

FOREWORD

I have changed all names and the location. You will never find me, or where my secret lies.

THE WILD WAY

“Just look at this! That effing bastard Ted Jarvis is trying to ruin us!”

He threw a piece of paper, plastic-sealed and edged with yellow cellotape, onto my lap. He had evidently just ripped it from some notice board. It was still running with trickles of rain. As I picked it up to run my eyes over it, with the corner of my right I watched him take out the brandy bottle and a glass, as if it was an absent-minded reaction, and not the main motive of his manufactured drama. To throw me off the scent still further, he went to put the glass to his lips and then appeared to have a second thought so cogent as to force his hand to put it down on the table. He went to say something, shook his head and snorted instead. Then, after a decent pause, he took his gulp and looked at the ceiling for guidance. With resignation, I played the part of the sympathetic wife he had designed for me. To do otherwise and challenge the charade and the indignation for what I knew it was, an excuse to drink, would lead to a furious row which I could not face. His hand and his head had trembled as he tipped back the glass but his eyes had a familiar gleam. He picked up the bottle and stood over me. As a sudden afterthought, as casually as he could manage, with an *oh, by the way* look, he asked me if I wanted one. It was nearly six so it was not an unreasonable invitation. I did not really want one but it would disappoint him if I refused. An alcoholic finds comfort and camouflage in company. So I nodded and he uncorked a bottle of red wine. His hand had calmed.

“Pompous arseholes!” he yelled, suddenly remembering the notice. He took it from my hand and read. “*Notice is hereby given that Herefordshire District Council in exercise of its powers - powers, I ask you – am I impressed?? - under Section 14 brackets 1 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 have made an Order, the effect of which is to close that part of the path used as a public highway WC62 - from a point outside Hollyhock Cottage that is approximately 18 metres to the south-southeast of the junction of byway WC62 with footpath WC72 at - Oh I don’t believe this! Listen! - at OS Grid Reference SO 553, 168 to a point that is approximately - only approximately? Couldn’t they get a satellite fix on it, or even get the tape measure out? Slipping up there, the pedantic bastards! - approximately 8 metres to the south-east of the junction of footpaths WC79 and WC79 with byway WC62 at OS Grid Reference SO 554,168.....it’s straight out of Monty Python! They sit in their airless cubes at County Hall dreaming this crap up, while people in the real world, doing real jobs, pay rates to put clothes on their fat, idle backs and grub in their flabby chops. Then they retire on a fat pension and pack away their pot-plants - which they spend most of the day watering and preening - to take home, and then sit on their idle arses at our expense for doing precisely bugger-all!*”

He looked for me to share his disgust and amusement, but I was only dismayed and confused. “Does it say why our lane’s closed?” I asked. He tossed it back to me and I read it properly. Half-way down it came to the point and said there was a danger to the public because of a landslide.

“A landslide?” I felt alarm. He saw this and laughed. He grabbed my hand and pulled me from the armchair. I did not resist because he had been forced to put his brandy glass down. I followed him out of the door and turned left onto the lane where the hedges were shaking themselves dry in the wind like water-logged dogs. It was chilly and beginning to get dark. He went striding out in front and I did my best to keep up. Then, at the crown of the bend, not far from Mrs Atkins’ Hollyhock Cottage - where those much-admired blooms were still the closely kept secrets of late March - he stopped and turned to give me his biggest grin. He held out his great arms.

“Best prepare yourself for a shock, Em. This is on a biblical scale.”

His irony deleted any images of a hillside and trees swept away into the gorge, but when I rounded the bend I was amazed to see - as far as I could tell - nothing. He skipped to one side and pointed down to the edge of the lane. I came close and looked. A section of tarmac had been replaced by a spurt of spring water and had somehow tumbled into the ditch.

“What? Is that *all*?” I cried. He looked at me in triumph, prodded around with the toe of his boot and dislodged a tiny bit more. It was a very narrow lane - as all the lanes on the hillside were - but a careful driver could just about squeeze past the hole. I looked down at the River Wye which was sauntering past far below us a little more rapidly than at its usual stroll. There were eddies and I could see some branches which it had dragged in.

“It’s just a bit of rain damage that’s all” I said, wrapping my arms around myself. “It’s a wonder there isn’t more considering how wet it’s been. Come on. I’m freezing.”

He put his arm round me and we turned for home. As we neared our gateway I looked past Rose Cottage, along to the junction with the wider road which plunged down to the bottom of the valley, I saw a large metal sign partially blocking the lane.

“I’ve had a look.” he said “It really does say ROAD CLOSED.”

Our cottage sat at the top of quite a steep drive and after the brisk walk uphill in the lane, I was struggling a bit. He was walking faster. We had left the door open in our haste and the wind had barged into the kitchen and knocked over the coat stand. While I hung everything back up he strode back into the lounge and I heard the gurgle of the bottle. I followed him in and picked up my wine glass to take a tiny sip.

“That effing Jarvis! Bloody interfering old fool. I’ve a good mind.....”

“But *he* isn’t a bureaucrat, darling. He didn’t write that stuff. He’s only a councillor.”

“Same difference.”

He took a large gulp, swallowed and took a deep breath. I told him to relax.

“OK, OK! I’m calm. I’m cool. Look.” He held out his massive hand which no longer trembled. It was now well gone six. That he had left it so long before his first drink was a consolation. He went to pour himself another and I nonchalantly intervened.

“Look, darling. Leave it now. We’ll finish the wine at dinner and then have a brandy and coffee. I’ve still not opened that Colombian stuff Dinah bought us for Christmas.”

He splashed just a little into his glass and nodded curtly, as if he was only waiting to return to his original subject. He pushed the top into the bottle and put it on the floor.

“If people think they can’t get through, they’ll turn round and find somewhere else to stay. How many people do we pick up who are just passing? We could be hundreds out of pocket. That creepy little git, Jarvis! Doesn’t like it we’re attracting trade up here away from his greasy B and B. I’ve a good mind to go down there and have it out with him!”

Down There was almost on the west bank of the Wye, a few lanes below us.

“Well, look, we’ll just have to email people to ignore the ROAD CLOSED sign and to be careful. Look. It says *here* it’s open for access. If you didn’t know about it, you could finish up in the ditch, especially in the dark. I can see why they’ve closed it.”

“I can’t understand you, Em! You always try to see the other man’s point of view, even when they’re up to no good and looking after themselves. You’re too...bloody.....*nice*. I’m telling you, he’s gunning for us because we’re the new kids on the block.”

A new thought burst in on him. “Those bloody Tories! Full of bullshit about enterprise and competition - but when it comes down to it, it’s a different story. Hypocrites!”

What I had been fearing seemed to be happening. The vicious bad temper for which he was renowned was now being fuelled by the spirit. The gleam in his eye was now a glint. I suddenly worried that this had not been the first brandy of the day. Had he put a bottle in his workshop again? The previous October, after he had come in and gone his length, he had given me his solemn promise never to drink in his own company again. He was about to

launch another salvo against that pathetic little, balding man, Jarvis, when I beat him to it. "Oh please, Jack, for God's sake. You're spoiling my day! This is paranoia! All our neighbours are affected and *they* don't have any paying guests - apart from Mr and Mrs Whatsit on the corner. It's all ludicrously officious and over-the-top, I grant you, but it can't be out of spite to us that they've closed the road. And it wouldn't be just down to Jarvis - probably some council engineer. Look, somebody called Lambert has signed the damned thing."

I was relieved to see his anger subside as the sense I had spoken sank in. I went over to cradle his head and sniff his breath. He did not smell too strongly. I picked up the bottle and went into the kitchen to check on the casserole.

We had been here just over a year on this delightful wooded hill amongst the ash and beech trees, overlooking the broad, sleepy Wye. But our new surroundings had not yet had the healing effect on Jack I had prayed for. I assured myself whenever he had a setback that, with time, he would forget the terrible year he had endured. It was unrealistic to expect the memory of what he had seen to be erased overnight. I had tried to get him to talk to me about the grisly discovery he had made but he had always refused, telling me it was best left unsaid. I knew the bare essentials - they had been reported in the newspaper - how all the boys and girls had been found dead. In his troubled sleep when he rambled incoherently and thrashed about, I knew that he was in that room again in the filthy backstreets into which he would not allow me to see. There was only two words I could understand he spoke in his sleep - COULD HAVE - but what it was he could have done do, I would never find out - or so I thought. One morning I gently suggested that he should go for counselling - he had refused the offer made to him at work - but, stupidly I mentioned it just a few days after he had fallen down drunk, and naturally he had interpreted this as a stealthy assault on his weakness for alcohol. He had vehemently asserted that he was not an alcoholic. Did he ever drink first thing in the morning? No. Did he drink every day? No. He was an *alcoholicist*, not an alcoholic. *Ifor* at the Riverbank Inn was an alcoholic, not him. He was not dependent, he just enjoyed a drink and sometimes got carried away. *That* was his weakness, and I should not worry. He kept maintaining that once he had got that year properly out of his system, then he would return to what he termed "normal." It was true, I have to admit, that prior to that ghastly episode he had been more or less a moderate drinker, in no way akin to the stereotype of the gravel-throated Detective Superintendent, with a bottle of Scotch rolling about in his desk drawer. But I had been just as certain that one way to get it out of his system was to literally *talk* it out, if not with me, then with somebody qualified to listen and advise. *Oh, oh, oh - a shrink!* he had cried, *Absolutely not!* Another useless trade he had no time for, like the bureaucrats and politicians he had come to loathe! The truth was that the job - not just the final scenes in his career - had scarred him deeply and turned him into a misanthrope. At dinner parties, once lubricated enough, he would boast that he liked about thirty people on the planet - including of course his dear guests, otherwise they would not have been invited! - and that the rest were rather a disappointment, to say the least. Our company found this shocking and amusing - but I could almost hear some people wondering aloud what it was like for me to live with this great, craggy bear of a man - wonderful company and witty though he was. How affectionate, sensitive and kind was he? He was genial and handsome, had been a brilliant policeman, with a hatred of fraud and deceit, and it saddened me that he resorted to those ploys to find pretexts for drinking. It saddened me too that he did not think me astute enough to see through them. It might seem like an absurd analogy, but I knew that like a fine claret, given time, all the hidden qualities I sensed were there would emerge and that one day he would pick me up and tell me he loved me without being asked. We had been married nearly two years, both after long, mediocre marriages to rather safe, predictable

people. I knew that my instincts about the softer side of Jack were not wrong. I had glimpsed it. It still had to be there. The dreamy river we lived by would one day wear away the flinty shell he had built up through having to deal with so much human dross.

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And what of me, now Marilyn Grant, nee Warner, ex-Chisholm? This was to have been a diary, a chart of our progress in our new skins. And very dull and, I fear, very disappointing it would have turned out, had we not been overtaken and tempered by events. Please understand, I am not proud of what I describe next.

I had been a personal assistant to the manager of a smallish custodian bank - since gobbled up by the Bank of New York - and had met Jack Grant at a reception which the last Governor was giving, and I was first of all struck by the sheer presence of him. Around him were clustered other, lesser men, intently listening and laughing as he evidently entertained them with some anecdote in a low, pleasant growl which I placed in the north of England somewhere, though which side of it, York or Lancaster, being a Londoner, I could not tell. My boss had begged me at the late notice to go with him as his wife had gone down with some sort of flu, and I felt quite flattered to be asked. My husband had no objection and even if he had had, I would have still gone. I was also much looking forward, I confess, to meeting charming Mr Patten, a Tory "wet" for whom I had some respect. But I digress, a failing of mine. My boss had gone to make a phone call and had left me with rather a dull couple who owned property in the hills overlooking the bay which they rented out. They told me of a minor royal who had been on their books, and of some soap opera actress and her boyfriend who had got drunk and trashed one of their flats. I tried to look in turn impressed, amazed and appalled, and after a decent interval I had made an excuse and wandered off amongst the other couples and groups. I was admiring the huge crystal chandelier in the centre of the ceiling when a chorus of laughter grounded my thoughts, and, as if a small body drawn in by this Jupiter, I began to hover, then to approach him and his satellites. He was a handsome man, grey-haired and distinguished looking, with a high forehead and a good nose. I did a slow orbit of him and saw how kind his eyes were - they were remarkably blue - and big for a man's eyes - and how attentive he was to the small Indian man who was trying to get clarification of something. I was close enough now to catch what was being said.

"But, Mr *Graunt*, this is not the type of humour I have learnt to associate with the English. I am more used to the gentle subtleties of Noel Coward and PG Woodhouse. Kindly explain, Mr *Graunt*, why the actress would say what she did. I am not understanding this quite, Sir."

"It's just another English way of joking, Mr Choudury. More saloon bar, or golf club humour... *As the actress said to the bishop*.... It's a way of making something innocent sound rude. It's hard to explain. So if someone said about a melon or a pineapple "My goodness, that's a big one" someone else might comment "As the actress said to the bishop." As Mr Choudury thought about this, Mr "Graunt" looked around, then down and saw me. He looked surprised and smiled. I had had a couple of glasses of champagne and felt brave.

"And then everybody falls about laughing," I added. "We Brits are not very subtle after all." His entourage gave me a good stare, took in a deep *oh-she's-one-of-that-politically-correct-school* breath and blew out like dolphins, before returning to their drinks. He turned to me. He said he hoped I had not taken offence. It had not been *him* to blame, he added under his breath, but a colleague who had just interrupted his story to mention actresses and bishops. He said he was sorry. *Had* I been offended?

"Not at all. I was eavesdropping. You were doing your duty, explaining British humour to a foreigner. You're not the cultural attaché by any chance?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed, with a genuine, pleasant laugh. "A witty *and* pretty woman! A rare beast

indeed!"

I told him my name but someone had been guffawing so loud nearby that he thought I had said it was Lynne. No, Em for Marilyn, I had replied. Within ten minutes I knew quite a lot about him, and him about me. He knew I was an unfulfilled, glorified secretary, a writer *manqué*, and I knew he was an important man with Interpol. We knew we were married and I knew that his wife had just returned to Hemel Hempstead with their teenage sons after the breakdown of his marriage. He knew that my husband of twenty years worked for the venerable stockbroking firm of Dimmock and Cowper at the Hang Seng. He had even asked me, with the frankness I expected of northerners, if I was happy, and the champagne in me retorted too boldly in the affirmative. He raised an eyebrow and said that I was one of the unusual ones. He told me he was forty-five and I just smiled. He was too gallant to press the matter. In the silence as the detective in him studied my hands and throat to assess my age and as I debated whether just to tell him, my boss spied me out, and after a swift introduction and excuse-us, I was taken off to do the rounds.

The next morning, a Saturday, I had been awake only a few seconds when I thought of him and had to contain a laugh at his jests. Then I felt rather guilty. Harry Chisholm, snoring lightly beside me in very early dawn, was a good, reliable husband who treated me with respect and consideration, and who - in his well-measured way - loved me. We were very comfortably off and lived high above the teeming floor of the city. If being married to Harry was a habit, it was not one I was in a hurry to break. But something below conscious thought must have been burrowing away, because the next Saturday when I awoke next to him and immediately thought about Jack again, a voice simply said to me "Do you want to stay with Harry for the rest of your life?" and the answer NO immediately followed, and kept echoing in my head all day. The next morning over breakfast that voice came straight out and amazed me, telling him I wanted a divorce. He had been scraping away in the honey jar and asking if I had bought a new one. He continued scraping and I thought that he had not heard me. He spread his toast, then put down his trembling knife and stared at me with a strange half-smile. Finally he asked me if I had a lover. I shook my head.

"Then why, Marilyn? Aren't you happy?"

"I'm OK."

"Is it the sex?"

"No...that's OK as well - when it happens."

"When it happens? It doesn't happen enough? Is that what you're saying?"

"NO. It's OK."

"Then why?"

"Because that's all my life is, Harry. OK. I'm not far off fifty. Being married to you, well I've done that now...and I need to do something else."

He tried to persuade me to change my mind but if he was torn apart he managed to conceal it. There followed a few weeks of inactivity like the Phoney War in 1939 when we carried on more or less as normal except that I took to the spare room at night. And who knows? It might have carried on like that for months or even years if Jack had not phoned me a few weeks later to tell me bluntly and matter-of-factly, as if he might be on his way round to make an arrest, how he could not stop thinking about me. I was shocked first of all - and not a little angry that he had gotten hold of my home number. He told me that he would not be much of a cop if he had not managed to. Anyway I met him for coffee and he took me to his flat where I realised with astonishment that sex with Harry, the one-and-only bed-mate of my adult life, had been anything but OK. On my return home I still felt dizzy and my face must have told Harry everything he needed to know. He cried a little, pulled himself together and sheltered behind the Financial Times. A year later Marilyn Chisholm had metamorphosed

into Marilyn Grant.

