the drug Henry and I had both been taking.

Erythropoietin (EPO) is a hormone that is produced naturally in the kidneys. Its function is to stimulate the production of the oxygen-carrying red blood cells. In the late eighties the drug industry had been able to synthesize it and market it as a treatment for anemia.

Ever since EPO first appeared, athletes have taken it to boost their red blood cell count and hence artificially improve their performance. The downside with this is that overuse causes thickening of the blood, which can trigger heart failure.

For both of these reasons EPO was immediately classified as a banned substance by sports'

governing bodies. Not that this had deterred athletes from using it because the other attraction of EPO was that it was undetectable.

I pushed the Microsoft Windows button to empty the trash. The article was gone and so was Henry. He hadn't needed much encouragement to keep taking the pills, not while he kept winning. I suspect the extra dose of them helped, the ones that I ground-up and mixed into his coffee. I thought it would be a tidier solution than a divorce.

I discovered, a couple of years later, that a method had been devised to detect EPO. In Henry's case no one was even looking for it. A man of his age having a heart attack while engaged in a strenuous sport was hardly front-page news.

Not to be Trifled With

I parked the car in the underground lot and struggled up the stairs to my twelfth floor apartment. I could have used the elevator, especially since I was carrying three grocery bags, but in the winter I needed the exercise. Besides, I could claim I was doing my bit for the Kyoto Accord by not wasting valuable electricity.

The phone was ringing as I entered my apartment. I dropped the bags and answered it.

“Andrew?”

“Yes, who’s this?” I asked.

“Katie.”

I didn’t recognize her voice. “Christ, why are you calling?”

I thought it was a reasonable question to ask my ex-wife. Actually, Katie was my first ex-wife. The other ex lived only a few kilometers away.

“Just wanted to wish you a happy New Year.”

“What about the other thirty New Years?”

She laughed. “Still the same old sense of humour?”

“I seem to recall that you didn’t find me very amusing when we were married.”

“I did at first, but it got tiresome after a while.”

She was right. In the end, my scintillating wit couldn’t save the marriage. “How did you manage to find me?”

“Easy. I Googled you on the Internet and found a technical paper you wrote. The bio gave me enough information to track you down.”

“I’m retired now.”

“Yes, but I assumed you wouldn’t go far. There’s only one Andrew Walsingham in the Toronto phone book. Besides if I want to find someone, I will.”

“Very clever. So, why are you calling me?”

“Just for a chat, Andrew. And I need some advice. I’m thinking of getting married again.”

“Again?”

“Yes, Peter is very nice. I live with him, actually. He has a big house near where you and I used to live. Peter is special, nothing like you or Silas.”

“I didn’t know you and Silas were divorced. What happened? Grow tired of him too?”

“We weren’t compatible,” she said, ignoring my jab. “He wanted to retire early and live off me.”

“Yes, I can imagine how pleased you’d be at that prospect.” Who doesn’t want to retire early, I thought but didn’t say so. Silas was a prick, and I didn’t want to sound as if I was on his side. “You cited incompatibility as the reason you left me when you ran off with Silas.”

“Yes. Soccer versus the ballet, Beatles versus Mozart, and nights in the pub drinking with your friends versus dinner parties with mine.”

She was right. Fortunately, we’d had no offspring, so the divorce was easy. “Yeah, so incompatible I sometimes wonder why we ever got married.”

“You know why you married me,” she said.

“You were the sexiest woman on the planet, and had an amazing ability to—”

“Yes, that’s all I meant to you wasn’t it? Do you recall the advice I gave you when we split up?”

How could I not remember? She had written me a letter, which I still had. “I believe you told me to spend time looking around and find someone compatible—that word again. ‘Play the field’ were your exact words.”

“That’s right, and did you?”

“Yeah, I met lots of women, but unlike you, I waited until after we’d separated.”

“Silas was the only one, but let’s not get into that.”

I didn’t want to pursue it either. I knew she’d only start carping on about Silas being better than I was. Although, in the end, apparently not. “You still haven’t told me why you want my advice. You’re divorced and getting married again. What’s the issue?”

“It’s about my new guy, Peter. I figured you’d be the best person to answer it because you’ve been there.”

“Been where?”

“When you and I were...you know... I suspect Silas caused you to go through a period of—”

“Of what? Self-doubt? I did, for quite a long time. Christ, Katie, do you know how it feels to be replaced by a complete asshole?”

“Yes, well, I know that about him now.”

I realized that Katie had hooked me. I couldn’t be mad at her. I still had the vivid memory of the beautiful blonde bride, my first true love. And she was now agreeing with my assessment of Silas. “So tell me what advice you want me to dispense. Not that I’m the expert because I couldn’t keep you happy.”

“No, but I’m not asking for that kind of advice. I’m concerned about Silas’s mental state.”

“You mean his anger level at what you’ve done to him?”

“In a nutshell, yes. Peter and I are worried he might do something...” Her voice trailed off, leaving me to imagine what it was that Silas might do.

“Look, it’s one thing to be mad at you for getting rid of him, but are you saying he blames Peter enough to want to harm him?”

“Possibly. What I wanted to know is: how close did you come?”

“How close did I come to what?”

“To killing him.”

Kill Silas? I definitely felt like it at the time. I even dreamed up a hit-and-run, but not seriously. “It was different for me; I was younger. I soon found plenty of female company, and in the end was pleased he’d cuckolded me. It got me out of the lousy relationship with you.”

Katie ignored my snide remark. Something she would never have done if she hadn’t wanted something from me.

“But we’re older now, Andrew. It’s not that easy for him to find a woman at his age.”

“Hey! He’s the same age as me.”

“Yeah, but you’ve probably kept in shape. Silas is over the hill. You’d never recognize him: fat, bald, and to top it off he hasn’t been able to find a job.”

“I thought you said he was retired.”

“He was, but when I no longer supported him he had to start working again. His pension isn’t very big.”

“Is he coming after you for money?”

“No, we settled the finances a year ago. He received half of the proceeds from the house sale, but we had a mortgage so he wasn’t left with enough for even a decent deposit on another one. Not that he can afford the monthly payments on a mortgage now.”

I couldn’t hear any joy in her voice at Silas’s demise. I figured she was concerned that he had nothing to lose by harming her. And it would not be in her nature to consider subsidizing her former husband. “Why don’t you go to the police?”

“They’d think I was nuts.”

“Tell them he’s got a gun.”

“Oh, you remembered that did you? When I knew I wanted to divorce him, I used to precipitate arguments that turned into full-blooded shouting matches. Then I told him I was scared of what he’d do to me, so I’d chucked the gun off a bridge into the river.”

“Had you?”

“No. I wrapped it in plastic and buried it in the garden, the ammunition, too. I wanted to keep it just in case.”

“Hang on a moment, Katie. I’ve just got in from the shops with some groceries. I need to put some of it in the fridge. Can I call you back?”

It was an excuse. I needed some time to think.

“No, it’s eleven-thirty here. I’m in a phone-box outside the pub. I’ll call tomorrow. Is this a good time for you?”

I told her it was.

* * * *

I harbored mixed emotions for dear Katie. She wasn’t the kind of woman one could forget, but had she retained the title of Most Devious Female? The woman who had tortured me for a year by parading her perfect boyfriend Silas in front of me, while reminding me of my own shortcomings? Even so, thirty years had elapsed; why call me now?

I hadn’t forgotten Silas either, nor his penchant for guns. We’d been friends once. But I realized, too late, that Katie had engineered this friendship with Silas and his first wife, Susan, as a means of seeing him on a regular basis. “Take Andrew down to the range,” Katie had suggested once, when the four of us were in the pub one evening. It seemed harmless enough, but while we were there, Katie invited Susan round for tea and scones, and a chat. Susan later told me that Katie said Silas had made a pass at her. More like it was the other way around, but Susan swallowed it—the start of the cancer that destroyed their relationship and helped push Silas into my wife’s arms. Not that he needed much pushing; Katie made his wife look positively dowdy.

* * * *

“I’m phoning from outside the pub again,” Katie said.

She had called the following evening at roughly the same time, but why a payphone? I knew this couldn’t be a coincidence. “Isn’t your phone working?” I asked.

She ignored my question. “Listen. You remember that time Silas took you target shooting?”

“Yes.”

“Do you also remember how you came home and told me you were a better shot than him?”

“Yes.” *Where was this leading?*

“Were you boasting or was it true?”

“It was true. I had a much smaller spread, and closer to the centre. I showed you the target, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but frankly I wasn’t interested.”

“What did Silas say about our relative shooting abilities?”

“I didn’t ask him. It wasn’t important at the time.”

No, she was more concerned with the caliber of his real phallus. “So why is it important now?”

“I want you to kill him.”

“What!”

“Don’t answer straightaway; think it over. Oh, my phone card is running out. Must go now.”

“The answer’s no,” I said, but the line had already gone dead—convenient.

* * * *

Katie was smart, probably more so than me. But I figured that if I was clever enough to once earn a six-figure salary, I should be able to work out what her agenda was.

I made myself a cheese and lettuce sandwich, turned off CNN, and sat at the table with a blank sheet of paper in front of me. I ate the sandwich before putting pen to paper. I then wrote:

1. Katie must be serious. She’s phoning me from payphones with a calling card she probably paid for in cash. Moreover, I can’t call her, since I don’t know the surname of her new guy. That means there’ll be no calls to or from Canada showing up in the phone company logs.
2. She knows I hate Silas’s guts.
3. She’s probably not lying when she says she’s worried about the welfare of her new partner, Peter. Or is that just the excuse for some other more compelling reason?
4. She now knows that I’m divorced a second time, and I wouldn’t have put it past her to have tried to reach me at work and discovered that I’d got laid off. In other words, she knows that, like Silas, I don’t have much to lose.
5. She has Silas’s gun.
6. Her new guy, Peter, is in on the scheme and will doubtless provide her with an alibi.
7. After a lapse of thirty years, no one would suspect me of killing Silas. Or would they?

I wrote down the numeral eight, but didn’t transfer the corresponding thought to paper. Anyway, it was sort of redundant: that Katie hadn’t settled with Silas financially, and he was coming after her for a chunk of cash.

I fed the sheet of paper into my shredder and in doing so felt like part of the conspiracy already. Something nagged at me, though. What was it?

* * * *

Waiting for Katie's call, I wondered what she looked like after all this time. Was she still the same foxy, slender blonde? I mused that, as a condition of doing her bidding, I should ask for one last night in the sack. But knowing Katie, in the unlikely event that she granted the wish, she'd probably give me a failing grade. She wasn't the kind of woman with whom one trifled.

The phone rang.

"Andrew, have you thought about it?"

"Yes, when do you want me over there?" I found it easy to acquiesce. I would be getting to see my former wife again, and I could pull out at any time. I'd already alerted my brother in Leeds, telling him that I wanted to visit him for a short break from Canada's brutal winter. He didn't query it. He'd been over for Christmas once and frozen his balls off.

"Oh, great." Katie sounded surprised but went on to tell me how "we" were going to do it.

On the face of it, the plan seemed foolproof.

"One other thing, Katie, I'm a bit short of cash, so I'll need money for the expenses?"

"Sure. I was going to offer you five thousand pounds as an inducement. You can take the expenses out of that."

* * * *

A week later, I caught the Air Canada evening flight to Heathrow. I imagined I was a CIA agent dispatched to perform a hit on someone the government wanted out of the way. Did they still call it "wet work?" In the departure lounge I studied the other passengers, wondering how many of them were on similar assignments.

