

O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

All the Bright
Contagions



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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ALL THE BRIGHT CONTAGIONS

—A NOVEL—

Colin Holcombe

CHAPTER ONE

I worked more colour into the background until the phone rang a third time.

‘Ah, there you are’, said my dealer. ‘You remember the lunch we talked about? Well, I have Mrs Stumpfl with me now. Shall we say one thirty?’

So it had come back, one of those advances that were always threatening the castles in the air I built to women’s charms.

‘So that’s a yes, is it, old boy?’ he continued.

‘Reg, I spent the whole weekend at Botes. Toured the estate, admired the pictures, did every-

thing needed, but not once did a commission come up. There's a living to earn, and if Sir Richard's portrait isn't finished on time—as the secretary keeps ringing to tell me—there will be blood on the moon.'

'Then we've good news for you.' The voice broadened into sunny cordiality, and over the phone came a picture of the scene at the Cope Street Gallery. Reg Ecclestone with green tie under crumpled corduroy suit, glasses pushed up over a great dome of a head, would be lunging about the desk, waving the receiver in the air. Opposite would be Mrs Stumpfl, her neat figure dressed in something from Stehle or Catherine Walker to set off those tranquil blue-grey eyes.

But eyes that were also perceptive, taking in more than they acknowledged, I realized on that first evening when we sat round the table—the Stumpfls, an MP acquaintance and an American couple staying the night. Stumpfl was quietly affable, like a Swiss banker with important clients,

leaving his wife to arrange the seating and lead the conversation. At first I was intrigued by both performances, but then only annoyed as the evening wore on and there was still no talk of a commission. Reg's bullying rankled, though I hadn't been looking forward to another stay with Christine's parents, which the weekend was replacing.

Of course I should have done more research when Stumpfl's name drew a blank on my library shelves, and taken my chances when asked to explain the Daily Telegraph's snooty review of my last showing. I only smiled, however, and said that was journalism for you, at which our American friend thumped the table and exclaimed, 'Hell, that was right: these newspaper men didn't know a damn thing.' We laughed and talked about the shipping business, new regulations from Europe, and their Bermuda holidays, while silently, all the time, I felt the exotic Mrs Stumpfl was weighing me up with a practised innocence.

Perhaps these recollections detained me, as I was late getting to the restaurant, but on giving Reg's and then the gallery's name, I saw Natalie Stumpfl sat at a table for two. 'Reg not joining us?' I said, taking the napkin from the waiter and filling our glasses.

'No', she said, the expression holding me at a distance. 'Is that difficult for you?'

'Not at all. Delighted to see you, Mrs Stumpfl.'

She looked at me for a moment, and then went back to the menu.

'So you've been shopping', I said when the waiter had taken our orders.

'Just a jacket and a belt.' She reached for the shiny bag at her feet. 'Something for one of Heinrich's conferences.'

'This season's colours should suit you.'

She replaced the bag. 'Is that what you usually do, Mr Staunton? Start by advising women on their appearance?'

'For a commission I often have to. What did you have in mind?'

'No. That would be something else.'

I toyed with the glass. 'Look,' I said, 'this is going to be difficult, but perhaps I should say I'd be only too pleased to paint your portrait. A captivating face, but not easy to get.'

'My likeness you are talking about?'

'The inner likeness. Faces are what we show to the world, but the truth is more difficult. Long pencil studies, careful squaring up and then the utmost patience.'

'Not the artist's response, what he feels towards the sitter?'

Of course that's the essence, the manners and personality of the whole body to be conveyed in a

few features, but the obvious was escaping me as I breezed on. 'Tedious hours of sitting by you, and a large bill from me. Frankly, I'd do it for nothing, for the simple pleasure of painting you, but that's not being professional. Or sensible from your point of view.'

She looked down, as though swallowing her thoughts, but I drew the last bolts across. 'Now, Mrs Stumpfl, you know what we're talking about. If you'd wanted to commission something you should have discussed it when I was up at your place a couple of months ago. Or at least with my dealer present. No doubt I'm adding two and two to make five, but a private tête-à-tête causes misunderstandings, with outsiders, and the parties concerned. Crass of me to mention it, but all I undertake is portraits to the best of my ability.'

Perhaps she'd been expecting that approach because the reply came at once, quiet and sensible. 'Not the "Christine Sitting: Study Number Three" I bought?'

‘Ah, one of my life studies. I’d forgotten Reg had those. For your husband?’

‘Your model is beautiful, is she not?’

‘Professional.’

‘No, that is too much’ she decided, taking the wineglass from me and returning it to the table. ‘Can we not be frank with each other. Why not call me Natalie, if I can call you Patrick?’

‘Just as you like,’ I said cautiously, watching as the glass stared back at me.

‘Well of course I have no designs on your virtue. You have your way to make in a world that depends on contacts and recommendations. That speaks for itself, though no woman’s going to be insulted to learn that she can still turn heads’, she continued. ‘In her own particular way, I am saying.’

I was still considering these disturbing remarks when the voice dropped its playfulness. ‘So we

must talk about Botes. How did you find the house?’

Thankfully familiar ground. However little I may have learned about the rich, this I did know, and had prepared a few compliments, even for the Stumpfls’ place, which seemed rather odd. You went down a steep drive from the electrified gateway, through parkland and trees, and then, half hidden in the wooded hollow, saw an extended Jacobean facade, genuine, and all that survived the waggish attentions of some nineteenth-century restorer. Natalie Stumpfl was expecting more than the usual banalities, however, and I said, ‘Botes Manor? Striking exterior, of course. And the inside . . .’

‘It is an empty shell, I know.’

‘It could do with some personal touches, but it’s an office as well. Your husband works from home, doesn’t he?’

‘You are good at this, aren’t you’, she said, smiling at last, the first unaffected smile I’d seen of hers. ‘I am not a worldly creature, as my husband will tell you, but I did finish my courses. In Moscow and in Paris.’

‘A reference to my Oxford years. Well, I accept the admonishment.’

‘Patrick, what is the matter? We are at Botes again. All the time I was trying to bring you out and you put me down. Here is the famous Patrick Staunton, I thought, the up-and-coming portrait painter, the gangling figure with his enthusiasms and his good opinion of himself. Heinrich found you entertaining, but to me you seemed an engaging fraud.’

The conversation was taking a familiar turn, but I put on a mournful expression, heavy with personal injury. She stopped, and looked exasperated. ‘Well, that is what I thought. Wrong, but understandable, I think.’

‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that, because I really took to you. From the moment you held out your hand and made the introductions.’

‘I tried.’ The silence continued, but I could afford to wait. ‘Yes,’ she continued, ‘perhaps I have spoken out of . . . not well. Rather rudely, Mr Staunton . . . Excuse me.’

‘Mrs Stumpfl, Natalie, I’m a painter, without expertise in anything else. If someone wants my opinion I say what everybody else says. If that makes me evasive or shallow then no doubt I am. Painting is all I understand, and not even that sometimes. Whatever you learned in art courses, I see it only as a practical skill, nothing different from plastering or playing golf.’

Gingerly she took the line. ‘I did take a course, yes. I wrote a dissertation. How did you know that?’

‘No harm there, provided you remember writing is not painting.’ I gave her a magnanimous smile, but Natalie Stumpfl had lost her self-possession,

and was looking at the tablecloth. Seconds ticked past. She opened and rearranged the handbag again. I could see the warm skin tightening over the collarbones, spreading under the lapels of the bouclé jacket, and the gleaming curves of the lashes, their vitality almost tangible. I was in no hurry, and had now stopped transferring skin tones to paint, imagining only that fragrant body in its small, neat clothes.

She looked up, her eyes inches from mine. ‘You are laughing at me! You are, aren’t you?’

‘At this little comedy, Natalie. You are very pretty when you frown.’

The sharp tap she gave my hand came with a sudden girlishness that was enchanting, and then unsettling. Do not get involved, I told myself, repeating it over and over as Natalie Stumpfl laid out her plans for the commission. There was a whole year of work. Portraits of Natalie and her husband, formal full-length pieces, and a couple of small character studies. Fine, I said. And some land-

scapes, views of the house and perhaps some interiors. Why not? I added with careless imbecility: not my speciality but I was sure to cope. Each stage drew Natalie closer, more candid and confiding. It was a long-cherished plan of hers. Whatever arrangements suited me would be fine for them. My social commitments in London, my once a week class at the adult education centre: they were understood. The work could be exhibited, yes, of course. As we left the restaurant, I was not so much drugged with happiness as transfixed by danger. She asked what we could do now. There was a moment of deep longing, and then the sharpest awakening. I was penniless, without social credentials, and had on my arm the wife of someone rich enough to end my career.

‘Some shopping?’ I said.

‘We are not going to see something? You have talked so much about artists.’

‘Exactly. You’ve had enough of my prating.’

She stopped. 'No, that was different. You came down the stairs, you said good morning and you went straight to our Kustodiev in the corner. I like the picture, but no one else has heard of him.'

'Boris was good enough in his way.'

'I know. And what you said was true.'

'Well then.'

'Because I was angry. The night before you treat me like a simpleton, and now you are playing games. That is why I walked out.'

'What was the point? No one else in your place cared about painting. I didn't think you did until I saw the Kustodiev and then the Serov. It was a peace-offering.'

'Patrick, I have had two months to know that.' Her fingers tightened on my arm. 'You don't understand? I wanted you as a friend. I built up these hopes, and then you walked in and dashed them. Why are you so unapproachable?'

‘Shall we try the National Gallery?’ The word ‘friend’ caught me short of breath as we climbed the stairs to the entrance and pushed through the revolving door.

‘So where do we start?’ said Natalie. ‘The Impressionists?’

‘Bit crowded usually.’

‘Not aristocratic enough?’

‘Natalie, none of the best art of this century has been painted for a social elite. An intellectual or political one, yes, but not one that stresses good manners, tolerance and a detachment from life.’

‘So why did you not accept our Moscow invitation? We could have opened doors.’

‘Because you weren’t being serious.’

‘And you had not told Christine.’ She swung round. ‘Is that not true?’

‘Very likely. Let’s try the Venetians.’

She took the stairs, and I followed her into a room that looked airless this weekday afternoon. Sometimes paintings will blaze into speech, but now they seemed only repositories of craft, what painters discuss and understand. Occasionally Natalie called me over and I explained how the work had evolved, the successes and the patchings over. Carried away with these expositions, I wasn't thinking when I added, 'Some things can be perfect. Wouldn't say you were too far off it.'

She shot me a surprised glance, but was smiling again. 'The Titian you do not like?'

'Lived too long. Around him all kinds of wonderful things were being done, but his hands weren't up to it. Of course our demented critics have praised the freedom and spontaneity of the work, but it's only rather sad.'

'Is that what you are afraid of?'

‘Some were prodigiously gifted to the end. Tiepolo was. Those over there. Just scenery painting, but wonderful.’

‘It is very accomplished.’

‘Kustodiev was a colourist. So was Matisse. But they kept everything in a high key. No shadows. Tiepolo brought in tone and colour in a way that no one else ever has. See how the tertiaries work together, the yellows and greens all tied in. Same with the other colours. That’s more than craftsmanship. Boucher, Veronese: they’re not in it at all.’

‘So where is Patrick Hugh Staunton?’

‘Don’t. I have my strengths, but they’re nothing like this. Students in those days were apprenticed from the age of five to painters who knew their craft. Hour after hour, day after day they were drilled and encouraged, for years and years. Not just their craft, it was their life, how they saw and understood themselves. Perhaps you see that dedication in dancers at the Kirov, or American

basketball players, but nowhere else. Today it's just words from critics who don't know what they're talking about.'

I'd said too much, and we'd collected a small crowd. 'Patrick,' she said, slipping an arm through, 'I understand. Can we have some tea now?'

'Shouldn't have gone on like that. Lots more to see.'

'I have to go back soon.'

'St. Martin's crypt? The Meridian Hotel?'

'There is a cafeteria downstairs. Heinrich is collecting me at four.'

We found an empty table, and I brought over the Earl Grey tea she'd wanted, with a slice of lemon. The eyes flickered as she took it, and she angled herself out of direct view. Neither of us spoke for a while, and I only reluctantly pointed out the usual crowd of students, visitors and the out-of-work that would make an ideal pencil sketch. You

should try, she responded, allowing a long silence to follow. It had to be got out, however, and so I asked again. Yes, the commission was still on, if I wanted it.

Somehow we got through the fifteen minutes before the Daimler arrived. Heinrich climbed out, exchanged a few words with me about his wife's hair appointment, and then saw Natalie into the back. She gave me what I thought was a despairing glance, as though she had tried to make a conquest but had only hurt herself. But that was a conjecture surely, a trick of the light, and I told myself that this was simply an important commission that would get me launched.

Frankly, it wasn't Natalie concerning me as I walked round to see Ecclestone. Or the vigilant husband, whose features I had been assessing again: the hard intelligence, and the eyes that sat waiting in their sockets. Not even Christine, I decided when I reached the plate glass door of the Cope Street Gallery and pressed the buzzer. My

Miss Manderson was currently out of town, enjoying a budget holiday with a sister up north, a prelude to the usual nesting instinct. Something deeper worried me as I peered into the gallery that afternoon. Several minutes went by. Then the customer, a portly gentleman in a blue pinstripe, was at the door and Reg was ushering him out with every show of genial favour.

