

3. Saturday day. She reached for the marmalade, eyes puffy as croissants

Something sinister welcomed me to consciousness Saturday morning. Ted hummed-sang Woody Guthrie underneath my window ‘... *my land I’ll defend life with your life need be, My pastures of plenty must always be free.*’

I awakened groggily after a bad night. The blue sky hurt my eyes, thanks to that sleeping tablet. I had a lifetime supply of the little darlings, a bribe for the botched operation on a crushed femur that caused me to develop osteomyelitis. The bone infection required another operation in which part of the femur was removed, leaving me with one leg shorter than the other. A strange bed and new surroundings invited a sleepless night. I usually succumbed in the small hours and reached for that little bottle. My dreams with their hypnogogic and hypnopompic imagery merged into a mass of mental spaghetti. I dreaded those sensory images that accompanied the states preceding and succeeding dreams.

We had dined last night at the local pizzeria, serenaded by the odour of garlic bread, the aroma of anticipated gaiety and a stench of unstated enmity which I had found supremely uninteresting. I had departed early after a wineless meal the colour of new blood and pus — I do not care for pizza — for the sanctuary of my room and a vintage bottle. I did not drink to be convivial. I preferred to catch the guests alone or in small groups, particularly after what I had learned last night while pouring over their handwriting samples.

Now I needed to get my blood moving. I dressed and wandered over to the sheds.

‘Morning, Ted,’ I said. My shadow fell on the tractor’s raised bonnet.

Ted straightened. ‘That should do it. Fan belt.’

I gazed into the jumbled mess and tried to look intelligent. I was not with a woman or a city male, so I could not fake it.

Ted climbed into the cab and started the motor. Perfect. He switched the engine off and jumped down with the same easy swing with which his ancestors had probably dismounted their steeds. ‘Run of bad luck with the old girl lately. The tractor, I mean. Last week a rear tyre punctured. Prob’ly ran over a stake in the field without knowing it.’

‘I heard you singing. I always sleep with the window cracked. Seemed a good time to catch up.’

Everything about Ted’s big bones projected solidity. Sun-cured, slow moving and stable as a tree. Rooted in a sense of place, as they said on the late-night radio. Conservatism appeared in his handwriting, in the compression and retracing of his Ms, Ns, Rs and Hs. Once again I was reminded that he was his mother’s son and would do anything for the land. It comforted me greatly to know that such people existed.

Whereas Fitzadam exhibited a sort of restless mutability that suited the water, Ted was inflexible and stiff, with the countryman’s way of being part of the environment without dominating it.

He gazed with such longing toward the shearing shed that I felt a criminal for keeping the man from his work.

‘I will be brief. Caterina thinks she’ll be murdered at the party tonight.’

The farmer smiled, baring the family teeth he had inherited from his mother. Their uppers slanted in and down toward the lower jawbone. Ted shook his head in the universal manner of bemused husbands.

‘You obviously do not take it seriously, Ted.’

'She's a bit of a drama queen, old man.' Ted wiped his hands on a greasy rag attached to his belt. That bit of cloth epitomised Ted's conservatism. A shirt in the country was never just a shirt. Once it had fulfilled its primary use, the farm wife turned its cuffs — farm help on the bigger properties. It could then be worn for warmth, hidden underneath something more presentable, or become a bush shirt for hunting trips and hard labour before retiring into a thousand strips to tie around garden stakes or mop up machine grease. If particularly absorbent, it might be used inside to dry dishes, polish silver or dust cedar joinery.

Ted exuded a smell of machine grease, petrol and a raw woolly-lanoline. As did other local farmers, my host dressed in inverse proportion to his wealth. He wore ancient jeans, a flannel shirt with a turned collar and a sheepskin vest that had seen better days.

'But surely all threats must be heeded.'

'What threats?' Behind him and beyond the shed the dark river etched a brusque trail through the valley.

'What are you saying? That it is all in her mind?'

'I'm afraid you're wasting your time, old man,' he said, eyes drawn again to the shearing shed. Ted's habit of tucking his chin under and elongating his neck, as *hatha* yoga and *tai chi* teach, caused ripples in his neck and throat, leathery creases like the folds of a sari.