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We had arrived back in England in the late autumn as the final leaves were falling and the garden perennials were shrinking back from the fog and frost to their winter sanctuaries. When the year turned, and as the days began to lengthen again we watched in delight as every day brought a fresh surprise in our new garden. In late February countless nubs of green appeared which gradually became swaying stands of daffodils and narcissi in late March. Along the margins of the paths, like tiny blue turrets, emerged the grape hyacinths; in a corner by the hedgerow and gate post, where the April sun had been incubating the empty spot, a shrub seemed to shoot up from one day to the next and covered itself in pink hearts - "love-lies-bleeding", Mrs Chapman told me when I asked her. The huge tree in the opposite corner where the lane took a sudden dive, turned out to be a magnificent pink magnolia and when the wind blew down the gorge the petals took off like tiny flamingos. And as the spring made way for summer the white clematis flowers which had smothered the cottage wall faded to a host of grey beards and were replaced by the softest, most delicate yellow roses spraying from stocks so thick that they must have been scaling the white walls for most of the previous century. The spring flowers drooped and gave way to red and yellow lupins, pale blue delphiniums and yellow verbascum and - of course - a bewildering array of roses. I felt as if I had inherited a great fortune and realised what dreadful agonies our elderly vendor, Mrs Hubbard, not long widowed, must have suffered on vacating it.

There was barely a space where I could plant anything of my own but what did I need to add? Against the stones of the garage at the end of the drive on a row of canes facing the soaring easterly sun, I planted my personal favourites, sweet peas. In that dark fibrous soil concocted from generations of fallen leaves they thrived and blossomed, pervading the July air with their heady scent.

With no encouragement from me, Jack occasionally followed my example, and with a delight I could scarcely contain, I watched him wonder around in his shorts and cream straw hat, tying in, hoeing and dead-heading. The whole garden was such an obvious and powerful metaphor of new life, of healing, of a new beginning that not even his prosaic soul could overlook it.

But our chief delights were the giant ash and beech trees through which the sun dappled the garden. Instead of being oppressive as I had feared, they cloaked us in mystery and secrecy, and we felt at our ease. On the practical side, my fair complexion needed the natural protection of the leafy canopy, and I could sit out on the few very hot days that first summer in comfort. Following Mrs Chapman's example, Jack built a large bird-table from which we could hang many feeders and it became our chief entertainment. One morning he seized me and almost carried me to the window, pointing to a gorgeous red and green bird, swinging on a nut-cylinder. In the other hand, in the book he had bought, he showed me a picture of the same bird - a green woodpecker.

Behind the cottage, high on a very steep slope, stumbling down on eroded terraces, was an apple orchard, and below it, almost adjacent to the house, was a dilapidated outbuilding which had once housed a cider press. I had been delighted when my disconsolate husband - by November he had developed a loathing of house-hunting after our return to Britain in the early autumn - had suddenly perked up to hear the estate agent mention it in passing. Before his posting to Hong Kong, he told me, he had been stationed in Paris. His friend and colleague Serge had owned a holiday cottage in a tiny hamlet called Le Rouge, not far from Le Mans, and he had spent many a weekend there. The area was famous for its cider and

calvados, and Serge had taken him once to a small cidrerie owned by a friend of his cousin. He produced a small vintage of cider champagne which was snapped up by friends and select hostelrys in the locality. It was, Jack told me, easily as delicious and refreshing as the genuine stuff.

The idea of rebuilding the cider house had roused Jack from the torpor he had been in since his descent into depression, and had so enthused him that my principal objection to the cottage, its easterly-facing aspect, diminished. The view through the bare trees was startling and the prospect of being tranquil and so isolated very seductive. The orchard and the gleam I had missed in his eyes for so long finally clinched the deal. We parted with a huge amount of money, having worked out that if Jack's police pension (mine was frozen) was supplemented by income from our guest-cabin we would get by quite comfortably, especially if we cleared an overgrown area on the extreme left of the cabin to grow vegetables.

Jack had even phoned Serge, told him of his project and invited him over later in the year, at a date to be specified. He had readily agreed and promised to squeeze his friend's apple secrets from him. No, Jack had retorted in French, he should bring him along! It seemed my prayers were being answered. Having a deadline to work to meant him drawing up plans and getting into a routine again. Surely now he would snap out of the stagnant mindset he had been in since his enforced retirement.

In April he took delivery of a large amount of local stone to replace the ancient boulders sold or robbed out for other projects long forgotten, borrowed a cement mixer and some tips from a builder he had befriended in The Riverbank Inn, and set to work. He built timber frames for the window and the door. Gradually a new outbuilding took shape on the base of the old. Then one morning he looked out disconsolately at the rain and said he would have a rest from it for a day or two, and get on with the website. A week later, with the spring sun firmly re-established, he showed no sign of wanting to get outside to finish the cidrerie off. This was frustrating because the back apex was complete and the front was not far off coming to a point. The concrete floor needed to be shuttered and laid and the roofing timbers he had fixed together sat propped against the garage wall. The lathes, the roofing felt and slates were on order. On the internet he had located an apple press. As casually as I could, I asked him one morning when those things were being delivered. He told me in that low, growling murmur I dreaded that he decided to *put things on the back burner*. He needed, he added, to do a few jobs in the cabin first.

"The website will be ready soon. Guests can't come if the shower is playing up. The cider will have to wait. Business comes first. I phoned Serge and told him it would be next year."

So he stopped the leak in the shower, hung a new bedroom door - the old one left a small gap by the jamb - and gave things a lick of paint. I went in to inspect his workmanship and gave him a hug. He held back a little. He told me, breaking away, that he had been rethinking the website.

"Let's just have your name on it, Marilyn. As proprietress. No need to mention me."

"Why ever not?"

"Why? Because I'd rather have it that way."

"But why?"

I had not detected the simmering anger within him. Now it exploded. He shouted that he had his reasons and stormed out. I watched him stride back through the garden, scattering the finches and tits on the feeders in all directions. He apologised later and said he would get on with the vegetable garden. A heavy shower drove him indoors after he had completed two and a half rows. Two days later the spade remained where he had left it. He returned from Ross to find me digging - or rather trying to. He dropped the shopping, hurried over and took the spade from me.

"You'll hurt your back trying to turn this heavy stuff. I can take a hint, duck. Let's have a

bowl of soup and I'll get cracking again this afternoon. I think the rain will hold off." But his weather eye was wrong and it poured. He spent his time pottering about in the workshop and three days later the spade still stood where he had slammed it. It was not long after that that I realised he had started his solitary drinking again. He had spent the late afternoon hammering away in the shed and I had taken this for a good sign. When he came in for his dinner I could smell it on his breath. I found the bottle of brandy in the tool cupboard and brought it inside. It occurred to me then that it - or more probably a predecessor - had also been secreted in the holiday cabin when he was doing his jobs there. I put it on the table and told him nicely but firmly that I would much rather him drink in the house. With me. I would quite like one too.

"I'm NOT an alcoholic! Why are you spying on me?"

"I know you're not. And I'm not spying. I came across it by accident," I lied.

"I NEVER drink until later. I just need one now and then - when it gets bad in here."

He banged his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Is it bad now?"

He held out his hand and it trembled slightly. I embraced him and he slowly embraced me back. But as usual he remained silent when I told him how much I loved him. Why did he never tell me the same and only nod or murmur if I asked?

In the end not only was he left out of the website, but at his insistence I lost my married status and was registered as Marilyn Warner. I did not argue. He told me without being asked that he just wanted to remain in the background and anonymous. I accepted this and put it down as a symptom of his depression. He insisted also that our utility bills and credit cards were all registered in my name. We had an ex-directory phone number and he only existed as Jack Grant for internet banking. He seemed to want to shrink back into a shell and exist only for me and the few acquaintances we had made on the Hill, who knew him only as Jack.

We had made one good friend since our arrival. Willem lived in a large house in the lane below ours and was a retired oil-tanker captain out of Rotterdam with a passion for photography. Nowadays he was content, he said, just to paddle his canoe along the Wye, looking for great shots of kingfishers. He could sell these for tidy sums to manufacturers of calendars and greetings cards. He had been lucky enough to capture one bird emerging from the water, surrounded by silver droplets, with a horrified fish in its beak. It was an amazing picture which had, he said, earned him a four figure sum - not that he *needed the money*. He spent any he earned on his two weaknesses, finest cigars and five-star brandy.

We met him one night by arrangement at the Riverbank Inn and he soon had us roaring with laughter at his anecdotes about life on the high seas. He had a round ruddy face and sun-bleached white eyebrows and hair, reminding me of Big Ears. He was almost as broad as he was tall - which was not much taller than me. His limbs and head seemed stuck within his body and I imagined five men all pulling at once might be able to make them pop out. We went to sit outside that fine May evening and watched Phil the Boat haul himself and his ferry-load of tourists across the river by the simple means of a loop of rope thrown ever further along the thick wire strung across the river between two poles. For how many millennia had the tribes in the area crossed the river that way?

"Ah! The simple ingenuity of the British!" he had exclaimed with a throaty cough, exhaling a delicious-smelling fog from his cigar. "You are not a subtle race of thinkers - like the French pretend to be - but it was practical geniuses like James Watt and Matthew Boulton who made the modern world."

It was the first time we had seen the ferry in action and Jack was fascinated.

"Maybe. But it would be hard to beat the Chinese. They could build a nuclear power station

out of junk." he said.

They swapped stories about the inventiveness of the necessitous peoples they had encountered on their travels and in their careers. They clearly liked and admired each other, totally unlike though they were. We began a fresh bottle of white wine and in the pleasant warmth which the sun, now disappeared behind the hillside, had left us, our appetites sharpened. Jake the chef, partner of Jim the landlord, made us a delicious salad of locally smoked trout.

We had often passed Willem in the lane and on the forest track which ran parallel to the river, and were on more than nodding terms. He had told us, amongst other things, where the best food was to be had. That was why we had arranged to meet him in the Riverbank. He had mentioned "we" and "us" and we had assumed a wife. But he turned up that night on his own and we never did find out about "her". Jack speculated he might be slightly mad after a lonely life at sea, with a split personality. I countered that perhaps he had just meant other friends when he had said "we eat at the Riverbank". As far as we could tell - because he never mentioned one - there had never been a partner of either sex in his life.

"Perhaps because of his job," said Jack, as we walked back home one night after meeting him there again.

"Or perhaps he chose that life because he just enjoys his own company," I mused.

The conversation at the inn that first time soon turned to why we had chosen to live in that part of the world. Jack gave Willem a special version of his CV and I decided to remain - maybe too conspicuously - silent. He told him he had worked for Interpol in Hong Kong in the eighties and had returned to Paris in '91. He had met me at a reception at the British Embassy, and when it came out that I had worked for a Hong Kong bank, it had given us plenty to talk about. It eventually emerged, he lied, that we had both spent family holidays in the Wye area and had almost certainly crossed paths without knowing it. Willem had raised his eyebrows but he seemed inclined to accept this version of events. Had it struck him, like me, that Jack's fascination with the rope ferry did not quite sit with the familiarity previous visits ought to have bred? I blushed and stared at the river. But Willem seemed keener to tell us his story than continue frowning in surprise at Jack's. His was pretty simple. He had seen a picture of the gorge on a calendar three years before and had known instantly that he wanted to retire there - at the grand old age of 50. Jack had shaken his head.

"Of *all* the places you've been to! *Here*?"

"Well, as you know, The Netherlands is quite flat. The ocean is quite flat too. I got so tired of *flat* - and this place seemed perfect. I like to sit in my garden and observe the peregrines over there. I get good pictures in the woods of the various birds. I can't think of a nicer way to spend my retirement. I have a first glass of wine and a cigar at six. I listen to Beethoven - from good old Dutch stock and part negro *he* was - and wait till the stars come out - when they *do* - and gaze at them through my telescope. I am a well contented man. I wish good health to you."

Jack raised his glass and fell suddenly silent. A sudden breeze had brought a chill into the air and we went inside.

"I must tell you about Ifor. Him at the bar" whispered Willem "Unless you already know." We shook our heads. Jack said he had never seen him before.

"Then you must have been here on his odd nights off," he replied with a grin.

The man he had pointed to was tall, thin and rather unkempt, squeezed into old-fashioned clothes too small for him. He stood in the corner between the bar counter and the wall, almost bolt upright and seemingly in a trance.

"He lives further down the valley where the tarmac lane gives up and divides into two tracks."

"One follows the river and the other goes into the woods?"

“That’s it! By the big house.”

Where the lane divided stood a large Victorian house which was partly a B and B and partly holiday flatlets. (Two I think.) Its name-plate announced it as Wye Manor, but - according to Willem - by the locals it had long been called Bleak House. It did a good, steady trade, said Willem, but few - if any - returned, unless their fascination with Ifor, its co-owner, overcame any scruples about its fustiness and lack of modern décor and comforts. For Ifor was an alcoholic. His wife put up with him for some reason, but at her insistence the bar at Wye Manor had been taken out. She had long given up the hunt for the scores of bottles he had hidden around the house and buried in the garden. Willem told us that he was the kind of alcoholic who always had a background level of alcohol and who, from the very moment he woke to the moment he slept, spent the whole day topping it up. He never got roaring drunk but he was never sober. Years of imbibing had left its mark. His skin was sallow and he was not well co-ordinated. One guest had mentioned to Bob, Jim’s predecessor at The Riverbank, that her landlord was disabled and had to get around by grabbing furniture and had a walker on wheels. This snippet had brought the house - or rather the tap-room - down.

I was concerned that Ifor could hear Willem’s tale but he assured me he was, in some autistic way, entirely out of the loop. He smiled and carried on. On the strict understanding that he would never be served spirits and never more than four pints of beer, Ifor was allowed three nightly outings by his wife, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to The Riverbank. A taxi travelled up from the village just off the dual carriageway to pick him up from Wye Manor, and two and a half hours later, when he had had his four pints at strict intervals of forty-five minutes, it returned to take him home. What made this all the more remarkable was that he lived barely three hundred yards away. His wife could not drive. On rare occasions “Mrs Ifor” came too.

On our subsequent outings to the pub we saw her once. A large, untidy lady who wore brown, elasticated slacks - the sort with elastic in the bottoms to cradle her feet - who never stopped hitching them up over her rump as she stood chain-smoking at the bar next to her Ifor. We watched fascinated to see what might pass for communication between them. But he just kept staring at the wall behind the bar, taking occasional sips from his glass like an automaton. Why he was looking with longing at the spirit-optics emptying and filling as Jim pressed tumblers up against them? Then all at once the solution to the riddle came to me and I almost cried out. It was simple and very sad. It was the clock which absorbed and obsessed him. Whenever the second hand reached twelve he took up his glass and drank.

“*That*” murmured Jack almost gratefully “Is an *alcoholic*.”

But between a tea-totaller and Ifor there are many shades of grey, I almost replied.

After our first meeting we left Willem and his cronies in the bar, with an open invitation to him to share our supper table.

“Why did you lie about Hong Kong?” I asked as soon as we were alone.

“Because I don’t want anyone to know what happened to me. I don’t want them to ask or talk about it. I wish now I’d stuck at Paris and not mentioned Hong Kong.”

I waited until we had overtaken a dawdling couple and left them safely in our wake.

“You really need to get it out of your system.”

“No. I need to put it behind me. Bury it. Believe me, Em, the worst thing would be people knowing the truth about me. About where I’ve been. People are nosy. A lot of them have the internet. I bet Willem does. If he asks, we are called Warner. I want my privacy here, Marilyn. I want to be left in peace. I didn’t mean to mention Interpol. It just came out. The wine. The truth drug. “

Our website looked very professional and it soon began to pay off. The photos of the cabin he had taken were really good and the picture of the cottage garden breathtaking. Bookings began to pour in and many people came more than once. Some even booked again for the same time following year. Jack brightened up for a while and even returned to his project. He bought a wheelbarrow and ordered bags of concrete for the cider house floor. He nearly bought a cider press then realised that it would not go through the door. He would either have to find a narrower one or dismantle part of the front wall. He cursed his stupidity.

"You could borrow a block and tackle from David Conway and winch it in over the wall," I suggested. "*Then* put the roof on. No-one would steal it."

He brightened and told me I had missed my calling. He said he would get on to it. But by the time the autumn came again the roof joists still stood propped against their wall, the wheelbarrow had begun to lose its sheen and the bags of concrete sheltered under their tarpaulin. He became so depressed in January that he sought help. He promised me again that he would not find relief in the bottle. The drugs took the edge off it and when the spring bulbs began to reappear in late February, and he brightened up, I almost wept for joy.

*

"We have our first weekly booking off the year! Next Monday till Friday," I exclaimed one Saturday in early April, a week or so after the collapse of the lane. We had had a few weekends booked but the booking of a whole week was another sign that the spring was finally arriving after such a dismal winter, in every sense. He looked up from his paper and smiled.