Ecclestone led me through to the small back-office and listened with a faraway expression. 'Yes, I thought you would.' The thirty-five per cent had come rather easily, I thought, but any grievance was snatched away by the contract Reg took from the drawer. All the details were in place, confirmed by Reg's scrawl and the precise signature of Natalie M. Stumpfl.

'All we have to hope now,' I said as I handed the contract back, 'is that the painter can deliver. Hasn't been consulted too much so far, has he?'

‘Wouldn’t worry, old boy. Everyone has complete faith in you. They wouldn’t have made you painter-in-residence otherwise. Private people.’

The eyes shifted and didn’t respond to my inquiry. But Reg had finished his patter, and it was time to start mine. ‘More Natalie Stumpfl’s idea than her husband’s, would you say?’

‘Well, you know how it is’, he said. ‘The young wife who wants to make something of the house, but Herr Stumpfl is behind her. All the way.’ There was a pause, a momentary hesitation, as he added, ‘But I’m sure you can look after yourself.’

‘As usual’, I said as Ecclestone began to rearrange his pens. ‘Well, I’ll be off then. Thanks for the commission, and I’ll keep you posted.’

‘Do’, he said, and held out a friendly hand. ‘You deserve it, and I’m sure you’ll acquit yourself admirably.’ He accompanied me to the door and gave his special boyish grin. ‘For both of us.’

‘Right you are’, I said, feeling the pursed look following me till the corner was turned into Bond Street. I joined the rush-hour crowds making their way down Piccadilly and paused for no reason outside the Meridian Hotel. What I was looking for I cannot imagine, except some friendly stranger with whom I could escape the thought that I was already far out to sea.

As there was no one at the bar, I settled in the lounge, insisting on coffee from the Thai or Malay waitress who came over with the tourist menu. Coffee to replace tea? Just a cup of coffee. Could she do that, in this over-gilt room of mirrors and chandeliers? She conferred with the headwaiter, and coffee appeared. For a while I turned over the events of the day, only vaguely following the movements of the waitress as she floated round. She laughed at my request for the bill, and another rich deluge of coffee was splashed into the cup. The woman left with such an air of happiness that I wondered when the smiling apsara came off duty. Unreal, but I wanted reassurance, and company,

and that compliant young body without life's troublesome complications.

Perhaps Natalie had been in the room some time, but it was only then I heard that slightly husky voice. Cautiously I looked round. She was sitting a few tables away, with her back to me, happily chatting to the MP I'd seen at Botes. My first impulse was to leave. It was none of my business, and the two of them might well have been waiting for Stumpfl. Only I didn't think so, not in the Meridian Hotel, and Natalie's hair looked the same. Why the lie, given so glibly when Stumpfl had collected her? That he didn't want Natalie around after she'd played her part, I could understand, but why such a plain falsehood? I strained to hear what was being said. Odd rushes of words. Laughter. They knew each other well, I realized with a stab of pain, and then came the obvious.

I had been a fool. Stumpfl knew exactly what his wife was up to. She had her life and he had his. It was as clear as day. She had teased me on Tie-

polo's rococo beauties and I'd given her a lecture on the painter's craft.

I slunk off to the basement bar and ordered a double whisky. An American in shirtsleeves was already in place, stuffing fistfuls of peanuts into his mouth, and there were some Chinese, with a spiky intelligence behind rimless glasses. The lounge waitress came through for a signature. 'No, I'm not staying here.' I said with a smile. There was a look, the dark irises disappearing into the upper lid and reappearing with a hint of reproach that stilled the blood. 'Unfortunately,' I added, 'but keep the change . . . '

'Sompong', she said as she took the note. 'Thank you, sir.'

It was the 'sir', inflected and smoothed away into a rustle of sibilants that brought my resolution to its knees, causing me to order another double, and perhaps another after that, though I don't remember, or the tube train journey back. But I found myself undressed in bed when I woke the following

morning, with a hangover that was soon to be the least of my troubles.

CHAPTER TWO

Christine Manderson was back a week later, in ample time to pose as the dashing blonde when we drove out to my dealer's party. We parked the old Mercedes in a gap in the long line of cars, and walked up the chained path to the mock-Tudor house. 'A knockout', declared Reg gallantly. 'Even more stunning than the paintings.' He led us through the chintz-furnished lounge to the guests on the far lawn. Natalie I noticed, and James, the sharer of my studio in Hammersmith, listening to an unusually animated Stumpfl. 'Come and meet the others', insisted Ecclestone as I went to join his

wife, who was on her own, flustered as always by company.

‘Fantastic turnout, Sibyl. Half the town must be here.’

‘We do our best.’ Christine had now reached Natalie. I saw Reg make the introductions, and Christine’s hands stay firmly on the hips. Not a good start, I was thinking as Sibyl chattered nervously. ‘You can thank the Stumpfls. They insisted on celebrating the commission.’

‘Hope they chipped in.’

‘Oh, we can run to it, at least for the moment.’ She intercepted my glance across the garden to the neighbouring properties that emerged from the depths of the hill. ‘All mortgaged, you know: built on hopes.’ She patted my hand. ‘That’s why we were so pleased you accepted.’

‘Pretty well had to.’

‘Will you let me say something without taking offence? I’ve been watching you. You haven’t taken your eyes off the glamorous Mrs Stumpfl since you arrived.’

‘Frau Stumpfl is out of my class. Not to mention that she’s happily married.’

‘Not from what I can see.’

‘Or they complement each other.’

‘Just be careful, will you?’ said Sibyl. ‘I have to go and check the food.’

Natalie was picking her way from group to group, and Christine had collected her usual band of admirers when the first course appeared. We took our plates, and I helped myself to something for Christine who was still talking to a group clearly of my profession. ‘That’s what he says. Don’t you, Patrick?’

‘I thought you’d like to start with the salmon. Looks excellent.’

‘There hasn’t been a decent painter in England since Orpie.’

‘Orpen. Shall we try the table over there?’

‘Don’t patronize me. That’s what you said.’

No doubt I had, but now I was playing my role of Patrick the charmer, and could have done without the thin voice saying, ‘So we have an unbeliever in our midst.’

‘Freddie, good to see you. Christine, this is Frederick Howells. You can read him in the Sunday papers.’

‘A veritable Judas, I do declare.’

‘Don’t know I’ve ever been numbered among the twelve elect, but let’s trade blows some other time.’

‘Why should we?’ said Christine, pushing the plate back. ‘Aren’t you going to stand up for yourself?’

‘Everyone knows Patrick’s views.’ I took her firmly by the arm, though she kept looking round till we reached an empty table.

‘Now what have I done?’

‘Just didn’t want an argument with Howells.’

‘I thought you believed in yourself.’

‘You know that.’

Christine had been there when I unearthed an old volume of ‘The Studio’, and found I liked the work, better than anything today. Of course I continued giving the required answers to my first year class—how we approach the giants of modernism, how their ideas count more than technical skills—but started to look carefully at the painting business. Patrick the Apostate made his own paints and canvases, and even stopped running the usual course on contemporary theory. For a whole term the Principal said nothing, but then had me in. Art colleges are state institutions, with syllabuses that

prepare students for careers in advertising and commercial art. Didn't I understand that?

Theory was reinstated, but I added some proper aesthetics to the usual nonsense. I dug up old painting manuals, and set students their humdrum exercises, until the year-end college exhibition caused a rumpus. The hanging committee voted my work out, and I countered with the regulations. The work stayed, and I doubled the prices. Out of the blue, Reg Ecclestone phoned one lunchtime to say that he'd seen the portraits and would I consider a small commission? So the career began, slowly, the second commission coming months later, when I was still teaching five days a week, and not enjoying the notoriety.

'Red or white?' said our host, appearing suddenly. 'You can drink, can't you, my dear?' He tipped the white into her glass but shook his head at me. 'Not if you're going to hide over here. Not fair to the others, keeping a smashing creature like this out of circulation.'

‘I’m all right, Mr Ecclestone’, said Christine, looking up with a pleased smile.

‘Then I shall push people on to you. The Stumpfls for a start.’

I got to my feet as the two came over. ‘Patrick,’ said Natalie, ‘how nice to see you again. And Christine. You have met Heinrich?’ She settled herself as I held the chair. ‘The weather has turned out warm again. You English are so much wiser. Heinrich, I told you. I should have worn something like Christine’s. It is very becoming.’

Natalie may have a slight accent, but her English is better than that. Often it’s astonishing, like something from a thirties novel, and Christine must have realized that battle lines were being drawn. ‘Yes, an odd country,’ I said, ‘but we do make an effort in this short summer of ours, mayflies as we are.’

‘That is not correct, I think’, said Stumpfl. He sat down and poured his wine into Natalie’s glass. ‘You are not summer creatures.’

‘We haven’t all bought the gloomy Modernist seriousness is probably what I meant.’

‘Is the Bauhaus gloomy, Mr Staunton?’

‘Pretty soulless, wouldn’t you think?’

‘And you, Miss Manderson?’ said Stumpfl abruptly. ‘You know these things? You have been to Germany?’

‘Once’, said Christine. ‘With Patrick.’

‘Two years ago. We took a coach tour to Berlin, Prague and Budapest. A fleeting glimpse of the cultural monuments. Of the past, mostly.’

‘That is pity for you. Now everything is changing.’

‘I admit we should know our eastern neighbours better. Even Christine thought our little coach tour

was a wild adventure into the mists of the Slav homelands.’ I turned to give her the floor but she was only baffled. ‘We have to talk, Chrissie’, I said, reaching a hand across. ‘The Stumpfles have paid us the compliment of setting up home in England.’

‘Have they?’

‘You must come down and see us’, said Natalie, the perfect teeth appearing in a radiant smile. ‘To make sure we are looking after Patrick properly.’

‘Of course, and thank you’, I returned, as Christine did nothing but fold her arms indignantly. ‘Perhaps we shall even talk about prospects in the east, though I don’t know there’s much in it for an old reactionary like me.’

‘Mr Staunton, there is.’ He looked at Natalie as though by signal. ‘But you would know that. Oxford? Modern history?’

‘Rather a blind alley.’

‘You got your degree, but you did not use it.’

‘That’s the English system. Study one thing and do another. Hopelessly old-fashioned.’

‘But you had reasons, no?’

‘Very likely.’

‘It is business’, he said, smiling at my annoyance. ‘We Germans are methodical people.’

‘But you are not German, are you? Or only in name.’ There wasn’t a flicker of acknowledgement, but Stumpfl paused, and I could see the hand had been called. ‘Now, please,’ I said, ‘surely we don’t have to fight these battles. Both sides have much to repent of, but doesn’t that belong to the past?’

‘That is the victor talking.’

‘Herr Stumpfl, your wife will tell you the English look at everything from their own interests. The Renaissance, literature, schools of painting: all grew up woefully out of shape in this cold climate.’

‘You see, my dear: the English understatement. The land of free speech. The great empire, the

originator of the industrial revolution, and Mr Staunton tells us that England is only a misshapen copy.'

'In artistic matters. For the everyday conduct of life, no doubt it's best the English do muddle along. Perhaps business even boils down to common sense.'

'There you deceive yourself, Mr Staunton. Decisions are planned. Always they are part of a larger strategy.'

'So you see how hopeless I'd be.'

'But you have sold yourself to my wife. That is something not easy.'

'A wife as attractive and intelligent as yours would bring out the best in anyone', I said, ignoring Christine, who looked back wary and uncertain.

'And how would you know?' said Natalie, the voice issuing as though out of nowhere.

I was surprised to see how piercing was the look beneath the doll-like features, but if Christine

had been threatened, and my past troubles brought up, I wasn't going to let matters drop. 'Natalie,' I said, 'you have a degree in art history. You saw my work, and said you could count on my doing the job properly. But if some penance is needed, if we must right the wrongs of modern Europe, then perhaps we should tear up the contract right now.'

The smile held, but for a moment there appeared—how shall I put it?—something faltering and pleading in Natalie's expression. She turned away, and looked for reassurance to her husband.

'My wife has a diploma in picture restoration', said Stumpfl. 'But in other ways you are right.' He nodded to Natalie, who got to her feet. 'We shall look forward to seeing you at Botes soon. I hope you will come too, Miss Manderson. It has been a pleasure.' Natalie smiled at Christine, and shook hands with me, the hand lingering a moment.

'A great pleasure', retorted Christine when they were out of earshot. 'What was all that about?'

‘Chrissie, I have no idea.’

I’d registered Stumpfl’s dexterity within an hour of our meeting, but I had never seen him before in this forensic manner, nor found myself so inadequate to the occasion. The Stumpfls left the party an hour later, and I told Christine to announce our departure around four. Howells had disappeared, but I was not sure of safety till we were motoring home along the M40, both of us fretful and depressed.

Things were different when Christine first appeared, one evening at the college dance. I’d heard one of the models referred to as the ‘blonde bombshell’, but hadn’t met her. It was only boyish high spirits, after some student I’d been dancing with went off to get us drinks, that caused me to stroll up to the figure chatting near the band, and I’m surprised she even heard me above the noise. She turned round immediately, however, and I saw those cornflower-blue eyes open with surprise and then something more. My partner was waiting,

however, and after a few minutes I sauntered back. An hour or so later Christine reappeared, gave my partner a shove, and dragged me off.

