

Just Add Nauseam

Word count: 66,537

Cast of characters

Hornbeam Hall

Caterina Hungerford	Mistress of Hornbeam Hall
Edward Albert (Ted) Hungerford	Caterina's husband
Sally Hungerford	Daughter of Caterina and Ted
Delleen	Housekeeper
Tina	Daily help

Houseguests

Meredith Eastmeadowson	Caterina's old friend, wife of Roddy
Roderick Eastmeadowson	Meredith's husband
Guy Fitzadam	Ted's brother-in-law and Anthea's husband
Anthea Fitzadam	Guy's wife and Ted's sister
Quaminus Frye	Amateur detective, uses graphoanalysis to solve crimes
Bolla Lester Norman	Widow of Brigadier Clive, distant Hungerford relative

Other

Bethany Breech	Quaminus's housekeeper
Dr Hassan	Quaminus's GP, and much more
Clover Frye	Quaminus's sister-in-law
Wilton Belcher-Batt	Clover's brother
DS Boyle	Detective in charge of murder investigation
Manfred Hermayne	Pastry chef
Mrs Herman	Manfred's mother
Jonesy	Drug addict who knows about Fitzadams's past
Joe Steebles	Firewood supplier to Linden Park
Dwayne Luke Steebles	Nephew of above, ex-convict computer hacker
Suleiman	Asylum seeker, computer programmer
Ibrahim	Suleiman's eldest brother, senior policeman back home

Famous handwriting samples

How many visions of a maiden that is
 No more - no more upon thy verdant slopes!
 No more! - alas, that magical sad sound
 Transforming all! Thy charms shall please no more -
 Thy memory no more! Accursed ground
 Henceforth I hold thy flower-embellish'd shore,
 O, hyacinthine isle! O, purple Lanke!
 Sola d'oro! Fies di davanti!
 E.A.P.

Edgar Allan Poe, author of first modern detective story, 'The Murders at the Rue Morgue'

God House
 9th August 1839
 My dear Sir
 I have had a
 few minutes to spare
 and would do me the
 favour of letting me
 have the pleasure of
 a few minutes conversation
 with you in the course
 of the day I should be
 much obliged
 Yours faithfully
 J. M. Franklin
 M.C.

Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), Governor of Tasmania

My dear Sir
 I shall be
 happy to see you ^{within} to day
 before 4 o'clock, or tomorrow
 3, when we embark
 in the schooner --
 I am my dear Sir
 very truly yours
 Jane Franklin
 Wednesday If within of

Jane, Lady Franklin (1791-1875), wife of Sir John

Editor's Note

I found this fragment from my casebook recently while redecorating my study. It led me to recall poor Caterina Hungerford, the obsessive-compulsive whom no one believed ... until too late.

‘A tribute to the late Mrs Hungerford, who lived when times were less bland and bleached, when sex belonged to all music, not just rock and roll—indeed to all of us, in any permutation we wanted,’ Caterina ting-ed her glass.

We'd gathered at the sideboard in the dining room. Blue food sat displayed on the antique silver Hungerford plate. Domed covers protected the hot dishes.

‘Any permutation at all,’ she repeated, raising a glass of white wine.

There is a gap in my notes—I think my brother's dog ate them—which resume here. I recall with the same spreading horror the way our hostess looked at her dinner guests as she provided six good motives for her murder.

‘What if actions are legal but disgusting? Should the sins of the fathers, or others, be visited upon the children? Do one's past negative actions negate one's present good life? Is a life founded on the blood of others valid? Should one keep quiet or expose it? What if it is criminal? What if it is not?’

All eyes devoured our hostess. Duke Ellington horned Blue serge unheeded. ‘Let us begin with my dear hus—oh!’

Caterina gasped. She clutched her chest.

I present Caterina's case in its entirety, with life's unflattering retrospectoscope turned upon myself on high beam. Please allow me to build up to my shame, i.e., Caterina's death. Oh alright, race precipitously to Chapter 5 if you must. One hopes one's readers possess more self-control.

1. Monday. Bring my killer to justice

‘Bring my killer to justice!’ she said. The solid cedar window sill framed her perfectly. Wife Imperilled. Dignity Unimpaired.

‘One of my dinner guests plans to kill me Saturday night!’ she turned away and whispered to the sheep dotting the distant paddocks.

I crossed my study to join her. I had to see the facial expressions she was trying desperately to hide.

My approach swirled the still air. She clutched her merino wrap close to her chest. We were two weeks into a soft autumn—no hard frosts or harsh winds—that had stripped the sun of its biting edge and stultified my demons, who had ceased pursuing me with their usual glee. I did not know that a new one had slipped in with Caterina Hungerford.

The mountains stretched blue and silent into the far horizon, beyond Tasmania’s foothills. Such was the feeling of timelessness that we could easily have been in the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first.

‘Why would anyone want to kill you, Caterina?’

Her facial contortions bespoke complicated motives. What didn’t she want me to know?

‘Let’s be seated,’ I said, leading her to a spoonback chair facing the desk and resumed my own seat. Behind her rose a cabinet belonging to my grandfather’s grandfather, a comforting connection with the past at which I often gazed. My visitor’s dark eyes flickered down my right thigh to the ankle before rising resolutely to my hairline. I pulled off the white cotton gloves so useful in examining documents.

‘Why, Caterina?’ I repeated, straightening all ten glove fingers individually to give myself time to collect my thoughts

‘Because of the secrets I hold. I do not mean to attract them. It just happens. Either people confide in me, or their friends and relatives do or I uncover information accidentally. It can be dangerous, especially when people become respectable after a delirious youth.’

Blackmail for something other than money?

‘I am not a blackmailer. I am a professional woman. You know that, Quaminus.’