"New people? Or one of last year's satisfied customers?"

"New, I think. A Mr Bonshor. Hold on. No. The address is not on our list. A man and his daughter. Wants to know if there's a bed-settee in the lounge. A bit odd."

My suspicious antennae had pricked up.

"Odd? Why?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. It doesn't feel right. Intuition."

"Suspicious, dirty mind you mean! Just tell him to come! Two hundred quid? Who cares what they're into? Then a hundred and forty *next* weekend."

"*And* the one after that."

"Can't be bad. I bet Jarvis's joint is empty, miserable old bugger. Make sure you tell your Mr Bonshor to ignore the ROAD CLOSED sign."

When our guests arrived the following Monday afternoon, my suspicions proved groundless, and I felt slightly ashamed. The daughter resembled the father strongly around the eyes and nose. Both had earnest grey eyes and unusually broad foreheads and I thought at first they might be Welsh. But they spoke with an indeterminate accent, neither north nor south. Their U-sounds were dark and I placed them somewhere in the Midlands, but definitely not in Birmingham.

He was called Paul and his daughter Sarah. What puzzled me - and I was loath to be nosy - was the apparent disparity in their ages. He was obviously past fifty, balding with some tousled, see-through hair that needed cutting - but she looked about sixteen. She was slight, quite tall, dark-haired and girlish; not pretty in the modern vacant way, but her face possessed strength and character, and her intense eyes revealed a beguiling intelligence. My first impression of him was not so positive. He had frown lines around the mouth, as if formed by years of melancholia - but after I showed them round the spotless cabin and he had a chance to take in the glories of the garden and the spectacular views on the far side of the gorge, his

face softened into an expression of serenity and delight. His daughter threaded her arm through his and said what a brilliant picture they could paint of it. I took this as a whimsical comment, but when I returned a little later with the complementary bottle of champagne I had forgotten to leave on the kitchen table, they were unloading watercolours, palettes and ring-binders of canvasses on the veranda. I could not help but ask if they were professional artists. The daughter laughed and he shook his unruly head.

"Very amateurish, I'm afraid, Marilyn," he confessed.

Of course he knew my name from the website and I had welcomed him as Marilyn Warner. But I still felt a little offended by his familiarity. I'm old-fashioned, I suppose. I hate to be addressed by people in call centres as Marilyn and do not hesitate to tell them so. Anyway, he seemed unaware that he might have appeared forward. His daughter whispered to me when he had gone inside for something that he had been a teacher of art and history in a Leicester school.

"He's very good, and I'm sure he'd love to paint you something." she added.

I wished her a pleasant stay and contrived to get a longer look at her face by saying she had a fly in her hair. As I picked it out, I looked at her eyes and saw the very early signs of crow's feet. I realised that she had to be at least in her late twenties.

The next day they knocked on the door and asked if there was a quicker way down to the river than by road. It *did* take for ever down the winding lanes. So I told them about the path we had named the Wild Way.

"If you're not looking for it you'll miss it. There's a slight gap in the laurel hedge opposite Rose Cottage and if you look in, there's a footpath sign. It's very overgrown and you'll have to be careful of the nettles - and if it's wet you'll get soaked. But it takes only ten minutes down. It's a killer coming back up though. You have to be fit!"

Jack wanted to buy some good wine for our summer evenings out in the garden. He loved barbecuing. Someone in the pub had mentioned a firm that did a free home wine-tasting, as long as an order for at least fifty pounds of wine was placed. So he had phoned the number he had been given and arranged a visit for the Wednesday evening of that week. Willem was coming and I said it would be nice if we asked our guests Paul and Sarah. As they returned from their walk to Monmouth, looking pretty exhausted, I asked them to join us at seven on the patio. I had bought smoked salmon, crab and prawns and had baked wholemeal bread. There was a fine evening in prospect and we could sit out under our garden lights until the April air grew chilly.

"A wine-tasting!" said Paul. "Sounds wonderful, but I don't think Sarah will drink wine, will you, duck? It doesn't agree with you."

"I'll try just a little," she said.

"I'll make sure we have some fruit juice, Sarah." I said. "I don't have much of a head for alcohol either. You can meet our Dutch friend Willem. He's very entertaining."

The young man arrived as arranged at quarter to seven in a black BMW. He greeted us cheerily and unloaded two large square cases with a top handle. In one were his reds and in the other, chilled by a frozen picnic block, a selection of whites. The bottles were topped by a metallic pourer to ensure that only a modest measure went into our glasses. He began his spiel very slickly, handing out cards with tasting notes and prices and jotters with pens for us to write down the wines we were interested in. The prices were impressive, some bottles costing in excess of fifty pounds, but most would set us back between ten and twenty. (We could buy perfectly good Chablis in Ross for around six pounds, and after two glasses did not most wines taste alike?) But I kept my thoughts to myself as the glasses were poured, emptied and discussed. Between each glass we reached for a piece of white baguette to clean our palettes. Willem had nothing bad to say about any of them, but Jack was more outspoken

- even rude - about some. Paul remained largely silent until a Frankenwein was produced. He told us of a night in Bayreuth, Germany when he had gotten drunk on the “blasted stuff” and had suffered for days.

“It tasted like thinners - not that I’m in the habit of drinking thinners.”

Jack said he liked it but it was very dry. Paul sniffed his and poured it into Jack’s glass. An hour later we had worked our way through the samples and Jack ordered a case each of the three wines - a red burgundy, a Chianti Classico and a grey burgundy from Lake Constance - which had most impressed us. This well exceeded the fifty pound mark. Willem also ordered a couple of cases and the delighted young man presented us with two bottles of plonk from the boot of his car to wash our supper down. I felt light-headed, Paul was slurring, Jack had his gleam and high spirits, but Willem seemed utterly unaffected. Sarah sat looking rather bored. The young man left us and I switched on the garden lights in the gathering gloom. We ate. I fetched a bottle of white from the fridge at Jack’s prompting. When I returned he was pontificating. He had evidently asked Paul what he used to teach.

"History is depressing. It's just the record of what utter bastards people are." said Jack.

Paul Bonshor laughed and emptied his glass.

"It’s the shadow-side I’m more interested in,” he said eventually “The hidden stories of people just wanting to be left alone by the powerful and the greedy and live their lives in peace.”

This seemed to embarrass Jack. His definition of history, in the light of this calm response from Bonshor, seemed wildly out of balance. Willem looked at Bonshor and said “So you are more into *social* history than the kings and queens....and *battles*?”

“Correct.”

Jack was not to be bested. The gleam had turned to a glint.

“You make them sound so virtuous, the *little* people. Given half the chance most of them would have been just as nasty. Absolute power and all that! Forget Marxist analysis. As if the poor, downtrodden masses, once liberated, would show more mercy than their oppressors. What about Stalin and Hitler?

“What about them?”

“Aristocrats? No! They were Nobodies and possibly even the worse for it, having been frustrated members of the Nobody class.”

“But that *is* Marxist analysis!” said Bonshor calmly. “The aspiring class will overthrow the suppressors - like lava under pressure. Marx never argued that the aspirers were morally better than the rulers.”

“Have you ever read Marx? He talked about a withering away of the state towards a perfect anarchy when a just means of production and system of rewards would be established. Have you ever read Moore’s Utopia? Rousseau? Hegel? All precursors of Marx and believers in the perfectibility of Man. *Get the politics and economics right and a new Eden would follow.* Bullshit! It’s not the environment that shapes men, but men the environment. I’ve seen nasty people from all walks of life, and it ain’t pretty. I swapped from History to P.P.E. at Cambridge. It depressed me too much. At least philosophy was clean and largely untried - like an expanse of snow without human footprints.”

“P.P.E. ? So what did you become? A philosopher, a politician or an economist?” asked Bonshor.

“Worse!” exclaimed Willem blowing out his smoke and laughing. “A policeman!”

Jack glared at him with an expression of absolute hatred but said nothing. He poured out more wine. I was dying to tell Willem what dangerous ground he was setting foot on. He had failed to spot the warning signs I knew.

“Willem is being flippant of course” said Jack calmly and I relaxed a notch. I tried to draw everyone’s attention to the colourful finch attacking the bird-feeder.

“In my idealistic youth I saw myself as a crusader - out to rescue the innocent from the villainous scum who predated on them. I *might* have been a politician, but becoming a policeman seemed to offer the chance to do immediate Good - better than voting in legislation that might do some good in five years’ *time*. The only politician I admire is Nye Bevan. He didn’t mess about. He brought in the NHS in the teeth of overwhelming opposition within six months. That’s how I saw myself. I had the determination to eliminate all the black pieces and the black squares from the chessboard. If I’d have been a politician I’d have been a benign dictator like Bevan.”

“Me too!” said Bonshor with enthusiasm as Jack paused. “I wanted kids to see history in a moral light. But, Mr Warner, you can’t deny that folks today have infinitely better lives than their Victorian ancestors. Life expectancy, material wellbeing, health - all because of men - and women - like Bevan. Why are you so dismissive of progress? It’s real!”

“It’s an illusion. We live longer but we’re not morally *better*. You’re retired, Mr Bonshor, right? Why?”

“I dropped off the pace.”

Sarah broke from her reverie and looked at him anxiously.

“The kids got too boisterous for me. They needed a younger teacher who could cope.”

“You mean they rejected your message?”

“Partly. It’s not their fault. Authority has broken down. Parents can’t control them. My old-fashioned style didn’t sit well. I couldn’t adapt. I went.”

Jack emptied his glass and smiled a victory smile.

“So. *There’s* your progress.”

But Bonshor was unabashed. “I don’t see quite it like that. It’s a generation thing. What would, for example, Queen Victoria think if she could see the present goings-on? I was Queen Victoria. There’s a new shift in morality and mentality. There always is. Basically, we’re old farts. *Après nous le deluge?* But the flood never comes.”

“Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose? Is that what you mean?”

Willem laughed. “You’re both right, of course, and you’re both wrong. It is not a new morality. Most people are still kind. Most people would run to help to her feet an old lady who has fallen in the street. Or a fallen child.”

Jack flinched. “Were children press-ganged into brothels in the olden days?”

“Oh without a doubt!” cried Bonshor in a sudden passion. “Have you never heard of Fanny Hill? How far did you go into history before you stopped?”

Jack stood up, catching the edge of the table and making the glasses and bottle dance.

“I *knew* the answer to my question! So, *how* are things better? I don’t need a lecture from *you* on child exploitation! I was sent to Hong Kong to shut those fucking brothels down and stop the gangs which were exporting kids!”

His voice trailed off and he sat down. In the silence the evening blackbird sang. I mopped up the mess and Jack reached for another bottle.

“I’m very sorry, Mr Bonshor,” he said. “I got carried away. The point I was trying to make was that it *still* goes on and is much better organized than it was before. Please accept my apologies.”

Willem patted his shoulder. He told Jack not to open a fresh bottle for *his* sake.

“I’m sorry too, Mr Warner,” said Paul. “The wine, I think. Please, don’t open another bottle for me either.”

Jack stalled and I took the bottle gently from his grasp.

“You know, when I went into the police I really thought that with a concerted effort - *and* education *and* better living conditions - crime would disappear. Like smallpox. And cholera. How many cases of cholera were there in London last year? And typhoid fever? But for every criminal I arrested another sprang up. Like the teeth of the hydra. That’s what overwhelmed

me in the end. Ça, c'est le deluge - la cruauté humaine, l'un envers l'autre - un fleuve sans pause qui s'augmente sans cesse."

"You'll have to forgive me Mr Warner," said our guest. "I only did French up to O-Level." I shook my head too, not wanting to be involved. Jack sprang up and went into the house. So Willem translated.

"He says it's a human flood of cruelty without let-up, getting worse all the time." Then he looked at me quizzically. "I would have thought your French would have been OK, Marilyn, you working all those years in Paris?"

I felt myself blush. I *had* understood but now I lied.

"Languages were not my forte, Willem. I got by. My boss was English."

"It's not a flood of *crime* you Brits should worry about," he replied, as if he had not heard me. "It's all those obese, idle so-and-sos who will not work. How many of them does one taxpayer support, I wonder? That's the flood you're going to drown in, when the dirt hit's the fan. And it will!"

"You should be alright this high up. Gangs of starving fatties are never going to get up here," said Paul, tongue in cheek. "But just in case they lose weight in the process, keep the road closed. And grow vegetables!"

"Oh for goodness sake!" I shouted. "How gloomy everyone is! The apocalypse is never going to happen in our lifetime! And I believe that we have just about enough goodness and commonsense to preserve our own hides and those dearest to us. There, that's my philosophy, for what it's worth." I began to clear the table. Jack had slipped back outside and now sat down.

"All men are equal" murmured Jack. "Equally bad."

Willem held up his hands. "What nonsense you talk sometimes for such an intelligent man, Jack!" he exclaimed. "Is the Pope as much of a rogue as Adolf Hitler?"

Unexpectedly Sarah spoke. "In God's eyes we are all equally sinful."

Jack laughed. "There you are, Willem! You're a sinner. The Pope's a sinner. Sarah says so."

"I believe that Jesus came to save us from sin" she said simply. But Jack shook his head. As far as he could see, he said, he had not made a very good job of it.

"No, you don't understand. To be a Christian is to be forgiven - even for the sins we are still to commit."

"You *really* believe that?"

"I do."

"I'm sorry. I don't think we are worth all that pain he endured. We must be quite a disappointment to God - with our trivial obsessions. Shopping...celebrities...*football* money...house prices...diet...*bettering ourselves*....God, how *loathsome!*"

I nudged him, thinking he was going too far and upsetting our guests, but Sarah appeared not to notice or to care.

"Sin can't be *eradicated*, Mr Warner, like smallpox or cholera. But each of us has free will. We can *choose* to be good. And to *do* good."

"And you really believe there *is* a heaven.....for those who *do*?"

"I do."

He laughed but with a hint of despair in his voice. "But how could I go? I don't like people very much. Does God do private rooms, like the NHS, for *misanthropes*?"

Willem laughed nervously. Sarah gave a weak smile and looked steadily and with certainty at Jack. *Could she tell him what she really thought?* Jack looked steadily back at her and nodded.

"I think being a policeman has blinded you to all the goodness there is. You are a very good man, I can tell. Believe me. Trust in Jesus and the fog will clear."

I cannot remember him being so stuck for an answer. Finally he thanked Sarah for her

observations but said he wanted to change the subject.

“Basically I want to be left in peace” he added. “I can’t help it. That’s the way I’m made.”

Jack had a very restless night. I knew he would be in his own territory of bad dreams from which I was excluded. He began to ramble in his sleep, shouting NO over and over again, until he reached the climax and screamed I COULD HAVE! I turned on the light and he woke sweating, with eyes ablaze.

“Jack, what’s the matter? What is it you could have done?”

“It’s nothing. Just a dream.”

“No. It’s not just a dream. Tell me. What couldn’t you do?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Because you can’t remember? Or because you *won’t*?”

He swung his legs out of bed and sat on the edge. I laid my fingertips on his long broad back, and joined up the freckles from previous summers. My mind returned to that night in the November before the hand-over to the Chinese. We had been not been long married. He had come in late. He was pale and silent. Instantly he had reached for the brandy which was normally only served as a digestive to our dinner guests. He told me a little of the grisly scene he had discovered. Eleven children - three boys, eight girls, the youngest ten, the eldest thirteen - and one adult were dead. When I managed to ask *how?* he had drawn his finger quickly across his throat. The newspaper gave the barest details. He asked me not to turn on the television or radio news. He was due for transfer back to Paris but he went in to tell his boss that he could not face it

.After a few days on sick-leave he tried to go back to the office, but came home one afternoon looking very grey and ill. He said a body had been pulled out of the harbour, and I gathered that it was connected to the brothel. Three days afterwards, in view of his distinguished service, his age, his state of mind and the upheaval due to changing status of Hong Kong, he was honourably retired early. We left Hong Kong almost in indecent haste. We stayed for two weeks in a hotel in Athens while arrangements were made to tidy our affairs. That spring and summer we spent in a villa on Minorca belonging to Jack’s brother. We liked it so much there we looked around for a place of our own near Ciudadella. A telephone call in late August altered everything. He told me only that it was from a friend at Interpol. That evening he simply told me that he wanted to go home.

“Somewhere really quiet. Off the beaten track. I’m fed up with hot days, Em. I miss the cool of rainy old England.”

We had been back a few weeks when Jack’s brother was killed in a road accident near the villa. Jack was left speechless with grief.

My mind returned to the present. Jack had dropped off to a peaceful sleep. I knew that he was not getting better, and possibly never would. That dark thought kept me awake until dawn.