In London, the following morning, I rented a car and headed south. Odd how easy it was for me to jump into a car with the steering wheel on the right hand side and then drive on the wrong side of the road—a bilingualism of sorts. This random thought helped distract my brain from the butterflies in my stomach.

The Hampshire countryside hadn't changed much: still as green as the emerald isle, even in winter. I navigated by autopilot on roads familiar to me thirty years earlier, but indelibly stored like an inbuilt GPS.

Katie had given me her address in a village just outside Wickham, halfway between Portsmouth and Southampton. She'd also given me Silas's address in nearby Havant. "He lives alone," she told me.

I first drove to Silas's rented townhouse.

The plan called for me to carry the gun in a large sports bag. "It doesn't matter if anyone sees you go in," Katie said. "You'll be long gone. But don't park your car nearby."

Duh!

I cruised by Silas's house and noted that he drove a rusting ten-year-old Vauxhall. Next stop, a restaurant, I was hungry. I waited until nine at night then drove past Silas's house once more. His car was still there and the living room light was on.

It took me twenty minutes to reach Katie and Peter's place, a classy, converted cottage on the outskirts of Wickham, a quarter of a mile from the nearest house. I could see why Katie had fallen for Peter. She'd always been nagging me to buy a place like this, mainly because she was a total snob and liked the idea of being a "country" lady. We'd viewed a similar one in the days when we were still in love with each other. I had complained the upkeep would be too much work.

Katie opened the front door and looked me over but didn't proffer a cheek. "Ah, I was right; you have kept in shape."

It would have been unkind of me to say that she hadn't. She had put on weight round the middle, but her complexion hadn't changed, and she still had the dirty-girl look; that had enticed me thirty-plus years earlier.

"You're late," she said, letting me into the hall.

"The plane was delayed."

She didn't comment on the implausibility of the excuse. The plane would have needed to have been diverted via Athens for me to be that late.

The bag containing the gun sat in the hallway. She stood blocking the way to the rest of the house. I wasn't going to be offered tea and biscuits, it seemed. "We've been invited to a party at seven, tomorrow, so you can do it any time between seven and eleven. Remember, it has to look like a suicide."

"Yeah, for my own self preservation, if nothing else."

Katie gave me a look that said she didn't quite understand my remark.

"Good. It's important."

"And if he's not in?" I asked.

"We'll be at the pub with someone else the following evening, at the same time. But don't worry; he'll be in. He doesn't have much money, and he doesn't have a woman."

"Do you have the cash you promised me?"

Katie turned around, cupped her hand, and called Peter.

He arrived carrying an envelope. He gave it to me. It wasn't sealed. I looked inside, removed the cash, counted it, and stuffed the fifty £100 notes into my pocket.

"I need to check the gun," I said. "And the ammunition. It's been stored for a long time. It might not work."

Katie turned bright red. "Good God, Andrew, you can't try it out here!"

"Well, where do you suggest?"

Peter came to her rescue. “There’s a bag of sand in the garage; you can shoot it into that. No one will hear you.”

Katie looked at me as though trying to read my mind. She turned to Peter. “Make sure you retrieve the bullets and dispose of them.”

“Yes, dear, and the cartridge cases,” Peter said. He picked up the sports bag and led the way into the garage. Katie and I followed him.

I removed the rifle from the bag, unwrapped it, then tore open the box of two-two-three caliber bullets. They seemed to be in perfect condition. I fed four of them into the gun’s internal magazine and pushed the bolt forward to feed the first one into the chamber.

“Why do you need four?” Katie asked.

“Just to be sure,” I said. I aimed at the sandbag. Katie put her hands over her ears. I let off the first round. The sound of the shot echoed around the garage.

“Seems to be okay,” Peter said.

I loaded the second cartridge.

“One’s enough,” Katie said.

I turned around and shot her in the head. I already had the third bullet in the chamber by the time Peter could react. I shot him, too.

After making sure Katie and Peter were both dead, I wiped the rifle clean using some old rags that were lying around. I dropped the gun beside Katie, the rags, too. Now my clothes, they’d have residue on them. I retrieved clean clothes from the trunk of my car, where I’d placed them on top of my suitcase. The contaminated clothes went into a garbage bag I found in the kitchen. I planned to dump the bag in a trash can in a service area on the M-1 motorway. No one would look for evidence two hundred miles away.

Before leaving, I called Silas’s number. Not that I wanted to speak to Katie’s ex, but I figured the police would check the phone records and notice the call. Silas answered—a bonus. I mimicked Peter’s voice as best I could. “Katie wants you to come over,” I said and hung up.

* * * *

Before leaving Canada, I had worked out the other part of Katie’s plan. She knew she’d be number one on the list of police suspects, with perhaps Peter a close second. Attention would have switched to me when she told the cops that I’d once threatened to kill Silas. Katie and Peter would have had alibis, and I wouldn’t. I had been set up.

Back in Canada and scanning the BBC News on the Internet a year later, I discovered that Silas had been found guilty of the double murder. The police found his prints on Katie’s doorbell and they had possession of a gun registered in his name. On Katie’s computer they found threatening emails asking for money.

The circumstantial evidence convicted him, the BBC report said.

Fifth Target

“We knew we were next,” Superintendent Pratt said.

“You knew? What do you mean by that?” the minister asked.

“USA, Australia, Spain, and last summer the London Underground attacks in the UK. Al Qaeda has targeted the so-called five crusader states they claim have occupied their lands.”

“So why weren’t we better prepared?”

Martin Pratt, the RCMP’s antiterrorism head in the capital, sat in Minister Gordon Bennett’s guest chair. To Pratt it felt like he was sitting in an electric chair, with the minister poised to throw the switch if he didn’t like the answers to his questions.

“Evidence so far, sir, points to a home grown terrorist who wasn’t...”

“On your radar screen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Surely this man...”

The minister looked down at his notes, but Pratt beat him to it. “Achmed Khalil.”

“Surely he made contact with someone who *was* known to you?”

Superintendent Pratt had prepared himself for the obvious question. “We’re rounding up the known sympathizers right now. And we’re also looking at Khalil’s friends and family to see if this bus bombing was part of a wider plot that perhaps didn’t succeed.”

“That was going to be my next question,” Bennett said. He’d been Minister of Public Safety for only six months, having moved across from the opposition benches when the Conservatives narrowly won themselves a majority in 2006. Originally elected as a Reform Party MP in ninety-seven, he’d been promoted in 2004 to the position of opposition critic for Trade and Industry. After the election, the PM gave him the Public Safety cabinet post.

“So far, we have found no evidence that he was not acting alone,” Pratt said.

“I take it your use of the double negative means you are not absolutely certain this was an isolated incident by one crazy person?”

“Correct, sir. We do know that Khalil boarded the bus at the Park-and-Ride, and that he was carrying a backpack and a plastic shopping bag. We have also tracked down two witnesses who said he was given the shopping bag, just before he boarded the bus.”

“Do you have any leads on this person?” Bennett asked.

“No, but the two witnesses have given us similar descriptions. That in itself is unusual. Witnesses are notoriously unreliable when it comes to describing a person they’ve seen only briefly.”

“I suppose there were no security cameras at the Park-and-Ride?”

“Yes and no, they’ve just been installed but they don’t cover the whole parking lot, only the passenger shelters. However, using the description of the woman...”

“Woman?”

“Yes.” Superintendent Pratt opened a file folder and extracted a photograph. It showed a woman wearing dark glasses and a hijab. The headscarf didn’t quite hide the woman’s black hair. She also wore a neck-warmer that had been pulled up over her nose to protect herself from February’s biting winds. “Using the witness descriptions, we found her on the surveillance recordings.”

Bennett studied the photograph. “Not very helpful. She might as well have been wearing a burqa.”

“Yes. So we’re looking for a Muslim woman, age unknown, slim with black hair, about five-feet-eight.”

“Shouldn’t be difficult.”

“We’ve identified a few women but they were elsewhere at that time of the day.”

The minister might have asked the policeman many more questions but the purpose of the meeting had been established: Superintendent Pratt, don’t screw up; find the perpetrators, and quickly.

* * * *

Pratt returned to his office in the RCMP HQ building on the Vanier Parkway. He immediately summoned Inspector Lapierre. Lapierre headed the field investigation into the bombing. His résumé contained a number of successful terrorist investigations, including one that alerted the FBI to a cell based in Boston.

Lapierre stood to attention, and Pratt did not invite him to sit down.

“The minister is up-to-speed but isn’t likely to remain off our backs for long,” Pratt said.

“No, sir. We’re using everyone.”

Pratt pointed a finger at Lapierre. “And don’t forget that the Ottawa police have given us unlimited access to their resources.”

“Unlimited?”

“Yeah, this is political. The commissioner has told me to handle the media briefings, so I want updates three times a day and if anything breaks, feel free to interrupt me even if I’m having a crap.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, and by the way, Scotland Yard is sending over the guy who played a key role in the investigation into their terrorist attack last July.”

“What am I going to do with him?”

“Apparently he’s an expert on scenario synthesis and video surveillance analysis. And talking of scenarios, what have you come up with so far?”

“We’re assuming it was organized by someone Al Qaeda parachuted in, and the attack executed by homegrown sleepers.”

Pratt frowned then stood up and walked over to the window. Lapierre mused that his superior might be checking out if the fall would kill him in the event that the investigation went pear-shaped. Still with his back to his subordinate, Pratt said, “Al Qaeda specialist flies in, organizes the bombing, but leaves before the bomb goes off?”

“Yes, we looked into that possibility but unfortunately, haven’t seen anyone remotely fitting that kind of profile entering or leaving the country recently. However, we’re going to search the airline records for the whole year.”

“What about the sleeper. They’ll be hard to find,” Pratt said.

Lapierre permitted himself a smile, invisible to his boss. “We’ll be profiling.”

“Understood. I’m prepared to answer the media on that one. The woman who handed Khalil the bomb: any progress there?”

“The tech boys have been studying the Park-and-Ride video footage to see what else they can glean from it. Perhaps the Sherlock Holmes that the Brits are sending over can find something.”

* * * *

Lapierre had arranged to meet Scotland Yard’s McKenzie at the airport’s arrivals level. He parked his unmarked cruiser in the pick-up lane and waited for the Brit to appear. Bloody waste of time sending him over, he thought. More political BS to show solidarity with our allies in the war against terror.

Inspector McKenzie arrived underdressed for the minus fifteen degree temperature and 25 km/hr north wind that greeted him.

He threw his bag onto the back seat and jumped in beside Lapierre.

“Christ. it’s cold here,” McKenzie said.

“I have a standard issue parka at the office. You can borrow it, but you’ll have to sign for it,” he laughed, and McKenzie wondered whether or not he was joking.

He offered the RCMP man his hand. “Jim.”

“Marcel, but everyone calls me Marc.”

“Can you give me a quick update, Marc? I know the name of the bomber, Khalil, plus you have footage of someone you believe handed him a package just before he boarded the bus. But that’s the extent of my knowledge.”

Lapierre pulled away from the curb and headed into town. “The witnesses were also caught by the surveillance camera, so we know they were pretty close to Khalil and the other person. The woman handed over the bag with the bomb and then departed. The video cameras lost track of her.”

“Has the picture of the woman been circulated?”

“Yes, but she’s bundled up against the cold and is wearing a hijab. It doesn’t entirely cover her black hair.”

They arrived at the office twenty minutes later, during which time Lapierre had added little else of value, mainly because his team didn’t have much.