‘Computers, isn’t it?’

‘Programming.’ She pulled her wrap tighter with a determined claw. ‘I will divest myself of all secrets at Saturday night’s dinner party. The plan may explode in my face.’

‘Which is where I come in.’

She nodded. ‘I do not want to die, Quaminus! I have plans for Hornbeam Hall!’

‘What would you like me to do?’ I eased onto my good haunch and crossed a leg.

‘If you cannot prevent my death, then please bring my murderer to justice—justice,’ she repeated, ‘in the true sense of the word.’

‘Have you contacted the police? Though no crime has been committed ...’

‘Of course not.’ She twisted her wedding ring three times clockwise, then three times counter-clockwise. ‘It is a private matter. I knew Mrs Bennett and the dear old duchess. That is why I came to you.’

My previous cases. The death of Mrs Bennett’s husband proved to be accidental. Myocardial infarction. That he’d expired in his mistress’s bed was irrelevant. And the dear old duchess, well, retrieving those cheques had been messy but cash and contacts ensured a successful outcome.

‘Your husband?’

‘Ted sees it as part of my ... condition.’ Her sartorial crispness underscored her tone of voice. She had driven for two hours from Hornbeam Hall without the intrusion of a single wrinkle into linen trousers the colour of field mushrooms and shirt of Antarctic ice.

‘Which is?’

She ignored my question and pointed at a manuscript on my desk. ‘What is that?’

I straightened its creases with feathery fingertip caresses. ‘A *billet doux* supposedly written by Sir John Franklin while he was Governor of Tasmania. It may be a forgery.’

‘Your fondness for old scraps of paper is well known.’ She toed the carpet with a stylish boot, the sturdy brown of a nicely roasted lamb.

Her evasiveness irritated me. ‘Caterina—’

‘I will make it worth your while.’

Ah. The conventional plea from the drowning to the dry, floated daily on the waters of life. Politeness had dictated our social intercourse for long enough. The time had come to exercise the firmness of character for which I was notorious.

‘If I’m to help you I need information. Knowledge. Answers to my questions.’

She tossed her wedge of light hair, cut short and sharp, which told me I couldn’t reach this woman and reinforced her resemblance to a stern pixie despite her thirty-odd years.

I’d plenty to keep me occupied. I simply had to finish my presentation to the Royal Society. ‘I’m afraid I’d be of no use to you. I can suggest—’

She collapsed in on herself on like a crushed magnolia.

Deflating imps was not to my liking. I am comfortably situated, thanks to the ancestor for whom I was named, a younger son who became a ship’s captain and sailed from England early in the nineteenth century. He imported merino sheep to breed and run on the twenty thousand acres he acquired in these rolling hills splattered with old sandstone villages. No one has yet been able to ruin Quaminus the First’s investment despite determined efforts, for

example by my grandfather, a gambling man who died inebriated on horseback. I'd had my go at running the place as firstborn. An encounter between my car and a tree one night ended that. The land needs someone whole, not dragging a bad leg. Nevertheless, I'd have managed had not my younger brother Miles been waiting in the wings to grab what he always wanted.

'Please, Quaminus.'

Thoughts of Clover blanketed my mind. We'd work to do this weekend with asylum seekers. Caterina would probably invite me to her dinner party. I made a mental note to ring Dr Hassan, my main local contact on the Underground Railroad.

I glanced longingly at the *billet doux* spread before me. I'd been looking forward to some solitude, without the well-meaning intrusions of my cleaner, whose clattering about the place in a Monday morning sort of way reminded me that I remiss in not offering morning tea to my visitor.

Caterina misinterpreted my expression. 'As payment, perhaps you will accept a little something that has been in my father's family since the First Fleet, a forged Colonial land grant. One of my ancestors was quite an accomplished artist, although we kept it quiet. I want it to go to a good home.'

Her voice trailed off as greed crimped the corners of my mouth. I controlled it quickly, ashamed, but she noticed.

Caterina noticed everything, an unfortunate trait which might well end her life.

'Why would you give me such a troublesome document?'

'I do not think the government could confiscate our property at this late date. I would give it to you even if doing so publicised that Father's fortune was based on fraud and deceit. That should demonstrate the urgency of my need.'

Perhaps a weekend at Hornbeam Hall would do me a world of good and precipitate a fresh approach to the Franklin manuscript.

‘The time may come when you need a rather large favour, Quaminus. I have heard about the plans your brother Miles has for this place.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He wants it for himself. Surely you’ve heard.’

A cloud-gust darkened the sun.

No, I hadn’t. ‘Will you have a cup of tea?’ I asked.

She nodded.

I limped to the door as Mrs Breech was passing—very conveniently, as usual—and set the ritual in motion, thus providing a respite before her eavesdropping recommenced.

‘My brother George is not far from here, as you know,’ she continued. ‘He will ensure you have got comfortable quarters for life. Certain things matter to him.’ She slewed her eyes at the window. ‘And you would see the same hills.’

One would think Linden Park’s big house would be enough.

‘Miles told my brother that it is not his home anymore, since Clover’s decorators worked their magic.’

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. After the accident I’d developed an unexpected sensitivity, an awareness of subtle olfactory layers. Early autumn emitted its own siren scents, like leaves mouldering with rain trapped underneath and droplets on top. Pears rotted on the ground under the tree near the kitchen block, awaiting wattlebirds and wasps. Mulberries decayed, decadent in one last alcoholic fling before dissolving into the earth. Smoke from fires played its own symphony. Gums burned pungent and sharp. There was nothing like eucalyptus. Wattle exuded a dirty sort of smoke as it swirled to the heavens.