I went over at half-past-eight to the cabin to make sure that Paul and Sarah were alright about the previous evening. Paul, I thought, had kept remarkably calm under Jack’s onslaught. But he was not there. Only Sarah. She stood next to me on the veranda and we watched the sun flee a cloud and seek refuge in the delicate tracery of the great beech tree by our boundary wall. I apologised again for the row. She laughed and told me one of her great-grandmother’s sayings. “When ale’s in wits are out.”

“Or wine,” I added, and paused. “My Jack had to retire early. He feels he never quite achieved what he wanted. It bothers him, but he exaggerates when he’s in his cups. Sometimes he gets very touchy.”

I would not normally be so candid - especially to a stranger - but I liked the daughter very

much. If I had had a daughter - I was childless - I would have wanted her to be something like Sarah. She had convictions and although I was a wavering agnostic, I respected her for them.

“It’s alright Mrs Warner. In many ways he and Dad are alike. I bet they would agree on nine things out of ten. Dad felt as if he was on a mission, like Mr Warner. It hurt him to retire much more than he let on, last night. His Head virtually forced him to quit - because he became too intense, she said, and because he insisted on the letter of the law, while she and others turned a blind eye. Being a teacher - a good teacher - is like being a good policeman, I think. Both share the same values. Both see life in the raw. Both believe in truth and goodness - and right.”

I could not help but let my hand steal around her shoulder. Our eyes met.

“And what about your mother? Is she at work?”

“She took her own life.”

“Oh, how awful! What happened?”

“Oh, she had a history of manic-depressive illness. Of course, Dad blames himself because the pressure of what he had to go through got to her. He wishes now he hadn’t fought it. The NAS - his union - let him down badly.”

“And where is he now?”

“He likes to get up early and enjoy the morning. He likes the solitude and the light of the rising sun. He gets ideas for his poetry.”

“He’s a poet too?”

“Only an amateur. He rhymes. Not in fashion. But we like it. It’s beautiful and sensitive.”

“And you? What do you do? Are you a student of some kind?”

She laughed. “No. Was. I did a degree in music. My mother was a violinist, but she had to give up performing because of her nerves.”

“You play in an orchestra?”

“NO! Only in an amateur band. I earn my living helping to run a craft shop in Leicester. We both needed a break. Mum died last November. This place is idyllic. We envy you living here.”

“Sarah, how old are you?”

She laughed again. “Dad reckons I’m 16 going on 29. I’m 28.”

“What a lovely old lady you will make,” I could not help saying. “And do you play the violin too?”

“Yes, but my main instrument is the piano.”

Our vendor had bequeathed to us an upright piano, which only her husband had played, as part of the house deal.

“Would you come and play ours? Tonight? I’ll do you both a salade niçoise as a peace offering, if you like fresh tuna. That is, unless you have made other plans. The piano has never been played. I would love to hear it.”

She said she would love to come and was sure her father would not pass up a free meal on their last night. We agreed to steer the conversation away from politics and philosophy if it took that turn.

I left her on the veranda with her words ringing in my ears. She **envied** us. I imagined myself, for some reason, walking in the silent woods with Paul. A new guilty thought stopped me in my tracks. I had been sure that Jack would meet all of my needs. Had I missed the boat again? This new territory of my thinking horrified me. I immediately turned away and came back to the present.

They came around at six, and after supper she played Schubert’s Impromptu. It melted our hearts and although Jack turned his head away I could tell he was moved. We applauded like

mad. While Sarah played something lighter I turned to Paul and whispered “She’s brilliant. You must be very proud.”

He could hardly speak. “The Schubert was her mother’s favourite. She played it at her funeral.”

After they had taken their leave of us Jack solemnly stared at nothing. His wine glass was empty but he showed no inclination to refill it.

“You know, Em,” he said after a long silence “Amidst all the vile cruelties which people inflict upon each other, when I come across such great beauty as that, that music.....” He could not finish. He did not need to. He sobbed and went to leave the room but I was too quick for him, throwing every ounce of my weight onto his lap and forcing him back into his chair. I stroked his head, undid his fingers which he had thrown across his brow and kissed his eyes.

“I didn’t want to say anything last night, but you were wrong, Jack Grant. You know in your heart that most people are good. Sarah is lovely. Paul is very kind and quiet. Willem is a nice, funny man. Jake takes a pride in doing good food for his customers. Everywhere you look there are ordinary people - like Paul said - going quietly about the business of doing good and being good. Paul was right. And Sarah was right. And you know what?”

“What?”

“*You* are a lovely man. The longer we stay here amongst all these trees the more you will heal. I know you will..”

“You are the lovely one, Marilyn. You deserve to be happy. One day I promise to be better.”

We went upstairs and he made love to me more tenderly than he had for months. Afterwards I promised him that I would learn piano if he would finish the cider house.

*

It was Saturday morning when, as I looked through my emails. I found one from Paul Bonshor.

Dear Marilyn,

Sarah and I would really like to say thank you for a wonderful week and your terrific hospitality. Here is a token of my appreciation.

THE DREAM PAINTER

*Like pencil sketches stand the trees
For a sharper brush in patient wait,
To pointillate by deft degrees
Fresh-minted buds in bursting spate;
Puss-willow dottles, catkins dangle
And gradually my canvas fills;
A celandine, my rare gold spangle,
Foretells of swelling daffodils
And primroses in vast array
Spilling from my palette sun,
Till I shall stir one flawless day
And daub a May from April spun.*

*And wash the woods with blossom snow
And dry the ways where lovers go.*

Paul

I emailed him back immediately and thanked him for the lovely poem. I considered deleting both his and my message, but decided there was no reason to. Jack had gone into Ross to look for a book about apple tree pruning and maintenance. I sat daydreaming in the kitchen when another email arrived. From Paul.

Dear Marilyn,

I'm so glad you liked the poem. I really fell in love with the cottage and the woods. I felt inspired. Coming to the gorge has made me feel alive again.

Sarah told me she had told you about my wife. It was a terrible, though not totally unexpected blow. She had attempted suicide before.

If you look under the bed in the cabin, you will find another token of my appreciation. I was too shy to give it to you.

Marilyn, I know it is absolutely none of my business, and we hardly know each other, but I was concerned for Jack. I recognised in him a lot of the symptoms my wife Helen suffered. I think you must have been out on Thursday afternoon when we came back from the woods. I could hear howling from the hedgerow on the left, and thinking a child might have fallen in the lane, I went to look. The noise was not coming from the lane but from Jack's workshop. I looked through the window at the front. It was Jack, I'm sorry to say, sitting at his workbench. He was in a terrible state.

I hope I have not gone too far, but I thought you ought to know,

Paul

I stared at the text and eventually wrote that I was grateful for his news. I told him that Jack had lost a dear brother and had been severely depressed, but that he was, on the whole, slowly improving. I asked him for more details of his wife - if he felt able to write about her - and sent the email.

Then I thought of his other gift. I went into the cabin and put my hand under the bed. Finally I touched something with a rough texture and drew out a canvas. It made me gasp, it was so beautiful - a water-colour picture of the garden in its spring glory with the forest and river in the background. I rushed back into the kitchen and emailed my gratitude and admiration to him. I was trying the canvas out on the wall when Jack came in.

"Em, That is brilliant! Where did it come from?"

"Paul Bonshor painted it for us."

"For us?"

"I found it in the cabin"

I glanced away for a split second and when I looked back he was staring at me very oddly. He threw his car keys onto the table and I asked him to hold the canvas against the wall for me to look. Slowly he came over and took it off out of my hands. As I hummed and ha-ed, and he moved it around, I sensed his impatience. He sighed and blew.

"So he didn't give it to you *personally*, before he left?"

"No. I came across it in the cabin. This morning, with a note.....thanking us both for a nice

stay....”

“*This* morning? Where? I went to put the new bulb in *yesterday*, after they’d gone, and I had a quick look-round to see if they’d left the place decent....I never saw it. Big thing to overlook.”

I had not mentioned the email. To do so now might seem odd. Suspicious even.

“When I put the vacuum round in the bedroom I noticed a corner sticking out from the bed. There was a note on top of it. Thanking us for our hospitality.”

“Thanking *us*? Why hide it? We might never have found it! Why couldn’t he just give it to *us*?”

“Why do you keep saying “us” like that?”

He put the painting down with exaggerated care on the table. He smiled, but not entirely with good humour.

“I reckon he fell for you, Marilyn “

An anger bordering on rage welled up in me.

“WHO? Paul? Don’t be so CHILDISH.”

“No? You couldn’t see it. I saw how he looked at you when his daughter was playing.”

“Oh come on! He was just moved by the music. He told me it was played at his wife’s funeral.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“That night. While you were miles away.....with your face in your wine glass.”

I saw him bristle, so I added quickly

“Why can’t you just accept it as a lovely thought - from a lovely person? To paint us a picture. Why look for some cheap, hidden motive? *He* is a lovely person and so is Sarah. I’m going into Monmouth to get it framed.”

He saw that his suspicions had disgusted me and he told me - not entirely pleasantly - that he was *only teasing*.

I parked on the main square where drinkers were enjoying the mild sunshine outside the old coaching inn. Monmouth is quite a pretty town with good inns, restaurants and interesting knick-knackereries and in one, a tiny art shop, I left my painting to be framed in antique oak while I walked down the hill to the bridge and the river. The mallards and swans were out in force and a couple were hurling whole loaves of sliced white bread into the water, causing quite a stir. Gulls were pursuing and biting the tail-ends of the fleeing mallards, causing them to quack and drop their prizes for their benefit. I laughed out loud at their ingenuity and their victims’ stupidity, and felt an easing of tension, as well as - I was forced to acknowledge it - something else. Relief.

As I drove back with my picture on the back seat a sudden thought seized me. What if Jack had looked at the emails? But I found him in a good humour and he apologised for winding me up. He had, he said, been a bit fed up not to find a decent book on his subject. There was half a glass of red wine on the table and I felt grateful, I suppose, that it was not something stronger.

As soon as he went out to carry on with digging the vegetable patch I went on line to see if Paul had replied. I was really keen to know more about his wife. He had not replied so I decided to tell him how well his painting looked on the wall. I asked him for news of Sarah. I do not know why, but I told him that although Jack was physically a big, strong man he was much more sensitive than anyone would guess, and rather ashamed to show his emotional side. I almost deleted the whole thing but my finger pressed the SEND button and that was that. I could have fetched it back by pressing UNSEND but decided it ought to be like *saying* something. Once a thing is said it cannot be unsaid, and invents its own consequences. I was going to sign off when I decided that it would be wise to save these mails into my “shopping”

folder, where Jack never looked. As soon as I had, I went into another server and created a brand new email address for myself. Once I had, I emailed Paul and told him that from now on he was to contact me on that address. I gave no explanation. I did not know what to say. But I did not feel guilty.

*

That hole in the lane! I almost forgot about it. But Jack grew ever more exasperated, even obsessive. I suppose, looking back, a confrontation with Ted Jarvis was inevitable. Letters to Jarvis had received at first bland assurances, then ever more curt replies. Finally Jack threatened to write a sarcastic letter to the local paper and it seemed this might do the trick. A meeting in the lane was convened. Jack remarked smugly how much politicians - even minor ones - feared exposure to public ridicule. The great day arrived and at around eleven o'clock cars began to turn up. (Yes, cars.) Two parked in our drive, blocking the exit of a guest who was in rather a hurry to depart. Four more cars entirely blocked the lane to the left of the cottage, where the cataclysm had occurred. We went out to join *seven* men and one woman wearing those silly identity tags around their necks, standing in rapt contemplation of the offending void. Some carried clipboards and most were dressed in smart suits. All had donned yellow plastic safety jackets. Jarvis was the silver-haired balding little man. I remembered him from Jim's Christmas bash at The Riverside. He had given a vote of thanks. I had thought him then quite harmless, if a little pompous. As soon as we were spotted, he assumed the leadership role and the pompous side of him swelled. He introduced the officials and one or two fellow councillors to us. I smiled. Jack grunted. I could read his thoughts exactly.

"We have," continued Jarvis in his local drawl "A little problem - a conundrum - here, as we are all aware - in terms of a new underground spring which has deteriorated and - at this location - disintegrated the tarmacadam surface and degraded the sub structural hardcore...if you refer, ladies and gentlemen, to the chief engineer's report..."

He offered us a copy - four or five pages stapled on the left-hand corner - and I took it while Jack stood with his hands stuck resolutely in his jeans pockets. He drew in a long deep breath through his nose and let it out as almost a hiss to show what he thought of Jarvis's report. I could tell that some of our visitors were already feeling rather uncomfortable - as I was. From his clipboard Jarvis obliviously and calmly began to read passages which I could see had been neatly highlighted in pink. In unison the others turned their pages to read those sentences too. Jack took his hands from his pockets, folded his arms and cleared his throat.

"Mr Jarvis, I'm sorry to interrupt you in full flow on such a fascinating topic as to the causes of a hole in the ground. They are pretty rare I know in this day and age, but may I be allowed to wonder aloud whether it might be more effective and less costly to the public purse to send out a bod with a brazier, a shovel and a bucket of bloody *tar*? Rather than you lot?"

The rotund young woman almost tittered. The others stood open-mouthed at such a preposterous, abhorrent suggestion. A little less confidently, Jarvis responded.

"But Mr Warner, if only you would permit me to reach the relevant parts of the report related to the underlying cause in terms of the spring and its...its *ramifications*....You would have a clearer understanding...in terms of the, er, *effect* which the water is having on the road.....Please, page four...."There appears to be a new spur of water which has been somehow diverted, perhaps by underground slippage, from the brook in the adjacent paddock belonging to the dwelling known as Hollyhock Cottage -"

"*Somehow* diverted? What? You mean to say, Mr Jarvis, that your man hasn't tracked it down to the *exact* point using a geo-stationary satellite? A bit *lax*, don't you think?"

Jarvis went to reply, realised he was being teased and read on unfazed.

“The water source might well compromise the whole integrity of the lane at” (and, looking steadily at Jack, he emphasized every next word) “**Between OS Grid Reference SO 553, 162 and 164.....**and it would, in my judgement, be neither cost-effective nor sensible to effect a minor repair on that section of the road which has been thus attenuated, as such a repair would be at best temporary and at worst pointless, in view of the deeper, underlying cause of the slippage. I have concluded that a trench needs to be excavated at said OS reference, so that the water course may be fully exposed and thereafter contained within a conduit to flow into the ditch at OS -”

“Oh please, Mr Jarvis” I exclaimed, suddenly furious “Please spare us the exact reference. The **ditch** would have done!”

Jack waded in. “So, what you are saying in plain-speak is that it can’t be patched up and the road re-opened. It’s got to wait until the *whole* road can be blocked off - so *no-one* can get through - dug up, and a pipe laid?”

“In terms of a *permanent* repair....yes.”

“And when might that happen? 2002? 03?”

“Oh no! Before then! But you can surely appreciate that funds for the current financial year have already been earmarked and allocated?”

The word “surely” was an unfortunate choice of word, as it implied that we were naïve or stupid. Jack drew in another deep breath.

“But you must have a contingency fund,” I exclaimed.

“Thank you, Mrs Warner. We do indeed. But it is only accessed in an emergency. And in terms of an emergency this....hole....isn’t....what you might deem an....emergency.”

“Excuse *me*, Mr Jarvis” countered Jack “I tend to agree. It is not an *emergency*. Our cottage and Mrs Atkins here” (she had come out to listen) “Are not about to be swallowed up. What it is, is a BLOODY nuisance! And a constraint on our business. Any number of potential guests have no doubt been deterred from looking for a place to stay up here and have turned back. Perhaps *you* have benefited. I suppose that if a hole opened up outside your *B and B* then the bloody digger would be running up and down there the next day!?”

Jarvis failed to spot the irony in this, and very unwisely remarked that, as the lower lane was classed as a busier thoroughfare, then a hole there probably would meet the criteria in terms of a major problem, resulting in the contingency fund being accessed. One or two of the others could see what a crass remark this was. They held themselves rigid for the inevitable blast.

“Mr Jarvis, how did you manage to get elected as a County Councillor? Are the people around here even more inbred “in terms of” inbreeding than even I imagined? This pathetic hole must have more brains - in terms of intelligence!”

“Mr Warner! -”

“No. Let me finish! You’ve had your say. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to fill a wheelbarrow with broken bricks - look there’s no water coming out of the bloody hole right now! - mix a little concrete and fill it in, move the ROAD CLOSED sign and -”

“If you do that, Sir” interrupted one of the suits “It would be an offence under the Road Traffic Act and you could be liable to fine of three or four figures..”

“You know Mr....” (and he went close in and took his dangly badge between thumb and forefinger)”Mr *Trehearne*, I’m very glad you pointed that out. But I reckon you would have a job proving I was the culprit. Unless you got the US to aim a military satellite to take high-resolution photos of me with my bloody pick and shovel....Well. I’d just like to thank you for taking the trouble to turn out today *mob-handed* to have a look at my hole. The fresh air and the valley must have come as a welcome change to your sterile little cubes at County Hall. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’ve got some work to do. You know, *work*? So if you could shift your expense-account motors out of our lane and off our drive, we would be most

grateful!”