'I do have something on the boil at home,' I admitted, thinking of the Franklin manuscript. 'Bit of a deadline on something for the Royal Society.'

'Well, you're not needed here, but of course you're welcome to stay as long as you like. Pleasure having you with us,' he said with reflexive good manners.

I tried another tack in my few remaining seconds. 'Caterina told me about her plans for the garden.'

Ted grunted. If the married state planted that haunted look on the features of such a man, I was fortunate indeed.

'You realise that the police will suspect you if anything goes wrong tonight.'

'Nothing's going to happen.' Ted discounted his wife's preoccupations, apparently from long habit. I sympathised with the poor woman. 'Talk to her friend. You'll be surprised.'

He was not wrong, as it transpired. All the misgivings, the shadows and whispers, the allusions and uncertainties thrown into the mental loaf tin were preparing to emerge from the oven fully baked and lumpy, with the lumps being on my thick head.

I reviewed what I had got as I strolled back to the house. Theoretical only it may have been, but I intended to prepare for the worst. Ted's handwriting lacked the recklessness to commit an unpremeditated act. As far as I knew, only one thing could rouse Ted to murder, and even that was unlikely. Then again, people always surprise you, as Mother used to say. I needed to check something in Ted's writing, a bit of muddiness that indicated either uncontrolled sexuality or a smudge on the paper. Never overlook the obvious. Remember Edgar Allen Poe's story, 'The Purloined Letter.'

On the other hand, Ted might do anything for the right woman. Still, sex, drugs and rock-and-roll did not define the man I knew. Or thought I knew.

Doubts assailed me as I walked back to the house. I wanted to check Fitzadam's sample. Was I wasting my time with an empty intellectual exercise to mollify a neurotic farm wife? Was the lady truly in danger? Did she plan to commit suicide for the insurance money and blame it on a hated sister-in-law, or were the forces of uncontrollable jealousy slowly driving her mad?

One had to ram one's mind into these channels, much as it bolted. Perhaps I had better re-examine Anthea's writing. What was she saying, something about old friends equalling old grudges? And Bolla: was her self-indulgence a façade? Was she protecting someone unable to defend himself? What about Roddy the paleoclimatologist? So many questions. Answers awaited, if only I could ferret them

out.

Once again the disquieting sense of being followed settled over me. I turned quickly. Not a soul in sight.

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Voices pooled in the dining room as I entered Hornbeam Hall. Etiquette demanded that I dive in, despite my lack of appetite.

Caterina and Fitzadam *sotto voced* at the sideboard over a platter of scrambled eggs and onions. They shot apart when they saw me. Now there was a permutation I had not considered. Guy removed his hand from Caterina's elbow so swiftly I would have missed it had my eyes not been drawn to the oil painting of old Mr Hungerford, Ted and Anthea's grandfather, over that solid block of cedar sideboard. The artist caught the nature of that *bon vivant*, who counted afternoon tea as his favourite feed. He had never approved of his daughter-in-law, so said Clover. Maman redeemed herself with her scones.

Bolla Lester-Norman ate at one end of the large mahogany table, still in her night world, eyes puffy as croissants. She broke a triangle of toast, spread it with marmalade and reached for a slab of bacon.

I shambled to the steaming food, assailed by the combined aromas of coffee, tea, sausages, scrambled eggs and onions, bacon, toast and French pastries.

I took the top plate from a pile at one end of the sideboard, noting the use of Royal Albert English Chintz china. It was perfectly appropriate for breakfast, with its roses, forget-me-nots and violets cavorting busily on a lilac-tinted background.

'Beautiful bacon, dear,' Bolla called out mid-chew. 'Your own beast?'

Caterina nodded.

Bolla bestowed the ultimate benediction. 'The Brigadier would have approved.'

Delleen ran into the room and whispered something in her mistress's ear.

Caterina scowled. 'Excuse me, please,' she said. 'I am needed urgently in the kitchen.'

I set down the empty plate and started toward my client.