People also exuded strong scents. Some smelled relaxing, like my sister-in-law Clover. I banished her from conscious thought, along with my other secret of harbouring asylum

seekers. I was ashamed of the Federal Government's immigration policies and determined to act in accordance with my conscience. I'd no intention of divulging my secrets to Caterina.

Other people reeked of darker emotions, like my brother Miles, damn and blast him.

Mother had left me just enough, assuming I would live here forever. Shifting from my present residence into a shack on the land at Miles's whim was completely unacceptable, as was moving to a flat in the city. I could think of nothing worse, except perhaps being powerless to impede my younger brother's plans. If I moved to George's, my time with Clover and the asylum seekers would be severely curtailed. We were very discreet, my brother's wife and I.

A clean fragrance overlaid with heartbreak assailed me from across the desk. Caterina was offering security for the rest of my life. I hesitated, but not for long.

I opened my eyes. It was not a cleansing wind that blew in a new demon. If my visitor affected everyone so adversely, no wonder she felt her life to be in danger.

'Why this weekend, Caterina?' I asked. The demands of farm and orchard meant that early autumn was not a particularly sociable time for our crowd.

'To honour my late mother-in-law, whose birthday is Sunday.'

'Why not host a luncheon at a restaurant in town?' I asked.

Her mouth hardened, an oar dipped in dark waters.

The door burst open after a short explosive knock. 'Your tea, Mr Q.'

'Thank you, Mrs Breech,' I said. This was not strictly part of her cleaning duties, but over the years we'd fallen into comfortable habits. Our relationship was not so unusual in this remote outpost of the British Empire, where certain things still mattered.

Mrs Breech wheeled the tea trolley to the Hope pedestal table in the middle of the room. A wheel caught on a corner of the Victorian wool carpet. Caterina jumped up and strode past

the fireplace, in which a gum log popped. She smoothed the carpet's rucked edge and eased the traymobile on its course.

My cleaner divested the trolley of its load, chattering all the while. 'Thanking you, Miz Hungerford, and I meself not a young woman, with me arthrititis and allergies, but unlike your good self me allergies ain't notorious, which everybody knows are set off by anyandeverything and my Will says —' She set teapot and jug and sugar, scones and butter and jam and biscuits on my desk within easy reach.

'That is all, Mrs Breech. I think we'll do the laundry today. There should just be time.' Wicked of me to banish her to the kitchen block behind the house, but I dared not risk more eavesdropping. In the delicate dance between master and domestic help, I had just trod on a toe. That it was intentional we both knew. That it would increase my payback I did not doubt.

That good woman tilted sideways, signalling the beginning of locomotion.

The door boomed shut in a manner which indicated the kind of music I'd have to face later. I could hear the bush telegraph humming as she banged down the passageway.

For a few moments, my visitor and I engaged in mono- and duo-syllabic conversation. Weak or strong? Milk? Sugar? One lump or two? Biscuits? Scone? Butter or cream? Jam? Ritual's end saw Caterina balancing one ginger biscuit and a cup of weak black tea on her knees. I preferred tea so strong it puckered the mouth, a full two-second tilt of the milk jug and four lumps of sugar. Scones I slathered with half an inch of butter, a lashing of jam and whipped cream so thick it mesmerised Caterina despite her despair.

'Now,' I prompted. I jabbed my thumb into the flesh just below the hipbone, still bristling from Caterina's involuntary glance at my game leg.

My opportunity to decline Caterina's commission dissipated on Breechly tides. My protestations were pathetic and flimsy in a roiling ocean of need. A row of stuffed parrots

shot by my grandfather's grandfather perched atop the cabinet behind my visitor. The jumble of blue wings, rumps and faces transformed Caterina into Medusa in an ice-blue shirt.

'Any idea who would do this, this deed?' I could not say *murder*.

'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.' She plucked from her handbag a tiny gold pencil attached to an address book. 'My disappointed husband, his despising sister, her hateful husband, my loving best friend and her self-adoring husband. And also a gluttonous old family friend. Also present will be the servants—I mean household help—three of them plus an imported chef.'

I watched her tick each entry with precision. 'And your children?'

'Sally and her brother are away overseas on a school trip.' Caterina hunched her shoulders protectively. She gnawed her ginger biscuit like a worried rodent. 'Have you ever considered the perception of reality, Quaminus?'

'Periodically.'

'The theme for Saturday's dinner will be blue food. Royal blue was old Mrs Hungerford's favourite colour.'

'Is it wise to obscure the colour of what you consume on such an important occasion?'

'The thought has crossed my mind. I have searched for poisons on the Internet. Murder-by-mushroom would be too slow and require more than one ingestion. Aconite, belladonna, digitalis—I think not. Hemlock leaves in the salad is possible but indiscriminate. Strychnine, arsenic, thallium: I doubt it. To my mind, cyanide has a certain *je nais se quoi* best suited to the festivities.'

How could she speak so calmly of possible impending annihilation? A morally disquieting alternative presented itself, that this little sylvan sprite was unwell or covering up another crime. I'd check with a third cousin, an insurance agent.

I pushed notepaper and pen to Caterina. 'Write directions on this, please.'

‘You have often been to Hornbeam,’ she said, surprised.

‘All the same.’ I needed a spontaneous example of her handwriting.

Caterina sketched a basic map and slid the paper back across a wooden surface worn smooth, propelled more by fingernails than the flat of her palm. The sound overwhelmed the soft avian twitter outside.

I wished Caterina—and all women—would leave me in peace. I stood up. ‘If that is all.’

‘Not quite.’

I sat down.

‘I understand you use handwriting analysis in your work.’

‘Yes.’ At best, it supplied vital clues and, at the least, informed my approach to suspects and their machinations. ‘I use books printed in the 1970s, so they may be dreadfully out of date.’ I had once found a set of correspondence-school books and a small library on graphoanalysis at an estate sale.