*

April went into May and the weather turned cold, wet and windy. The tree blossom was ripped off as soon as it opened. Jack came down from the orchard and said disconsolately that there was no way there would be a cider crop this year. He phoned Serge to tell him and the whole project was shelved till the next autumn. I was fed up of the cement mixer, cement, roof timbers and wheelbarrow just standing there making the place look untidy, and told him so. He agreed under much nagging to take it all around the back out of the view of our guests. He moved the timbers and the barrow but bad weather caused the rest to remain where it stood. Our second summer came - quite an indifferent one - and we found ourselves often without a booking. It added to the air of - not exactly dissatisfaction - that is too strong a word - between me and him. But, like those generally disappointing days of June and July, which were ultimately wet or windy, almost everything that was said and done by us was tinged with a wistful sigh, a slight shrug of the shoulders, an *ah well, never mind*. But at least he was not drinking spirits, and if he drank a little too much wine on some evenings, he was not usually morbid. He certainly slept better. I felt OK.

I carried on my secret correspondence with Paul and began to tell him of my anxieties and doubts. He told me that the worst thing I could do was to put too much pressure on Jack. His own professional distresses had, he was sure, contributed to the dreadful final depression which had led his Helen to climb into a hot bath one evening and slit her wrists. But it was not all about my predicament. He began to tell me of his worries about Sarah. She needed, he said, to find someone to love her dearly. She herself was prone to feelings of low self-esteem because she was so different from her contemporaries. He told me of an unhappy love affair she had had, which she had broken off because of irreconcilable differences over religion and morality. He sent me poetry and short stories. He told me our “ethereal” friendship had become vital to him. I saved his emails in my shopping folder and created a special file for his poems. The loveliest was this one.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

I murmured of the simple woodland flowers,
Anemones of white, gold celandines,
Of birds the warmer April sun empowers
As winter’s silent, icy star declines;
Of fronds of ferns unwinding from their sleep
Above bedraggled beds of leaves and cones,
Of early bluebells, shy, yet keen to peep
As on a breeze a bee, awoken, drones.
Upon a wooden bridge she rests a while
The brook leaps down, all eager for the fell;
I take her hand, her eyes glance up to smile
And shine with love beyond the love words tell.

Along her downy arms my fingers crept.
Amidst her dreams of silver flowers she slept.

*

Early August was much better. The sun sailed purposefully across the sky from dawn till dusk. Those dark clouds blown in on malicious north-westerlies had gone. The wind veered round first to the south-west, and then dropped altogether, abandoning to the high atmosphere frills of cloud which bothered neither man nor beast. Our book filled up. The garden shook off the paralysis induced by chill winds and almost exploded into flower. The blood-orange crocosmias blazed up from long green shoots against the grey stone walls, and stopped many passers-by in their tracks.

It was in late August that everything came to a nasty head. Jim and Jake were having a curry night and the place was heaving. I am no great fan of the stuff but Jack and Willem were keen to go, and cool, sarcastic Willem always did him good. After our meal we came inside and sat on bar-stools as the chill twilight emptied the tables on the terrace. In a nearby group someone worse for wear unwisely made a loud comment about asylum-seekers and Willem quietly took him to task.

“I would rather, my young friend, live next door to a asylum-seeker - who has enterprise - than any stupid racist - or any idle, fat person who will not work and draws only benefits, and whose children would burn down my fence.”

The man he was addressing began to bluster. He had a low brow. He asked Willem aggressively if he was a foreigner - and if he was calling *him* stupid, idle and fat.

“My dear friend, we are all foreigners here. You are clearly an Anglo-Saxon, as almost certainly my ancestors were. Mine stayed put in what is now Holland. Yours emigrated here from the North Sea coast for a better life, probably because sea-levels were rising in a warm period in the fifth and sixth century. Had they remained where they were, you would doubtless have been a German.”

His friends found this hilarious. The man protested. How the f*** did (Willem) know that? He hated the bloody Germans! Calmly Willem asked him his surname. He told him his name was Golding.

“Golding! You are of the Golding sipp! There were Hastings, Birmings, Dalmings -scores of “-ings”. Look at the place-names of the towns and villages - . Your ancestors came over in a boat. They were the boat-people, the unwelcome immigrants of fifteen hundred years ago. Plus ça change....”

The man began to puff out his chest and Jack stood up to tower over him. Jim the landlord saw which way the wind was blowing and told the group to finish their drinks, as they were shortly leaving.

“The racism of the British is possibly the most nauseous and hypocritical of all the nations,” said Willem, after they had sloped off.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Jim. “We get all sorts in here, and the locals are pretty easy-going. Just now and then we get arseholes in like them. They can’t take the beer. It’s too strong for them lager-boys. That reminds me. There was a Chinese fellow in here last night - well half-Chinese. He was asking if anybody knew where a Jack Grant lived. Not been moved in long, he reckoned.”

I had never seen Jack look so ghastly. The blood drained utterly from his face. Jim could not help but notice and I had the distinct feeling he had slyly dropped this bombshell to see how he would react.

“Jack,” he said, taken completely aback. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“What did he look like?” he managed to whisper.

“Pretty tall for a Chinese. Almond eyes, but he rest of ‘is face was normal, see. White as you and me. Smart business suit...”

“And what did you tell him?” asked Jack.

“Nothing. Didn’t quite like the look or sound of ‘im. Flash. London accent. Drove a black

Merc. Is your surname Grant, Jack?"

"No. Warner. Did he hang about?"

"Ad a meal. Talked to one or two customers. Tourists. They knew nothing. I for was in but he couldn't get any sense out of him, of course. Left after about an hour, I reckon. Nice juicy tip. Left his mobile number. Phone 'im if I 'eard anything....Might be doin' myself a favour, like."

He took a card from the pocket of his richly embroidered waistcoat and slid it across to Jack.

"Let me buy you a drink. Jim," he said.

"Oh, no. Have this one on me. Bitter?"

"No. I'll have a double brandy.....Seeing as *you're* paying."

Jack swallowed it almost in one go.

"Let me know if he comes back, Jim, won't you? Here's my number."

"But why?" he said. "If you're not the Jack he's looking for?"

"I'm organising Neighbourhood Watch. There are some vulnerable people on the hillside. Isolated. We can't be too careful. Who knows what the guy was really after?"

"Right!" said Jim. "Too right. Good thinking. Who knows what he was really after? I'll keep my eyes peeled."

The sun had set and a brand new whole moon was swimming and rippling in the Wye. It was a beautiful sky, full of stars, concealing not one secret. A blackbird was still singing somewhere. A chill ran down my neck as we walked up the slope from the pub to the road. I did up the front button on my collar. Jack walked in front of me with his shoulders bent back like a marching soldier and his hands in his pockets.

"I really hope, Jack, that you are now going to tell me the truth about what is going on," I whispered.

"Let's take the Wild Way back." he replied. "It's not wet. The road is such a long drag."

He plunged into the hedge by the old telephone box and into the darkness of the narrow footpath. I followed. The moon illuminated the dark strip of earth in front of me and then a series of stone steps fringed by nettles as tall as I was. The light was so strong that the back of Jack's coat looked almost as green as it did in the day. The steep pathway turned sharp right, ran along the fringe of Willem's land for perhaps fifty yards and then turned sharp left. We had only come up this way once - on a wet day the previous April -- and I had gotten so soaked that I had sworn never to use the path again. The steepness of the path and the height of the steps were so exhausting that I began to drop back. A long vertical trek followed the left turn by Willem's house, and then, scrambling on loose gravel, I turned right again onto a horizontal walk which brought relief to my lungs. I turned right just in time to see Jack turn left again on the next ascent. I was angry and breathless and not a little frightened. But I was resolved not to shout out to him to wait. I sensed that he was climbing as quickly as he could and wanted to escape from me. I turned left and climbed again. A very high hedge on the corner loomed in front of me and my fear turned to terror. As I came close a large bird flapped in my face and flew off. I screamed. I stopped, bent double with stitch. Jack's face appeared in the moonlight and I screamed again.

"What are you trying to do to me? Scare me to death? You bastard!"

"Come on."

He took my arm. We had one more right and left turn, another twenty yards in the narrowest passage of all and then we climbed out onto the road, opposite Mrs Chapman's place, about forty yards from our gateway.

"Now tell me. Who is looking for you and why?"

"This, Em. Is your escape route. You could go to Willem's place or the pub."

"Stop it! You're frightening me! You will tell me what is going on. I have a RIGHT to know!"

I have no secrets from you. Now tell me yours. Or I'm going."

He took a pace backwards as if stung.

"That might be for the best, Em. It isn't right you should be caught up in this."

"Caught up in WHAT? TELL ME!"

"Come on. Not here."

It was absolutely quiet, as if the whole world had stopped what it was doing to eavesdrop.

Nothing stirred, not a leaf trembled. It felt absurd that there was a threat to us in this serenity.

In the kitchen he went to open the brandy bottle and I saw red.

"Leave it!" I yelled. You don't need it! Don't be so bloody weak! A big man like you behaving like some derelict in a shop doorway!"

He went to lock horns with me but all my frustration exploded in his face.

"If you drink, I'll pack and go now. In the night."

I rushed into the pantry and came out with my arms full of bottles.

"Here!" I shouted, spilling them onto the table. "Get stuck in. They'll solve all your problems."

He stared at the bottles rolling around. One fell onto the floor and smashed. He put the stopper into the brandy bottle and sat down. Eventually the awful silence was broken by him.

"I need to tell you about the brothel, Em, and about a man called Simon. The most unscrupulous man I have ever met. It disturbs me that God allows such people to exist. But never mind that. They do."

And he began, slowly and hesitantly at first, to tell me about the man who haunted him still.

"Simon Ho was at Cambridge with me. The same college. When I first met him, I admit, I was very impressed. And so were others. He was friendly, urbane, thoroughly articulate - and intellectually sharper than a knife. A little circle of admirers began to gather around him. They would often meet in his room until the early hours to discuss philosophy and debate the great controversies of the day. Out of the blue he asked me to come too, and I was flattered. There were heated arguments but everyone parted on amicable terms even when we had too much wine to drink. Ho supplied it - the very best, not cheap plonk. He was rumoured to come from very wealthy parents. Then everything changed. His tutor had introduced him to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. And he bought it, lock, stock and barrel. His infatuation with Nietzsche happened to coincide, I remember, with an unexpected election victory for the Tories in 1970 or 71. Facing certain defeat, Ted Heath had made some outrageous promise to cut prices *at a stroke*, and it did the trick. I remember on election night Ho rampaging around the college, bottle in hand, fulminating against the *morons*, the egregious swine who had voted in their droves for the *slaughter men*. Overnight Simon's belief in socialism and his goal of seeking the greatest good for the world went straight out of the window. He began to rave about the unique individuals who had so excelled in charisma and intelligence - such as Napoleon - as to take the world, literally, by storm and leave it for ever altered. Such men, he argued, were not to be judged by the rules governing the *common people*, as he began to call them. No, great men forged their own sets of rules and were entitled to. Otto von Bismarck became a particular hero of his for uniting scores of bickering principalities into one nation. Bismarck's motto through *blood and steel* encapsulated exactly what Ho thought Nietzsche believed - the principals of force, deception and war legitimised by a great Cause - the formation of *Germany*. He even put up a portrait of Otto above his bed. I remember one meeting in his rooms in particular. "To what" he proclaimed like some demagogue "Do we owe our civilisation, our great buildings, our great inventions? To committees? To political parties? Of course not! To a few great thinkers! To men of insight, determination and vision! Had those hundred or so leading men never lived, then we would still be in stinking animal skins and hurling stone spears around, as they still do in the rain forests!" They say, Em, that the worst fascists are disillusioned socialists - think of Moseley!

- and if Simon Ho was anything to go by, there is probably some truth in it. Anyway, I decided to read Nietzsche and soon afterwards changed from History to P.P.E”

“So Nietzsche impressed you too?”

“On the contrary! Where he was coherent it was the most hateful, bigoted rant. He loathed women. Hated Christianity. He despised the masses, the workers and their unions - for him a symbol of their innate feebleness. I couldn’t help but challenge all this reactionary tosh. Granted, I said one evening, we needed the great Conceiver of ideas, but the Conceiver equally needs the little people to realise them. I used the pyramids as an example. This new version of Ho hated to be challenged on such a fundamental point, and from then on we were estranged. He joined the Young Conservatives and eventually formed a student branch of the Monday Club, a particularly unpleasant variety of arrogant, libertarian reactionaries. There was quite a lot of tension on the campus and eventually a debate was organized and I was asked to speak. I forget the exact wording of the motion but it was along the lines of “This House Believes that Might is Right.” Ho was the proposer. His argument was ingenious. “Great men” he argued “Determined their own law - as Napoleon and Alexander had done. So any criticism of them by lesser mortals - (which we, the opposers of the motion patently were) - is self-evidently invalid.” And he sat down! After ten seconds! To great guffaws of laughter and cheers. Our proposer, a nice stick of a chap who was studying Divinity, was utterly flummoxed by this and waffled on for ten minutes - it felt like an eternity - repeating himself, correcting himself, coughing and losing his voice- and his place in his notes - and making what Ho had said about mediocrity seem even more brilliant and apposite. Finally he sat down to a round of jeers. Then Ho’s seconder came on. He tried to be clever too, but he fell a bit flat. I can’t remember what he said, because I was so bloody nervous. Then it was me. The silence was appalling. I began badly but then had the inspirational idea of tearing up my speech into little pieces and scattering it. It seems like a cheap, cheesy trick now, but back then it worked. “These pieces” I declared “Represent the 50 million reasons why the motion was not only wrong, but dangerous and must be defeated!” I asked the room to remember that 50 million people had died in a world war which had been fought to decide whether might was right. How could a Cambridge debating society not twenty-five years later even consider passing such a motion? A scattered chorus of hear-hears emboldened me. There were shouts of protest too. “Might *was* right then!” a voice amongst the smoke exclaimed. “Because Might - the Allied Forces - had been needed to defeat the enemy.” A clever riposte, but it didn’t throw me. It was not Might *alone*, I shouted back, but Might allied to the cause of Christian values - a crusade against pagan forces, the forces of darkness and the ancient forests, which believed in nothing more noble than the conquest of territory and the suppression of whole peoples. “Might is right is the motto of barbarians! It does not belong in a civilised world, a world we should now strive to enhance through better education and our great institutions, such as the UN.” I knew that this would infuriate Ho. His face - once so gentle and pleasant - was screwed up in hatred. I turned deliberately to face him. “Mr Ho’s view,” I remember saying “Boils down to little more than the exploitation of a mass of uneducated little people, intellectually impoverished by their brutal lords and masters, and easily cowed into submission and bribed and cajoled into uniforms to fight for fake causes, which mask the real point of the exercise - the financial interests of the so-called supermen! Educated, sceptical people would have laughed at the demagogue and not admired him.” There were cheers. “Would this house prefer Sparta to Athens?” I yelled. “NO!” they yelled back. I turned again to face Ho.

“Nietzsche is a fraud. He dresses up the irrational and the atavistic as intellectual and elitist! Who, I ask, were to emerge as his modern Supermen, the new Alexanders? One was a self-preening megalomaniac, a new Julius Caesar, destined to forge a new Roman empire on the back of poor, bleeding Abyssinia - an empire where he would make the *trains run on time!*

The ludicrous Mussolini! The other a greasy vegetarian whose penis failed to develop properly, whose paintings failed likewise and were so bad that he couldn't get into the Vienna Academy. Had he been a little better a dauber and *had* been allowed in - that neo-Napoleon - A. Hitler, a minor artist, would be hanging now in some remote corner of the Linz museum, and the world would be none the wiser!"

I realised at this point that Jack was reliving, not remembering the debate. He had spoken with a fervour I had never seen in him before.

"But Jack, all this sounds exactly the opposite of what you were saying to Paul Bonshor. It could come straight out of *his* mouth."

He stared at me and I was afraid for a moment that he was angry for mentioning the name, or for interrupting his train of thought. Then he nodded and looked down at the table.

"I really used to believe it, Em. It wasn't rhetoric. That's how far I've fallen."

I patted his hand. I made us a pot of coffee - while he reviewed his life. He began to smile to himself.

"I sat down to roars of approval, Em. I shall never forget it. But the vote - considering we were living through the era of student protest and free love and all the rest - was close. Ho had packed the room with his cronies. By a handful of votes the motion went down. Ho sprang to his feet and accused me of using emotional logic and anecdote - (he was right of course) - and he literally snarled at everyone on the left side where my supporters tended to be. He shouted at them, calling them stupid cattle, and stormed out. He never spoke to me or acknowledged me again.