* * * *

Lapierre had given McKenzie the office of a colleague on paternity leave. An hour after dropping British detective off, he knocked on the door and entered. McKenzie had already hooked up his computer and downloaded the surveillance recording. He looked up.

“Any scenarios for us, Jim?” Lapierre asked. His tone contained a harmonic of sarcasm.

“I’ve been looking at the picture of the woman who allegedly handed Khalil the bomb.”

“And?”

“Can you get me the personal details on the bus passengers?”

“Hey, this is not the old Soviet Union, we don’t keep dossiers on every citizen.”

“Someone must have spoken with their next of kin.”

“Yes, we’re doing that but how does it help?”

“Khalil used that bus regularly to go to school, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he was a student at the University of Ottawa. We’re focusing more on his contacts there rather than the passengers.”

“Yes, that’s good. Marc. I would be, too, but you’ve got me here to look for the not so obvious, lateral thinking stuff.”

Lapierre held up both hands. He knew the last thing he wanted was to be accused of not cooperating. The Brits were currently helping the RCMP with a whole slew of terrorist inquiries. “Okay, I’ll get Constable Fisher on to it. She’s with the local police.”

At eight-thirty the next morning Constable Fisher knocked on McKenzie’s door. Unlike Lapierre, she waited for an invitation to enter.

“Come in.” McKenzie stood up as she opened the door. “Ms. Fisher?”

“Just call me Fisher.”

He laughed. “Just call me Inspector. Sit down, and tell me what you’ve got for me.”

“Lots. I was able to assign one officer for every three passengers on the bus. I’m telling you this so you know it’s thorough...”

McKenzie laughed again. “I didn’t doubt it.”

“And if you need any follow up, the name of the investigator is there in the file.”

McKenzie opened the file. “What’s the significance of the two lists?”

“The first list contains only those passengers who boarded the bus at the same stop as Khalil.”

“Why do you differentiate?”

“I thought it might be significant. Co-conspirator perhaps.”

“Yes, we should start with those. I see there are six.” McKenzie picked up a pen and started to read Fisher’s file. After ten minutes he circled two of the names and handed the file back to her. “Can you take me to see these two?”

“May I ask why?”

“You may. They’re both married. It’s likely their grieving spouse is at home.”

Fisher gave him a puzzled look. “Okay.”

McKenzie stood up. “Right now! Since you know the city, you drive, and I’ll phone them on the way over to warn them we’re coming.” He went to the closet and removed the parka Lapierre had lent him. “I’ll need this.”

Fisher nodded. “Not this cold in London, Inspector?”

“No, but damper.”

* * * *

McKenzie chose Freda Simpkins first. Her late husband worked at a charitable organization downtown. She described him as a churchgoing, community minded man, and perfect father. Even without the hyperbole, McKenzie didn’t think there’d be a link to the bombing.

Before visiting Mrs. Simpkins, the two officers had decided that if any of the interviewees asked why they were being questioned they’d say they wanted to find out if their husbands had known the bomber. Freda Simpkins didn’t ask.

On the way to their next candidate’s house, Fisher asked, “Shouldn’t we be looking for the Muslim woman who handed Khalil the bomb?”

“Our woman might not be a Muslim, just pretending to be.”

“Oh, why do you say that?”

“Last July I was studying a lot of close-ups of Muslim women as well as men. In my judgment, our suspect doesn’t appear to be wearing her hijab properly.”

Fisher turned her head sharply towards McKenzie. “Oh, I see where you’re going.”

McKenzie pointed ahead. “Good, but you’d see even better with your eyes on the road.”

Mrs. Smith lived on a quiet street in the Glebe. “Here we are,” Fisher said. “Number thirty-two.”

A woman in her fifties answered the door. “Mrs. Smith?”

“Yes. You must be...”

Fisher showed her ID. “And this is my colleague.” McKenzie had told her not to introduce him to avoid any potential sensibilities that a foreigner was involved in the investigation.

“Come in, officers. Let me take your coats.”

Mrs. Smith led them through the house into the family room. The house looked to be in immaculate condition, as though Mrs. Smith had cleaned and polished it ready for a real estate agent to begin the process of selling of it. The two detectives sat down on the leather sofa, and McKenzie extracted his notebook. Mrs. Smith perched herself on edge of a matching armchair.

“My condolences,” Fisher began. “It was a terrible thing to happen...”

“Yes. It was. We were planning to...” She reached for a box of tissues.

“Take your time, Mrs. Smith.”

“We were planning to go to Australia next month. Our first holiday in quite a time. We’d been embroiled in a court case just two weeks ago and had to delay the holiday. If my husband hadn’t been required to testify, he wouldn’t have been on that bus.”

Fisher turned to McKenzie and raised an eyebrow. “Court case, Mrs. Smith?”

“My husband is... was an investment advisor. He was being sued.”

“Who was suing him?”

“A client claimed that my husband lost a lot of his money. Ridiculous really, and anyway it was thrown out on a tech...” She stopped.

On a technicality, McKenzie wondered. Did that mean her husband had really been culpable?

“Anyway, I guess it’s all academic now.”

“Did he always travel to work by bus?”

“Yes, he liked to read on the journey and hated traffic jams. The car would have been safer, wouldn’t it?”

It sounded like a rhetorical question. Mrs. Smith removed a tissue from the box and blew her nose. McKenzie turned to Fisher and nodded his head in the direction of the door.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Smith, this wasn’t a good time to call. We’ll make sure we find the people who are behind the killing of your husband.”

They left before Mrs. Smith thought to ask any awkward questions.

“Call the station and get the details of the court case,” McKenzie said, once they were back in the car. Fisher did so without questioning him. “Back to the office?” she asked.

“Yup.”

By the time they reached McKenzie’s office the information they’d requested had arrived. Smith had been sued by Arthur Noble and his wife in a joint action for two point three million dollars.

“Hmm, not chickenfeed,” McKenzie said. “We need to talk to the Nobles. But first, lunch. Jet lag and lack of brain sugar are making me light headed.”

Fisher smiled. “Not good for a cop involved in a tricky investigation.”

They found a roadhouse style restaurant close to the office. A place where one could order a giant hamburger and fries and be out of there in half an hour.

Both ordered the Maxi-Burger and coffee. McKenzie stirred a couple of teaspoons of maple syrup into it. “Caffeine and sugar,” he said. “We live on it, don’t we?”

Fisher nodded, and pulled in her stomach. “Do inspectors in England actually do the investigative work, like in the TV crime shows?”

“Yes, and even chief inspector, too, which is as far as I’m likely to go in the Met.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not political enough. Nor am I a good manager.”

“A Lone Ranger?”

“Yes, and I guess that makes you my temporary Toronto.”

“Tonto.”

He laughed out loud. “Right.”

* * * *

Before going to lunch, Fisher had asked the photo lab boys to produce a picture of the female suspect but with the hijab stripped off, and in place of it told them to substitute short black hair. “Could have been a wig,” Fisher suggested, so McKenzie requested the techies produce two more with brown and blonde hair. For good measure he also asked them to replicate the three photos but showing the suspect with long hair.

An envelope containing the photos arrived soon after lunch. McKenzie looked at them then passed them to Fisher. “Let’s hope the suspect doesn’t have red hair,” she said.

McKenzie puffed out his cheeks then exhaled slowly. “Damn. So we need two more.”

Fisher phoned in the request. “They’ll be here in half an hour. Want me to make sure the Nobles are at home?”

“Best we see them separately. Where do they work?”

“The wife is a scientist working at a government research place near her home. He’s an engineer working downtown.”

“Okay, let’s go to her home and hope she arrives at least half an hour before him.”

“And in the meantime?”

“We’ll pick up the photos and then go see some of the others on the list.”

The rest of the list offered up nothing promising, and the two officers arrived at the Nobles’ house at five that evening. A short-haired blonde woman in her mid-forties answered the door. Fisher waved her ID card. “Ottawa police. Are you Mrs. Noble?”

“Yes.”

“Can we speak with you a moment?”

“What about?”

“Just routine. We’re investigating the recent terrorist bombing. One of the victims was known to you, I believe?”

Mrs. Noble turned red. “I don’t know who the victims are.”

“Can we come in? It’s rather cold.”

Mrs. Noble backed into the lobby, and the two officers entered. McKenzie closed the door but Mrs. Noble stood her ground. This seemed to be as far as they were going to get.

“The victim we’re interested in is Mr. Smith. He was your investment advisor wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And you recently sued him?”

McKenzie had been standing behind Fisher so that Mrs. Noble could not see him extract the photos from an envelope. He selected the one that had been doctored to give the suspect short blonde hair. He chose this moment to interrupt. “Do you know this woman?”

Mrs. Noble buckled at the knees, but McKenzie stepped forward and caught her. They sat her down on a sofa in the family room, and Fisher watched her while McKenzie fetched some water. He handed it to Mrs. Noble.

“Are you okay?” Fisher asked.

Mrs. Noble drank a couple of mouthfuls. “Yes.”

“I’m arresting you on suspicion of murder. You can call a lawyer or the legal-aid duty counsel on a 1-800 line. What do you want to do?”

“My husband knows nothing of this. I dreamed it up on my own. Smith ruined our lives.”

No, it’s you Mrs. Noble who’s ruined your lives, McKenzie thought.

* * * *

McKenzie took a seat in Pratt’s office. Lapierre sat behind him.

Pratt opened a file and picked up a red pen. “I have to see the commissioner in half an hour. The minister will be there, too. So shoot.”

“You know the motive?” McKenzie asked.

“Yes, I read the summary,” he said tapping the pen on the file. “Get on with it.”

“The suspect knew that Smith caught a bus into town every day from that particular Park-and-Ride. She disguised herself as a Muslim and chose another Muslim to carry the bomb onto the same bus that Smith boarded.

“Why would a stranger take the package?” Pratt asked, scribbling notes into the file.

“That was the point of asking a fellow Muslim. She guessed he would trust a woman with a package of, say, books.”

“What was Khalil supposed to do with the package?”

“She probably told him her husband left early for work and forgot his bag. ‘Are you going as far as Bay Street?’ she might have asked. She knew it was likely, as Bay Street was the first downtown stop. And if not, then nothing lost. She could afford to be patient.”

“And the bomb? Where did she get that from?”

“The instructions on how to make them are on the Internet. She’s a scientist, remember.”

* * * *

The Minister of Public Safety, the RCMP commissioner, Superintendent Pratt, and Ottawa’s Chief of Police faced the media at a hastily arranged press conference.

“I’ll hand you over to Superintendent Pratt of the RCMP,” the minister said, after offering his condolences to the victims’ families and then giving a short party-political speech on how effective his department had been. Pratt gave more details on the suspect and her motivation.

“What put you on to this, Superintendent?” a CTV reporter asked.

Pratt looked smug, as though he’d single-handedly solved the crime. “The technical analysis of the videos showed that the perpetrator wasn’t a Muslim. Once we realized that, we asked ourselves, if she’s in disguise then she may be wanting to lay the blame elsewhere.”

“How did Mrs. Noble allegedly manage to get Khalil to take the bomb?” the reporter asked.

“Khalil was a nice guy, unlikely to refuse a request from a fellow Muslim. And we believe she picked a Muslim because she assumed we’d be thrown off the scent.”

“Which you weren’t.”

“No. We keep an open mind on an investigation like this.”

“Was this a joint effort, sir?” an Ottawa Citizen journalist asked.