‘Surely there is an organisation on the Internet.’

‘Perhaps at some later date.’ I’d no intention of contacting what society viewed to be quacks and cranks, although almost certainly they were reasonable people.

Caterina extracted an envelope from a handbag that resembled a sheet of puff pastry. ‘I doubt that human nature changes much. Here are six samples. Each guest wrote the same sentence using all the letters of the alphabet, then a sentence or two using the word *blue* and their signatures, in anticipation that you would accept this challenge. You will find Meredith’s different. She is so ... *Irrepressible*.’ Caterina *never* spoke in italics. Or capitals. I should have been alerted. Missed Clue Number One.

‘Have you included samples of serving staff and caterers?’

‘It is not one of them. You can always add them later.’ Caterina checked her watch and rose. ‘I must be going.’

As she had arrived so she departed, her final words floating on the air. 'Bring my killer to justice. That is all I ask.'

Outside, black-and-white Belted Galloway cattle speckled the undulating hills. A male fairy wren hopped on stick legs across the rim of a birdbath near the euonymus tree, its tiny turquoise body round as a tennis ball. Mrs Breech's screeching wafted into the house as she harangued our firewood feral, Joe Steebles, out the back.

Blue food? This case might prove to be beyond me. Taking on more than one was able to deliver was nothing new. Life would have been utterly different had Father lived another few years. I was like most teenage boys round here who let off steam by going to the pub.

My younger brother had Linden Park now. The proprietor should be Quaminus Giles Frye, not Miles blasted Frye. Why did I have to drink so much that night? I would be breeding purebred Hampshire Down rams if the place were still mine, not Miles's nice safe merinos. Thank God I had health insurance so I was not a burden on the family. I needed to ring my cousin, both to confirm that my policy was in order and inquire about Caterina Hungerford's insurance activities.

I quite enjoyed life on the white steed, rebuffing the attacks of the banking brigade upon Mother's dear friend the duchess with no sharper weapons than pen and powers of reason. Then the duke's sister appeared in my study in her hour of need. No one much cared that Mrs Bennett's husband had a fatal heart attack in his mistress's arms, but such public indiscretion damned him forever. By the time that death by natural causes was determined, I'd cemented alliances with police, government bureaucrats and health practitioners.

This constituted the sum of my investigative experience. I had refused subsequent cases which involved skulking about. Eavesdropping reminded me of my childhood, of peeping through stair rails and feeding on adult conversation addled by alcohol, to be stored for later dark ruminations which still invaded my nights. 'He's not got a farmer's temperament.' 'He

prefers a calligrapher's quill to a shotgun.' I hated them speaking like that. I saw Mother huddled over her inlaid mother-of-pearl worktable, reverently unrolling T'ang Dynasty scrolls of eighth-century Chinese masters. We were exploring Oracle Bone Script when she died, the oldest known form of Chinese writing.

On her deathbed Mother asked me two things. First, to make her a calligraphic memorial. That I never finished it remained one of my biggest regrets. I held her icy hand as she requested to live my life 'appropriately.' We took a stroll on the dark side, which I have preferred ever since to grim and desiccated virtue. If I were unable to complete her calligraphic memorial, at least I could honour her memory when iniquitous humanity loomed, as now might be stalking Caterina Hungerford.

Blue food ... Dusting off the social skills ... At least the weekend's focus would not be matchmaking. Mother called me a good catch despite the accident, as mothers do. My sister-in-law's attempts to pair me off became less energetic as I settled into contented bachelorhood. Clover insisted that women liked my brand of long lean looks, particularly as my hair, which I wore longish and combed straight back, had not receded one centimetre, despite my having achieved the late thirties. I proudly outshone younger brother Miles in that department, who already combed a long strand over a bald dome in the deluded way of men.

I laid out printed Caterina's directions and tapped the magnifying glass, tilting it slightly to the left over my client's laboured sample. What was that doing there? I rejiggled the glass.

2. Friday. The siren scent of cinnamon

I might not understand them, but I determined that two of the female species would not outsmart me, at least not today. It was Friday afternoon at Hornbeam Hall. I had rolled the carpet back and lay gloriously unfolded on my stomach in the first room at the top of the stairs, directly above Caterina's office. I placed ear to glass on the hardwood floor in an attitude of unguarded abandon and listened to the conversation below.

'How's the hornbeam jelly biz, Cat?' came through clear as a bell.

'Excellently, thank you, Merry.' Pause. 'I am afraid that Quaminus suspects something.'

'I hate all this dishonesty, violet.'

'So do I. But it is what you wanted.' Caterina's voice wafted through the floorboards.

I repositioned myself, splaying a little wider—most unseemly for a gentleman—to catch every word.

'I've changed my mind, especially after what happened to your mother.'

'We were only nine years old.'

'We should have known better.'

'Fang!' The under- and overtones in that one syllable were frightful to absorb.

'I didn't realise it'd be so horrible, petal. Please let me out.'

'Not this time. It is far too late,' her friend said with deadly emphasis. 'You will have to see this through to the end.'

'It's not right.'

'I do not care.'

‘My dear young man, what *are* you doing?’ asked a vision of shimmering silver-haired femininity framed in the open doorway.

I scrambled to my feet ungracefully, shamefully.

‘The Brigadier always said—’

‘This is my room, Madame. Please leave at once.’ My manners deserted me, to my utter mortification.

‘I apologise. So often the bathroom in these old houses is the first room at the top of the stairs.’ She hoisted a chartreuse straw handbag over her shoulder, using her free hand to prevent its contents from overflowing. A military man in a pewter frame, a monstrous bar of Toblerone chocolate and the head of a stuffed giraffe nestled behind her elbow.