I had completely forgotten about him when a quarter of a century later our paths crossed in Hong Kong. I had not been there long, when I was invited to a banquet at their equivalent of the chamber of commerce, along with two other officers who were showing me the ropes. A Chinese further down the table seemed to be looking in my direction quite a lot. I thought he might be staring at the gorgeous blonde I had found myself next to. I just happened to smile at him and nod, and he did likewise. I began to study him more closely. His suit was so obviously expensive it was clear he was a man of considerable wealth. His silk tie was beautiful. His cuff-links were platinum gold, I'm sure, and his watch, well.....everything about him just shouted money..Afterwards, in the private casino, he stood at the roulette table surrounded by his cronies and - I didn't know it for sure till later - his bodyguards. I went to watch a game of blackjack and was glancing at my watch - you know how gambling bores the arse of me - when a flunky handed me a note. "Meet me in the lounge" it said. And there he sat, in his huge armchair. "So Jack, you did become a policeman. Have a seat," he said in perfect English. I must have looked as baffled as I felt.

"You have forgotten me?" he said. He smiled but then a hint of unpleasantness came into his voice. "But of course, how stupid of me. We Chinkies all look alike to you round-eyes, do we not? I am Simon Ho, of Caius, 1969-72."

I was astonished. What had happened to that lean, fresh-faced youth who could not sit still in his chair during tutorials? This man was slow and overweight. And he spoke so deliberately, with barely a flicker in his intonation or his face. His eyes looked like lights long gone out. After I had put my hand into his limp hand, and had given him a brief tour of my life, I asked him what he had become. I wondered aloud - to humour him a little - if he still read that nutcase, Nietzsche. There was not a glimmer of a smile, not a hint of a rejoinder. He stared. A door suddenly opened and an obsequious face with an enquiry popped around the corner. My companion barked out an order in rapid, angry Chinese and the door immediately shut.

"I am a businessman, Jack. In the kind of business of which I doubt you would approve. That is why I wished to have a little word. When I heard that you were coming to Hong Kong, I was worried for you, Jack."

At that point I realised that his use of my first name was not out of friendliness but to

demonstrate my inferiority and, at some level, his ownership of my fate. I was tempted to call him Simon but resisted. He sipped from his huge brandy glass and continued.

“This place is not London or Paris, or Cambridge for what it matters. It is my home and has its own set of rules.”

The face of Napoleon flashed instantly into my mind.

“Here, the pursuit of wealth is the great religion. To be poor here is a terrible sin. I shall not tell you *how* I am rich, for others will no doubt do so in time. But try to remember one thing - and you saw tonight some of the most powerful people in the place - it is best not to aim too high and interfere with the flow of capital. It is a great stream and anyone who tries to stop it - as your King Canute might have tried to do with the tide - will fall in and disappear. Stick to the little people, Jack. I will throw you one or two now and then, for the sake of appearances and your reputation.”

“Are you threatening me, Mr Ho?”

“Yes, I suppose I am, but entirely for your own good. Now I have done. Goodbye.”

He got up and closed the door behind him. I have never seen him since.”

“So was that him, the man in The Riverside?”

He laughed and told me that such humble footwork was way, way beneath him.

“So who was it then?”

“A distant relative - or the employee of one? It doesn't really matter who he is. He is a tooth of the hydra. But let me carry on. As long as you're not too tired.”

It was nearly two o'clock but I had to find out what exactly we were up against and why. I made some more coffee and he resumed where he had left off.

“In the taxi on the way back I casually asked my colleagues what they knew about Simon Ho. They frowned. When I mentioned he was the man at the roulette table they cottoned on. “Oh, you mean Kong! King Kong they call him. The Super calls him the Pimpernel. We can't lay a glove on him, but we reckon he's one of the cleverest, nastiest crooks in the colony. He's surrounded by his own family and there's no way to get a man in under cover.” Well, Em, I asked them what he was into. And it turned out to be the usual - protection, horse-race fixing, prostitution, narcotics, contract-killing; but it was all rumour, all supposition. I looked at the file on him and it was mighty thin. There had been no arrests, no allegations, no evidence. So I put the file away and got on with my job. Then I met you. And it was a few weeks after that that we had some sort of a breakthrough. A prostitute came in badly beaten up and told us who had done it and where. We raided the brothel, got more info and closed down a whole string of them. I got a message in my pigeon-hole. It said simply in capital letters DO NOT FALL IN. And I knew then, Em, that I had hurt him; that he was the big pimp. At about the same time someone at the Home Office started giving us grief about child prostitution. Chinese kids were turning up in London and there was a news story about paedophiles on tour in the Far East. I was to clear my desk and concentrate on cracking the ring which was thought to be controlled in HK. I had a feeling that even if Ho was not actually in charge, he would have some sort of interest in it. The prostitute I mentioned turned up headless pretty soon after she left hospital. I swore then and there to myself that I would close the bastard down. Remember that night when we had champagne? I told you I was just feeling so good because you'd agreed to move in, but it was a bit more than that. A man had shot another over a card game in a sleazy hotel and was looking at manslaughter at the very least. He was desperate, because he'd promised his wife he'd stop gambling. He left us speechless when he told us he worked for one of Ho's nephews. He was prepared to work for us if we did him a favour and dropped the charges. He told us that the nephew was in charge of finding kids - mainly pubescent girls - to supply Kong's - Ho's - brothels in Hong Kong, Thailand and Europe - in any city with a Chinese quarter. Bingo. The nephew, he said, was ambitious and annoyed with Ho over something. We decided that if we could arrest the nephew in *flagrante*

delicto, there seemed a good chance that we could sweat him and turn him to testify against Uncle Kong. I had a chance to break him and his whole rotten empire, Em. That's why I was so over the moon that night at dinner. We bribed the hotel owner, put the body deep in the morgue with a John Doe ticket on his toe and let the killer go. For months we did nothing, just kept in touch, had him tailed and waited. Then came our first gold nugget - the address of a child brothel. I could have gone straight there, rescued the kids and closed the place down. But I wanted the nephew there to nick him - and time as well to set up a sting with a young-looking policewoman, Sally Wu, to trap the sex-tourists. It would be a win-win-win situation! I asked our contact if the nephew ever went there and was told hardly ever. Could he be lured into going? The only way would be if one of the customers cut up rough. The nephew loathed paedophiles and took great pleasure in breaking their necks if he had an excuse, even though they put meat on his table. So a fake emergency call might do the trick, particularly on a Wednesday night, when he tended to go nowhere special. So we set the raid up. The rest you more or less know. I thought that there had almost certainly been a leak from one of the Chinese officers - probably another bloody nephew, or great-nephew - (I should have asked myself *how* Ho had known I was coming to Hong Kong, how he knew I had been in Paris, and *why* I had been invited to that bloody banquet!) So we arrived at the house and found the downstairs inches deep in blood. Eleven kids, eight of them girls, and the madam - all tied up with their throats cut. Try to imagine the smell. You can't. I could have saved those kids, Em. I sacrificed them, the tiddlers - the little people - for a bigger fish. If I'd gone straight in....."

"But Jack, you did do the right thing! If you'd caught the big man, then hundreds of kids would have been saved!"

"All "ifs" "could haves" and "would haves". I failed, Em. I blamed myself for not sweating the "grass" more, getting more addresses and closing what I could down. Truth is, Em, I wanted HO! I wanted the kudos of beating him not once but *twice*. It was *personal*!"

"No, Jack. You did what you thought was right *at the time*. Any policeman would have done the same! For the *greater* good. We all have personal motives too - we're *human*. You didn't slit those throats!"

"But I didn't rescue them and I *could have*. I *COULD HAVE*, Em, I *COULD HAVE*!"

The shrill self-accusation from his dreams made my blood freeze. He held his head and rocked to and fro. I made more coffee. There would be little sleep had tonight. I began to tell him how proud I was of him, of his principles, which *were* still there. Ordinary, little people *did* still matter to him, otherwise he would not be so upset. But he shook his head. He looked awful.

"I've not told you everything, Em. In one way it gets worse. I'm more angry than upset. It was a set-up. From start to finish....."

"But set-ups can go wrong -"

"NO! Not *our* fucking set-up! I mean *Ho's*. He stitched us up - me - up like a kipper. Me, the great brain on the force! The dead body in the hotel, the killer - the double agent - the whole thing was a sham just to make me look stupid! Ho had influence with the local press - he threatened to leak the whole story and humiliate Interpol. *I* would have to carry the can. It was either demotion, retirement - or worse - the sack! The other victim was Ho's nephew. His loyalty was suspect and it was our "double agent's" job to sound him out to see if he would betray Uncle Kong. He must have said he would because it was his body which turned up in the harbour in his best suit three days later, with a message for me in the inside pocket. How dared I think, he wrote in block capitals, that I could possibly beat him on his own territory? A dear nephew had been tempted and swayed by me and was now dead. I was to blame and would pay the price. I would never be left in peace. I would always be looking over my shoulder - and - just when I thought I might be safe the final blow would come. He had

contacts in places I would never dream he did. That's why I had to leave Minorca, Em. I never wanted to. Remember I had a phone call? A voice just told me our address and then the line went dead. Don't you see? Ho had Peter killed, thinking he was me! Or as a warning! Now can you understand why I had to keep my name out of everything here? Why I had to drink sometimes, just to stay sane?"

"But Peter died in a car accident! You have absolutely no proof it was Ho's doing!"

"No proof, but I *know* it was. I just feel it. The coincidence would have been amazing. I should have warned him..."

I went to console him with more good arguments but a question stopped me. How on earth had Ho found out we were living in the wilds of Herefordshire? Jack seemed to read my mind.

"Someone at Interpol is his contact. Perhaps someone in Pensions. Someone who can hack into Records and leave no trace."

"But we'll have to move!" I exclaimed. I jumped up without thinking and locked the kitchen door "We need protection - police protection!"

"There's no point moving. Here is safer than anywhere. We don't live in a normal street with lots of neighbours. The house has a name, not a number. Thanks to Jarvis - God bless him - the road is closed. No-one has heard - or ever will - of a Jack Grant here. I don't exist. Our man could be looking up and down on this side - and on the other side of the river - for ages. He doesn't have a picture of me - or he would have shown it to Jim. Don't you see Em? If he knew where I was he would have knocked on our door by now? He would never have *asked* anybody and risked leaving clues. We'll sit it out. We'll be alright. I promise."

We slept until lunchtime. In the afternoon, partly out of defiance, we went into the woods, even though it was drizzling. What had seemed two springs ago so idyllic, now seemed dark and threatening. There were no simple, elegant flowers in the glades spot-lit by sunbeams; grasses and ferns were bent and bedraggled and brown mushrooms threatened to be unpalatable, or worse. We walked in silence. A group of adolescents from the nearby campsite came cycling past. Their language was foul and I sensed that Jack was on the point of saying something, so I told him to not to. On the car park on the other side, which used to be the railway station, there had been a pitched battle between youths from rival villages the previous Saturday night, apparently organised in advanced. A dangerous sea was lapping up against the shores of my island, and I resented it. I thought about the swinish, obese people I had to rub shoulders with at the superstore in Ross. I had never considered myself a snob before - I was after all from commonplace stock, my father has been a railway official - but I could not believe how oafish and vulgar so many of my compatriots had become in my fifteen year absence from Britain. There. I've said it. Why pretend?

In the corner of my eye I saw a figure duck down in the forest to our right. I gripped Jack's arm. He had seen it too. We stopped and looked. A hood? It bobbed up again and Jack found a branch. He began to take a few steps into the undergrowth when other figures came charging down from further in, whooping and laughing. The hooded figure came rushing past us, yelling obscenities. They were kids playing a chasing game. Jack tried to laugh it off but I could not. I felt so ill and it was then that I knew that, sooner or later, I would have to leave.

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My diary records that it was three days later, after our fateful visit to the pub that my idyll was shattered. From my bedroom window I noticed that a large white van was squeezed into the lane outside Mrs Chapman's cottage. I thought it might be trying to deliver some cushions I had ordered online, and had been thwarted by Jarvis's barrier. I went out to tell the driver to

come on, when I was halted in my tracks. Down the side of it I read FORENSICS. Behind it were two police cars and in the drive of Rose Cottage, an ambulance. I ran back to tell Jack. He put down his paper and shook.

“Go and see what it is.” I said. “I’m frightened.”

He came back and said that the constable had turned him away.

“All he could tell me was there had been an incident.”

“Oh God! He went to the wrong address. The Chinaman!”

He told me not to jump to conclusions. We sat in silence for an age. He could find no words of assurance and I felt totally dejected. There came a knock on the back door. It was a CID man, name of Jenkins. He asked our names and without hesitation Jack told him we were the Warners. And totally unexpectedly he added that he was a retired bank manager. I know I must have cringed.

“What’s happened?” asked Jack, as the detective joined us at the kitchen table.

“A break-in. It must have been during the night.”

“And how is Mrs Chapman?” I dared to ask.

“Very, very poorly. They beat her up and put her into a coma.”

“*They?*” I could not help but blurt out.

He had a low forehead and a mass of crinkly hair. He had a slight cast in one eye. He looked anything but astute but my remark had obviously struck him as odd. He asked me why it should surprise me that more than *one* person was responsible. Had I seen anyone? A lone stranger hanging about? I was flummoxed. Would I be forced to volunteer information about the Chinaman? Where would that lead? I panicked. I burst into tears.

“My wife was quite close to Mrs Chapman, officer. We saw and heard nothing. The first we knew anything was wrong was when we saw the white van.”

I nodded. Jenkins did not seem wholly convinced but let it pass. He told us that the postman had found her dog on the drive with its neck broken and the front door open.

“You were close to her, Mrs Warner? How well did you know her?”

“We’ve been here since the November before last. We talked about gardening. We chatted in the lane.”

“Did you ever go round?”

“No. Never.”

“So, you couldn’t say what might be missing?”

“No.”

“Any idea about family? Where they might live?”

“She was a spinster, ex-headmistress of a private girls school. She did mention a brother.”

“Any idea where he might live? We’re still looking for an address book and checking her phone records.”

“No, I’m sorry. I can’t be helpful at all.”

I knew he could sense I was hiding something. He was in his late forties. He had had plenty of experience of liars. He turned to Jack. Had *he* seen anyone hanging around in the past few days? Any strangers?

“Plenty of strangers, officer. We have a visitors book full of them. We have a guest cabin.”

“And which bank did you work for?”

“Barclays.”

“This visitors book. I shall need to borrow it.”

“Why?” I asked. “You surely don’t think it was one of *our* guests?”

“Perfect cover, Mrs Warner, if you want to case a few houses.”

“He needs to check for criminal records, Em.”

“Quite right.”

“But surely a *crook* wouldn’t enter his *real* details!”

“Correct. So I shall need to compare the book with your own records, to see who failed to make an entry - or who left out their address, or altered something. Can you do a print-out for me? ASAP? It’s routine. My team is asking other guesthouses for the same stuff.”

Jack went into the office and came back with the lists. As soon as the detective had left we had a row.

“WHY did you lie to him Jack? He’s bound to check up and find out! Then we’ll be suspects!”

“If you hadn’t said *they*, he wouldn’t have noticed a thing. Do you think he’d care what I did for a living?”

“SO WHY DID YOU TELL HIM?”

“It’s natural to say what you do - did - for a living. Any cop will tell you it’s the next thing people tell you after their name. He won’t check up. We’re only neighbours for God’s sake! He’s got enough leg-work to do!”

“I feel like a CRIMINAL! I’m fed up pretending and living a false existence. This isn’t what I want, Jack. I want to move.”

“That bastard Simon Ho isn’t forcing me out of here.”

“Forcing YOU! What about ME? This is MY life too! The break-in is a warning to us. Like your brother! Can’t you see that? *You said yourself*, he wants to toy with us, then strike when we think we’re safe!”

He tried to find a reply. When it came I laughed. *He wasn’t moving*, he stammered. *He had plans for here. The cider house.*

“The cider house. The cider house! You haven’t touched it for months! MONTHS!”

The FORENSICS van was still wedged into the lane and the constable would not let me through. I decided to take the Wild Way down to the river. It was a sunny morning and Willem was sitting in his garden. He saw me through the hedge and called out my name. He let me in through his wicket gate and fetched a chair. He had not heard a thing about Mrs Chapman. He was shocked.

“I spoke prophetically did I not? That night in your garden – about danger?”

“Please don’t remind me.”

“You’ve been crying, Marilyn. Were you and Mrs Chapman so close?”

“No, it’s Jack. We’ve had words.”

I thought his silence might be due to embarrassment. I felt an urgent need to be gone and enjoy the solitude I had rushed out of the house in search of. I went to stand.

“Marilyn, what is Jack hiding?”

I felt alarm - and my anger reignited.