'No, Quaminus, have your breakfast,' Caterina demurred. 'I can handle this.'

'Perhaps I should accompany you, Caterina. I feel responsible.'

'Can't you hear, Frye?' Fitzadam said, brushing past me, plate piled high with sausages.

I waited to speak until he had deposited himself across from Bolla.

'Please, Quaminus,' my hostess said.

'If you insist, Caterina.'

'I do.'

'If you need me ...'

'I know where you are.'

I did not like this at all and hoped my pursed lips demonstrated my displeasure.

My gesture was wasted. Mistress and help had other things on their minds.

They hurried out.

I needed a moment to collect my thoughts, so faced the Hungerford paterfamilias hanging over the repast. What secrets was the old man harbouring? I had questions for Fitzadam. Something did not tally. I decided to speak to him with one part of my brain and listen for Caterina with the other.

I surveyed the assembled food. The scrambled eggs and onions were unappetising, their yellow-and-brown unpleasantly aggressive against the lilac-tinted English Chintz china. I selected one piece of toast and a cup of coffee. Unlike tea, I took it black, with four sugars.

'About that apartment building in Sandy Bay,' Bolla was saying as I turned away from the sideboard with my plate, cup and saucer.

Fitzadam twitched his head in my direction as he sawed through his sausages with knife and fork held high.

I started toward the other breakfasters.

'Heard you had an offer, which you refused,' Bolla continued baldly.

'We can do better,' the developer whispered. 'Trust me.' A vertical wrinkle over Fitzadam's nose fanned into his brows, shielding narrow eyes.

I sat across from the sibilant twosome. Although my appetite had deserted me, I was quite looking forward to drinking my coffee from the fine bone china. No one could convince me that its delicacy and translucence did not enhance the flavour of hot liquid.

Fitzadam glared up at me, chewing.

'A word please, Fitzadam — ' I began.

A dreadful clatter arose from the kitchen wing.

I jumped up, coffee forgotten. For the second time in two days, I hobbled-ran down the passageway, following the scent of cake and consternation. Fitzadam was so close on my heels that I smelled the sausage on his breath.

Bolla's words wafted towards us, past the portrait of Anthea's mother. 'Let them fight it out amongst themselves. I shall finish my breakfast.'

I unknotted the three strands of screeching voices as I neared the kitchen. Caterina, Manfred and Delleen. I was very worried about my client. This was completely out of character.

I burst into the kitchen, followed by Fitzadam, as Delleen waved her arms like a demented windmill and cried, ' — not to buy those broad beans! He wouldn't listen!'

Two scents assailed me: furious peppermint emanating from Delleen and the stench of my own ignorance.

'How you expect me to make ze perfect Salade Nicoise!' the chef shouted.

'I told you, broad beans are not to be served in this house!' Caterina cried.

'Just one leetle — '

'Is that all this bloody fuss is about?' Fitzadam demanded. 'I'm outta here.'

'Can't we get rid of him, Miz Hungerford?' asked Delleen. 'He's a fraud and a fiend.'

Manfred rose to his full height, which was not much. 'How dare —'

'At any other time, yes,' Caterina said, regaining control of herself.

'But Miz Hungerford —'

The mistress of the house turned to her housekeeper. 'Delleen, will you do something vitally important?'

'Of course, Madame.'

'Please scrub this kitchen from top to bottom. And disinfect it. Twice. Call in Tina if you must, but you are the one I trust to do it properly. I am putting you in charge.'

I sympathised with Caterina. Maintaining staff discipline could be hideously difficult. I eased out the door to the scents of fury and mint, justifying my intrusion upon a domestic drama as professional vigilance. I had to do something to earn the Colonial land grant Caterina had promised me, something that would keep the demons at bay.

I climbed the stairs unobserved, I thought. I welcomed a bit of quiet time in which to examine handwriting samples. My hostess still had not furnished the promised cursive note, so I had to carry on analysing her printed directions. People who are more comfortable in the realm of ideas than they are with their fellow human beings tend to print, although Caterina simply may have wished to communicate clearly. Or perhaps the desire to obfuscate motivated her.