We got a taxi back, Christine running into the road and stretching out her arms to make the driver brake suddenly. 'He'll tell you', she said, and handed over a note. The closeness of our dancing was nothing to the frank happiness with which she now reached up and folded me in her arms. We were still lying over the back seat, her warm body pressed into mine, when I realized we'd stopped. Dreamily she came to, pushed the hair from her face, and staggered down. The cabby was waving the note she'd given him as I fumbled for the extra money, but the man simply drove off, the only time I've seen a flicker of heart in our national institution.

My flat was much too neat to be true, and, with that uncanny intuition of women, Christine marched over, pulled out a drawer and tossed its contents out of the window. 'You belong to me', she said, as

I stared into the garden below. 'I don't share. Not Christine Manderson.'

So began the affair, good in those days. She could cry off, be difficult, but once in bed was always direct with her feelings. Models do not take up with painters, I should tell you, despite the biographies and the public's fantasies. They are modest creatures who earn too little from back-breaking poses to want to continue associating with the trade. All the same, students do sense the privacy of the bodies they draw, however engrossing the posture of the skeleton, or the exact webbing of the dozens of muscles they must note and understand. Here is a creature extended and vulnerable in a way they wouldn't otherwise see, and with that familiarity comes possessiveness. The sense of something stolen from the class fuelled the dislike when Patrick turned apostate.

I don't think Christine cared. She doesn't make enemies, and placidly continued her hours as commissions began to arrive, and I could transfer

to one day a week at the adult education centre at Belsize Park in north London. Two summers later I won a large commission—the six grandchildren of a doting landowner—and in a fit of confidence didn't reapply. Immediately I regretted the decision and spent six months on State support. Once settled into the hand-to-mouth existence of the other tutors, however, I began to like the threadbare independence. I had time to widen my interests, though it was to Georg Michnik that I owed my interest in matters Russian.

Georg is a Pole, a taciturn etcher in his early sixties. At that time I knew him only slightly, as a shambling automaton who would hunch his shoulders at being spoken to, and then swivel round to fix a gimlet stare through wire-rimmed glasses. To everyone's relief he took his meals in the etching room, an outbuilding of the converted school that served as the centre, and it was here that I mentioned the Stumpf's pictures after my return from Botes.

He looked at me crossly. 'The Futurists? They are rubbish.'

'The World of Art. Serov, Supunov, Kustodiev. I saw a couple recently.'

'They will be copies.'

'Looked pretty much like the genuine article to me.'

'So now you are expert?' Georg gave his Himmler look and went to turn off a hotplate beginning to blur with smoke at the far end of the room. He'd understood, though, and was waiting for details as he settled himself again. 'These people have money?'

'Heinrich Stumpfl. An industrialist or something.'

'No wife?'

'You know my policy.'

'When I was a young man it was different. I was the best dancer in Warsaw.'

I doubted that, but said, 'How life passes.'

'Like a dream. You do not know that because you are young. You think life will go on just the same, for ever and ever.'

I saw myself the recipient of a shameful confidence the old man would later regret mentioning.

'The young never listen.'

Not true. Largely through Georg I started drawing again: in life-class and at railway stations: anywhere the body is relaxed and at ease with itself. I even spent two exhausting weeks in Delhi—a cheap flight and an even cheaper hotel—where for hour after hour on the hot roads I drew the bustle, the street porters, the women trudging about the markets.

Georg might produce his etchings of rural scenes, which were beautiful but strangely empty, apparently selling only at some Painters' Cooperative he belonged to, but for me it was people. Couldn't you exhibit back home, I'd once asked

him, but he'd only growled something about art being universal.

He was still looking at me. 'She is married happily, this client of yours?'

'Georg, people are. Or they have the freedom to change.'

'They are luckier than they realize.'

I knew what he meant. Poland when the war ended: whole cities destroyed, people starving, a quarter of the population missing. Georg had wangled a student exchange to Czechoslovakia and fled to Austria when the Uprising failed.

'But we build again. Stone by stone we make Warsaw as before: Poland for the Poles.'

It had been stupid of me, and Georg was now off on his favourite theme: the need to believe in something, that art expressed spiritual values. In my present state I might well have believed him. 'I know what you think', I said, nodding to one of my

sketches he'd put on the wall. 'Just amusement to people who have nothing beyond their self-satisfied vanity. That's why the latest commission includes some landscapes. Broadening my scope.'

'That is sure? You are doing landscapes? You are getting desperate, my friend. Or this client of yours . . . ' He looked at me shrewdly and then winked. 'You have more freedom there?'

'Nothing like that.'

' Well, your friend will ask around.'

'I'd be obliged if you did nothing of the sort. Heinrich and Natalie Stumpfl are simply clients.'

Georg's marriages I'd heard about in his flat one wet February, crouched round the smoking paraffin heater. He'd been annoyed when I'd only nodded, and rummaged in a drawer. 'You think my wife not beautiful?' he said, producing a photo.

She was. 'Renata, is that?'

‘Marie. Austrian.’ He looked at me with jovial complicity. My Polish wife was something else.’ But then he changed, and I had to prattle on about my own affairs, which didn’t interest him, not in the slightest, though he opened a new bottle of schnapps. ‘To women’, he said. ‘Or in your case, because you do not understand much, to woman, eternal woman.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I tell you what you do,’ said Georg, leaning confidentially across, ‘you rejoice.’

‘Rejoice has it, Georg. You’re right.’

‘No, you listen, my young friend. You understand nothing. Life is a bewitchment, an enchantment. If you do not know that then you cannot be artist. You see: here I have nothing, but I am happy, because I look at the world. It is tragic. A terrible place, but it is beautiful.’

Matters had gone too far to make a joke, and I stared at him uncertainly.

‘Do not worry, my friend. You will see. It will turn out good.’

It hadn't so far, and all that was clear this afternoon as we drove back along the M40 were other people hurtling past in the fast lane. Occasionally I joined them. Patrick Staunton may not have the family intelligence, but he does have the sportsman's steady nerves. The Mercedes has seen better days, however, and I soon had to drop back into the middle lane. We were now entering Hillingdon, the western edge of London, passing rows of suburban houses and sensible lives. With Christine quiet, I thought again of explaining the commission, the four days a week I should have to be at Botes.

I was always explaining, even to my father when I'd tried to prepare him for Christine. ‘Just bring her along’, he'd said promptly. ‘If she's a good-looking girl that'll be more than enough.’ But I could see within a few minutes that the old boy was determined to enjoy himself. ‘We came here for our

honeymoon', he remarked as soon as we settled for lunch in the Basil Street Hotel.

'Oh right', said Christine.

'Seems a long time now, though the décor hasn't changed.'

Christine looked round vacantly.

'Or the waiters, by the look of them.'

'Don't know about that,' I put in, 'they wouldn't have been Greek or Portuguese then.'

'Spanish', decided my father, calling one of them over. I have a reasonably stocked mind, but my father is a natural, one of those who grow peevish when surrounded by everyday stupidity. Once Penelope, my brilliant sister, was dead, from leukaemia at twenty, he was already making plans for an early retirement to Spain. 'It's a fascinating country', he said to Christine. 'Still Moorish in places. Berbers, as you know.'

Christine was unruffled. She took the old gentleman in the frayed linen jacket as a leftover from another age, to whom she had no responsibilities. It never crossed her mind that my father was expecting a contribution to his talk on Andalusia. Or that in our bantering exchange, he was continually trying to draw her in, though without success. When he asked to be seen off at the airport the following day I knew I was in for some searching questions.

He seemed conciliatory at first. 'Clearly level-headed', he said after a longish while, mostly spent discussing the items for which I was to scour the antiquarian booksellers. 'No doubt about that.'

'Amazingly good-natured.'

'She is. And much else. It's none of my business, but if you want someone devoted to you, to look after you, then you'll never do better than that woman. Not in this world. You understand me?'

'I do know that.'

‘Well, don’t bridle at what I’m saying. Tell her. If you care for her, get married. There’s nothing else to be done.’

‘Christine might very well turn me down.’

‘But if you want a soul mate, more your intellectual equal, then it’s no good stringing her along. For her sake or yours.’

‘So we’re not talking about Christine.’

‘Patrick, you are all I’ve got. The one person I still care about. I’ve done my best to instil in you the fundamental decencies of life, but I seem somehow to have failed. I don’t know what you propose to do with this woman, or your whole life.’ He was angry, and I thought for a moment he’d pick up his belongings and march off through Departures.

‘I’m to plan for what I don’t even know myself?’

‘Then isn’t it time you found out? I fought in the Spanish Civil War, but not at your age.’

‘I happen to be working hard.’

‘Why take up this damn-fool profession in the first place?’

‘It’s the only way I feel in charge.’

‘I told you at the time, and I’ll tell you again: what is done is done. You will always remember what happened, and so perhaps you should. But there’s no point in blighting your future with it. Just face up to your shortcomings. We all have to.’

He stopped and was staring at me, the skin stretched sharply over the impatient cut of the eyes and small jaw. But we’d both said more than was needed, and were glad when a couple joined our table. For several minutes we were silent, until my father gathered his things and said, ‘Let’s go for a walk. I’ll be cooped up for hours in that metal tube shortly.’ I carried his battered holdall and we walked through the terminal building, pausing to watch the aircraft coming in over nearby runways.

‘There’s no one else, is there?’ he said gently, almost as an aside.

‘I meet attractive women through my work. But that’s as far as it goes.’

‘Couldn’t you get around more?’

‘I have to paint what I can. Mostly that means the women of rich husbands.’

‘You don’t know? You should, Patrick. Look, I am sorry for the unpleasantness. I care about you, and would like you to do well. Write to me, would you? You used to write very well.’

‘I used to do a lot of things’, I said and shook his hand. We walked to Departures. He went through and then suddenly turned, waved his hat, and disappeared.

That had been nine months ago. I had written, but not said anything important, a failing that weighed on me as we arrived at the flat. But Christine, balm as she is to all life’s complications, sim-

ply stripped off and climbed into bed. 'Come on then. If you still want me?'

'Rather', I said, repeating it an hour later, though she wasn't fooled.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

Christine took a last puff, and squashed the cigarette stub into the ashtray. 'You know, I think you're giving me up.'

What can you say to someone who expresses herself so nakedly, when you have a warm-blooded woman reeking of intimacy, her flushed body waiting for your answer?

'Are you sleeping with her?' The eyes had gone opaque, as they do those rare occasions when something troubles her.

'Who, for Heaven's sake?'

She sat up, tucked her legs in and said, 'So that's it. You're afraid. This Stumpfl woman has given you the shakes.'

'Nothing of the kind.'

'You're afraid of the experience, the deeply transformative experience into a vulnerable, caring human being.'

'Chrissie, put the psychology book away, would you? I'm telling you the truth.'

'You're a monster. Any thought of me cross your mind, the poor mutt who's been going with you all this time?'

'Now that you can't complain about.'

I was shot down immediately. 'You were a million miles away this time.'

'Was I? Sorry.'

'Is that all you can say?' Abruptly she swung herself off the bed and padded over to the sink, the

broad vastus muscles flexing under the raw sienna of the thighs, a mesmerizing sight, making the soul ache for brush.

‘It’ll have to be instant. You’re out of the other.’ She lit the gas, dumped the kettle on the ring, and padded back. ‘You’re a fool. I could be really fond of you.’

‘What about going out tonight?’ I said. ‘Try the new French place?’

‘What do you take me for? I’m not forking out so you can give me the bad news in swish surroundings.’

I watched her sit down heavily, tug on a pair of briefs, and then go over to the TV, finding one of the panel games that were her usual refuge when vexed. Soon would come tidying up the flat: stacking the folders, returning plates and dishes to the sink. I know she had no conversation, that we’d go to college functions, and at the bar she would sit,

hour after hour, saying nothing, only waiting until she could take me back to the flat.

There my little arrangements were sacrosanct. A book might be collected from the floor and placed on the bedside table, but the page at which I'd left it open would still be upwards or have a marker. She worried endlessly about my diet, and if I got low on tea or bread I would find that she'd slipped out and restocked. Her family's birthdays were remembered, and all her friends', scrupulously, and what was chosen was always thoughtful. No doubt she was possessive and domineering, but if there is a heaven we go to, then I believe it will be peopled with warm and caring creatures like Christine.

She was bringing the coffee, and loomed over the bed. There were the two cups, the sunlight playing over the dark surface, a large hand with pink-painted nails, a warm body with its peach and salmon blotches and small freckles, the crisp white brief—and astonishment. Whatever I'd been thinking a moment ago, I now had a picture, possibly a

whole series of pictures. I should have to add items to the tray, and perhaps give Christine a half-open housecoat, but here was something I unquestionably wanted to paint. I knew it as I always knew them: a searing pain of recognition, and then the despairing months of working it out. Christine was not in a mood to be asked, however, and for a while we concentrated on drinking the coffee. ‘Now, Chrissie,’ I said at last, ‘we get on well enough, don’t we?’

She didn’t hide the contempt. ‘Just tell me.’

‘You’ve met the Stumpfls. All they’ve done is commission a large series of pictures.’

‘So Christine will model the dresses, is that what you’re asking?’

‘You’re a different size. I’ll get someone else if necessary. What I’d like to keep you for is something different.’

‘So why all the drama? You’ve had good commissions before.’