“I’ll take that one,” the minister said. “Yes, absolutely a joint effort. We tackled the investigation on multiple fronts simultaneously. Superintendent Pratt was in charge of the investigation and had forty officers supporting him from the RCMP and the Ottawa Police Service.”

While the minister was reveling in the reflected glory of a spectacular success, the unsung Inspector McKenzie sat in a taxi, heading for the airport. He arrived in plenty of time to catch Air Canada’s flight 888, bound for London.

Curse

I didn't even realize the curse existed until my mother died. After the funeral, my sister Linda took me aside and told me about Mum's terrible secret, which, it transpired, was the reason the curse existed.

"Joseph, Mum told me not to tell you about this until she died." Linda hesitated for a moment and raised her eyebrows. I made no comment, so she continued, whispering now. "Dad wasn't your father."

"What!"

Mum's funeral service took place in the Holy Trinity church. The grey stone structure, half a mile from our family's home, had been built in the eighties. It looked much older, blackened by one hundred and fifty years of London soot, deposited by the fine drizzle that fell for most of the dark months. The weather gods conspired to provide a wet November funeral, too. Fitting, I suppose, as one prefers them to be somber occasions.

I had attended the same church as a child, although not voluntarily. I always thought I could do something more useful at home, but our parents insisted Linda and I go off to Sunday school for an hour. I now appreciate why my parents welcomed those quiet times, on Sunday afternoons, without the two kids in the house. In adulthood, my church-going lapsed, with the exception of weddings and funerals. Dad's had been the last one I attended, two years earlier. He'd been buried in the same plot as the one Mum was now being laid to rest. A single gravestone recorded their names, birthdates, the dates they died, and that they loved each other.

After the funeral, my wife, Heather, our kids, Ben, and Richard, and I returned to Mum's house for the gathering of family and friends. Linda and Heather had organized food and drink for forty or so mourners. With everyone settled and holding plates of sandwiches and cups of tea, Linda grabbed my arm and took me upstairs to my old bedroom. That's when she dropped the bombshell.

"It's complicated, but Mum told me that I must tell you straight after her funeral."

"Okay, go ahead. But first, how long have you known?"

:"When Dad died, she mentioned it vaguely. But when she got sick six months ago she unburdened herself of the whole story."

"Unburdened is the right word," I said. "Did Dad know?"

"I assume not."

"Why didn't she tell me instead of you?"

Linda didn't answer my question. She looked uncomfortable, and I sensed she felt this was the wrong time and place. "Can we chat about it tomorrow," she said. "Come over to our house tomorrow. You're not working are you?"

"No."

"Good. George will be, but I have the day off, and the kids will be at school."

George was her husband. Like Heather and I, they had two children. I had the following day off, too. I didn't want to wait for the answers to questions like: Why the secrecy? And who-the-hell's son was I?

"Christ, Linda, you're my sister. Why couldn't you have told me?"

"I promised Mum I wouldn't. When you hear the story you'll understand."

I doubted that. "I expect the absolute truth."

"Of course." She put her arm around my waist and guided me to the top of the stairs.

* * * *

We lay in bed awake until about midnight. Heather provided me with a sounding board but she soon realized I didn't want her to inject theories of her own. She eventually dozed off, and I spent most of the night in fitful sleep, filling in the rest of the story. Or what I imagined it to be.

In the morning, Heather left for work, wishing me luck. "Are you sure I can't come with you?" she asked. I thanked her for the offer but explained that it was best I talk to Linda alone. She seemed to understand.

I fed the boys, packed them off to school, and headed over to Linda's.

Linda had put a pot of coffee and a plate of chocolate digestive biscuits on the kitchen table. She knew I couldn't resist the digestives, and the caffeine gave me a much needed boost after my sleepless night. I munched while she related the story.

"It was 1952, Aunt Betty had thrown a birthday party for Mum to cheer her up. Dad had been shipped out to Korea only days before. He'd been conscripted, and they had been hoping the war would be over before he could get through basic training. But the conflict dragged on and on, so off he went to war. At the party, Mum got blind drunk and one of Betty's male friends took advantage of the situation."

Linda seemed to be choosing her words carefully, and I wondered whether or not Mum had been raped. A horrible thought, but Linda had promised to tell the truth.

"Mum said she didn't know who the man was, but more likely didn't want to identify him. Dad had left only a few days earlier, so the timing of your birth didn't raise any eyebrows."

"What about Aunt Betty? She must have known about this."

“Apparently Mum never gave her the whole story.” Linda held up her right hand and sighed. “The one I’m trying to tell you.”

“Sorry, but you know me. I’m going to be interrupting you. So how was Mum so sure I wasn’t Dad’s child?” I asked.

She sighed again and nodded. “The Rhesus factor. Mum knew she and Dad had compatible blood types. If Dad had been your father you’d have been okay, but you weren’t. At birth you had hemolytic disease. It’s a condition where the red blood cells are deficient. You almost...”

“Died from it? Is that why I was baptized in hospital?”

“Yes, they do that so you go...”

“Yeah, I get it. Go to heaven free from all sin. How come Dad didn’t know about this?”

“Well, he was in Korea when you were born, remember. Mum wrote to him to tell him you’d had gastroenteritis. It was quite common in newborns and also potentially deadly.”

“But I survived,” I said.

Linda reached across the table and took my hand, the one with chocolate on it from the biscuits. “Yes, you did, and never forget that Mum loved Dad, and he loved you no different than if you’d been his flesh and blood.”

The way she phrased it, I wondered if Mum really hadn’t told him. “I know he did,” I replied. “And by the way, you’ve got chocolate on your hand.”

Linda laughed, and wiped her hand. Almost immediately, her face returned to the earnest look that had been there since the start of the conversation.

“There’s more,” she said.

* * * *

Back home later, I told Heather my sister’s story.

“There’s more! Christ, how much more can there be?” Heather asked.

The kids were downstairs watching a rented movie and eating pizza. They didn’t question the surprise treat nor why their parents were upstairs in the bedroom, sitting on the bed chatting.

“This next bit is, to say the least, bizarre,” I said.

“You mean the rest wasn’t?”

“Yeah it was, but wait ’til you hear what Mum next told Linda.”

* * * *

“I’d been moved to a private room for Joseph’s baptism. He lay beside me in a bassinette. Poor Joseph, what had I wreaked upon him? Why didn’t I tell the doctor? I’m sure you know the answer to that one. He’d already told me that your Dad and I had compatible blood types. I couldn’t forewarn him that Dad might not be the father, because that would mean... Well, it was a terrible disgrace in those days.

“In 1952, the immunization procedure wasn’t yet available, but even if it had been, I’d still have had to explain why I needed it. And besides, if the father did have the opposite Rhesus factor, the chances the newborn would get the hemolytic disease weren’t one hundred percent certain. The doctor said there was a one in three chance. Mind you, he might have been saying that so I wouldn’t get worried. But Joseph did get it.

“I remember looking over at my sleeping baby. At the moment of birth, the lack of red blood cells made him appear blue, but he’d had one transfusion and his colour seemed to be returning. He’d need two more before pulling out of it.

“Our vicar, was away at a church conference, so Reverend Clarke from St. Thomas’s substituted for him. Your Uncle Ted and Aunt Jane came along. They had previously said they wanted to be the godparents. You need at least one godparent for a baptism.

“The reverend held Joseph’s pale hand and sprinkled him with water. In a flash, it was over, and nurses whisked my poor fragile baby away.

“Reverend Clarke waited outside in the corridor until Ted and Jane had gone. He stood at the door, a tall, imposing figure, who bore a strong facial resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. ‘Can I have a quiet word with you?’ he said.

“‘Be quick, they’ll take me back to the general ward,’ I replied. The general ward housed twenty beds, so I knew we’d have no privacy there.

“He came in and closed the door. I expected him to sit down, but he remained standing, holding the moral high ground. ‘I looked at your son closely when I was baptizing him. The blond hair and blue eyes make him look very angelic. Almost as if he was destined to join the other angels.’

“‘Oh no, I thought, is this bloke a fanatic? But I didn’t say anything. I figured he’d be gone quicker if I just listened.

“He gave me a stern look and said, ‘But the other feature I noticed was the sign of the cross on the palm of his left hand. It is an indication that he will be protected from people who wish to do him harm.’

“He’d twigged to the fact that Joseph was not your dad’s child. I assumed he must have seen that kind of thing before. I guess in his job, he would. I lay back on the pillow and cocked my head to one side, hoping that I looked puzzled.

“‘Do you understand what I’m saying, my child?’

“‘I felt like telling him I wasn’t a child, but I nodded. ‘It’s just between the two of us,’ I said. Blimey, the two of us? Who was I kidding? The nurses and doctors must have worked it out what had happened.

“‘Tell your husband that Joseph had gastroenteritis. And if Joseph ever realizes that he almost died at birth, you must also tell him the same thing. You know why I’m saying this, don’t you?’

“I figured he wanted to ensure I fully understood. I coughed a couple of times, composing in my mind what I would say. Or rather, what he wanted me to say. ‘I think you’re telling me that if my husband ever found out and didn’t treat Joseph right, harm would come to him.’

“‘Harm to your husband, yes.’

“‘My husband would never do anything like that,’ I said. ‘He’s a good man.’

“‘Nevertheless...’ He left the sentence hanging.

“‘I just told you; I will never tell anyone.’

* * * *

“I suppose that when your father died, your mother thought she’d been freed up from her promise to Reverend Clarke,” Heather said.

“Yes, that’s what I concluded. Mum’s death came out of the blue. She was only fifty-eight. You don’t think...?” I knew I didn’t need to complete the sentence.

“Don’t go there, she said, standing up. “Let’s go downstairs and grab what’s left of the pizza.”

I remained seated on the bed. “Is that why Linda wanted to shed herself of this as quickly as possible? Did she imagine she’d become cursed, too?”

“Stop it, Joseph. You’re getting me worried about *you* now. You’re talking twilight zone stuff. Get a grip.”

My wife was right. I’d let Linda’s story possess me. Had Linda embellished it, I wondered? Had she added her own commentary or interpretation?

Heather grabbed my right hand and pulled me up off the bed. “Let me take a look it. But only because I’m curious.”

I offered her my left hand, palm-up. With her little finger barely touching my skin, she traced out the sign of the cross. Her light touch reminded me that my mother had often performed the same ritual; something I recoiled from once I reached the age of ten. “It’s still there,” I said. “My first reaction when Linda told me the story was to check the lines.”

Heather tut-tutted. “It’s just a silly superstition. We all have lots of lines on our hands. The vicar gave your mother that cock and bull story to scare her into not revealing the secret to your father.”

The kids had left us only one slice of pizza each. I shoved them into the microwave for thirty seconds to warm them up. Heather took hers and joined Ben and Richard on the sofa in the living room. I remained in the kitchen, pulled a pad of paper and pen from a drawer. I sat down, pizza in my left hand, pen in the right. Phil’s was the first name I wrote down.

* * * *

“Don’t go over to Phil’s house today, Joseph,” my mother said. “His dad is home from the hospital and he’s very sick.”

Phil, my best friend and classmate, lived across the street. He was taller and heavier than me, and at that time he'd passed through puberty and I hadn't. Consequently the gap in our sizes had grown larger. This didn't affect our friendship, but Phil's dad took great delight in teasing me about my small stature, and that I was a smartass, always coming top or second in the class. When I knocked on the door of their house he'd always call out something like, "Phil, your clever clogs little friend is here." Recently this had changed to, "Phil, the choirboy is here," a reference to my high pitched voice compared with his son's.