Gossip comprised the only information I had gleaned so far about Bolla Lester-Norman. She loved her husband, her food and staying in country houses. Some felt that hosting the widow of a brigadier added respectability to the gathering, or so my sister-in-law assured me. A lonely widow activated my bachelor warning system. In response to my perfectly valid concerns about whether the widow was likely to be on the prowl, the unrepentant Clover had merely smiled. Infuriating woman.

‘An understandable mistake, Mrs Lester-Norman,’ I said, beginning to regain my composure.

‘Bolla dear, like the champagne,’ she replied, backing away.

‘Mrs—Bolla—’

The door closed. I pawed the floor with my foot in frustration like a wounded stallion. The rustlings and murmurings below stopped immediately.

I returned my attention to the overheard conversation. What were the old friends incubating? What happened to Caterina’s mother when the girls were nine years old? I pawed the floor again. The silence below thwarted me.

The room smelled solid and oppressive, like my childhood. In the 1840s—that hungry decade—and beyond, Colonial builders used cedar everywhere, in furniture, doors, architraves and fireplace surrounds. Carpenters who came to this country found Australian red cedar easy to carve and cut, as the soft wood imitated mahogany. Once smelled never forgotten, we said of its odour. Solid but oppressive. Like the day.

I opened the door onto the landing. The siren scents of ginger, yeasted wheat and cinnamon sang from the kitchen wing, beckoning me down the stairs. I stopped near an old barometer, plain and appropriate, that predicted calm weather. I wasn't so sure.

My three sharp raps on Caterina's door were answered immediately by the woman of my dreams. A wild blond halo framed a remarkable face with liquid blue eyes and long black lashes. A stab of longing pierced my heart, alongside a jolt of treachery administered by the long reach of Clover.

'You must be Quaminus Frye,' she said, holding out an electrifying hand. 'Meredith Eastmeadowson. We've just been talking about you.'

'I know, er, pleasure to meet you.' I touched fingertips with an oasis of symmetry and grace. To hide my confusion, I examined a large whiteboard that dominated the inner wall. *Blue dinner party*, I read, followed by the date in precise block letters. Categories stacked the left margin like a misaligned spine: timeline (begun six months ago with a call to the pastry chef), menu, music, personnel and guests. Caterina listed all main and mobile telephone numbers. This work of impressive organisation reminded me of black-and-white late-night movies in which overweening military commanders plot destruction with overacting subordinates in front of massive world maps.

From the computer, Caterina gestured me toward a cedar sofa with scrolled arms and carved feet. 'I will be with you in a moment,' Caterina said. 'I am just finishing some cataloguing. Birthdays, addresses, that sort of thing, before the serious work begins for the

party.’ Caterina was the only person I knew whose computer posture was perfect. Most of us hunched or slumped.

‘How much do you know?’ Meredith asked. She was the perfect height, around five feet ten.

‘Everything,’ I lied, sitting on the sofa.

She glided over to the computer, hugged Caterina and perched on the edge of the desk.

‘Oh good, it’s out, although the Hawthorne Effect changes everything, Roddy says.’ She wore turquoise wool-denim trousers and pumpkin-coloured cotton polo-neck jumper, perfectly appropriate for the time of year. A little Chinese silk jacket the colour of the autumn sky added a stylish touch.

Caterina strode to the whiteboard like a general and faced us with hands clasped behind her back. ‘You should not interrupt!’ she said.

‘Sorry!’ Meredith said. ‘I’m so excited to meet the private detective saviour.’

Surely Caterina’s best friend did not have murder in her heart. But why was her handwriting sample different from the others? In what vice did my client grip this vision of perfection?

My male warning system was temporarily disarmed. I basked in Meredith’s scent. Its fried-food stench overlaid with a citrusy and expensive bouquet was not altogether unattractive, particularly added to the odour of aestheticism running under the surface.

‘The Hawthorne Effect is a scientific principle of observation, is it not?’ I asked. Feeble, Quaminus. You’re losing your touch, old man, such as it was.

‘Yes. My husband told me about a woman found in an experiment in the 1930s that people behaved differently when they knew they were being observed.’

These women were hiding something. I'd discover it eventually. I always did. Meanwhile, I fidgeted on the abstractly patterned raspberry-and-lilac upholstery. It was as difficult to settle into as my hostess.

'You'll protect her, won't you Quaminus?' pleaded Meredith.

'Our hostess will not die tomorrow night,' I assured her. 'I am as certain of that as I am of my place on the land.' I turned away so they would not see how greatly the idea of this dinner party worried me. Would blue blood flow?

A knock at the door interrupted my ruminations. 'Miz A sizable woman entered. No makeup masked her middle-aged plainness; in fact she celebrated it by slicking back her greying brown hair into a tortured bun. A low buzzing noise accompanied her. She hummed *Waltzing Matilda* in a rasping monotone. That extraordinary sound was rather unsettling in its disregard for rhythm and pacing.

'Perhaps you two would like to confide in me now so that I may fulfil the function for which you hired me, Caterina,' I said to the two friends. 'I overheard bits of your conversation earlier.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'We planned to tell you tonight, when it will have gone on long enough.'

'To what do you refer?'

'Oh Quaminus, you should see your face,' Meredith giggled.

'The truth,' I said in a tone rarely used during optimistic daylight hours.

Caterina laid a hand on my forearm, her smile an asymmetrical slash. 'Full confession later, Quaminus, word of honour.' I'd hoped to ride the wave of the conversational mood I'd overheard upstairs and land upright on the shores of honesty. The resulting crash and tumble nauseated me.

'I certainly hope so, Caterina,' I said in sternest tones. I would depart and damn the

consequences if these women continued to obstruct my efforts.