‘There isn’t any drama, though I have a feeling that all is not well, that I’m being played along.’

‘The contract’s been signed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, maybe it’s just you treading the straight and narrow with your clients.’ The happy expression returned. ‘Only I never know with you.’ She frowned and tentatively slipped an arm round. ‘You’re keeping me for the other series?’ She looked at me carefully. ‘Well, I may even get the meal tonight. On your forthcoming earnings.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m in the funds. Sold another of my pieces recently.’

A mistake. It was blindingly obvious before I’d finished the sentence, but I had to sit there, smiling, as Christine gathered her thoughts. ‘Which picture? One of those studies of me?’

‘One of those that Reg took away for a mixed exhibition.’

‘And this Stumpfl woman, she bought it?’

‘For her husband.’

‘Patrick, you’re a fool.’ She got off the bed and walked about the room, finally plonking herself in a chair opposite. ‘God, you’re a fool. I might till then have swallowed your story. But it’s Natalie after all. She’s got designs on you, and you don’t know what to do.’

‘Of course not. Natalie simply bought the study because her husband collects paintings.’

‘Because she’s sizing up the competition.’

‘Come on, Chrissie.’

‘You know how much you owe me in modelling fees? Two hundred and eighty, with yesterday’s session. So you can pay up. If this Natalie Stumpfl’s got money to throw about, there are deserving causes nearer home.’

‘Christine, you’ll get it. Once the contract’s over.’

‘Oh no, you’re not escaping into work this time. You’re going to have to do better than that.’

‘Let’s just go out, shall we?’

‘And forget all those times when you were prancing round your studio, showing off what I’d bought you.’

‘You’ve been fantastic, Chrissie.’

‘And you’ve taken advantage of it. ‘Oh, you look so enchanting, Samantha. Please sit your elegant fanny down here, Lady Stewart.’”

‘Mrs Stewart, actually.’

‘I know you, Patrick. You’re a fraud. Maybe the work isn’t bad, but women don’t pose for that. They like to be titillated. It’s what you’re good at.’

‘Chrissie, just shut up.’

‘That’s struck home, hasn’t it? Well this time the shoe’s on the other foot. You’re going to have to interest me. And not just interest, work for me.

Have a shower and come back. I want it properly from you this time. No fantasizing, no just going through the motions. I'm a woman, just how much you're going to discover. When I'm finished with you, you're not going to feel a separate person for a long time.'

What could I say to that, borrowed as it was, I suppose, from some book she'd been reading? But she was right, and stayed so for the weeks following, until I took myself wearily off to Northamptonshire and the new assignment.

CHAPTER THREE

Botes Manor stands at the far edge of the Cotswolds. On three sides are the level fields of the shire counties, bordered by elms and slow-meandering rivers, but for a few miles around the house the land rises again into small hills. The estate is not marked on maps, however, and, as on the previous trip, it took some time to find the entrance, where I had to pose for the surveillance camera before the gates whirred slowly open.

Two miles down the drive the facade came into view. Thin ribbings of yellow sandstone rose into spires and were separated by immense diamond panes of glossy darkness. Again it had that secre-

tive appearance, though the housekeeper was outside waiting to welcome me as I brought the Mercedes to a halt on the gravelled forecourt. The Stumpfls were away at present, she said, but arrangements had been made. We went through the high entrance hall, and up the stone staircase to the first floor. My room was a short way down the passage: a man's room, homely and airy, with a scatter of Persian rugs on the floor and deep arm-chairs. The late sun sparkled on the lead joins, and through the rippled glass I could see the lawn sloping down to the swimming pool. Perfect, I told her, and went down to collect my second bag.

Mrs Wylie was hovering when I helped myself to the cold buffet laid out in the small dining room. Herr Stumpfl had been most particular. Whatever I wanted for breakfast, or any other meal, I was to let her know. Kippers, I said, with toast and coffee. She nodded, and later took me up to the north wing where a room had been converted into a studio. My easel, mixing table and paints had been brought over as I'd asked, but there were also stretchers,

another studio easel and two rolls of canvas. New brushes stood in jars, and I didn't need to run my fingers through to know their quality.

My first concern was to plan the assignment. The owners would come first, and after them the staff, and then the house. I made rough drawings of Mrs Wylie, Bursken the bailiff, and the grounds-men, and afterwards splashed in a little watercolour. The real work would have to wait until my hosts returned, as I explained to Christine on my first weekend back.

'So we're having to live it up all on our own-some.'

'It's just a job. We agreed the money's going to be useful.'

'We agreed that you'd be out of this hole by now. You haven't even looked at the Steeles Road flat.' She handed me the sales details again.

'We will.'

‘And there’s an invitation to a fancy dress party. Opened it because it could have been urgent.’

‘That’s all right, Chrissie. I don’t have any secrets from you.’

‘So who are Mr and Mrs G.F. Howard?’

‘Must be Jerry Howard. Haven’t seen him since Oxford days.’

‘You can count me out.’

‘Don’t be silly. You’ll like him. What are you going as?’

‘You don’t listen.’

She agreed in the end, and through the London A to Z we found a detached house in one of Esher’s leafier quarters, expensive and not what I’d have expected of Jerry’s background. Our host wasn’t at the door, and I couldn’t place the brunette who stretched out a black-gloved hand. ‘Of course,’ I said, going back, Christine not following, ‘you’re Jerry’s wife. We haven’t met.’

‘And you’re Patrick. Told you much about his errant past, has he?’ she said to Christine.

‘No.’

‘Just as well. You and I should have a little talk. If you haven’t netted Patrick by now you clearly need some help.’

She put a protective arm around as I tried to intervene. ‘I’ll look after her. You go and enjoy yourself.’

‘Lost the better half already?’ said one of the men who’d strolled over.

I grinned. ‘Patrick Staunton.’

‘Peter Rivers’, he said, shaking my hand again. ‘Yes, you can count on Gloria. That Avengers turnout suits her, don’t you think?’

‘So that’s what it is. I had more lurid ideas.’

‘Naughty boy.’ He looked at me closely. ‘Old friend of Jerry’s?’

‘Oxford days. Same college.’

‘Ah, the artist. Jerry said he’d invited some luminary or other. But I can’t say you look much like a painter to me.’

‘I’m Attila the Hun, in case this get-up isn’t making the point.’

‘Not like the other industrious little doodlers we have in our agency. You wouldn’t keep your head down for long.’

‘I’d be happy to try.’

‘Packaging. That’s what we do.’

I laughed. ‘Tell me how Jerry’s doing.’

‘Ask him yourself. He’s through there. But make sure you meet my wife. Veronica’s got her eye on you.’

It was Jerry, though older, with a little heaviness in the good-natured expression. He poured a whisky and then, without looking up, doubled it.

‘Rapine and slaughter tonight, is it, O valorous one?’

‘Jerry, how are you? Long time.’

‘Fine.’ He gave my hand a vigorous shake. ‘You’ve met Gloria, haven’t you?’

‘She snaffled my girlfriend.’

‘You could always pick them.’

‘Gloria is charming. Congratulations.’

‘My friend, I thank you.’ He bent down to open another box of glasses. ‘Drop back in an hour or so, would you? We can slope off and have a pow-wow. Unless you’re going to stay the night? Bags of room.’

‘Love to, but I don’t think Christine approves of my drinking buddies.’

‘Say no more. Toiling like the rest of us, eyeless in the mill at Gaza.’

I wandered round, through the six rooms that made up the ground floor, all furnished in standard taste. Snatches of conversation floated past: the job, last year's holiday, the children's education. One could do worse, even if all the bright promise of these bodies was already settling into comfortable middle age. In the garden I found a concrete bench and put my feet up on the sundial, realizing that Christine had been right: my boots didn't go with the costume. Still, I preferred a Bohemian style, even as I liked the Spartan surroundings of my bedsit, with its scuffed plaster and curtains that didn't reach the window-sill.

'Why's that?' Christine had once demanded.

'The contrast. Your glowing skin against the tawdry scene.'

'You're sick.'

'The freedom to make a new world.'

'And selfish.'

But that's what I did. Women bought themselves underwear and bedroom ornaments that no one would see because the objects created a world of interior luxury. That world was what I sensed—eventually, if I flattered and cajoled enough—each filled with an individual personality. It's what I painted, and what they paid for, even if I cheated with the fees or the setting. To create a presence that only the two of us understood, to stain the air with a bright radiance, as someone put it. The phrase came back as an intriguing reminder, and I wasn't for a moment aware of Jerry standing over me.

'You ready?' he said.

'You're not giving up on your own party?'

'We most certainly are. Sir Walter Raleigh and Attila the Hun are off to the local for fresh supplies. Come along.'

We threaded our way through the cars parked in the long driveway and set off down the road—

sauntered, I should say, with the self-conscious happiness of boys truant from school. Ten minutes brought us to The Wheatsheaf, where Jerry held the door. I went through into a lounge almost empty this warm Saturday evening. ‘Lummy’, said the barmaid as I made my way over.

‘No, this is on me’, said Jerry. ‘Sheila, let me introduce an old friend: Patrick Staunton the painter. Now in disguise.’

I grinned raffishly.

‘Take your hat off when you meet a lady. No manners these barbarians.’

The woman collapsed slowly on to the bar, displaying an extravagant cleavage. ‘You’re off your block. Both of you.’

‘That’s no way to speak to an old and valued customer. I shall have the usual, if you please.’ He handed over a fiver. ‘And my friend . . . ’

‘Will have a tonic water.’

‘Careful type, are we?’ said the woman, placing the drinks on the bar.

‘Driving.’

‘Use the tube, loverboy.’

I smiled, put on my helmet, and carried the drinks over to the table near the window.

‘It’s good to see you’, said Jerry. ‘And sit round here, so you don’t ogle my property. All going well, is it? The good and the great queuing outside your studio?’

‘I’d like to hope so.’

‘You think I’ve sold out, don’t you?’ he said in that self-deprecating drawl I could now remember.

‘You’re doing pretty well, as far as I can see.’

‘Balderdash. The blight of middle-class respectability has fallen across my life. How does it go?’

‘And there is nothing left remarkable under the visiting moon?’

‘That’s it. True, my friend. I see nothing of the old crowd. You’re the last of the innings.’

‘Patter of tiny feet now?’

‘Sebastian and Philip. Take after their mother.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘Yes, all satisfactory on that front, but you know what I mean. I want them to make something of themselves. You don’t have a real job, but the sky hasn’t fallen in. Not everyone has to have a mortgage or holidays abroad or school fees to save for.’

‘Sometimes wish I had.’

‘Really? Cupid’s arrow has struck home? Found your soul mate, your true heart’s desire? I am most profoundly happy. Don’t be put off by the moanings of this poor married doormat. Marriage is an honourable estate. Engaged to the woman? Christine, is it?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘You may bend Uncle Jerry’s ear. I am replete with the wisdom of ages, and very discrete.’

‘Hence the budding affair with our friend over there.’

‘That is a gross slander on my character.’

‘Just wondering where I fitted in.’

‘Nowhere. Unless that studio of yours is available?’

‘Not really.’

‘Occasionally?’

‘Jerry, I have a poky bedsit that serves as flat and studio and everything else. It’s Christine’s territory. I’ve never brought women back there. Or clients. They go to a studio I share down in Hammersmith, where there’s no privacy. None at all.’

‘Just an idea.’

‘What’s wrong with a quiet hotel?’

‘Gloria. She scrutinizes everything: it’s her money, or most of it. Besides, a painter’s studio would be romantic.’

‘Anything else I should know? Nothing about having promised the poor woman a sitting?’

‘It is possible.’

‘You haven’t changed. Look, these days I never work for free. I have to be professional.’

He looked at me forlornly. ‘Understood. I should have known better.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Quite all right, old man. We forget how people are when we haven’t seen them for a while. You always were a serious coot. Stuck to your guns, whatever you did.’

‘I’m not making difficulties. Just the truth.’

‘What you have to remember is that not all of us are made of the same unbending steel. It causes

problems. Patrick says no, and everyone has to adapt. Even Rowena did. Now don't interrupt. I'm going to tell you something. You know who went up to Scotland afterwards to see her father? Muggins.'

I stared at him, puzzled. 'Didn't know you'd met him.'

'Why did I invite her to that last ball? Just to take her off your hands? No, it was because I was in love with her. Absolutely besotted. All that time you were half taking her out and playing around I was the one who desperately wanted her back. Didn't you know that?'

'Why the hell didn't you say?'

'Because we were friends, and Rowena wanted you. Is that hopelessly derring-do? If Rowena could be happy with you I wasn't going to stand in the way.'

Slowly the memories came back: Jerry's behaviour, the odd hints Rowena had dropped. I saw the kindness of Rowena's father, the unspoken as-

sumption among the staff that I would gradually take over. Of course I'd been flattered, as any young man would, and it was only one afternoon, as we sat in the drawing room in the spotlessly-kept house, that I realized what was missing. Rowena was a presentable woman. Her father had all the straight dealing you'd expect of a military background. And the setting was magnificent. But there was nothing of the atmosphere in which Patrick Staunton could live. A better man would have ended matters on the spot, spoken to laird and daughter, and quietly packed his bags. I hung about, though, shocked by the revelation. For a whole year I couldn't explain.

Jerry was looking at me.

'I don't know what to say.'

'All forgotten, old man. Water under the bridge.'