"Why did Phil's dad come home from hospital, then?" I asked my mother.

"Perhaps... No, I don't know, Joseph," she replied.

"Can Phil come over here?"

She gave this a few moments' thought, then phoned Phil's mother.

Phil stayed the night and left the following evening when his mum came to collect him. I learned a day later Phil's dad had died. I remember my first thought: no more of him teasing me.

* * * *

The kids' movie had ended, and Heather rejoined me in the kitchen. "Tea?"

It was a tradition in our household that this simple question could mean, "Would you like a cup of tea?" or "Please put the kettle on and make a pot of tea." Sometimes. Heather would put the kettle on, point at it, and say, "Tea." Which wasn't a question, and meant I had to make it. This time, however, she filled up the kettle and put a couple of teabags in the pot.

"What are you writing?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Looks like a lot of nothing."

"It's a list of people I've known who died prematurely."

Heather made no comment but continued to place the cups, saucers, and milk jug on the table. She came up behind me and put her chin on my shoulder, so that I could feel her breath on my ear. Usually when she did this I'd get an erection. "What happened to them?" she asked.

"Some died, some had serious accidents."

She pointed to the first person on the list, Phil's dad. "Who was Phil?"

I told her.

"Next one?"

"A bully at school. Subsequently, he lost a leg in a motorcycle accident."

She went down the list, and I rattled off the nature of what they had done to me and what happened to them. Some were bosses at work; some were colleagues who had stepped on me in their quest for promotion. There was my

ex-fiancée, who'd two-timed me, and also a couple of social contacts who'd spread lies about Heather and me.

"These last two died of cancer, didn't they?"

"Yes, the quick acting, incurable variety."

She squatted down beside me, her hands on my thigh, and looked me straight in the eye. "And you didn't make the connection?"

"No, how could I?"

"Couldn't the clergyman's curse and the death of the people on your list simply have been a coincidence? People die, you know."

Having a math degree, I knew the odds were astronomic that all those people in my circle of acquaintances would die before the age of forty-five. "Yes, I suppose so," I said.

"But just in case, remind me not to ever do anything bad to you."

It could have been a joke, but she wasn't smiling.

* * * *

My sister died of leukemia a year after Mum. She was thirty-nine.

Months later, her husband, George, showed me one of her diaries. After Linda's death, we met regularly in the local pub and talked about whatever he wanted to discuss. Often it was Linda.

George held the diary open at a page reserved for May in the year their second child had been born. "I wanted to show you this," he said.

I thought it strange that he'd share Linda's private diary with me. Until I read it.

Monday 12

Home from the hospital with baby – no name for her yet. I was relieved that the Rh inoculation worked out okay. Mum had told me she'd had a nasty experience with the Rhesus problem at Joseph's birth.

Tuesday 13

Mum came round to help me get straight. George was relieved that he could go to work and get out of the way. In a quiet moment, while the baby was sleeping and Mary was up in her bedroom playing with her dolls, Mum told me this incredible story about the birth of Joseph, and about a weird clergyman.

Just before she left, Mum told me to forget the story and made me promise never tell anyone about it. “Not George, not Dad. And after Dad and I are gone you must absolutely not tell Joseph.”

“Linda never revealed your mother’s secret to me,” George said. “Honest.”

Had George figured out there was a curse? No surely not. Linda’s diary entry did not contain any details. Or perhaps now that my only sibling and both parents were dead did he simply believe I had a right to know she’d broken her promise to Mum? I had to think quickly. “It’s not a secret any longer.”

“Oh?”

“I almost died at birth. The clergyman promised my mum I would pull through.”

“Why was it ever a secret?”

I shrugged. “I’ve no idea. Perhaps because my mum felt partly responsible for whatever it was I almost died of.”

“I was right to tell you, wasn’t I?”

I gripped his shoulder. “Of course you were. Keeping secrets can be a real curse.”

Plain Dane

“What are you doing this weekend?” Timothy asked. Timothy was Madeline’s boss, and she’d been in his department long enough to know he wasn’t interested in her answer. He simply wanted an excuse to tell her what his plans were for the weekend. His last jaunt involved spending the four-day Easter break on a friend’s yacht cruising the Mediterranean off St. Tropez. She wondered whether or not he did it to make her feel somehow inferior. She’d been used to that in high school. Plain Dane they called her. Coming top of the class and excelling in athletics seemed to give her classmates extra license to tease her. They also made her conscious of the fact that she’d never qualify for the “pretty girls” clique.

“I’m visiting family in Copenhagen,” she replied.

“Copenhagen?”

It’s the capital of Denmark, she felt like saying. “Yes, you know my parents are Danish. I have cousins, aunts, and uncles there, and I speak—“

He cut her off. “Dead language, of course.” He then proceeded to tell her about his upcoming long weekend, hunting game in Scotland. “Catching a flight to Aberdeen straight from work,” he said. “In fact, I’m off right now. Shut up shop won’t you.”

It didn’t sound like a question.

“Oh! Can I leave early, too?”

“Yes, but first make sure there’s no outstanding urgent mail.” He picked up his bag and coat, and departed. “Toodle-oo.”

She looked at her watch, two-thirty. Timothy had only just returned from lunch.

“There wasn’t anything urgent to deal with. She’d already done it while Timothy was at lunch. Shutting up shop entailed ensuring all of the files were cleared away, cabinets locked, and computers backed-up and logged off. Tasks for which her London School of Economics education was overkill. But her MBA wasn’t why Maddie secured the prestigious Foreign Office job. Her academic credentials helped, but the Civil Service selection board had been even more impressed by her fluency in four languages, not counting English and Danish.

Timothy couldn’t top that, or even get close, which, she figured, was why he took every opportunity to put her down.

* * * *

Maddie’s trip to Copenhagen wasn’t exactly thrilling for her, mainly because Mom and Dad would be with her. Or rather, she’d be with them for the half-

yearly hop across the North Sea to their homeland. They insisted on paying for her ticket. “You might meet a nice Danish man,” her mother would always say. To which Maddie would reply, “I’m British. Why would I want a Danish guy?” On this trip they’d booked her business class, while they traveled coach. “You’re more likely to meet a well-heeled man in the expensive seats up front.”

However, she didn’t actually meet any interesting men until the journey home. Standing in the shorter first class check-in queue at Copenhagen’s Kastrup airport, she turned around and spotted her parents twenty places back in their line. She wondered why they pushed her so hard to meet men. Do all parents want desperately to marry-off their daughters? She was only twenty-five, plenty of time. Or did they think she needed help because she wasn’t beautiful? What’s wrong with being slim, intelligent, and athletic? Okay so I don’t have big boobs? Are boobs and a pretty face all men care about?

“Did you have a good weekend?”

She turned around to face a man in a suit. “*Er du talende hen til mig?*” she replied, asking him in Danish if he was speaking to her.

In London she would sometimes use this technique of pretending to be a foreigner in order to play for time. She’d read, in a book called *Blink*, that the brain can make very accurate split second decisions based on very little information. So in the two or three seconds the man grappled with figuring out what language she was speaking, she made an assessment of him. Tall, with the boyish good looks of Prince Harry, she guessed he was about six years older than the Prince. He had Harry’s blue eyes and reddish fair hair, though. Wearing what looked to Maddie like an Armani suit, he’d spoken with a BBC accent. Her verdict in that brief moment: yes, worth chatting to.

“Sorry ... do... you... speak... any... English,” he said, making every word sound like a separate sentence.

She smiled. “Yes, you caught me by surprise. The weekend was okay; didn’t rain, at least.” Oh, Christ, she thought, I’ve resorted to talking about the weather.

“You speak Danish but you sound English.”

“I speak four others languages. I’m with the FCO.” She cringed as she said it. You bloody bighead, Madeline. But then why not? He’s not going confuse me with a fashion model.

“I’m in electronics,” he said. “But I won’t bore you with that. Do you live in London or are you traveling onwards from Heathrow?”

Hmm, why is he asking? “Yes, in the burbs, Redbridge.”

“Oh, not far away. I live in Islington.”

“Ticket please.” The Danish woman at the BA counter said, making no attempt to speak in her native tongue.

Maddie handed her the electronic ticket printout.

The man leaned over her shoulder and spoke to the ticket agent. “Any chance of us sitting next to each other, assuming that’s okay?”

Maddie wondered to whom he’d addressed the last part of this question and nodded for the benefit of the agent. “Can I have *your* ticket then, sir?” the agent asked.

“Hope you don’t mind,” the man said. “My name is Robert.”

“No, of course not.” *OF COURSE NOT!* “I’m Madeline.”

The agent assigned them two adjacent seats in row three, and checked their bags.

”We’ve got plenty of time for a drink first,” Robert said. “I’ll catch up with you in the BA lounge. It always takes guys longer to go through security.”

She thought about her parents languishing in the long line of people who didn’t have access to the airline’s first class watering hole. On the way out she’d stayed with them in Heathrow’s shopping-mall-come-fast-food-eatery. Her dad had wanted to buy a raffle ticket for a Ferrari on show there. Mom vetoed it, telling him he’d never win the car, and even if he did it was too low for her to get into. Maddie thought he wouldn’t mind driving the sleek red sports car alone, but didn’t say so.

Her thoughts returned to her parents in the lounge with all the other coach-class travelers. Don’t feel guilty. This is what they want me to do, for heaven’s sake.

Robert joined her at the bar in the lounge. “I hope you didn’t already pay for that,” he said, pointing to her gin and tonic.

“No, I gave them your seat number.”

“I didn’t think... Oh, that’s a joke. Sorry, I’m a bit slow and a trifle distracted being with a pretty woman.”

Pretty woman, indeed. Must not have his contacts in.

She managed to avoid telling him she still lived with her parents, concentrating on her job as project manager organizing the rescue of Brits in dire trouble in various parts of the globe.

Robert seemed to think she wouldn’t know much about computer hardware until she told him she had an MBA and had written her thesis on the topic of the dot-com bubble. He revealed that he held some patents, but brushed the achievement aside as being something anyone could do.

They called the Heathrow flight.

* * * *

On the short hop home, Maddie wondered how she was going to explain to Robert the presence of her parents at the baggage carousel. “Oh, yes, they always chaperone me and travel in coach.”

She knew she'd think of something, but hadn't so far. At that moment, the captain announced they'd be landing in ten minutes.

"Have I got time to go to the loo?" Robert asked one of the flight attendants.

"Yes, be quick."

Robert disappeared, and Maddie did, too, but not to the toilet. She dashed to the back of the plane.

She leaned over and whispered in Danish. "Mom, I've met a guy, so—"

"Understood, dear," her mother replied in English. "We'll see you later, at home."

At Heathrow, Maddie stood beside Robert waiting for their bags to appear down the chute. Her parents had positioned themselves on the other side of the carousel. Her Mom had a silly grin on her face and nodded a couple of times. Okay, Mom, I get it, you think he looks acceptable.

Outside the terminal Robert grabbed a taxi, took Maddie's bag from the baggage cart, and opened the door for her. She hopped in, not used to the regal treatment.

They headed into town. "You can drop me at any Central Line station," she said.

"I thought we might go somewhere to eat first," he said.

Maddie had to concede that it sounded like a good idea: more time with this guy. "Oh, okay." She looked at her watch: eight o'clock. "As long as I get to an Underground station by eleven. I have to work tomorrow." She wondered if he'd take her request as a hint she wouldn't accept an offer to sleep at his place.