Caterina grimaced. 'There is an old will which would turn life here upside down.'

Back in my room, I fanned out the handwriting samples on the table. I'd begin with Meredith's while she was still fresh in my mind. Caterina asked her guests to write out, *The fox-and-bleu-cheese quiche evinced a mighty, purple haze in the kitchen's jaw*. As Caterina had warned, Meredith wrote something entirely different. I'd never seen such honest and forthright As and Os: not a sign of self- or other deceit, nor manipulation or prevarication. Where was the motive? The greed, the desperation? What buttons could her old friend push to force the writer of this highly literate hand to contemplate murder?

A rap at the door made me long to be in my study at Linden Park on a Mrs Breech-less day. 'Come in,' I growled with no good grace.

Delleen entered bearing a tray laden with scones, translucent pink jam, cream and tea things. 'Your afternoon tea, Mr Frye.' She plunked the tray on top of Meredith's sample.

I lifted a corner and removed the paper gently. 'Thank you, Delleen.'

'Been here for forty-three years I have, since I was a girl,' she said, left hand on hip.

I knew the type. She wore felt slippers and a long bibbed apron over a thin cotton-print dress in all seasons and never felt the cold. Mrs Breech's counterpart withdrew a roll of peppermints from her apron pocket, flicked one free with her thumbnail and popped it into her mouth.

'You'll get your sustenance in this house if it kills you,' she said, narrowing her eyes and looking me up and down slowly as if evaluating undernourished livestock. 'You're to eat

the lot.’ She pointed to the loaded tray with the roll of peppermints. ‘And don’t be long about it, if you please. There’s a lot to do for the party tomorrow night.’

I watched her backside fill the doorway, thanking God my family had been spared its Delleens. They blustered to cover dismal financial need, which made them resent their employers but hobbled them from biting the hand that fed, at least to our faces.

From our side, one dare not object. Help was hard to find, and this created an uneasy alliance. I preferred the Bethany Breechs.

‘I would like to ask a favour of you,’ I ventured. It was a calculated risk, but far better for her to be on side as soon as possible.

‘What?’ The housekeeper turned and stared with unnerving sternness.

‘Will you be my eyes and ears? Tell me if anyone who should not enters the kitchen or dining room between now and tomorrow night.’

‘That’s spying.’ She smiled for the first time.

‘More like protecting.’

‘Hmph.’ She hummed *Waltzing Matilda*.

‘I understand if you do not want to help, Delleen.’

‘Why should I?’ She sucked the life out of that peppermint, cheeks puffing and contracting. Hornbeam certainly was blessed with strong women.

‘I am worried about Mrs Hungerford.’ I hoped to secure her cooperation by being deliberately vague.

‘Spose I could,’ she said slowly, with an air of great beneficence.

‘I’d like to ask you a question, Delleen.’

‘What?’

‘What happened to Caterina’s mother when she and Meredith were nine years old?’

She stopped humming and sucking. ‘The poor woman died,’ she said simply, ‘and that’s all I’m going to say now.’

Peppermint hovered in a cloud between us. Finally I said, ‘There. I have done it.’

‘Done what?’

‘Confided in you. Not a word to anyone.’

She resumed singing and sucking simultaneously with a bar of *Waltzing Matilda* and a conspiratorial whiff of peppermint.

‘As you’re confiding in me, I’ll tell you something for free.’ She turned her head quickly from side to side, certain that the walls had ears, and leaned into the room from the doorway. ‘I’ve heard some interesting things.’

‘Such as?’ I asked. It went very much against the grain to gossip with the help.

‘Miz Anthea was never very patient, even as a child, and she hated going away. Threw quite a tantrum she did, when her parents forced her to go away to boarding school. Once she ran away and came home and locked her door and wouldn’t come out for days. Said she’d only leave her home feet first.’

With that the good woman made her triumphant exit.

My concentration dissipated. I needed a break. I stacked the examples of handwriting into a neat pile with Meredith’s on top and reached for Delleen’s tea tray. You are the most fortunate of men, I told myself. Fresh scones and homemade rose petal jam. Perhaps one day I would write a monograph on why each woman’s scones tasted so different despite the use of identical ingredients.

I got up to stretch my bad leg, heeding the admonitions of my physiotherapist: at least once an hour. Silence on the landing arrested my attention, a sudden cessation of creaking floorboards and comings and goings. I crept to the door and opened it sharply.

No one. Perhaps it was merely the late-afternoon chiaroscuro, the flickering of shadows upon shadows.

A scent from the adjacent bathroom drew my attention. From under the door snaked a trail of incense whose scent I associated with the Hippie Sixties. A tuneless but spirited humming of the Byrds' song *Eight Miles High* accompanied splashing and other sounds of joyful immersion in the moment. Could Bolla Lester-Norman contemplate cold-blooded murder or plan the writhing agony of death-by-poison or the slow seeping of extinction by exsanguination? *Keep an open mind*, I heard Mother's admonishing voice paddling through the ether. *One never knows*. Mrs Lester-Norman idolised her late husband. Perhaps a scandal involving honour, money or women would push her over the brink.

I pulled my head back into the room, secured the door and limped to the dresser. My image rippled in its old glass mirror as I reached for a comb. Clover said the way my hair was long and brushed back reminded her of Michael Douglas in *Wall Street* and brought out my sculpted features. In our carefree days long ago, she compared me to a certain classical statue I am too embarrassed to name.