Remember the obvious, I adjured myself, such as the formalised writing previously taught in private schools.

All the downward, upward, forward and backward slants, all the idiosyncrasies and different pressures began to blur in my mind. I needed to take a fine toothcomb and sort through all the samples in a new light.

Hang on. I stopped on the stairs, hand on rail. Something stood out a mile. I had noticed it in Caterina's printing the morning she had engaged me. I had put it aside because things got busy, and then forgotten about it. I needed to check her K-buckle, that indicator of resistance to authority.

I opened the door to my room and froze. An alien fragrance overlaid the cedar. I was unable to place it.

Something was wrong.

I heard it in the heavy breathing that feathered the hairs on my neck.

I saw it in the chaos on my table.

I felt it as a thump on the head that made me see black.

* * *

'You're not dead, are you?'

I opened my eyes and peered into Bolla Lester-Norman's concerned face, so was uncomfortably close that I smelled her breakfast croissants. I stared at her eyebrows, those manmade exuberances of unnatural colour. They were her only concession to the dictates of feminine embellishment. She had pencilled in high, arched eyebrows an uncomfortable distance above the browline in the fashion of a bygone era. I closed my eyes in case I was hallucinating and reopened them to see a rising and falling inverted V over the widow's nose.

'Once again I find myself on the floor staring up at you.' I struggled to an elbow with a pathetic attempt at dignity.

Those eyebrows stopped me. 'Stay where you are.'

I fell back onto the planks.

'I'll get Ted.' Ted, not Caterina. She instinctively turned to men in times of crisis.

'No need. What happened?' Anthea boomed from the doorway.

'I heard moaning,' Bolla explained and added, after seeing my mortified expression, 'of the pained variety.'

At least I had not embarrassed myself.

'Poor pet,' Bolla said, stroking my brow.

I rather liked the attention. Had Bolla treated the Brigadier as she did her stuffed giraffe?

I managed to stand, unsteady on my feet. The room whirled.

Caterina was right. Why had I been coshed?

'Someone's bopped Quaminus on the head and ransacked his room,' Bolla said.

'In my house!' Anthea cried.

'Pestilential,' Bolla agreed. 'What a mess.'

I surveyed the damage. 'All the handwriting samples have been taken,' I said. Perhaps they were not the intended target, but the afterthought of someone who wished to obscure a search for Caterina's document, the irresistible payment I had not yet received. Had the same person trepanned into Manfred's pastry version of Hornbeam Hall?

I started to sway.

Anthea and Bolla gathered round and lowered me to the bed. 'I wish the Brigadier were here,' Bolla said. 'He'd soon sort things out.'

'This is a setback, not a catastrophe. I made copies and left the originals at home.'

Before I knew it, I was prone with my shoes off.

'Stay here,' Anthea ordered grimly, fluffing pillows behind my neck. Useless to argue with such efficient femininity. Anthea smelled clean and fragrantly soapy, obviously fresh from a shower. Had she washed away another scent? Did she realise

what she had said? I would check Anthea's handwriting for the star-shaped T-bars that indicated tenacity. Elvis Presley's writing sprang to mind:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "at Respect". The word "at" is written in a smaller, more compact style, while "Respect" is written in a larger, more flowing cursive.

Which strokes should I examine for inability to relinquish? I floated off. I felt nauseated and had a headache. Perhaps I did need to rest. That bump on the head necessitated serious rethinking about the guests and their problems. I would rest first, just for five minutes. If I stayed at Hornbeam much longer, I would have another little secret as well as a massive loss of dignity and moral fibre. Eavesdropping ... lying ... Mother would turn in her grave ...

The images in my mind tossed and scrambled. A ghost grabbed a door handle in the hall, sprouting vegetation from the armpits, and faded into the dining room. Caterina could not know about my two secrets. Surely not. If required, would I sacrifice the affair with my sister-in-law Clover or my harbouring of asylum seekers? Yes, I had secrets like everyone else, and I intended to keep them. I had had enough of detecting and would tell Caterina I was leaving. First I would rest for five minutes, just five minutes.