'Look, I'll do the girl's portrait, and gratis, if that's what you've promised.'

'Like to do Gloria's as well?'

‘I’m not cheap now. One grand at least.’

‘Ask two. Just get us a room in London with the extra cash.’

‘No, Jerry.’

‘Or just slip us the money.’

‘Rather high stakes, isn’t it? With a good-looking wife, beautiful home, two children . . . ’

‘If I don’t break out occasionally, I shall go mad. Sheila is something I must have.’

‘Couldn’t you use her place?’

‘Seen her boyfriend, all fourteen stone of him? Sheila knows the score. She’s not my type any more than Christine is yours.’

‘Christine is about the kindest creature I know.’

‘Right, grovelling apologies, old man. We’ll fix up a dinner party sometime. I thought you were just playing around.’

‘Would you mind if we went back now? I promised Christine she wouldn’t be abandoned.’

‘Understood. We shall go back on the instant.’

I looked at Jerry during our return as though to find something I hadn’t seen before, but he was just the same, ambling along with that small boy’s quizzical expression. The front door was open as we came up the drive and I could feel the music heavy on the air. Christine was sitting it out, but got up immediately I came into the room. ‘Right,’ I said, ‘let’s dance. Dance as though our lives depended on it. Chrissie, please.’

Both Stumpfls were back the following week, though it was through Natalie that I made arrangements. I began their portraits in the studio, working at them alternately. The fierce look had not returned to Stumpfl, and I soon gave up trying to balance the man’s chilly ambience with his busi-

ness successes, concentrating on the obvious pleasure with which he followed his wife around.

In truth it was Natalie's portrait that pleased me most. There is something unexpected, even magical about a portrait coming to life, and I began to feel I'd never painted so well. Even Stumpfl would look in at lunchtime, and again at five. Sometimes he would sit there after dinner, with all the lights turned on, which spoiled the flesh tones that I'd built up with acid yellows and pinks. But it made no difference. He was astonished, and I think for those spellbound minutes Natalie's portrait meant more than all his shipping and international concerns put together.

The portrait began to make claims on me too. There was nothing unusual about the pose, just Natalie three-quarters facing, with the light coming from the window and reflected on the left. Too much light, an older school would have thought, not so much bathing the face as dissolving into it, as though that surface were a gentle swelling from the

ground itself, a soft-breathing membrane of transparent subtleties that I wove hour after hour in a slow frenzy of concentration.

Perhaps the strain began to tell, as I started making excuses. We should go out, walk in the grounds, take picnics, place characters in a more natural setting. All these experiments came off: Natalie sprawled by the picnic hamper, in a loose white top, her sandalled feet pushing into the grass. The pencil found its own way, picked out just the right features. Even the watercolour washes, where I touched in the shadows in the far eye and under the chin, and then filled the background with the glowing greens and blues of the thick trees behind had only to take their place around something that was already abundantly alive.

The reasons were obvious. With this carefree, gentle creature I was in love, wholly given to her presence, and could not imagine how it should be otherwise. I had said nothing, and done nothing, but Botes staff and Stumpf himself were as aware

of it as though we walked around all day with tall paper hats on our heads. In six short weeks, where not a word of intimacy had passed between us, it was as though I'd known Natalie all my life. The light chatter of her voice, the precise fold of arm, leg and body in a hundred arrangements, her dresses, the indescribable softness of her body fragrance: all this I felt and was fiercely partisan to. Since she knew that, and seemed instinctively to know what I would say and do next, there was no need to draw attention to the matter. We were courteous and awed by each other, and the day went on quietly around us.

Unreal, you will say, adolescent make-believe. No doubt, though left to myself, composing landscapes, or half reading a book in the library after the Stumpfls had gone to bed, there wasn't an inch of her body that I didn't imagine caressing and intimately filling. But all fantasies vanished on seeing her, and while I'm sure that no gross physical act would have distressed her, nothing was expected or advisable. If a word is wanted it is ver-

tigo. Here on the high trapeze we swung effortlessly through our elaborate routines, safe while we followed them exactly.

I generally got up early, went for a stroll around the estate, and then joined the Stumpfls for breakfast. Natalie was a late riser, but Stumpfl had put in an hour or two at his desk, appearing soberly correct in grey suit and tie. Natalie dressed informally, but I never saw her in negligee or dressing gown. Perhaps it was a courtesy to me, so my imagination should have less to fasten on, but in time I realized that Natalie was also a sensible and organized woman, her day fitting into her husband's routines.

For long periods the two were away on business but Natalie always prepared lunch when back, and often dinner as well. She had her own interests, probably the estate finances, as I saw her in conversation with Bursken, or bending over the flower beds with the gardeners. Did she still see her friend in London? I knew she did, but whereas she took

the ten o'clock train on Saturday, I had left the Thursday evening before.

What could I say to the dashing blonde? Christine had drawn her own conclusions, and was soon trying to compete. She now cooked on Friday evenings, having a meal prepared when I came home from class. She bought herself recipe books, and invited Georg and another couple to lunch one Sunday, which went off well. Just needs company, Christine said, reminding me of what I should have done years ago. She talked for the first time about painters, dragging me off to London exhibitions on which she had clearly done her best to become knowledgeable.

Of course we also toured the letting agencies, tramping up and down stairs, admiring rooms, gardens and a host of details I carefully noted on the particulars—a tedium relieved only by the charm of some agents, with whom I was often chatting as Christine stocked up with even more literature. Each prospect was to be our new life together. I

gave way to breezy enthusiasm, which was then tempered with qualifications, and remarks that we wanted the best, something worth the money, which of course depended on keeping in with Reg, the Stumpfls and a continuous stream of new clients.

Perhaps it would still work out. None of this was Christine's fault, and I tried as much as was humanly possible to be attentive to this good-natured woman. Each night I would draw her up and batter away at that heavy libido, filling and pounding as at some impregnable fortress that was locked against me. She always responded, eventually, her body shuddering in paroxysms that would have been gratifying had I not been drenched and shaking with exhaustion.

Those thoughts were somewhere else when I fastened another sheet to my pad and began on the figure sat in the long grass and pretending to read. 'Can't see why we shouldn't have one of these as a full-length painting.'

‘We are forgetting someone.’

‘I could easily paint Heinrich in. You take his place. Just angle yourself and look at me.’

‘Patrick, he will not want that. And I should not either.’

She looked angry for a moment, and then went on sorting out the hamper. I took a sandwich and a couple of boiled eggs, and then sat away from her, gazing towards the house which appeared on the far slope, its south face almost white now in the strong sunshine. One of the gardeners was working on the terrace, and in the upstairs room Heinrich would be at his desk, writing or on the telephone.

‘Look, my idea, I know, but should we be having so many of these picnics?’ She didn’t reply and I turned round to find her staring into the hamper. ‘Is it wise, do you think?’

She stretched a hand across and I realized that she'd been crying. 'You've finished the studies out of doors anyway, haven't you?'

For a second I wanted to take the body in my arms and say that I should never finish admiring and being near her. But that was against our understandings, of course, and I said, 'Suppose so. It's just the trees that keep me awake at night, as Heinrich knows.'

'You should not tease him. When he pays for something he thinks it belongs to him.'

'He can have the work when I'm satisfied', I said. 'That's the only way he's going to buy me.'

Natalie coloured. 'Do you know what my classmates are reduced to, the people I trained with? They are in tiny flats, one room flats in tower blocks where nothing works. Their lives are not going anywhere. Of course they may be lucky: their husbands do not come home drunk, or beat them up.'

The rest have become couriers or call-girls or cheap prostitutes on Komsomolskaya ploshchad.'

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

'You do not know why Heinrich was angry at Ecclestone's party? All these people who gave themselves airs, and do not know a thing outside what appears in the papers. You waved Heinrich's openings aside and started on some airy nonsense of your own.'

'I don't know anything about business.'

'And Heinrich does not know how to talk to people. But you've no idea what the others were like—fat Poles, German bankers with their business expenses, Americans not out of nappies. Heinrich was the only one who treated me like a woman. He did not sidle up, or make promises. For six weeks he sent a car for me every evening, and took me wherever I wanted to go. With me he was honest and straightforward. One evening, he looked across the table and asked if I would be his mis-

tress. Nothing about a flat or foreign currency. Patrick, I liked him. I was happier that night than I was ever in my life.'

'You left him for Paris, though.'

'Heinrich sent me. After six months he said I should get a qualification recognized outside Russia. There were no strings attached. If I found someone else, or wanted to stay abroad, he would understand.'

'Generous of him', I said, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice.

'Maybe he is a ruthless operator, but that is not with me.' She smiled. 'You are thinking of Magwitch and "Great Expectations". Someone Heinrich could always imagine.'

'Is that why you moved to England?'

'It is why you were chosen. Because you also have a past.'

'There's nothing mysterious about me.'

‘Who are you trying to find? Your mother, the little girl that dumped you?’

‘Rowena didn’t dump me. She took an overdose.’

‘She dumped the whole world. Just as your mother did.’

‘Natalie, what is this?’

‘Why did your father marry? He was old for that.’

‘We have been doing our homework, haven’t we?’

‘It’s business.’

‘Then you’ll probably know he met Pru through a wager. She was a helper in the college canteen, just serving and doing the sweeping up. But she was beautiful, and when someone bet my father, this old dry stick of a bachelor, that he’d not win her, he accepted the challenge.’

‘He fell in love with her?’

‘Completely, though there were always other men. She was away weekends at a time, even when I was small.’

‘Which is why you keep Christine.’ She paused. ‘Don’t you understand? Heinrich wants me to forget someone by taking up with you.’

The blood drained away.

‘In time. When there is something to bring us together and keep me safe.’ She smiled. ‘Why are you so slow? Of course I am interested, and perhaps more than interested. But you will not leave your model, and I cannot leave Heinrich.’

‘I’ve no reason to. Christine is one in a million. I can hardly support myself, and certainly not someone like you.’

‘You do not want an affair because you do not know what will happen.’

‘I’d be even more desperately in love. You’ve no idea what it’s like.’

‘It is a nightmare for me too, every time I see you. That was why Heinrich talked me into lunch with you, because I liked you. I told you: he is clever.’

‘Heartless is more like it.’

‘Then it is a heartless world, if you want something badly enough. Patrick, are you listening to me? Please, I cannot say more.’

The pain came so suddenly that I wasn’t even aware of holding Natalie in my arms, or of her whispering urgently as she freed herself, ‘Not now, Patrick, please, please darling . . . ’ It must have been in stupefaction that I got up awkwardly to put some distance between us. A plate snapped under my feet as I went over to adjust the easel. Then the wretched contraption fell over, and I was trying in my confused way to set it up again when I felt Natalie’s hand on my shoulder.

‘I am going to the house now. Heinrich and I are eating out tonight. But you will think about it?’

‘What use is that?’ I muttered, still picking the grass from the paint. I looked up, but Natalie was now walking back to the house.

Christine had a surly manner when I returned the following day. Her flat had been burgled, nothing much stolen, but the whole place turned over, which Patrick seemed not to understand. At Saturday lunch we had one of those sputtering discussions on how the relationship was developing.

‘I’m not pressing you to marry me. I’m even turning a blind eye to your carrying on with this German tart.’

‘I’m not carrying on.’

‘I said I’d get a better job so we could have a decent flat together. Which you still won’t decide on.’

‘They haven’t paid me.’

‘Patrick, you could give up the commission tomorrow. If you weren’t playing me along.’

‘I want what’s best for us.’

‘Best for you.’

‘I’ll go and see Georg this afternoon’, I said. ‘He wanted to look at my landscape sketches. All right, Chrissie? I’ll be back to cook.’ She didn’t reply, but sat down heavily in the one armchair and turned on the television. ‘About six’, I added, pulling the door behind me.

Georg gave me a pointed look, poured us some schnapps and helped unpack the folders. ‘Ja’, he said irritably, waving me aside to sort out a small pile, which he laid on the table. ‘These are all right’, he decided at last. ‘For you it is start. It is not bad.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But it is not art. You are not a landscape painter. It does not talk to you.’

‘Just tell me about the colours. I’m trying to work the Stumpfls into their setting.’

He looked at the Polaroids I’d taken of the Stumpfls’ portraits, and then put them down. ‘Terrible, my friend.’

So out it came: the pent-up frustrations, the evasions I’d been forced to adopt. I was shouting, perhaps wildly, that Georg knew nothing about the Stumpfls, or portraits, or anything at all. His figure seemed to collapse into itself, but then he was recovering something from the table drawer, a studio album, I realized as I took the thing and turned the pages. Georg was just about recognizable—not unhandsome in a thickset way—but his wife I knew immediately, the smile radiating from the figure stood on the church steps.

‘She was beautiful, Renata, ja?’ he said hoarsely.

‘Yes. And those drawings of her weren’t so bad.’

‘That is why I tell you make changes. Now, when you can.’ He’d gone over to the table and was looking again at the Polaroid shots, at Natalie’s portrait, which he picked up and stared at for a long time, shaking his head as he put it down. ‘My friend, it is dangerous. You do not know these people.’ He shook his head again and waved me into the armchair. ‘All these months and you do not know who this man is.’

Perhaps I did, vaguely.

‘Matynia,’ said Georg carefully, mashing the syllables between his teeth, ‘Kostek Matynia. This I tell, and you listen, you listen very carefully.’