You're a fraud, I accused my reflection. *It's wrong. You shouldn't be here. The lovely Caterina had her way with you, and so easily. Not a whimper. You sold out for a scrap of old paper. Without your beliefs, what else is there?*

What did I have to lose? Peace of mind? That vanished years ago, the night of the accident. Now I felt as if—no, such thoughts must not be allowed to surface. I made myself smile at my reflection. A smile not a scowl, that first psychologist said after the accident. Force the mind into other grooves and eventually they will become second nature. They call it CBT these days: cognitive behavioural therapy.

I settled in at the desk for some serious handwriting analysis, fuelled by hot tea, steaming scones and rose petal jam.

One always started with the victim. All I knew was that a beautiful woman with her father's fair hair and her mother's Sicilian eyes feared for her life. I unfolded Caterina's printed specimen and held it far from my face to gather an overall impression. It reminded me of William's Faulkner's handwriting: very small, extreme order, I's and T's precisely dotted and crossed—no scrawl, sprawl or maul, little vitality, crackling intelligence ... What was that doing there, I wondered again as I had Monday at the desk in my study at home in Linden Park. I needed to examine the rounded middle-zone letters in a cursive writing sample to confirm my suspicions.

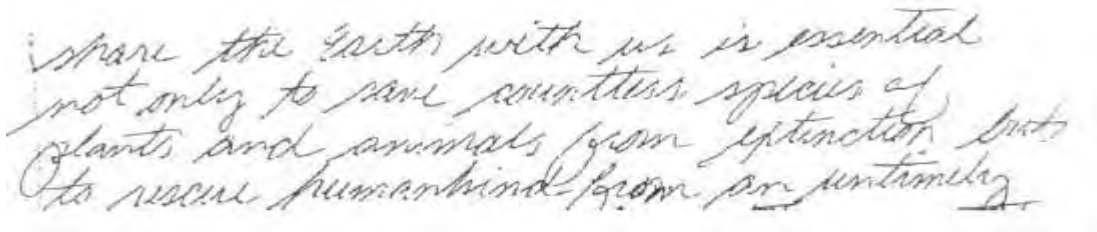
I drew out her best friend's sample. Meredith's exuberant habit of calling Caterina by all sorts of flower-related names, *petal* and *violet* among them, seemed incongruent with the dignified sample before me. The death of Caterina's mother continued to affect the women deeply, but why? Was it the tie that bound? Meredith's sample still niggled. I determined to request a second sample, something not controlled by Caterina. She'd mentioned something about a walk through the grounds. It would give me a chance to see her again. Some exercise would clear my head and help my bad leg.

I opened the Holland blind and poked my head out the open window. The drone of a ride-on mower unleashed the aroma of freshly mown grass and drew my eyes to the back of the house, where lawns unfolded in crackling sheets. The outbuildings were off to one side. I saw Ted near the shearing shed. I would talk to him tomorrow, when he was less obviously busy. No sign of Meredith.

* * *

The mid-afternoon sun warmed my leg and settled peacefulness on the land, with its fleeting shadows and tweeting birds. What secrets lurked in the lush profusion of the Georgian

mansion's round garden with its circular drive? The way it closed and looped back protectively upon itself brought to mind a graphoanalytical lesson about mid-zone letters such as As and Os. Internal hooks and squiggles indicated manipulateness. Empty letters depicted honesty with the self and others. Those closed and looped to the left meant self-deception. We all needed a bit of that to grease our progress through life. Imagine life without it! One shuddered. Letters closed and looped to the right indicated secretiveness. Double internal loops conveyed intentional deception. No one indicator stood alone; others factors influenced all formations. Manipulateness, evasion, secrecy, honesty: none of the guests' handwriting showed them to the degree that did murderer Ted Bundy's.



to spare the earth with us is essential
not only to save countless species of
plants and animals from extinction but
to rescue humankind from an untimely

Ted Bundy, U.S. serial killer

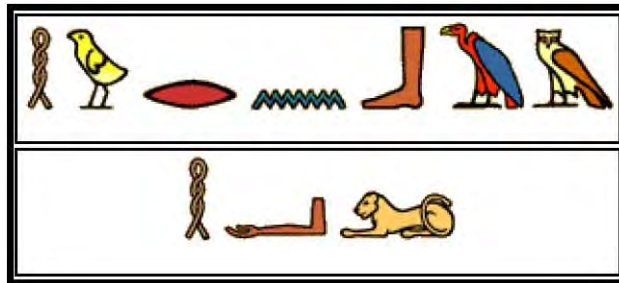
I passed the end of the *macrocarpa* windbreak just beyond the curve in the road. Two rows of hornbeams, *carpinus fastigata*, flanked the drive. Here in Tasmania's Midlands, cars often stopped at the stone gate in mid-to-late autumn, their occupants gawping at glowing berries orange as a chainsawer's vest.

Long, tapered hornbeam thorns spiked out dangerously from the branches. The loosely serrated shape of hornbeam leaves contrasted with the rounded exuberance of their mass, the colour of a healthy lawn as yet unbronzed by a gentle autumn. Leaves were notched like inverted V formations found in Ms, and Rs. Meredith and Roddy. And in Ns and Hs. Graphoanalysts claimed that such formations indicated the investigative mind of one who preferred to learn things on his own and not accept the findings of others, like ex-U.S. President Bill Clinton.

I need your help. In many hours and Senate races, new Democrats are threatened by old Republicans filling

Ex-U.S. President Bill Clinton

My ruminations led me back to the house and along the verandah. I hadn't seen Meredith, but it could wait. I peered into the Egyptian Room through the french doors. What secrets lurked behind Hornbeam Hall's severe windows? I extended a flat hand to shade my eyes and aid my examination of a plaque on the far wall inside the room. The Hungerford daughter, Sally, had ordered a lozenge from the Internet and presented to her father, Ted, at Christmas: the words *Hornbeam Hall* in hieroglyphics.