"So do I. There's plenty of time."

Robert found them a Greek restaurant in Islington. She didn't know it at the time but the place was only a block away from his condo.

"I come here because the people know me. Plus, I've been to the Greek village where they're from."

"Oh, when?"

"I was touring Greece with a former girlfriend. We visited lots of little villages but actually stayed at a bed and breakfast place in Trythnia, a beautiful location for a holiday home but a really awkward place to reach. It's at the western end of the Peloponnese."

"And Trythnia is where the owner of this restaurant lived?" Maddie asked.

"Yes, they owned the B&B we stayed at."

"What happened to the former girlfriend?" Maddie made eye contact with him to see if he objected to the question.

Robert laughed. "That's two questions you're asking. One: what did I find wrong with her? And two: what didn't she like about me?"

Maddie started to stutter an apology, but he held up his hand. “I was kidding, Maddie. But seriously, it’s reasonable that you should expect an answer.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“I’m going to tell you anyway. First question: I thought she was overly controlling.”

Maddie frowned, but was pleased. Good, that’s not me. “In what way?” she asked.

“She wanted to redesign the interior of my condo. When I said I was quite happy with it the way it was, she went into a pout and then made little comments about it for weeks. She had this Pavlovian tendency to attach reward to my changing the color scheme. She’d say things like, ‘I might want to spend more time in your bedroom if it didn’t look so hideous.’ And then add that she was just kidding.”

“Just kidding about what? Spending more time in your bedroom?”

Robert laughed so loud that he almost choked on his souvlaki. He reached for his glass of water and drank half of it. “Yes, I should have asked her that,” he said.

“And what about the other side of the coin?”

Robert chuckled, as though he was trying to suppress his laughter and another choking fit. “The only failure of mine that seemed to annoy her was the one I already mentioned.”

From what she’d seen of him, Maddie could easily believe he didn’t have any serious faults. But then she asked herself: what does he see in me? How can I ask him without looking bloody stupid?

She needn’t have worried. Robert must have sensed what she was thinking. “The kind of girl I think I’m compatible with is slim and sporty, a good conversationalist and quick witted. But I guess those last two go together.”

Wow, what a smooth talker, but she wondered whether or not he was the type who varied his pitch to suit the situation. She decided to change the subject and they swapped information on their respective jobs. Robert supplied more details on his work designing machine tool robots but did not reveal who employed him.

Perhaps he’s worried about secrets, or his work might be related to the military, Maddie thought. She understood, because she had the problem of confidentiality in her own job. “So when Mr. X in country Y has landed in jail...” she said and continued in a similarly ambiguous manner.

“And I assume you have no current attachments, Maddie,” he said, when she’d finished her story.

Now it was her turn to reach for a glass of water, mainly in an attempt to hide her beet red face. What do I tell him? This is the watershed, she told herself. I

have to be honest with him. She couldn't stand the thought of developing a relationship with this gorgeous guy and then be let down later. Although absolute honesty wasn't a policy most of her friends and colleagues seemed to employ. You're not them. Start as you mean to go on, girl.

At that moment the waiter arrived and put the bill on the table, giving her a few more moments of thought. "There's no rush, sir. More coffee?" He then turned to Maddie. "I always tell Mr. Robert to imagine he's in the Peloponnese. As he knows, madam, we live life at a leisurely pace there, although we drink more ouzo than coffee."

Robert looked at the bill. "It's a bit warmer in the Peloponnese, as I recall, Anton."

Anton laughed. "Indeed it is."

Robert fished a credit card out of his pocket and gave it to him. "And as usual, you've under-charged me. I'll make it up on the tip."

"Thank you, sir."

When Anton had gone, Maddie had her speech clear in her mind. "There are two things I have to tell you, Robert."

"The meal was lousy and you've got a splitting headache," Robert said.

She laughed. "Not quite."

Anton returned and Robert completed the paperwork. Anton seemed ecstatic over the size of the tip, and Maddie had to wait while he regaled Robert on Greek cooking and the beauty of his native land.

A smaller tip would have got rid of him more quickly, but she chided herself for the uncharitable thought. Finally, they were alone again. Maddie lowered her voice. "I'm a virgin," she said.

"Oh, that's one more thing I like about you," he replied.

Her mind raced. What did he mean by that? Another inscription on the gold chalice on his mantelpiece: Madeline, my first Scandinavian virgin?

"What's the second thing you want to tell me?"

"I still live with my parents."

"I'm having a hard time figuring out why these two revelations are so earth-shattering," Robert said.

His reply caught Maddie with no easy comeback. It wasn't what she had expected him to say. However, his next statement came as no surprise. Looking at his watch, he said, "I have to get you to the station."

* * * *

Maddie had expected the Greek meal to be her first and last date with Robert. But over the next four weeks Robert took Maddie on a dozen more: the opera, ballet, concerts, West End shows, and expensive restaurants. "When are you

going to bring him back here for dinner?” her mother said. She’d issued the open invitation after Maddie said she wouldn’t be home for supper, one evening.

She hadn’t really told her mother much about Robert. How does one ask one’s mother for advice on how to proceed with a relationship? It’s different these days, she argued. Instead, she sought counsel in the shape of her co-worker, Janet.

In the two years Maddie had been at the FCO, Janet had become her best friend. She worked in an adjacent cubicle and had a similar academic background. However, Janet differed from Maddie in that she had no shortage of lovers, in spite of her bespectacled bookish appearance. “How do you do it?” Maddie once asked her. “All men have a weakness,” she had replied, but would not elucidate.

The pair had decided to go for a drink and something to eat on Friday evening. Robert had gone out of town and wouldn’t be back until late, and Janet confessed she wanted the night off from her current boyfriend. “Don’t make them think they can phone you up for a date when they’re at a loose end. Or if they just want sex.”

They left work at six and wandered up Whitehall to Trafalgar Square and found a pub on the Strand. The place was half-full. On Fridays, London’s office workers wanted to get home, it seemed, and the Friday night theatre crowd hadn’t arrived yet.

They went to the bar, and both ordered a pint of lager. Maddie decided on steak and kidney pie, while Janet preferred the Friday special of fish and chips. They took their drinks and a numbered token, and found a table.

“So,” Janet said, “how’s progress with Robert?”

“He’s being very sweet to me,” Maddie replied.

“Being sweet usually means he’s conservative and a gentleman.”

“Yes, that pretty well sums him up. And he’s very generous. Takes me everywhere, and I’ve yet to pay a penny. Going Dutch is a concept he’s not comfortable with.”

“Nothing wrong with that. But you said you hadn’t inspected the bed sheets at his place, yet.”

“I haven’t even been invited back for coffee.”

Janet picked up her glass but then put it down again. “That’s a bit strange. Perhaps he lives in a one-room hovel in a crappy part of town.”

“I doubt it. He’s got a good job.”

“Has he ever suggested bonking you at your parents’ house?”

Maddie smiled. “Oh, is that why my mom and dad have been going out in the evenings more frequently?”

“Okay, I take it that’s a no.”

Maddie downed almost half of her lager. She waited for a few moments as if expecting the alcohol to take effect then, after taking a deep breath, said, "I told him, well, you know...."

Maddie's virginity had come up in their conversation before. "What did he say?" Janet asked.

"Nothing much. What do men think about girls who are virgins?"

Janet laughed but then stopped abruptly. She'd spotted the server approaching with their food. She held up the token and waved it at him. There was a lull in the conversation while they began eating. After a couple of mouthfuls, Janet said, "Hmm, what *do* they think? Good question. God knows."

"I mean, is being a virgin a turn-on or a turn-off for them?" Maddie asked.

"Neither, they'll screw any girl once. But I suppose the extra incentive of being the first does give them a little added excitement. Although I'm not the right person to ask because I sort of engineered my own cherry popping."

"Oh, how?"

"Silly kid's stuff, really."

"How old were you?"

I was in the last year of high school. My friend Wendy was dating a guy six years older. He had a pal called Kevin about the same age who was girlfriend-less at the time. Wendy knew I hadn't been to bed with a guy, mainly because the boys we hung out with were such idiots, but she also knew I wanted to. Anyway, to cut a long story short Kevin and I got it together."

"And what happened after that?"

"He dumped me," Janet said.

Maddie blew out her cheeks, exhaled then went back to her steak and kidney pie. She ate a couple of forkfuls then said, "But my situation is different. Although I'd also like to be popped, as you so graphically put it, Robert seems reluctant."

Janet picked up her glass, downing the remains of the lager. "Remember I once told you all men have a weakness?"

"Yes, but you didn't explain what you meant."

Janet held up her glass. "Get me another lager, and I'll tell you."

Maddie laughed. "This better be worth it." She wandered over to the bar, returning with two more pints. She put them down on the table. "Before you start, let me tell you Robert doesn't appear to have any obvious faults."

"Yes, he does. He hasn't asked you to go to bed with him, so something's up. Or rather it isn't up."

"Very funny."

"Does he kiss you in a sexual way?"

“Yes, he does. His mouth is sooo kissable. You wouldn’t believe how perfect a cupid’s bow he has. And he always tastes like he’s just eaten a whole packet of mint chocolates.

“When you’re kissing him, can you feel his dick?” Janet asked.

“It’s difficult to miss feeling Robert’s.”

“Yes, men love rubbing it against a girl’s tummy. That’s assuming he’s taller than you.”

“He is.”

“Perhaps he likes kinky sex and he’s waiting for the right segue before mentioning it. For example, has he asked you if you have any tight leather pants?”

Maddie looked at the ceiling, as though she was trying to remember such a conversation. After few moments, she lowered her head and took a sip of lager.

“Not that I recall.”

“Is he gay?”

“Blimey, clutching at straws aren’t you. And no, he’s not!”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t, but next time I see him I’ll ask him if he wants to meet Brian at work.”

Janet laughed. Brian was the office clown and openly gay. “I give up.”

Maddie reached out and patted her hand. “Thanks, Janet, I appreciate your help. I’ll look for some signs on future dates.” Her comment sounded sarcastic.

“Don’t worry. He’ll do it when the time is right, and if he doesn’t, you wouldn’t want him anyway.”

* * * *

Maddie’s cell rang as she was undressing for bed. This she achieved by removing items of clothing and letting them fall to the floor, where she’d leave them until morning. She picked up the phone and continued to undress, now with only one hand.

“Oh, hi Robert.”

“I’ve just arrived home,” he said, sounding out of breath.

“Did you run all the way from the station?” she asked, squirming out of her panties and trampling them into the rug.

“I’m always breathless when I call you. Hadn’t you noticed?”

I’d rather you be breathless after fucking me, Maddie thought. I’m naked here. She couldn’t summon up the courage to tell him. “No, I can’t say I have noticed.”

“You said you were going out with Janet tonight. Did you have fun?”

Maddie pulled back the duvet and slipped into bed, propping a pillow against the headboard. “We chatted about you.”

“Oh, good or bad?”

“Good, of course. She’s very jealous of me.” While this wasn’t strictly true, Maddie had no doubt that Janet would find him attractive.

“Now you’re teasing me. Anyway, tomorrow night, what are you doing?”

“Er, let me consult my appointments book,” she said, making no move to exit from the comfort of her bed. “Nope, I’ve got nothing on.”

“Good,” he said, missing the innuendo. “I’m going to cook you supper. Can you make it here by tube? I’ll take you home, but I’m going to be busy in the kitchen.”

“Sure. What’s the address?”

He gave it to her then started to give her directions.