It was after twelve when Georg finished. I’d phoned Christine earlier, and did so again after our talk, but she slammed the phone down. Georg found me a blanket and I slept in the easy chair. In the morning I went out for supplies early, and made a decent breakfast. There was much show of dignified refusal, and Georg was so long dressing in the bathroom the eggs turned leathery, but around nine

we were both drinking a final coffee as the weather cleared and the prospect of another sunny day glowed through the window.

‘Why don’t we go down by the river? I’ve got another portrait to do this morning but I should be clear by one. You could bring the car back and collect Christine, couldn’t you? Have a pub lunch.’

Georg looked at me suspiciously. ‘Christine know this?’

‘Better you don’t tell her.’

‘Ja, okay, we go.’

We didn’t talk on the drive down, and afterwards Georg simply moved over and drove off in his gear-grinding way. I walked over to the turn-of-the-century frontage, creaked open the door and went through. There are several small rooms off which James and I use by agreement, but only the one studio, a large converted room that opens on to the garden. James is not a tidy person, I was still clearing the trolley and adjusting the screens when the

doorbell rang. I went out to find Sheila and partner lodged on the doorstep.

‘This is Stewart’, said Sheila, tripping back in a tight pair of jeans and smiling half-embarrassed. ‘He’s my boyfriend.’

I saw what Jerry had meant: a large man with an angry expression, crew-cut and a gilt earring disappearing into the strong neck. ‘Delighted to meet you’, I said.

‘This your place?’ he said, pushing past me into the studio.

‘What I share with a colleague, yes.’

‘You do all this?’ He walked over to the early sketch of Gloria and then pulled some others from the stack of failures.

‘That is so, Stewart. Can I get you a beer or something? It’s a tiring business watching someone have their portrait done.’

‘Okay girl,’ he said, ‘seems all right. I’ll get your bag from the car.’

He carried in a large suitcase, took himself round the other rooms, and then went out, slamming the door. ‘Was that necessary?’ I said once she had finished examining the stack and flopped into the portrait chair.

‘He didn’t think you were genuine.’ She stretched out lazily and smiled. ‘But I can tell.’

‘Right, well, we’ve got a couple of hours. For changing, there’s a screen back there, or a bathroom on the left. Give me a shout when you’re ready. I’ll fix us some coffee meanwhile.’

‘Okay, loverboy.’

Ten minutes went by. She was making up, I supposed, which would have spoiled the silky complexion. ‘All right, is it?’ I called out as I came through.

‘Ready’, she sang out.

I nearly dropped the tray. She was sprawled elegantly in the chair, legs crossed, wearing high heels and nothing else.

‘Lord in heaven! What the hell are you doing? It’s a portrait we agreed.’

‘Do you think I have a good figure?’ She unwound and stretched herself, angling her arms behind her head. ‘Stewart thinks so.’

‘He may not be so thrilled at you showing yourself off to someone else.’

‘I want you to paint me like this. You do other women, don’t you?’

‘I paint professional models, under certain conditions, which doesn’t include a private studio when there’s no one else around.’

‘Afraid Stewart will come back and catch us? He wouldn’t mind.’ She stepped down and walked across to the suitcase, from which she extracted a wallet of family snaps.

There was Sheila on the bed in various poses, by the window, sat in the garden and holding a straw hat coyly over bust and navel. 'Fine, but not my scene.'

'Stewart took those. Belongs to a photo club. They swap them, the boyfriends. So he wouldn't mind.'

'Sheila, let me explain. Painting is not photography. It's hard work. You have to stretch yourself into unbelievable poses. It's uncomfortable after five minutes and unbearable after ten. It's badly paid and not well regarded. If you want glamour, go and see one of the west end agencies.'

'I have, and they won't take me. Even tried the local art college. Awful. They didn't come out looking like me at all.'

I remembered my early efforts. 'So who's to know I'd be any better?'

She was off in a flash, over to the stack and pulling out canvases till she found what she

wanted. 'There you are,' she said, holding up an unfinished study of Christine, 'if you can do that for her, you can do that for me.'

'Jerry said a quick portrait sketch, because he'd led you on.'

'What's a boring old portrait to me?'

'Soft complexion: excellent bone structure: you'll be amazed.'

'Your friend coming here?'

'About twelve,' I lied, 'and I'd like the portrait finished by then. I don't want the situation exploited.'

'Oh I am, I am.' She smiled provocatively. 'Please Patrick. If you paint me like this I'll do whatever you want.'

'Very well', I said angrily. 'We have an hour and a half. I'll do a life study pastel for twenty minutes and then the portrait. That's my last offer. Twenty minutes and you're going to have to keep still.'

The pose was a difficult one, enough to make even Christine complain, but Sheila kept it surprisingly well, the arms and body sweeping out in the joy of life. A good figure: chubby but with a soft lustre to the skin and two neat little dimples above the sacrum. 'Right, that's it', I said, putting the charcoal down.

She came to stiffly, eased her shoulders and then stalked over. For a moment she said nothing. Then she unfastened the paper from the easel and held it up. 'Can I have it? I'll tell Stew it was the life class at college.'

'Whatever you like. I'll leave you to dress, and we'll get started on the portrait.'

'Patrick, which one? She skipped over and hoisted one dress and then another from the suitcase. 'Which one?'

'The black.'

'Don't go. You can talk to me.'

‘There are certain proprieties we’re supposed to follow.’

‘I want to talk about Jerry.’

‘What about Jerry?’

‘I’ll tell you.’ She rummaged about in the case and selected some red underwear, which, humming slowly, she slipped on.

‘What about Jerry? I hope you’re going to be careful. He’s got a lot to lose.’

‘Everyone knows about Jerry.’ She fluffed out the dress and went to look in the mirror. ‘Do you know why he fancies me? Because I won’t give it him.’

‘Then what’s the point?’

She didn’t reply but settled on the chair, and straightened her head. ‘Is that okay?’

‘About it. More to the right and look up a bit.’

Half an hour went past, and there were no difficulties. In fact I began to be amused by this forward creature, similar to Natalie in size but so different otherwise. Around half eleven I called a break, and Sheila stepped over to inspect progress.

‘Cor. That’s marvellous.’ She kissed me on the cheek and then turned the easel to view the sketch from a distance. ‘Better than the other one, isn’t it? Expect you were nervous. Your girlfriend the jealous type?’

‘Sometimes. Only these last months I’ve been so busy she only sees me at weekends.’

‘Wish Stewart would. That would be really nice.’ I must have looked surprised, as she went on coyly, ‘You know. He’s a piledriver. When he’s not working on that exercise bicycle he’s grinding away at me.’

‘So why, excuse my curiosity, do you want to take up with Jerry?’

‘Because I want someone to hold me, whisper sweet nothings in my ear. Is that too much to ask?’

‘Suppose he might.’

‘Doesn’t have to be Jerry.’

‘No thank you. My life’s quite complicated enough.’

‘I know you’d be nice.’

‘And it’s not fair on Jerry.’

‘You went round together, didn’t you, because you pulled the birds? I can tell. What do you think of these?’ She fished out a small pair of briefs from the suitcase: black silk, slit up the front and trimmed with lace. That’s what I’m going to wear now. Think Jerry will like them?’

‘I thought Stewart was picking you up.’

‘Told him I was seeing a girlfriend.’ She made a face, opening her mouth in surprise. ‘When you’ve

phoned for a minicab we can talk about this modelling you're going to give me.'

'Oh no I'm not.'

She draped her arms around my neck. 'Please.'

'Four days a week I'm up in Northamptonshire on a big commission. For the rest of the time I'm using Christine for another series. I don't have a moment spare.'

'This Christine my size?' she said, hanging in closer.

'No. What are you anyway, 34 E?'

'D. I just push them up a bit.'

'Well, look, possibly, just possibly, I could do with someone to model the dresses. The client in Northamptonshire is about your build, though not so full in the bust. If you could get into a C fitting without doing yourself a mischief I suppose there could be some work.'

‘That’s my boy.’

Irritably I finished the portrait, sprayed the two sketches, and slipped them into separate tubes. The minicab called some ten minutes later, and I helped her with the suitcase. Back in the studio I tidied up so there was only the August sunshine streaming through the windows when Christine arrived an hour later. She handed the keys over, and seemed in a good mood. Georg had brought his etching plates, and would be busy while we talked, the two of us, to make up for some of the recent troubles.

It was possible, I thought at Botes the following afternoon, though Stumpf himself wouldn’t have been present.

‘So,’ said my host, throwing the newspaper down as he got up from the chair, ‘you are not represented in German galleries?’

‘I have an exclusive contract with Reg Ecclestone.’

‘That is why I obtained his permission. I have contacts in Frankfurt and your work will appeal to Germans. You have some paintings unsold?’

Of course I was thinking of Georg’s account, the atrocious pictures they conjured up. Perpetrated by Stumpfl’s thugs, or people he had worked for. ‘Not really, Herr Stumpfl.’

‘Mr Ecclestone tells me you have twenty pieces with him. They will make a good introduction.’

Why had Georg given me the stories? Surely you keep them to yourself? Your own wife dragged off, raped and mutilated. ‘There’s some things to organize first.’ I could see him at his desk, signing papers as the knife went in.

‘That is why Mr Ecclestone has lent us your portfolio. My wife has made a booking for Tuesday. You have no objection?’

CHAPTER FOUR

The chauffeur was waiting for us, and we had only to recline in the soft leather seats until the doors were clicked open and we could stroll in to the hotel reception.

‘Two singles, not necessarily adjoining’, said Natalie in a matter-of-fact voice. ‘Will that be satisfactory, Mr Staunton?’

‘Perfectly. And we must meet later.’

‘Tea at five’, she decided, before following her luggage across the polished floor to the chrome lifts. A porter took my bag, and I carried the small portfolio of drawings, the one thing genuine in this

shiny business world into which Natalie Stumpfl dissolved without trace.

‘We can stay here if you want to’, she said after dinner, as we sat drinking coffee in the hotel lounge. She was just across the table, and the business suit seemed more to offer than contain the body.

‘You’re very pretty tonight.’

She took my hand, folding it carefully into hers, and then running a finger over the knuckles. ‘So?’

‘So let’s hope it’s all worthwhile, that someone takes to the work.’

‘Patrick, I do not always want to do the running. Could you not treat it as a night out? Heinrich knows that we are here.’

‘Rather what bothers me.’ I nodded to the far side of the room, where the chauffeur raised a glass.

‘How is it difficult to accept these things? You remember a certain Ilonya Petrenko. You know how she described you? Tall, shambling and unashamedly charming.’

‘Who?’

‘Nothing was happening at first, she said. Then this lopsided head would suddenly bob up from behind the easel, followed by a brush that traced wild gestures in the air. That is what we need, the voice would declare. Colour. Lots of it. Now that pink dress is perfect. We have white in the pearls and earrings. Wonderful. Then your head would disappear, and there would be a furious brushing sound, followed by more compliments.’

‘You’re making this up.’

‘Suddenly you would appear next to poor Ilonya, and the schoolboy expression would burst into a fit of enthusiasm. What do think? More contrast? Would you mind, just draping this scarf round? Not

the neck, that is too pretty, but across the armrest and a leg.'

'Can we talk about something else?'

'Then you would startle her by thrusting the half-finished work at her, and ask her opinion.'

'You have to say something.'

'Ilonya is the most tight-fisted woman I know. But she paid up like a lamb. You agreed two thousand, and charged her three and a half.'

'There turned out to be more work.'

'Because you wasted so much time.'

I tried to grin.

'You were selling. Just as we did with that little collection for you at Botes.'

'It had crossed my mind.'

'Which is why Heinrich wants you to run a gallery.'

‘Impossible. I’m a painter.’

‘You are not only that. The money would give you the security to paint as you want. Perhaps for both of us.’

‘Moreover, you have to know the product, and believe in it.’

‘The World of Art period, which you have an eye for, and I think is lovely.’

‘Can’t see Heinrich losing you without a struggle.’

‘Then perhaps there is a plan.’ She motioned to the waiter. ‘Anyway, you need encouragement.’

Did I? Even at school, when I sketched friends, their life was only as I allowed it. I was the magician, the great conjurer who by a hundred skills breathed life into the dry strokes.

‘Just say yes.’

Why not get the bill and take this yearning and beautiful creature to her room and do what any other man would do, passionately and reverently until all the heartache was made good? She was extraordinary. In the up-thrown table light her top lip swelled with a hurt radiance, the lobes of the ears glowed red, and—most striking of all—the eyes seemed lost in a shadowy innocence.

‘We could just talk. You could tell me about yourself.’

‘Small hope of that.’ I smiled and touched her hand. ‘See you in the morning.’

We were business-like at breakfast, and during the short ride to our first call. The owner was smooth kindness itself, going through the slides and drawings carefully, asking questions, paying the odd compliment. He knew his job, and afterwards we went round the current exhibits, most of whose names were new to me. I liked him, and

was disappointed when Natalie remarked in the car afterwards that we'd have to be patient: one didn't get into Frankfurt's top gallery just like that.

Our second call met with a cooler reception. The owner didn't spend time with us, and I was glad to be out. No good, agreed Natalie, as we sat in Erno's Bistro on Liebigstrasse. 'Let's hope for more from the Schneider Gallery', I said, taking the bill, which Natalie wrenched from me and paid.