Translation: Hornbeam Hall

Fortunately the French doors were unlatched. I pulled them open and entered a Mediterranean world. The plaque drew me close. It had a certain gravitas despite its computer provenance. I would not even attempt to read hieroglyphics. I'd enough trouble with modern English, particularly as written by Caterina's dinner guests.

An armchair beckoned, with a good view of the tennis court. I sank into it and manoeuvred my bad leg into a comfortable position. Ahhh. Two Old Kingdom hunting tapestries separated by a column of boomerangs hung over the white marble fireplace. Across the top, a slate-blue band of white hieroglyphics joined the two tapestries. A pair of black-

and-white fourth century BC pottery goblets, after the Goblet of Susa, flanked the mantelpiece.

The sploek of fast-travelling balls attracted my attention through a window on the fireplace wall to the tennis court beyond. Fitzadam played against his agile wife with energy if not grace. Just like his handwriting. The property developer liked to play at every opportunity. We'd no doubt be subjected to that hollow pinging sound again, before the dinner party tomorrow evening.

I'd heard rumours of Caterina's business involvements with her brother-in-law. Had she made bad investments she could no longer hide from her husband? Was her jelly business in distress? Maybe Ted wanted a divorce or she could no longer bear Anthea's criticisms. Whatever it was, my hostess had confided at least part of the truth to her best friend. Were the old chums plotting a nice little dose of feminine poison? Had the medical examination uncovered a terminal disease that my third cousin neglected to impart? Did our hostess suffer from a fatal allergy? What would any of them gain, particularly the lovely Mrs Eastmeadowson? Did blackmail infiltrate their friendship? Appearances could be deceiving.

I thought about Caterina's intense involvement with her computer. I needed expert advice, someone to help me access Caterina's computer files should she prove uncooperative or unable. Where to find such a creature? Any investigation would have to include three-pronged research: personal contacts, the above-mentioned files and knowledge gleaned by graphoanalysis. Relying upon only one prong would be like flailing butterfly nets through the air. Telephone calls during the week had resurrected my contact network, except for the computer expert who was on maternity leave.

I returned my attention Fitzadam's flailings on the court. Nobody with a body that long and such squat legs could negotiate tennis with agility. No handwriting with H-stems so high and such convoluted Qs could be called fluid. Ted viewed him as an intruder. Familial hopes

of his evanescence faded when Anthea produced offspring: an heir, a spare and a little girl. Hamish, Alex and Felicity, I believe they were called, although I'd never met them and they didn't seem to feature much in their mother's world. That Fitzadam did well in business endeared him to no one. Would a doubtful past or less-than-honest present lead him to kill another human being? This man would never abdicate the throne for love.

Poetic justice dictated that Anthea Hungerford marry Guy Fitzadam. Houses and property obsessed them both. Fitzadam dreamed of despoiling the land. *If it is empty build on it* was his creed. I knew the type. I had seen them often enough at the races, with their air of condescending greed.

One guest remained about whom I knew nothing. I had neither seen him nor overheard any gossip. Dr Roderick Eastmeadowson was a scientist who depressed his dinner partners into catatonia with talk of catastrophic climate change and unavoidable civilisation collapse. Why would he kill Caterina? Did Hornbeam produce too many carbon dioxide emissions? Were her cows too gassy, farting too much methane? Was it personal or professional? Was Roddy protecting his wife or had he erred ethically on a paper's authorship? Blackmail again.

I had little to go on. Despite all this speculation, nothing had happened aside from an alleged hole in a cake and misplaced fava bean. Yes, but ... something *smelled* wrong.

<p>SIDEBAR.</p> <p>Ancestors & Egyptian Adventures</p> <p>The Victorian spirit of adventure infected both a Hungerford forebear and a Frye of my own. The two men put managers in charge of their properties and sailed off into the horizon, my great-great-grandfather for Mesopotamia and Ted's for Egypt via East Africa, where he had arranged to get in some big game hunting. My ancestor was interested in matters carved by a much smaller sword, the wedge-shaped stylus used for cuneiform inscriptions. He visited Uruk at an exciting time, after the initial mid-nineteenth century excavations but before Sir Leonard Woolley's definitive work in the nineteen-thirties. A tradition evolved whereby each generation of Fryes visited the area. I'd been on my way to Uruk when Father took sick and I had to return home.</p> <p>The interest in Mesopotamian forms of applying stylus to tablet struck every generation differently. My great-grandfather disregarded his father's wishes completely, but Grandfather studied the then-new science of archaeology in university and became something of an expert on cuneiform inscriptions. I believe he even met Agatha Christie when she accompanied her husband, Max Mallowan, to Mesopotamia. My father had no literary inclinations whatsoever and spent his time on that obligatory pilgrimage examining sheep and other stock. I had been quite looking forward to immersing myself in the great library with those marvellous old texts. Should have planned to go there first rather than saving it for last, but we were not to know about Father's heart. What rankled most was that Grandfather's grandfather's favourite piece, a lovely wedge of cuneiform he had</p>	<p>appropriated, went with the big house, where it was entirely wasted on my brother Miles.</p> <p>A plaque that read Hornbeam Hall in hieroglyphics adorned the wall opposite the french doors to the front verandah of Hornbeam Hall. In each corner of the Egyptian Room stood a life-sized ushabet, a royal funeral statue. The ushabti from King Tutankhamen's tomb represented servants meant to perform tasks demanded by the king in the other world. They embodied aspects of the king himself, prepared to deal with any contingency arising in time and space. All four in this room crossed their arms over their chests.</p> <p>The makers of the Hungerford ushabti had done a fine job. Perhaps they had worked in the Theban necropolis at the time of Rameses IX, whose sculptors had gone on strike until receiving their ration of wheat.</p>
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