“Hiding? Nothing! Why are you prying?”

“Prying? What does that mean?”

“You really don’t know?”

“My English is pretty good, but I have not heard this word.”

“Prying. Being nosy. About personal things.”

“I’m sorry. I feel concern for both of you. I can tell you have been worried. And I know that Jack is not Jack Warner.”

As if my knee tendons had failed I sat back down. “What? How do you know?”

“It was how Jack reacted at the pub to the mention of the stranger which confirmed it. Jack *Grant*, isn’t he? I had a feeling he was not telling me the truth about his career. And you lied about your French. Your wine-tasting night...when I went into the toilet I spotted your copy of Baudelaire in the hall bookcase. Your school prize, Marilyn, for General Merit. I’m sorry. I pried? Is that right? Is it a regular verb?”

It was a relief to get the whole sorry story off my chest. I knew I could trust Willem. He

swore a solemn oath to tell no-one. He urged me to persuade Jack to involve the police but I told him he was handling it his own way. I kissed Willem on his great forehead and left.

I decided not to go to the river. I felt unburdened and ready to talk our options over with Jack calmly. I found Jenkins in my living room when I returned.

“Ah, Em!” said Jack. “DI Jenkins was as thorough as you suspected he might be. I was wrong. And Jim at the Riverside has told him about our Chinese friend. What did you do with that piece of paper he gave us with the mobile number on?”

“You had it! Why do you think I’ve got it?”

“Sorry officer. It’s probably on the council tip. Bin was collected yesterday. But if it turns up in the house, I’ll let you know.”

“Well Mr Grant. You won’t blame me for being less than convinced you’re telling me the truth again. As you, above anyone else, should know, withholding evidence and obstructing the police are serious offences.”

He had called him Grant.

“But this Chinese man is absolutely nothing to do with Mrs Chapman. I give you my solemn word on that. He’s probably just an officer I knew in Hong Kong trying to look me up.”

“I can’t write “solemn word” in my report. *You* know that. I need to interview him and eliminate him from my enquiries.”

“Look, we’ve co-operated with you. You have our private lists of guests. Going all the way back to last year. I’ve told you, I have no idea where the phone number is.”

“But *who* is he? What does he really want here?”

“I’ve told you. It’s an entirely private matter. It is not in any way connected.”

“You were given his number. So I assumed you called him.”

“No.”

“You weren’t the least bit curious to find out what he might want. You didn’t call him?”

“I told you - no.”

“You realise that I could take your mobile and get hold of your landline records?”

Jack took his mobile from his pocket and threw it to him. He told him he could have it. The officer put it on the table.

“You said he might be a colleague. Who would know you well enough to come all the way out here – thousands of miles – just to look you up? You must have a name in mind!”

“I’m only guessing. I have no idea!”

Jenkins shook his head. “Why do you not use your real name?”

“It’s personal. There’s no law against it - *yet*. I value my privacy.”

The copper stood up.

“I’m astonished that you, an ex-police officer, ex-Interpol, are prepared to lie your head off when an old lady is at death’s door.”

“And I’m astonished that you have nothing more to go on than a young Chinaman who was so obviously only interested in me - and even more astonished that you would believe that an ex-cop - who saw more violence in Hong Kong than you will ever see in this backwater - the odd fist-fight on a Saturday night - would deliberately withhold one relevant fact in such a serious matter. If you think I’m obstructive, then arrest me!”

“If I come across the slightest good reason in my investigation to do so, then believe me, I will. Good day to you.”

I saw him to the gate. He gave me his personal card and told me to call him if I needed to talk.

“Mrs Grant. I understand you must be loyal to Jack. You aren’t a *practised* liar, I can tell. But there’s something else in your eyes. Shall I tell you what it is?”

I did not reply.

“Fear.”

I still said nothing. But he was wrong. It was terror.

*

Mrs Chapman died. I had almost decided to phone Jenkins when the news broke that the gang - or rather the trio responsible had been arrested. There had been a series of antiques thefts in the villages. Mrs Chapman's brother confirmed that a number of items had been taken. I would have almost accepted then that the break-in had been a coincidence - and had *nothing* to do with Ho - were it not for the vehemence of the denial issued through the solicitor of one of the men. He was a thief, he admitted, but would never resort to killing an old lady. This stuck in my mind like a fish bone in the gullet. I asked Jack if he thought the police had the right men, and though he tried his hardest to convince me, the doubt, the awful doubt remained.

I found myself thinking about Paul and Sarah going about their routines, safe and sound - and sad - out there in the lowlands. I wrote him emails and told him what had happened to our neighbour and how nervous it made me feel. I was dying to tell him how unhappy I was, how the man I loved was trying to hide in a shell he called Jack Warner and how there was no room in there for me any longer. After a particularly downbeat message from me, he sent me the following.

Marilyn,

If you ever need a break, you know where we are.

He had sent his address. I copied it into my diary and deleted the email.

One morning in September I got up to the dismal sight of lashing rain. Trees clung tenaciously to the mist across the gorge all day. It felt as if such a deep low had set in that only a howling gale would dislodge it. On the second day it still showed no sign of lifting. The rain would ease off for a while and then resume. What was making that tapping noise? I tried to ignore it but in the end I had to go out and see. It was the tarpaulin covering the bags of cement. I felt like pulling it away but knew that would be stupid and would cause a huge row. I spread an old blanket across it to deaden the sound.

“Surely it can't carry on much longer!” I said to Jack the next morning as he made breakfast. “It's going to drive me mad!”

At ten there came a polite rap at the door. A couple were staying in the cabin and the lady was out there under a large umbrella.

“Mrs Carter! Oh please do come in out of this awful rain.”

“No thank you. I'm muddy.”

She offered me the key. They had decided, in view of the forecast, to cut short their stay. I said I was sorry, but she was already hurrying off to jump into their car. With a curt wave they were gone. The carpet in the cabin was a terrible mess. A clumsy attempt had been made to clean up muddy footprints. The whole thing needed shampooing. I told Jack and he let rip.

“I knew I was right about those two. Bloody scumbags! Got “scruff” written all over them. Bloody old banger he drove.”

“Oh come on. You can't judge people by their car. It's only mud! How can you be so shallow?”

“I'm not shallow! It's me that's got to go into Ross to hire a shampooer. Well, it can wait till tomorrow.”

I reminded him that he had to go to the doctor's on Friday to review his medication.

"Well I can make a detour and pick it up afterwards. I'm not making a special trip today. The new guests won't be here till early Saturday afternoon."

"But it needs time to dry out."

"It'll dry out overnight."

"But will it though, in this damp air? I'll go in today, if you can't be *bothered*."

And this was the overture to the most dreadful, vile, terrifying row I had ever had with him, or anyone. I accused him of putting everything off *till tomorrow* - the vegetable plot, the cider house, life itself.

"My whole life is on hold because of you! Because you can't get a grip. Because you are too much of an intellectual to be counselled by lesser mortals. You SELFISH, SELFISH man!"

I told him I wished we had never met, how mistaken I had been in him, how depressed I was.

"Maybe you can live here as a recluse, a man without identity, with no contact to anyone down there. Drinking and drinking. Well, I can't share that. Does it ever occur to you that I have feelings too? Have a right to feel safe and happy?"

"I suppose you're regretting leaving boring old Harry! You should have stayed on safe, solid ground with him! I had no idea when we met that fate would take this course. Believe me, Marilyn, I am sorry! I won't hold you to your vows. You had no idea - nor did I - you were signing up for this...." His voice trailed off.

"Please, Jack. Not *more* self-pity! Try directing some at *me*, for a change!"

I turned my back on him and made the cardinal error of staring at Paul's painting, the sunny idyll he had given me. Jack saw.

"Well, if you're not satisfied with this place, with me, then better go to lover boy. I'm sure you've kept the address of the great artist! I'm no expert, but it looks like a pretty crude piece of work to me!"

"Well at least he managed to *finish* something!"

That was that. There was then only one fate for it. He seized it, pulled it off the wall, hook as well, and slammed it down on the table, breaking the glass and the frame. He grabbed the canvas and hurled it into the corner.

I rushed upstairs. I packed a few things and - with not one more word between us - he was not in the kitchen when I left - I drove away. The rain was so bad that I could barely see the road, never mind the signs. So I just drove and only stopped, it felt like hours later, when the rain stopped. I was in a small town in Wales I had never heard of. I sat paralysed for an hour and watched people rapidly criss-crossing the road between the small shops, wondering what reasons - if any - for private despair they had. I tried to put mine into perspective. Jack *could* get better, I knew he could; and we had nearly a million pounds in property and savings with which to buy ourselves the seclusion and safety I craved. There had to be places where we could escape this stupid vendetta. In case you are thinking I had done the right thing in leaving, and you have no time for the Jack I have depicted, please try not to judge him too harshly. I have not included the many kindnesses of which he was capable. He was a complicated man. And he was right. It was *my* decision to leave *boring old Harry*. That I had never regretted.

I stared down at the same grey street through the yellowed lace curtain of the single room I had found. In my bag was the card which Jenkins had given me. I wavered between optimism and pessimism. Even if the police were capable of protecting us, did we want to live within an invisible moat?

It was such a relief to get away. Perhaps Jack would now realise how serious I was about change, and make a determined effort. Was the Wye really the safest place from Ho? But perhaps if we shifted, like a rabbit hiding from a circling peregrine, we would attract the very attention we wished to avoid. And police activity near and around us might have the same

result. My mind could not settle on a sturdy enough reason to be at peace. I thought suddenly of Jack's botched operation in Hong Kong and almost threw Jenkin's card into the waste bin. But superstition held my hand.

My phone did not ring. I was tempted to go back on Saturday - until I got a really angry, drunken-sounding text-message from him. Sunday was still dull but on Monday a lively westerly sprang up and ushered the clouds away. The grey street brightened and shoppers emerged in tee shirts and tops, dawdling at shop windows and stopping to speak. I thought of Sarah Bonshor's optimism and almost said a prayer.

On the Tuesday afternoon I phoned him. I feared and expected he would still be drunk but he asked me in a clear voice where I was.

"In Wales somewhere."

"Are you OK?"

"A little better. And you?"

"I've been having a good look at one or two things. I cleaned the cabin but then those bloody Fletchers who were coming cancelled because of the weather. I mended the picture. I got some glass from that place in the village. By the clock tower. You know?"

"Not really."

"Only a couple of quid. You're not...in Leicester? With *him*?"

"No! Of *course* not!"

"I've finished one or two other jobs that needed doing."

"Oh.....good."

"If you come home, you'll see. I miss you Em. Please come home. I love you."

I was shocked. He had told me he loved me.

Within two hours I was home and we had a blissful reunion. Afterwards he took me out and told me to close my eyes. I opened them at the door of the cider house and saw a perfectly even floor and the roof timbers in place. He told me that the slates were coming and also the cider press he had found on line. It would just fit through the door. There were enough apples in the orchard to make about twenty bottles of champagne, he reckoned. Serge had emailed him with his friend's recipe. He took me to the far corner of the garden and showed me the winter cabbage and purple broccoli he had planted in the newly dug soil. A pigeon was showing an interest. He began running around like a demented Tarzan, shooping the bird into the high reaches of the ash tree.

"I tried to make my peace with Ho," he said back in the kitchen.

"How?"

"I wanted to speak to him on the phone. I didn't tell you I had his number. I found it in that box of stuff I cleared from my office back then. I was going to tell him what he wanted to hear. That he had been *right* about *might* all the time. That I was sorry about his nephew. That I was only doing my job and never wanted anyone to end up dead. That my brother had made us quits. That he was cleverer and had won."

I felt despondent. "So he wouldn't listen?"

"No. He couldn't! A voice asked me who I was....."An old friend from university days," says I.... "Then I would be saddened to hear," says same voice, "That Mr Ho had died suddenly of a heart attack at the weekend." We're in the clear Em!"

A few days later juice was flowing from the new cider press into the wooden bucket for its first fermentation. He showed me the case of empty bottles with old-fashioned stoppers which would hold the must during the second fermentation.

"If I put too much sugar in they'll blow," he said. "Or it'll fizz up so much we'll either lose it or the sediment will come up into the wine."

A letter arrived from the council. An extra amount had been found to repair the road in November when the tourist trade was slack. We decided to throw a New Year's Eve party and even ask Ted Jarvis and his wife.

I suppose the only dark cloud this autumn is Sarah's health. She and Paul were going to come in late October - with Jack's blessing - but he emailed me to cancel. She had been rather down and then, out of the blue, the shop where she worked was forced to stop trading. I told him how sorry I was. I hesitated to tell him to tell her how wonderfully things had picked up for us, and that I could almost believe it was due to a prayer I had almost said. It sounded so corny. In the end I just told him there had been a turn-around in our fortunes.

So that is about that. Christmas is a-coming and the goose is getting fat. We are looking forward to our third spring in the valley. And next summer has to be better than the last one.

This will be a proper, ordinary diary from now on - whenever I can think of something worth adding!

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I will add the final chapter, now that I have just added the foreword. It has been a very long night and I have just been a walk around the garden to clear my head. The frost is sticking like coconut ice to the broken grasses. The runner beans I forgot to pick are blackened and just a few Brussels cling to their stems. And is there a sadder, lonelier sound than a crow crying on a cold January morning? The ground is like concrete and the spade is stuck in the corner like Excalibur in the stone! I seize it and gradually work it free. But I am a poor Arthur. My kingdom is a dead realm of broken dahlias and wilted daisies. The cabin is locked up and I doubt I can be bothered to open it this year.

Marilyn has no idea I found her diary. It was in a shopping folder where I should never look. I was looking for *his* address. She doubtless has her copy of this and her ending will be very different to mine. I'm not very sure of how to pick up from where she left off. I'm only used to writing reports. I wish it could be a happy ending. It might yet be if she comes to her right senses and returns.

Where did it all go wrong again? Did Marilyn miss her real calling, not as an authoress, but as a nurse or a counsellor? Does she really think I'm strong enough to take it? The number of times I have reached for the bottle - and put it down again! I'm not going to let this bugger me up. But where did it go wrong?

I read her account first of all in some turmoil and anger, hunting and skimming for evidence of sexual betrayal. Finding none, but still unconvinced, I read it slowly again. And the scales fell from my eyes. Betrayal? She was the one betrayed. By me. I had betrayed her patience, her tolerance, her forgiving love. She had held her tongue a thousand times, had never given up hope and had believed in me in spite of my depression, my moods, my deceit and my weakness for the bottle. And I had let her down, had not told her what she meant to me, had merely convinced her in the end that I could cope without her. And now she was gone, unlikely to return. She had taken her good clothes. I looked around and realised how unmaterialistic she was. There was nothing to come back for - no trinkets, no knick-knacks - just a few books. All I could do was to keep sending her texts telling her how much I loved and missed her.

I'm not a very likeable man and I know she thinks her poet needs her more than I do. Oh yes, I found those emails afterwards. A cyber-affair! All very noble and platonic. And she did

assure me when she sent her one and only message that it was not about sex. Which is ambiguous. Did she mean she has sex with him but that it is not important? Or are they just good friends? I asked by text - she has her phone switched off - but she did not answer. Draw your own conclusions. I asked her if she was ever coming back as well. No answer. If I find his address I'll wring his scrawny neck. I keep looking. She must have deleted it. I emailed him but it comes back as undeliverable.

When in the autumn had it gone wrong? Had I not really convinced her that my adversary was dead? She had not commented at the time. The way she reported what I had said - virtually verbatim - seemed trite, the sort of story you might tell a child to reassure it after a nightmare. I tried to recall any instances of an unguarded look of doubt - or inner division - , any instance of words of misgiving, but found none. Dear, sweet Marilyn - but what a hard nut to crack she was when she wanted to be! Only in that instant when she first mentioned that bloody picture had my detective antennae noted an uncanny evasiveness in the manner in which she had glanced away

I pull up a beetroot but it is drilled with holes. I kick it into the hedge.

November was fine and Christmas was fine but the year began badly. The champagne was a joke - sour and musty. I poured the bloody lot away. We all laughed of course but inside I was very disappointed and not a little embarrassed. I had perhaps had a little too much - well, bloody hell, it was New Years Eve - and the Hole came up. It was Willem's fault, but somehow I ended up telling Jarvis he was an arsehole. Not the most diplomatic thing to say, I reckon. It's a good job we'd already done Old Lang's Syne.

So New Year's Day Em was like an old telly - I got the picture but no sound. I had sort of promised to go easy on the juice - but one drink lead to another. Anyway, a couple of days later she hears that Bonshor's daughter had tried to do herself in with an overdose. She was recovering, but *he* was in a terrible state and so she was going to spend a few days there. That was nearly three weeks ago. Has she slept with him? ("He needed to have me close, Jack - *please* try to understand. It wasn't for *my sake*."). Women have a knack of making their infidelities appear innocent, even saintly. Never mind. I've come back into the warm and now I'm going to fill in the missing pieces. By the way, his picture. I'm looking at it. I went to break it again, but maybe I'm superstitious. So it's still hanging there. Just.