She led the way to the top floor of a concrete office block. Half lost in the shimmering web of twisted fluorescent lights, contemporary sculpture was on show: trendy work, I explained to her when we got back into the car. It wasn't arrogance. I did know what was good and bad in my work, and I expected a dealer to spot the difference. You have to start somewhere was all Natalie said, but then added we'd made the sale. They'd give me an exhibition early in the New Year. 'That's good', I said, and followed my own thoughts.

There is not much to see in the gleaming Legoland of Frankfurt, but I spent a couple of hours on the south bank of the Main, trailing between the museums—Liebighaus, Städel, the Museum für Kunsthandwerk. Many of the painters I knew from artbooks, but it was over the Noldes and Kirchners that I lingered most, however different their styles to my carefully plotted work. By unspoken agreement, Natalie stayed back for facials and some shopping. We both needed space, and in a reflective mood I walked along the broad expanse of the Untermainkai, to the hotel, where I took a long bath and dressed for dinner.

The chauffeur took us to a restaurant of Natalie's choice. My one good suit had been cleaned, and Natalie appeared casually dangerous in a short cocktail number. The bandleader gave us a nod and struck up a livelier note as we were escorted over and settled.

‘Seems we’ve helped already’, I whispered, and Natalie laughed, ordering Chablis before the list appeared.

‘So let us just be happy. Ask me to dance.’

Perhaps we weren’t in the real world at all. Over her bare shoulder and the hair, which she had set in a sixties style, I was aware that our performance was creating a stir. We spun out and round. Two elderly couples that had been patrolling the floor stopped and moved over. Natalie laughed, stepped swiftly between my feet and held herself so upright that I could feel the breath surge happily into the lungs and out. The band modulated into a rumba and we followed, Natalie throwing up her small fingers in the flourish that marks the end of each movement. Round we went again, until the number ended, when we smiled and answered each other. Natalie curtsied again, to the band and then to other guests, who were still applauding when she ran back to the table.

‘To us’, I said, filling her glass. ‘And some food,’ I added as she got to her feet again, ‘or we shan’t last the night.’ As though to remind me of our first meeting, Natalie ordered fish again, though I stuck to soup and pasta and a good light wine. ‘You could have more than that. Heinrich does not expect us to starve.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Christine not look after you?’

‘You’re prying. Come on, let’s dance again if you’re going to empty another bottle.’

‘Anything you want, Patrick. I’m yours tonight.’

For answer I held her firmly. ‘Don’t say that,’ I murmured, ‘not yet.’ The return look was furious, and then painful as she stared into the distance. The earlier high spirits had gone, and we walked back stiffly, starting the main course without speaking.

‘Why do you make me feel such a tramp?’ she said as the plates were cleared. ‘What are you afraid of? That I would not catch you, hold on to you?’

‘With a husband and a lover already?’

‘Join them. First among equals, if you are not possessive.’

‘Natalie,’ I almost shouted, ‘don’t you understand? I’m in love with you.’

‘But you can’t expect me to give up everything, can you?’

‘Which is why I’m opting to stay put. Even though you appear everywhere I look: your face, your voice. Only it’s still on the surface, thank God.’

‘You cannot imagine me with someone else?’

‘I know exactly how that beautiful body would look, but can’t picture you because the image burns out. Don’t you understand?’

She pulled a face. 'Not really. But I will tell you something, on one condition: that you open up.'

'We've been through that.'

'Do you not want to know who my lover is? It is not a man.'

My response must have showed, as her features tightened. 'My serious attachments are always to women.'

'Well, why not?' I said lightly, the smile painful in my teeth.

'I sleep with my husband, and with other men sometimes. But I do not form attachments to them. Is that a difficulty?'

'Of course not.'

'You have to take me as I am. I offer my time, my body and my friendship, but not my intimate feelings.'

‘This person Heinrich is worried about, that I’m supposed to steal you away from—should I know her?’

‘Julia. You will meet her, but listen: everyone has their fantasies. You put her into yours and see if I am still the same person sitting at this table. Am I?’

‘No’, I said bitterly.

She threw her napkin on the table. ‘Well, then I am sorry. But that is how I am. Why will you not accept the world as it is? Christine does. She’s like your mother: level-headed and generous. Now you have disowned one person you must put another in her place.’

‘Could do without the psychology. An affair with you doesn’t exactly promise the earth.’

‘Patrick, do you think I throw myself at anyone? I will not be made someone’s property, that is all.’

‘I’m not asking for that.’

‘You are a child reaching out for what it cannot have.’

‘Thank you for the reminder.’

‘Oh, you think Heinrich is a crook because he did not grow up in some sheltered middle-class family. In the communist world you fight or you go under.’

‘I did read history.’

‘Nothing to do with it. Heinrich’s father was a loyal communist, but it did him no good. He disappeared like all the others.’

‘That will have been the Brezhnev period. Dé-tente with the west, rising living standards.’

‘The NKV never forget. That he had managed a coal division in eastern Germany when the Soviets took over. Or that the Germans let him carry on when they marched back. That he was still there when the Red Army returned. Do you want to know what happened?’

‘Not really.’

‘The men were sent back as slave labour. The women were raped, systematically, day after day. Their own half-starved women, but our all-conquering heroes were not particular. You think of that, when you retreat into your English decencies. If Heinrich’s father did not marry immediately you can see why.’

‘How does that concern me?’

‘I have told you. Artistic patronage looks good to the English, and pre-Revolution Russian art is not well known. I can look after the restoration, and you have the eye to develop the field. Heinrich will make a little money, enough to stop suspicions the business is a front for something else.’

‘There must be some basis for all these stories.’

‘Of course we settle scores, but we do not murder people.’

‘Or mutilate and torture them?’

‘How would that help?’

‘Not good for business.’ Already the fears were subsiding. Georg’s stories were absurd, the old charlatan. Natalie seemed close and adorable.

She took my hands, and then turned to look at me, her body warm and silent.

‘In a moment’, I said.

‘We would be better at the hotel.’ She wrapped her arms round as soon as I got to my feet, so that I had to guide her carefully between the tables. Gently we went round, Natalie holding herself simply but not listening to my questions. ‘Everything’, she murmured. ‘So long as I do not hurt myself.’

‘Although it’s not going to be the solid joys and lasting pleasures.’

‘This is the world’, she said tolerantly, lifting her shoulders so that we were formal again. ‘But if you want to preach good suburban morality then it is not going to work.’

‘Can I ask something? You’ve said this before, to other men?’

‘It is not important.’

‘So who’s to know I’d be any better.’

‘We shall have to see.’ She nestled her head closer. ‘I am not giving you up. I shall keep trying.’

‘Should hope so. I’m in love with you.’

‘Not yet, but you will be. That I guarantee.’ She drew her head away and looked at me, smiling at my earnestness. ‘Can we go now?’

‘Not without the pudding.’

That was my escape, if you can call it that. The waiter presented the roulade with an extra spoon for Natalie, who dived in immediately. For me, however, each spoonful seemed part of Natalie herself, and with the last spoonful we stared at each other. The hand had been overplayed, and the banker called in the chips. Short of bodily picking her up and carrying her off, there was nothing I

could do but smile on the unsupported excitement that slowly settled into politeness on the journey back. At the hotel reception, Natalie took the keys, handed mine over, and then walked to the lift. I watched the floor numbers glow one after another, and then took the stairs up to my own room.

In that chastened mood we returned to England. Two weeks passed, and the last hot days of summer condensed to a fragrant sharpness. The work went on as before, spreading out in sketches and watercolour studies. The two full-length oils were finished and placed in the panelled room where dinner was served, though they retreated into themselves, settled into what belonged somewhere else.

The early autumn is a wonderful time: the trees rich-toned, the light golden and ever changing. No doubt Georg was right. I'm not a landscape painter, but even this tenderfoot began to experience that deep enchantment of seeing work still hold the attention.

If these few weeks now seem the still eye of the storm, when matters had once again settled into a comfortable existence—four days at Botes, a day at the Centre, the weekend with Christine or Georg—I remember them as a time fraught with mischief. My distrust of Stumpfl had not slackened. The second portrait showed him looking up from an armchair with the newspaper folded in his lap, but I can't say the pose was disarming, or that I stopped a for moment feeling that probing intelligence week by week adding to his business empire.

My feelings for Natalie absorbed particularities. How she would flick the hair behind the ears in going through the week's accounts. How she would look up, half turn round and smile when I had been secretly studying her, even when there was just the small head and pert ears above the sofa or armchair. If cooler grew our acceptance of each other, the person in my mind became more unsettled and insistent. Wherever she was, in whatever room in Botes, or perhaps away from the estate, I always sensed an invisible thread connecting us, knowing

that if I did something, she would do the same, by a telepathy that I didn't want to explain.

Whether Christine understood I couldn't say. Nor deny that sometimes, in the thick of performing, of reaching inside to extract the last layer of happiness from that distended cave of desire, that I had to concentrate hard not to let my attention wander. I did my best. There were several long heart-to-hearts, as Miss Manderson calls them, and then a Friday when I came home to find the table had not been set, and an incandescent Christine was thrusting a postcard at me. I stared at Sheila's untidy handwriting, but was amused for a moment only.

'It's a joke, is it?' Christine repeated, close to tears. 'Doesn't seem funny to me. "How about us getting together again sometime, loverboy! Give me a tinkle, or a tickle, or the real thing!! Go on, soon!!! Love S."'

‘Look Chrissie, I’m not responsible for my clients’ stupidities. Just someone I did a portrait of. As a favour to Jerry.’

‘I know who did the favour, thank you.’

‘Jerry asked me to do a portrait of an acquaintance, and I didn’t like to let him down. Do you want me to cook?’

‘Sound like an acquaintance to you?’

‘Nothing happened.’

‘Well you can phone Jerry right now and sort it out. What’s this woman’s name?’

‘Let it go, Chrissie.’

‘I thought you wouldn’t! You even have to drag in an old chum to cover your tracks. Despicable.’

I was about to deliver some sermon about not living in each other’s pockets, when another thought struck her, and she was across the room in a bound.

‘That’s it. That’s who rearranged your papers last week. Blame me, but it was this woman, this S someone. You gave her the key.’

Of course I’d thought it was Christine. I’m a methodical creature. In the diary go meetings, contacts, expenses. Everything is put away neatly. A brush in the wrong jar, or one photo out of place, and I know immediately. It wasn’t important, but I’d wondered why Christine would take to checking my correspondence.

‘That’s what I complain about. If you must have these sordid little flings, keep them to yourself. Show a little respect, that’s all I ask.’

‘Chrissie, listen to me. I’m not having an affair. Not with anyone. How this woman got my address I have no idea.’

‘Well, I tell you one thing: it’s not going to happen again. Is it?’

‘No’, I said hopefully. ‘Of course not.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Christine stormed out in tears, and Jerry was no more helpful when I phoned him the following day.

‘Are you and the gorgeous blonde going to be free shortly?’ he said. ‘Only Gloria’s got a dinner-party lined up.’

‘Could we have a chat first? Say at Covent Garden, if I bring the loot?’

I was uncomfortable, and offered to throw in Jerry’s portrait when we met in a coffee bar near his office.

‘No blood money, thanks, old man.’

‘Gloria’s happy with the work?’

‘Got the dough?’

I slipped it to him in good movie fashion, in a brown-paper envelope folded into the newspaper. ‘No idea how useful this is going to be’, he said, but I’d had too much trouble making Gloria’s outraged parakeet expression into something decent to want to know more. Besides, I liked the woman, with her hard stare on life.

‘Look, it’s Sheila’, I began. ‘There was a postcard from her, which Christine intercepted. She’s supposing—well, you can imagine what’s she’s supposing.’

‘No need to explain.’

‘So why give Sheila my address?’

‘She had me over a barrel. And with you being a famous painter and all that.’ There was surliness as he added, ‘Much more glamorous than a poor marketing executive.’

‘Jerry, models are models. Sheila’s an attractive woman, but for you I mean . . . You know what you’re doing?’

‘So you could paint her, couldn’t you, old pal?’

‘Possibly, but I’d have to clear it with Christine first.’

With that small boy’s touch of mischief, Jerry made a deferential bow. ‘May the Gods bestow eternal happiness on the doings of Patrick Staunton.’

I did try that weekend, and had made some progress before Christine jumped to her feet. ‘You’re not going to get out of it this time. If someone’s been through your papers it must be that tart of yours. It wasn’t me.’

‘Will you just listen? I’ve been talking to Jerry, and the situation’s difficult.’

‘Not for me. We’re going to have a good talk when we go down there next week. That’s right:

while you were gallivanting about with Jerry, making up the latest pack of lies, Gloria phoned and invited us.'

'We have to talk first.'

'You still saying I rifled through your papers?'

'Not rifled, just a few out of place.'

'So there's someone else. Is that what you're saying?'

Christine is not unreasonable, but was now in a temper. We had lunch, and I went round to Georg's in the afternoon, where I got the usual lecture.

Unexpectedly, the Stumpfls had been called away, Mrs Wylie explained when I got down to Botes the Monday following, but I saw the blue Daimler back in the forecourt when I tramped in with my gear around six o'clock. Figures moved behind the dark windows.

It was only the bailiff talking to Stumpfl, however, who looked across the library and called, 'Mr Staunton, you will have a sherry?' He nodded to Bursken, who backed out. 'It will be just the two of us for dinner, but we must dress properly, no?'