“I’ll Google a map,” she said.

* * * *

The following evening, Maddie took the train to the Angel Underground station. After winding her way through the back streets, she looked at the address she’d scribbled on a piece of paper. Ah, there’s his condo. It was less than a hundred yards away from the Greek restaurant where they’d eaten on their first date.

“Come in, Maddie. Everything’s on, so I’ll give you a quick tour.” He took her coat and hung it in the closet.

They stood facing each other. “Lead on,” she said, wondering why he was staring at her. Did she have a spot on her nose?

Without saying anything, he grabbed her, pinning her arms to her side, and gave her an open-mouth kiss. She held the kiss, not wanting to break off. Eventually, he let her go.

“That was nice,” he said.

“Me, too.”

* * * *

The design of Robert’s condo struck Maddie as rather odd. From the entrance lobby they had to pass through the dining room to reach the stairs and the kitchen. “Smells delicious,” she said. “What are we having?”

“I have a confession to make. My cooking’s not worth a bean, so I got that Greek restaurant to cater for me. Remember Anton? He left a few minutes before you arrived.”

Can’t cook, she thought. I’ll mention that to Janet. It’ll put paid to her gay theory.

He showed her the rest of the house. The living room and one of the three bedrooms were on the second floor. The other two, including the master, were on the third floor.

Robert pulled back the drapes in the master bedroom. “You can see St. Paul’s Cathedral from here,” he said.

Maddie squinted into the setting sun. “So you can. And Smithfield meat market, too.” She smiled at him to show she was teasing.

He smiled, too. She loved his smile. It was the kind of smile that people can’t fake, and one which made a girl feel special. Her dad was the only other male she knew who could do it. “Let’s go and eat,” he said.

On the way down they poked their heads into the two guest bedrooms. Like the master, they, too, had en-suite bathrooms. With what looked like recent interior and exterior renovations, and the location, Maddie estimated Robert’s condo to be worth over a million pounds.

Robert served up almost the same dishes they’d had in the Greek restaurant, a month earlier. They started with bowls of taramosalata and fava, and naturally, some pita bread. He then produced a bottle of Chardonnay that definitely wasn’t Greek. “I’ve been saving it,” he said. Maddie looked at the label. Fifty pounds, she estimated, probably cost more than the meal. “Are Souvlaki and rice okay for the main course?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s great,” she replied, but failed to put the necessary enthusiasm into her voice.

Robert seemed to have read her mind. “I’m not very good at this. It’s on account of being left-brained.”

“It’s fine, Robert. If you didn’t know already, let me tell you that a girl always warms to a guy who wines and dines her.” She had to stop herself adding, “...no matter how basic.”

“I’m sure you’re just saying that,” he said “but I’ll accept it as a compliment.”

She reached across the table and stroked his cheek. “Yes, please do, and by the way, this is a fabulous place you have here. I’m still living with my parents and trying to save up for the deposit on a mortgage.” She wondered if he’d spot the implied question. Where did his money come from?

“Living with them is the best way to raise the cash,” he said. “Keeps your expenses low.”

He missed it, she thought, and decided to give him a prod. “How much do you think I would need to qualify for a mortgage on a half decent apartment?”

“Lots. I’m not much help because I paid cash for this.”

WHAT! Okay, now you can ask him. “You inherited the money?”

“No. Do you recall those patents I mentioned?”

“Yes, but doesn’t the company you work for own them?” Oh, no. Do I sound ultra nosey, she wondered.

Robert poured more wine into her glass. She took a mouthful, more than was ladylike, and cocked her head, as if waiting for his answer.

“Yes, but I own the company. The royalties are mine, after expenses and tax of course.”

She nodded her head slowly. And when Robert appeared to have returned his attention to the meal, she took stock. The mystery of why he seemed to like her deepened, because on top of everything else, he had pots of money. Ergo, he could get any girl he wanted.

Her mind returned to Janet’s comment about some guys getting a buzz making love to a virgin. But if that were true, why didn’t he bring her here and do the deed four weeks ago? Janet had once mentioned that guys expect the average girl to hold out for one-point-five dates before having sex, although Maddie assumed this was more likely to be Janet’s average.

They finished the meal and carried their wine glasses upstairs to the living room. Robert brought the remains of the wine with him. They flopped down on a leather sofa.

Robert raised up the bottle. “Want to finish this off?”

She held out her glass. “Whoa, that’s enough. I think I’ve had three quarters of the bottle.” *But I feel great and ready for whatever else you want to serve up.*

Robert put the bottle on the coffee table. “A toast,” he said, holding up his glass. “To the beautiful woman I would like to marry.”

Maddie had no idea what he was talking about. Is this a brush-off last-supper? She held her glass in her lap and looked at him. “Who is this woman?”

Robert laughed. “Raise your glass and I’ll tell you.”

She did so, and they clinked glasses.

“Madeline is her name.”

Maddie put her glass on the table, took his, and placed it beside hers. She jumped up and plonked herself down on his lap, sitting astride him on her knees. She could feel him rising up to meet her. “Are you sure? We haven’t even slept together. What if I’m hopeless?”

“What if *I’m* hopeless?” he replied.

“You probably know you’re not. After all, you’ve had intimate partners.”

“But you don’t know what they thought of me in the sack.”

“There’s one way I can find out,” she said. “But us having sex is only part of it. What is it that makes you want to marry me?”

“You’re a nice person, Maddie. Do you think in four weeks I can’t tell how wonderful you are?”

She dropped her head onto his shoulder and started to cry then fumbled blindly for her purse, opened it, and extracted a tissue.

“Oh, and there’s one other thing I like about you,” he said.

She sniffed then blew her nose. “What’s that?”

“You don’t wear make-up, so when you cry you don’t have black mascara streaks running down your face.”

His comment made her cry even more.

* * * *

Maddie was not destined to walk down the aisle a virgin. That status had ended the night Robert proposed to her.

The following Monday, she waited until Janet arrived and went over to her cubicle. She whispered in her ear. “I lost my cherry.”

“Oh, wow, brilliant. If you don’t mind my asking, what was it like?”

Still whispering, two inches from Janet’s ear, she said, “So that’s what the G-spot is all about. I hope their equivalent is just as good.”

Janet laughed. “They think it is. You took my advice and exploited his weakness then?”

Maddie pulled away from her close proximity to Janet’s ear and spoke in a normal voice. “Not really, but I think I know what it was.”

“Oh?”

“He had a phobia for women who wanted him for his money.”

PIALOU

You can't get there from here. Never had this platitude been more true. In this case "there" was a small west African village called Gambasalu. I had to find a way to get to Gambasalu from Toronto by November 16 – one week away.

I'd worked as a project manager for an insanely intense American company that only hired workaholics. I knew all about PERT charts, drop-dead dates, and critical paths, so I told myself that organizing the trip, even in such a short time, should be a no-brainer. Now retired, I regretted that I'd not taken time off work and made the trip while my wife was still alive.

First stop: pick up the yellow fever shot from the pharmacy on the ground floor of my doctor's medical building. Luckily for me they stocked it, and I didn't have to drive across town to their main office.

"Normally I'd recommend the hepatitis and malaria inoculations, too, but..." My doctor paused. I nodded to acknowledge that he didn't need to complete the sentence. I knew that while a Yellow Fever inoculation was mandatory for entry into the country, the other two weren't.

He injected me with less than half of the contents of the vial, poured the rest down the sink, and slotted the syringe into a receptacle designed for that purpose.

I slipped the Yellow Fever certificate into my pocket and departed immediately for Ottawa and the embassy. With the visa stamp in my passport, I could now book the trip. And on November 12th, I locked up my two-bedroom condo and caught the overnight KLM flight to Antwerp.

In Antwerp, I bought Pialou's present. It was expensive but I had taken with me an international money order. A few days earlier, the vendor told me to make the money order payable in Euros. "No credit cards," he said. I got the figure almost right – those last minute currency changes are a nuisance – and paid the shortfall with cash. Next stop: the railway station to catch the train to Paris. I felt like a contestant in *The Amazing Race*.

I prefer to travel by rail than fly; but the option is rarely available or practicable. The Antwerp to Paris leg was the only part of the eleven-thousand kilometre journey that permitted me to savour the pleasure of the railways – for me, a love affair since childhood. The small indulgence would have been hard to explain to someone who wasn't a train buff, but the diversion didn't slow me down. And that was important, because this was one of the rare times in my life when it was better to arrive than, as Robert Louis Stevenson once put it, "travel hopefully."

The Mirabelle Hotel nestled behind the Gare du Nord, which meant that on alighting from the Antwerp train I could walk there. My luggage didn't present a problem; I carried only a smallish backpack. I planned the hotel's proximity to the railway station for a second reason. I would be back there in the morning to catch the airport express to Charles de Gaulle, the only one of two airports in Europe with a direct flight. Direct flight to the capital, that is, not Gambasalu.

Finding Gambasalu on a map had been a challenge. Pialou had told me in a letter that her village was forty kilometres from Soubtoua, the nearest large town. Given this piece of data, I estimated that the distance from the capital to Gambasalu via Soubtoua must be about 245 kilometres. Should be there in half a day's driving, I thought, which showed how much I knew about west Africa's roads and culture.

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My Air France flight touched down in the early evening, and, because I was now close to the equator, the sun had already disappeared for the day. In the air, approaching the capital, I'd noticed only a few lights illuminating the city. A blackout, I guessed. I'd read that electricity in Africa was not something to be taken for granted, along with many other everyday items, like clean water and food.

The smell of the tropics hit me as soon as I exited the plane and reminded me of the Caribbean. What was it: the powerful oxygenated fragrance of the vegetation or the salty sea air? Both.

In the terminal building (presumably lit by its own generator), the President greeted new arrivals. Not personally, a gigantic poster did the job for him. Perhaps it was an election year?

I patted myself on the back for bringing only carry-on baggage, as the lack of encumbrances enabled me to skip around those who had to retrieve bags from the conveyor belt. My foresight and business class seat put me in first place at the immigration desk. Just as well, for behind me a scrum formed, mostly locals elbowing bewildered tourists out of the way. The uncivilized behavior made me wonder if lineups were peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon culture.

The darkness outside the terminal building didn't hamper arriving passengers from finding taxi drivers, or vice versa. They were all over us, shouting prices like brokers on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. My taxi driver understood "Atheni," the hotel I'd booked via the Internet. I'd chosen it because the photograph, with its backdrop of palm trees and beach, made it look as though it had been transported from Waikiki Beach.

I checked in, dumped my bag in my room, washed and shaved, then headed back down to the front desk.

"I'm looking for a reliable guide with a car to take me to Soubtoua."

I thought the desk clerk might not speak English, because he looked at me blankly. Had I said Soubtoua correctly? I decided to translate into my limited verb-less French, “Soub-tou-ah, *par la voiture, avec le guide,*” and hoped my pronunciation held up.

The clerk continued to stare. I repeated the name of the town and held an imaginary steering wheel in my hands in a mime of me driving – I refrained from providing the sound track.

“I understand English,” he said. “We don’t often have requests to go there.”

“But do you know anyone who could take me?” I paused, then added, “He must be reliable and English speaking.” I stressed the language requirement because my French was barely sufficient to get around France, let alone this country.

He gave a Gallic shrug, which I took to mean that the English speaking part of my request was redundant. “I will make a phone call. Would you like to wait in the bar? I will send him over.”

“Thank you, I am very grateful.” And to prove it, I put a twenty US dollar note on the desk.