That terrible rainy Thursday, after I bust it and she cleared off the first time, was painful. I realised that the only way I could get her to leave was to break the bloody thing, but even so it upset me. I was in the workshop when she went. There was brandy in there. I got rather pissed. Surprised?

It was a charade what I told Jenkins about Jim's written note. It was not quite a lie to say I had no idea where it was, because I *had* chucked it. But the number was in my head. 07891 420108. Later in the afternoon when the brandy wore off I phoned him. I told him I was Jack Grant and asked him very pleasantly what he wanted. Of course I knew. He played as innocent as me.

"Mr Grant!" he exclaimed. "How come you've got my number?"

His accent was a London one, Cockney even.

"You gave it to the landlord at the pub. I've only been here a few months and hardly go in there anyway. So he didn't know I was *Grant*. Anyhow, I heard him mention to a customer if he had heard of a Jack Grant on the west side. That's *me*, I says, Wye View Cottage. So here I am. What can I do you for?"

The phone went dead all of a sudden. To allay any suspicion I knew what he was about, I rang him and rang him, even sent him a text. Only then did I give it up.

I reckoned there was a fair chance he would not come until Saturday, even Sunday. But I could not take the risk of being unprepared. I made sure every door was locked and bolted and I screwed down all the windows. I put food and water in the workshop and a large bucket, with a lid, for a toilet. I bought the most powerful flashlight I could. I sharpened the best knife we had to razor quality and took it with me. The weather was chillier so I needed a good blanket. He would almost certainly come at night so I covered up the window and slept as much as I could during the day. I took a Henry James novel of Marilyn's - a bloody awful verbose author - to read to help me fall asleep. Normal boredom also helped and Friday was certainly all that. On Friday night I kept awake until dawn. I was surrounded by solid brick walls on three sides and from the edge of the only window I had a clear view of the end of our drive leading to the front door. It was unlikely he would approach from the back if he was a stranger. He would not know which gate led from the uppermost lane - unless he had cased the joint during the day. But that would draw attention to himself. On the radio it said that Sunday would be cloudy. I decided that if I were him, that would be the night I'd choose. On Saturday morning a horrible idea struck me. What if Marilyn decided to come back? I texted her. "Go see lover boy. Don't fkn care. Leave me in peace. Got bottle of brandy." I thought it would do the trick, and, as it turned out, it did, (probably more so than I intended). I did not touch a drop of alcohol. I ate a lot to help me feel sleepy. I managed to doze off and on, until about nine, and then resolved to spend Saturday night awake. I opened the top window to listen out for the sound of a car, of footsteps, anything unusual. The intermittent moon was quite bright and when it disappeared for short periods in the clouds it became almost unbearable, so intense was the dark. Adjusting to it made my eyes very tired, and I was appalled when I awoke suddenly in absolute darkness. I could fancy myself dead. I could not even see the time on my watch. It dawned on me that in my hideout I was in fact a prisoner. If he were out there and if he were to shine a torch in, I would be trapped like a rat. Bang. Or Molotov cocktail. Boom. Two-One to Ho. I crept to the very back of the workshop and covered myself up with the blanket and waited in a state of nothing much short of terror until grey light began to filter in around me.

He would come on Sunday night and I would need a better plan.

On Saturday morning I was very weary and my body ached from the discomfort and cold. As I went out into the chilly air to let myself into the house I almost fainted. I recovered and cooked myself an enormous breakfast of everything fry-able I could lay hands on. I drank a gallon of our best coffee and in spite of the caffeine slept for an age in our soft bed. At tea-time I checked on the forecast. Overcast but not wet. I phoned - of all things! - for a Chinese takeaway from the village and told him - as usual - to ignore the ROAD CLOSED sign. And that's when it hit me what to do. God bless you, Jarvis, you pompous arsehole. At seven the cloud-stifled light was already fading when my meal arrived. I met the deliveryman at the gate - and almost had a heart attack. It was not our usual guy, but a much taller man. But fortunately not my assassin. I ate the food quickly and, before darkness fell, arranged the duvet in my office chair next to the kitchen and shaped it until from outside it really looked like a big man poring over his computer. I drew the flimsy curtains to, left on my screensaver, lit a table lamp and turned on the radio. In the little light remaining I walked to the first horizontal section of the path we had called the Wild Way, opened a canvas chair I had taken from the patio and zipped myself into a sleeping bag. A flask of the strongest coffee I could bear would keep me awake, plus the absolute certainty that he would come - no, would have to come - that night.

The tiny torch I had unearthed showed me it was nearly ten. Occasionally the noise of cars

arriving and departing The Riverside wafted up from below on the gentlest of breezes. At gone eleven I heard car doors slamming and engines starting. One by one Jim's customers drifted off in the night to their beds and there was finally silence. Now he would surely come. Perhaps he had been waiting in a lay-by further down by the main road waiting until all the cars he had counted and noted driving in had passed him by once more. What was he doing to keep himself alert? Sudoku? Texting his friends? Texting Ho?? (Who was, of course, very much alive) Perhaps he was screwing the silencer onto his handgun and checking that his torch was working. Perhaps he was checking on his route, maybe a map he had bought in the bookshop in Ross where I had failed to find a decent book on apple tree maintenance. It was a dying art, obviously. Was he as nervous as I was? Did he have any inkling that I knew he was about to come? Would he come alone? The idea made me sit bolt upright. Killing one man would be difficult. A second would be impossible. My blood raced in my neck, my ears and even my nostrils. What if he had been sitting all the time behind a hedge, in a tree, watching my movements since I had left the house and was only waiting until the dead of night and the end of all activity before performing, without chance witnesses, a task which was merely routine to him? I put the brakes on the thought and tried to relax my stiff body. I considered the very opposite, the most banal explanation of all for this man's arrival on our doorstep. What if I was wholly, ridiculously mistaken? A man was looking me up and he just happened to be a Chinese. Was he indeed the relative of an ex-colleague who just wanted to pass on something important to me? A warning *about* Ho?

Oh my God. What if he had really done his homework? What if he came up the Wild Way? Had he even bought an Ordinance Survey map? I thought of Jarvis's absurd notice and report...OS....what? Was my assassin as much a perfectionist/nerd? Was he even, as I was considering this, working his way up behind me? I turned my head and saw only blackness. A torch would give him away. I turned my whole body around. I listened for any tell-tale crack of twig or footfall but there came only the sleepy rustle of the leaves. In one cloud a very dim moon glimmered and died. An owl below screeched. Had he spooked it? Like a man under water I held my breath.

I thought of our night-march this way and how angry Marilyn had become. She thought - and wrote - that I had teased her. But I was not teasing. She got that completely wrong. I was running. I had only one thought - to be home. But something she wrote much later was entirely right. I was single-mindedly wrapped up in myself. My first wife, Ealinor, thought the same. "It's your greatest strength and your greatest weakness" I heard her declare as in my recollection she disappeared from my life again - for the umpteenth time - without any objection from me. She was right too. Single-mindedness - *strength* - had gotten me to where I wanted to be - top-cop in the field, not one of the flat-arsed brigade, an office creature. The images of the murdered children - some virtually decapitated - burst suddenly into my mind from the place I had buried them and I groaned. Ho had returned from my past to ruin my life and was on the verge of doing so again. *Then*, I had walked into his trap due to my single-minded arrogance - *weakness* - for I had never considered for one second that I was being tricked. *Now*, within a mile of me or less, my nemesis, his hired gun or great-nephew, was steadily approaching from one direction or another.

I exhaled and breathed in the sweet early autumn air - the precious air of my new home - and a new feeling invaded me. Anger. And determination to win. He was doing it for money. I was playing for my life - and Em.

A car? I held my breath again to listen. It was barely audible but there was definitely something - a change in the air. It became a low purr like a friendly cat and it was climbing, or rather creeping up the hill parallel to the Wild Way. I racked my brains. Willem rarely drove. Mrs Chapman...was dead. Mrs Atkins did not drive. Would it carry on climbing to the upper lane? Oh no, was it Em returning?? But she hated driving at night - her eyes, what was

the name of that condition she had?

There were no headlights pointing up to the clouds. Why would anyone drive on parking lights on such a dark night? The purring continued but did not grow louder. I shivered. Had he come to the ROAD CLOSED barrier and stopped, as I was sure he would? I pictured him sitting there, thinking what to do. All at once the purring stopped and for a long time there was utter silence. I was on the point of laughing the whole theory out of mind when I heard the faint click of a door. It opened then closed. Definitely. Had he really come??

My rushing blood drowning out all sound, I was forced to rely on my radar to follow his progress. As soon as I knew he must have already passed the entry to the lane, I got up, turned the corner, climbed the few steep yards to the road and looked around the hedge at the very top. My plan was to come up behind him. I was still not wholly convinced that he *had* come, so I was completely shocked to see a flashlight briefly illuminate the grit of the road and switch off. Then three or four times more. I had never been so gripped and arrested by terror before - and I could not believe its vice-like power. I counselled myself slowly that this was not the best survival strategy and the foot I was willing with all my mental might to move forward, finally did. I thought I could hear him breathing and the gentle pad of his shoes. I watched and saw with horror the nameplate of the cottage on the four-bar gate appear in torch light for a second like a phantom framed by the pitch black, then disappear. He was already too far in front of me to take by surprise. I began to walk - almost to float - along the road. The whiteness of the gate grew stronger and I saw black limbs straddle the bars like the legs of some monstrous spider and vanish. He was in. He would have to tread very carefully upon the twenty yards of pebble drive and he was bound to hear his own feet crunching. This would hide the sound of me pacing to the gap in the hedge by my workshop. I squeezed through and peered around the back of the outbuilding and past the cabin on my right. The lamp from my office was illuminating the couple of yards in front of the window. I expected him at any moment to be bathed in it, drawn into it like a moth. He would not suspect that he was being watched.

But he did not appear and I began to fear that he had crept around the back, and even climbed for some reason to the top by the orchard. I had assumed he would bring a gun but perhaps he had a different plan. Would he fire-bomb the precious cottage? I discounted this as too risky and too unsure a way of killing us. But still the uncertainty grew until it was as dense and oppressive as the night. Had he set time-bombs and gone? But no, there had been no sound of a car starting. He *was* there, somewhere, and again the awful feeling that he was somewhere very close, even behind me, became almost a conviction. Had the lightened room and the hunched shape struck him as too easy and convenient? Had he seen in an instant what my plan was? Perhaps he was waiting behind the tree. Knife! I had left my knife in the bloody workshop! Could I sneak in? I edged along the wall. A tickle in my throat grew and like a concert-goer I swallowed hard to stop it becoming a cough. This was turning bad. Now a movement by my leg. Two yellowed eyes opened and closed. Mrs Atkins bloody cat! I prayed it would not meow. I stood absolutely still and held my breath.

The clump of bamboo moved suddenly and I thought he was in there but it was only a gust of wind. So where the bloody hell was he? A shadow on the whitewashed wall. He was not even ten yards from me. The shape moved away slowly and blended with the darkness of the front door. He was moving steadily towards my trap. Would he be fooled? The moon which had found no previous entry to the night glimmered through the thin fabric of a cloud, illuminating us both. If he turned now he would see me. The light paralysed us both. When it vanished he was left half-crouching in the faint glow of my office window. I went to my left and trampled through wet vegetation - doubtless the spinach which Marilyn thought would do us so much good. I finished up behind him and well beyond his peripheral vision. He reminded me of a dark figure in a comic album I had once possessed - a figure clinging to

dark castle battlements on a page I always tried to avoid as I flicked through, late at night, when I was supposed to be sleeping. My ankle struck something very sharp. Pain streaked up my leg. The bloody spade. Where I'd forgotten I'd left it. I nearly overbalanced, reached out and grabbed the handle. He still seemed to be peering in at my shape. Was he wondering if it was really me asleep? If he looked really closely he would make out the outline of a bottle and a glass, both two-thirds empty. Come on. This was a convincing little tableau. If he knocked the pane the game might be up - so I had arranged it to look as if I was well past it. The pain subsided and was replaced by warmth. Rain pattered unseen on nearby leaves. The moon reappeared as dirty rags snagged in the upper ash branches, which began to lurch in the wind like drunkards waking.

Come on! What's the *matter* with you?

A sputter. A tinkle of glass. And again, and then twice more. A fury seized me. This was my property, my life! He had just murdered me with not a pang of conscience. I took the spade and marched up to him. At the last second he turned and looked at me astounded. The spade hit him on the shoulder and as he wheeled, yelling in pain, the gun popped again. The bullet zinged past my ear. I hit him with my fist and he staggered back. I tried to wrestle the gun from him but he was strong. The gun popped again and this time all the fight went out of him. He fell and breathed rapidly and violently as he began to die. I felt his chest and felt his hot blood on my palm.

"You bloody young fool," I said simply. But he did not have the breath to reply only to wheeze as he continued to drown in his own blood. I took pity on him and broke his neck. In his pocket I found his car keys and his mobile. I put them into my pocket and then fetched my sleeping bag from the lane. I zipped him into it. I wanted to leave the least amount of gore around as I could. I dumped him in the wheelbarrow and emptied him out in the workshop. I locked up.

The clock on the dashboard said it was just gone one as I backed his black car out of the lane. Where would be the best place to hide it? It was normally an hour or so to Hereford but there was little traffic and I was there in forty-five minutes. I crossed the bridge over the Wye and skirted the city centre away from prying cameras. In a back street not far from a high-rise estate I left it with the keys in the ignition and the door unlocked. A top of the range Mercedes would not last long here, I reckoned. I pulled up the hood on my jacket and walked towards the glow of the city centre. Near the station was a taxi rank. I roused a sleepy driver and offered him £150 to take me home. I told him my car had been nicked.

He dropped me within a mile of the cottage and by four I was mashing a cup of tea. I switched on my assassin's mobile and scrolled through his messages until one caught my eye. The code was Hong Kong. The message read "Photo of subject to secure fee." He wanted my dead face as proof. I thought immediately of Bonshor's poster paints which he had left behind. Had Marilyn remembered to take them with her? I turned the cupboards out and cursed. Then I looked up and saw the corner of the box pointing out from the top of the cupboard. I took them down and some flour to produce a deathly pallor. I mixed red and purple and with a knife smeared it onto my forehead, giving it a crater-like edge. In the centre I applied a smudge of black to give it depth. I mixed red with oil, and brown with oil, and spattered them on the wall to produce convincing brains. I sat down with a mirror and positioned my lolling head just below them. I took several photos until I was satisfied with one that showed the kind of dead, faraway eyes and astonished mouth I had seen so often in my enquiries. This was the one I sent to Simon Ho. I calculated. In Hong Kong he might just be eating lunch. I turned the phone off and waited half-an-hour. I took a chance that he would not ring, turned it back on and immediately the phone beeped with a message. I pressed

SHOW and read "Good boy". How long would it take to reach his ears that a distant great-nephew had mysteriously disappeared? Would he then check with the British press that a former high-flyer from Interpol *had* been murdered? I thought it over. If I simply disappeared then it might not make the dailies - maybe only the local gazette. People go missing every day. I texted back "Body weighted down in river" and switched it off.

At five o'clock the first hint of daybreak appeared on the far side. I made more tea and started the concrete mixer. By six I had a beautiful glossy floor drying off in the cider house.

Amongst the rubble below, in a cavity I had picked out between the rains the previous week, curled up in a tight ball with his mobile, settling down for a long stay, lay my uninvited guest.

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I had hoped for a happy ending - at least in this version of mine. I watched the drab winter canvas gradually fill as the spring daubed it, until it had the garden awash again with gold and blue. Marilyn wrote in April that she would not be coming back. She had become a Christian and wanted a divorce to marry Paul. She had not, she insisted, broken her vows. I wrote back to agree, and to absolve her of her vows - for I had not upheld mine to her - to love and to cherish.

I would not have to sell the cottage - she wanted only her savings and a small settlement. I would have to arrange a mortgage which the income from the guest cabin would cover. I would apply for planning permission to demolish the workshop to make way for a second cabin which, with a little help from my friends, I could build. I would make my peace with Jarvis.

A television programme about Hong Kong under the Chinese made me sit up and stare. The authorities had cracked down on vice and there was a line of prisoners queuing to clamber into a lorry to be taken away and shot. The large man being helped up the ramp with the resigned, expressionless face bore a remarkable resemblance to my old friend. But, as he said himself, the Chinese do look alike to us. Anyhow, that night I slept as soundly as a baby.

A warm May saw all the pink apple blossom set. I was determined there would yet be a good vintage from my cider house.

And whenever Marilyn gets tired of her safe, boring Mr Bonshor, here I will still be.