He beamed, dropped a hotel brochure onto it and slid the two items off the desk into his pocket. I turned and headed for the bar.

A man approached me in the bar an hour later. He introduced himself as Alain, no second name. He was a tall, spindly man with Hollywood good looks and a smile to match. Alain informed me that he’d spent a year as a hotel worker in London – the town of my birth. Funny how a simple common link can bond two people. I ordered some food and drink for us both and spent the next half-hour explaining what I wanted. I omitted telling him that I didn’t want to fly to the nearest airport and get a ride from there. I’d researched it, though. The closest airport to Pialou’s village was in Tokadé – still quite a trek away – and it lacked a paved runway. And besides, looking through travel literature, Tokadé sounded like this country’s equivalent of Dodge City in the Wyatt Earp days. I figured my chance of finding someone reliable and English-speaking in that town was zero.

We settled upon the price and terminated the meeting with a handshake.

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Alain arrived at seven the next morning, and we breakfasted together. I selected food that I actually recognized: croissants and a fruit cocktail. Alain ordered something I’d never heard of. “Ablo,” he said. “It’s made from corn and sugar. Take a spoonful.”

“Hmm, quite tasty.” And I wasn’t just being polite; the taste reminded me of Sugar Puffs.

Bellies suitably full, we moved to the parking lot, where he introduced me to his Land Rover. It looked like an army surplus one David Attenborough might have left behind twenty years earlier after making a BBC documentary. Alain invited me to look it over. "It's a fine machine," I said

"Made in England." He seemed proud of the fact, but I didn't consider that to be a great endorsement.

The Land Rover started first time, and we drove off, heading north out of town. Now that we were away from the tourist areas, I noticed the local authorities didn't bother to paint *défense d'uriner* signs on the walls. Toilet arrangements here were handy for men, but where did the women go?

The open road beckoned, but Alain stopped at a gas station instead. I guessed that this was the last chance to fill up for a while. The place also boasted a bar/eatery, but I couldn't imagine he was hungry already. Instead of going to the pumps, Alain pulled into a quiet part of the parking lot – a field really, but minus the grass.

He leaned back and plucked a bag off the back-seat. He pulled out an AK-47. "Insurance. Know how to use it?"

Yeah, I have one at home; doesn't everyone? I shook my head.

"It's quite simple. The magazine goes in here." He plucked one from the bag and slotted it in. "Pull this lever back to cock it, and you're ready to go. One other thing." He tapped a catch with his forefinger. "Single shot." He flicked the catch forward. "Continuous. In this position, the gun keeps firing until you release the trigger. *Comprenez?*"

He smiled the kind of smile that I interpreted as meaning I'd never need to use it. I hoped not.

He shoved the gun back in the bag. "Bring your valuables," he said.

I put my camera into a fold-up nylon bag that held my overnight gear. I carried all of my other valuables in the deep pockets of my cargo pants and in the belt around my waist.

We hopped out of the Land Rover and headed for the bar. Alain sprinted ahead of me, to avoid getting wet, for the morning downpour had just started; I'd forgotten about that meteorological feature of this part of the world.

We found a seat on the corner, and Alain sat with his back to the wall. A man approached us carrying some bottles. "*Bière ou Coke,*" he said.

I don't drink, so the decision was easy. Alain ordered a beer.

The man put the bottles on the table. He said something that, to my untrained ear, sounded like, "*Cinq cents.*"

"Five hundred," Alain said.

I had no local currency but made the calculation in my head and handed the waiter two US dollars – fifty percent more than he'd asked for. With Alain, I was getting the non-tourist price for a drink.

It had occurred to me that Alain might not like driving in the heavy rain, but I thought I needed to find a polite way of asking him why we were sitting here drinking instead of being on the road to Pialou's village. "Do you need to get gas?"

"We have to wait for the next convoy."

Convoy? Oh, yes, of course. My research had told me that out of the main urban areas the highways weren't the safest of places. But this bar didn't strike me as the safest of places either. It's an uncomfortable feeling to be the only white person in a bar populated by men who are probably unemployed or, if they did have a job, were earning less per week than I'd spend on a bottle of wine. The lighting level didn't help my state of uneasiness – the place was almost windowless.

Half an hour after entering the bar, Alain cupped his ear, stood up, and went to the door. He turned to me. "Bring the bags; it's time to go."

I reached the door as the convoy rolled by. We tagged along.

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Forty kilometres into the journey, the paved road petered out, to be replaced by one surfaced with a mix of dirt and gravel, mostly dirt. I thought it odd that in spite of the deluge earlier, the road had already dried out. An unpaved road, searing temperatures, and enough trucks to transport a whole army brigade, meant that the rest of the journey was going to be as dusty as a cattle drive.

Alain's Land Rover had no air-conditioning – I hadn't expected it to – and in the stifling heat we would broil with the windows shut. So we ate dust, but it was the small price to pay for the security that the convoy provided.

The smaller vehicles had edged their way to the front. And we did, too. But there was a certain pecking order to respect. A late model Volvo headed the line. "A government official," Alain said. The car had its windows closed.

I settled back for the now slightly less dusty ride.

"Do you do this kind of job very often?" I asked.

Alain turned, looked at me, and chuckled. "Guide? Yes, I have a good network of contacts, and tourists seem to trust me. I have the added advantage that I share your European blood."

"Oh?"

"My father was a French civil servant. He deserted my mother shortly after I was born. Posted back to Paris, my mother said."

"You've never met him?"

“No. But it wasn’t as bad as it sounds. He sent money every few months, so my mother lived in relative luxury and could send me to school. That’s where I learnt English. She insisted upon it. ‘Key to the world,’ she told me.”

Alain gave me an account of his life growing up in this country. And I reciprocated with my life story as we trundled along at the speed of the slowest truck, about forty kilometres an hour. Even at that speed, it seemed fast on the pitted, unpaved roads. Must play havoc with the suspension and tires, I thought. Then, as if to prove the point one of the tires let out a loud bang.

“Puncture,” Alain said. He pulled over.

We hopped out to examine the damage. The front right tire was indeed flat. Alain dashed to the back of the vehicle and grabbed one of the two spares. He emerged from the dust cloud and dropped it at my feet, then returned for the wheel wrench and jack.

The long line of cars and trucks continued to pass by, drivers tooting their horns and passengers waving.

“Will they wait for us?” I asked.

“No, they know we can catch up.”

I now knew how a wounded buffalo felt when it could not keep up with the herd.

“Undo the wheel nuts while I position the jack,” Alain said. I could sense the urgency in his voice. He, too, seemed to understand the notion of being separated from the herd. But he would, this was his country.

We went into action like a pit crew in a Formula One Grand Prix. It took awhile, and the convoy’s billowing dust had disappeared over the horizon by the time we threw the flat and the tools into the back of the Land Rover.

We were off again but didn’t get more than a couple of kilometres before spotting another wounded buffalo in the shape of a battered white Toyota pickup truck. It was parked in the middle of the road, blocking our path. “Bandits,” Alain shouted.

The white pickup looked familiar. “Weren’t they in the convoy?”

“Yes.”

Oh. I get it.

The two presumed bandits had raised the hood and were in the act of performing the something-is-wrong-with-my-engine charade. It involved peering at a supposedly kaput motor. They flagged us down.

Alain swerved off the road into the long grass. We bounced over the hard-packed ground, mercifully free of solid obstacles, and rejoined the road, fifty metres farther up. I looked back. One of the two men fired at us with a handgun. I knew enough about small arms to know that it wasn’t the best

weapon to use at that range. The bandits slammed the hood shut, jumped into their pickup, and gave chase.

“They have to kill us now,” Alain said. “Assume you are already dead. It’ll help.”

I’d heard the same quote from my uncle, who had been badly injured at the battle of Caen a few days after his D-Day landing on Gold Beach. My aunt always used to say, “Come on Albert, don’t exaggerate.” But my uncle said it with such passion that I knew he wasn’t making it up. Alain sounded the same.

I picked up the AK-47, slotted in the magazine, pulled back the cocking mechanism, and climbed into the back of the Land Rover. Peeking through the canvas cover at the back, I could see them through our dust cloud. They were closing fast. The man in the passenger seat leaned out of the window and aimed an assault rifle at us – Kalashnikov’s invention seemed to be the weapon of choice here. How close would he want to be before opening fire?

Evolution has programmed our brains to think quickly even in situations beyond our experience. I guess that’s how we all got here. I flicked the weapon into “continuous” and fired a burst at their windshield; twenty shots, I estimated. Christ, where’s the other magazine? But I didn’t need it. The truck veered off the road, hit a boulder and flipped over. As it did so, the guy in the passenger seat flew through the window and came to a quick stop against a boulder. The truck burst into flames and, as far as I could see the driver had not been able to extricate himself.

“They’ll have to wait for the next convoy,” Alain shouted over his shoulder. I assumed he’d said this just in case I harbored any thoughts of going back to check on them. “But I doubt they are still alive,” he added with a chuckle.

I made my way back to the front seat. Alain had not slowed down by even one kilometre per hour. He slapped me on the shoulder. “Good shooting, white man.”

Not something to be proud of. Was my life worth more than theirs? Probably not, but I rationalized the act by telling myself that I’d saved Alain’s life. After all, he wouldn’t have been at that exact place in time and space if it hadn’t been for my obsession to see Pialou. And besides, it was them or us.

* * * *

We soon caught up with the tail of the convoy, and Alain edged his way forward again, one vehicle at a time; a tricky process as there were no passing lanes. We reached Soubtoua before regaining our position.

In the middle of the town Alain peeled off from the convoy and followed the signpost to Pialou’s village. On a road far worse than the one we’d left, the final forty kilometres of the journey took two hours.

The Sun had started to turn red on the horizon when we reached our destination. Alain asked the first person we met if she knew Pialou Mbingbe. The woman did. “*Venez avec moi.*” She walked ahead of our vehicle and beckoned us to follow her.

The drama of the journey meant that I’d forgotten to be nervous about this first-time meeting with Pialou. Would she think I was crazy coming all this way? I’d been her “foster parent” since she was eight years old, “adopting” her ten years earlier through a foster children’s charity based in Toronto.

We arrived at her hut.

Pialou looked the same as she had in her photos, even to the white cotton blouse and floral skirt. “*Je suis Joseph Cosgrove.*” I did my best to give my name a French ring to it, but I suspected it came out with an Inspector-Clouseau-like pronunciation.

It didn’t matter. She recognized my name without me having to ask Alain to explain in French. She flung her arms around me.

Oh, how I wish my language skills had been better. She spoke slowly and I understood her, but my part of the dialogue had to go through Alain.

And then Pialou asked the obvious question. “*Pourquoi maintenant?*”

Why now, indeed? “I only have a few months to live,” I said. “I felt I couldn’t just desert you without an explanation.”

I removed my money-belt and gave it to her. The weight of it must have surprised her, for her arm dropped a few inches before she steadied it. She looked in one of the pockets and extracted a one ounce, 22-carat gold Krugerrand. There were twelve all told, each worth about \$750. In Antwerp I had paid \$9,500 for them. The outlay would barely make a dent in the inheritance my sons would receive, but in Pialou’s family it would be the equivalent of ten years’ salary. I knew she’d want to share it with them.

“*Pour moi?*” She started to cry.

* * * *

I returned home to live out the final three months of my life – all that the liver cancer would grant me. It allowed me to see the kids a few more times, hand over copies of my will, write this story for them, and send a final letter to Pialou.