We sat in the large dining room, where the table had been set with polished silver and starched napkins. The evening's opalescence filled the air between us, making Stumpfl seem insubstantial and remote as he began circling his guest.

'Not much point in staying on, was there? I'd fulfilled my father's hopes, and now I wanted to get on with other things.'

'It is a festive time, with examinations over. A time to celebrate, no?'

'Probably done too much of that before.'

Stumpfl's smile appeared in one corner of the mouth. 'You had another reason. A woman, was there not?'

‘As it happens.’

‘Which I am sorry to know’, he said, edging past the silence. ‘I can see a man is not interested to become close to someone later.’

‘As you say’, I replied, angrier than I’d expected.

Adroitly, Stumpffl switched tracks to ask, ‘So what will you achieve in your time here?’

‘I’d like to complete the commission.’

‘That you will do well, I know. Mr Ecclestone says you are a perfectionist. You have no other hopes?’

‘What else is there?’

There was a long pause. Stumpffl seemed to have lost interest. He filled his glass. ‘Then neither of us will have problems’, he said.

No one can deny that matters were plain enough, but then the points shifted again. ‘You get

on well with my wife?' he said. 'You trust each other?'

I muttered that Natalie was indeed a charming and intelligent woman.

The hooded look opened backwards into a smile. 'And attractive, I think.'

'Very.'

'You avoid my question. I ask if you could act professionally if you ran a gallery with my wife.'

'Herr Stumpfl, I am a painter, and dealing is something else. Natalie kindly made the offer in Frankfurt, and I agreed to think it over.'

'Unfortunately, I have to tell you that Natalie will not come back to Botes. Not for a long time.'

'I'm sorry to hear that', I said, feigning indifference. 'I shall miss her, of course.'

'But you are sensible. You will make a name for yourself and then find someone to marry.' He rang

the bell for the next course. 'We do well here, Mrs Wylie', he said when the housekeeper put the last of the vegetables under the salvers. 'Another bottle of the '92, I think.'

'That is why I make an offer', he continued, after I'd opened the bottle and reluctantly filled our glasses. 'I ask you to form an association with my wife that takes her from this Julia woman.'

'If Natalie prefers women, there may not be much we can do.'

'That I do not believe. She only run away. Like you run away from yourself.'

'Herr Stumpfl, this is becoming impossible. Natalie is your wife.'

'She will always be my wife, even if you are not brave enough to help me.'

'Please don't say that.'

'You are angry because I say the truth. You refuse because you are afraid.'

‘Very likely.’

‘So we drink something decent.’ He went over to the cabinet and poured two large vodkas.

But it was the words that stung most. ‘Everything is mine, except my wife. I ask you to form an affair so I can keep her, and you are offended.’

Of course it was sad, and I began to understand this chilly man with his cosmic dreams. Natalie also appeared in a different light, but it was the spirits getting to me when I said, ‘So you would prefer, if Natalie has to stray, that she take up with someone you had some hold over?’

‘You do not wish to marry this Christine of yours, or anyone else, is that not so? So I offer you Natalie, with only one condition. You act properly. You follow good manners. That is not unreasonable.’

For a moment I was tempted, but then thought of Christine, of Georg’s stories, and how closely

into Stumpfl's web I should be drawn. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I really must think about it.'

'Then you must be quick.'

Stumpfl left early the following morning, and I had the house to myself. I tried to picture Natalie, but Georg's stories interfered, and then there was the dinner party.

'It's not till next year now', said Jerry when I phoned him. 'We've got some of Gloria's relations staying over.'

'Well, think of some story, would you?'

Christine simmered down in the weeks that followed, and I began to plan ways of avoiding yet another Christmas with her difficult family.

'Chrissie: they're most hospitable. There's just not much to do up there.'

'Being friendly would be a start.'

‘I was, even to that cousin of yours, who kept calling me the gas fitter.’

‘Only because you were so snooty. You have to try harder.’

‘Why don’t you go on your own? You deserve a break.’

‘And leave you to invite that German woman? No, I’m staying here.’

The flat hunting continued, until a week before Christmas, when Christine left to spend three days with her family, and Georg and I got wildly drunk at the Adult Education party. Christmas day was quiet. Christine bought me a shirt and a pair of trousers, and I got her some extravagant underwear, which she slipped into before our little morning romp. Even in these exertions I was thinking of Natalie, however, and did so even more when Christine put on a see-through nightdress to prepare lunch. We were respectable by one o’clock,

however, when Georg presented himself with a bottle of cognac and a little present for Christine.

All did their best, but lunch wasn't a success. Georg shrunk into himself. Christine was silent, and I found myself launching on one aimless topic after another. At last I asked Georg about his latest show at the Painter's Co-operative, that mysterious band of hopefuls in south London. He stared at me morosely, probably overcome by drink.

'You must have sold some', said Christine, rubbing salt in the wound. 'Patrick says they're fantastic.'

'They're landscapes, pared down but with beautiful control of tones. At first there seems hardly anything there, and then you realize that it's all been recorded. A modern Whistler.'

'What would you know? You only do bimbos.'

'Perhaps I'll come to my senses when I grow up.'

‘You take this gallery job. It safer for you.’

‘What’s that, Patrick?’

‘Nothing.’

‘The Stumpfls they offer him a job to set up a new gallery. But he does not want to tell you.’

‘You sod. We agreed nothing more after this commission. That’s what you said.’

‘Chrissie, it’s only a possibility, though I’d work locally.’

‘You bastard. That’s why you never decided on a flat.’

‘Because we don’t know about the money.’

‘And this Stumpfl woman, she’d be there too?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Ja, I think so.’

‘Georg, will you stay out of this?’

‘No, I’m glad you told me. This reptile wouldn’t have.’

‘Chrissie, you don’t understand.’

In a temper she was now on her feet, and threw the nearest drink at me. ‘You bastard!’

‘Georg, if I didn’t know you better, I’d think you were making trouble. What the hell did you have to say that for?’

‘Because it is true, my friend.’

‘Normally I’d walk you home, but you’ll excuse me if I just bundle you out. There’s the coat, and the scarf. And don’t forget the hat.’

I returned to the flat, but Christine remained engrossed in a television programme.

Two weeks later I was back at Botes, sketching the staff, and putting together a full-length portrait of Stumpfl from scattered studies. The house was

gloomy, and there was no echo of Natalie's infectious laughter. We had patched things up, Christine and I, mostly by my agreeing to find new clients, to which Jerry's long-awaited dinner party was an important step.

My clothes had been ironed when I returned to London the following Thursday, and a new tie bought for the occasion. Certainly the wind was picking up when we arrived in Esher by train, Patrick burdened with a large bowl of yellow chrysanthemums. Miss Manderson was striding ahead, over the last of the autumn leaves as windows of the large houses reflected fragments of the evening sky.

Until Jerry folded back the hinged doors to display a table set for eight, I'd imagined we were in for a quiet evening. Christine sat upright on the sofa, bruised with awkwardness. Gloria reclined next to her, sparely elegant in a blue trouser suit. Jerry busied himself with the drinks, going out from time to time to see how the food was doing.

‘Quite usual for us, old man’, he drawled, seeing me watching him. ‘Gloria likes to do things in style down here.’

‘Nothing I can give you a hand with?’

He dropped his gaze, his eyebrows crumpling up, like a dog’s embarrassed by its master’s over-friendliness. The pause lengthened. Christine shifted. I started again, ‘So we have the house, a bit run down, and two people who are not English at all, but want to appear so. Like the nabobs returning from India with the spoils of empire.’ Carpet-baggers, I was about to add, when Gloria swivelled and dropped a hand on Christine’s knee.

‘Seen the place, have you?’

‘She’s had an invitation’, I said quickly. ‘And I’m sure—’

‘Will you let Christine speak for once? She’s got an opinion like everyone else. So, do like having Patrick away all the time, men being what they are?’

‘No’, decided Christine, her mouth turning ugly.
‘But that’s his job.’

‘It is’, I said. ‘And Chrissie in fact—’

‘Patrick!’ shouted Gloria. ‘Just go on. We’ll keep him muzzled.’

Christine paused. ‘I don’t trust him. He’s always got something up his sleeve. At the moment he’s trying to blame Jerry for some little fling he’s having. Isn’t that so, Patrick?’

‘Are you?’ said Gloria.

‘Of course not’, I said.

‘Yes, you are!’ exclaimed Christine.

‘That’s right. You go for him’, said Gloria, getting to her feet as the doorbell rang.

‘Shouldn’t pull these tricks on your old pal, you know’, said Jerry, bringing up the rear.

Of course I was annoyed, but I got to my feet as the newcomers came through: a bearded Alex

Connolly accompanied by a tall woman heavily made up, her sharp mouth continuing into a hooked jaw.

‘Patrick Staunton’, said Gloria, completing the introductions. ‘Currently in the doghouse for some affair he’s having.’

‘Really?’ said the woman, looking at me under a fragile aloofness.

‘Chance would be a fine thing, Susan’, I said, smiling. ‘Very nice to meet you.’

‘You’re not?’ said the woman. ‘Gloria, what a pity. I’d love to have an affair. Alex says everything comes down to sex.’ She settled, and kicked a leg over. ‘So you wouldn’t do a life study of me?’

‘Sue works in a gallery’, said Connolly. ‘New Departures. Streatham.’

‘Doing all right down there?’

‘Streatham is very up-and-coming.’

‘Probably should widen my own representation.’

‘We wouldn’t be of any use to you. We only handle contemporary work.’

‘Installations’, explained Connolly.

‘Not the debased and academicized simulacra of a discredited and elitist past’, said Susan.

‘I got the drift.’

‘Well, that’s shut you up, hasn’t it?’ said Christine, beaming with satisfaction.

‘About time. Better pull your socks up, and start turning out the real stuff’, said Gloria.

‘Real art with a capital A’, I said, beginning to grasp the point of the evening. Surely Christine, her face still pink with embarrassment, wasn’t expecting me to put up with this? Jerry was toying with the bottle, Gloria and Susan looked happily at each other, and Alex was polishing his glasses. I stared round the room and wondered what I was doing with these tiresome absurdities. But then, through

the window, I saw Pete Rivers and his wife making their way down the path, and waved back.

With Susan and Connolly I could have enjoyed a pleasant evening, whatever our views. When the second course arrived, lamb cutlets with a good assortment of vegetables, I began to cheer up and forget the earlier grievances. Gloria smiled at some studio anecdotes, and Susan laughed, that piranha jaw hanging out as she caught the humour. I even tried to draw in our bespectacled friend, who was stroking his beard and gazing at me suspiciously. Not Patrick at his most buoyant, but doing his best.

‘Gloria said you’d be interesting, but you’re a typical specimen’, said Connolly at last, taking his glasses off with a flourish. ‘Displaced libidinal psychosis.’

‘Alex is a psychiatrist’, said his wife.

‘Did you wet the bed as a child?’ Connolly remarked, leaning over.

‘Gloria, is this on the program?’

‘Now suppose I were to call you an upper-class twit who thinks he can paint. You wouldn’t mind that, would you?’

‘Wouldn’t want to pay good money for it.’

‘Now he’s starting’, said Susan. ‘He’s very good.’

‘What is it you get out of painting women? Think about it.’

‘What do you expect me to say? That I paint women because I can’t go to bed with them? Education of our visual senses boils down to repressed sexual wants, when the best painting would be the most lascivious. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘Tell me what you aim for.’

‘Well, let me see. I produce something beautiful that evokes the sitter’s personality and character. A pictorial reality that isn’t otherwise available.’

‘Wish fulfilment.’

‘Exactly’, said Susan.

‘Got you there, old man.’

‘But tell us,’ said Connolly, smiling, ‘why women?’

‘Because of their charm, their sensitivity. That special dimension they create with their private occupations.’

‘That you project your inverted feelings into. You don’t like women.’

‘They don’t seem to complain.’

‘Christine, does Patrick give you what you need?’

‘He plays around.’

‘So we have to ask, Patrick. What have you done that’s so dreadful that you have to blame women for?’

‘You tell me.’

‘He drowned his sister. Didn’t you?’

‘Would you stay out of it, Chrissie?’

‘An accident? She drowned and you got the blame for it?’

‘Everyone understood.’

‘Anyone else die in your family?’

‘No.’

‘I think you ought to mention Rowena’, said Jerry, who was refilling glasses.

‘There was a girlfriend who took an overdose’, I said wearily. ‘My last year at Oxford.’

‘You took it badly?’

‘Locked himself in his room for two days, and then fled Oxford’, said Jerry.

‘I took it badly.’

There was an uncomfortable silence.

‘Now that is guilt’, declared Alex, putting his glasses back on.

‘Well done!’ said Gloria. ‘Expect you’re pleased to have that off your chest.’

‘Told you’, said Susan. ‘Alex is a marvel.’

I looked around the room, more exasperated than angry, as the voice started. ‘Let’s take this a little further’, I said. ‘The reason I try to show women in their best light is to say sorry? Secret reparations.’

‘Denial.’

Christine nodded her head sagely. Veronica was looking at me carefully,

‘So if someone’s assertive it’s because they’re overcompensating for repressed feelings of shyness.’

‘The “shadow-self” we call it.’

‘That’s the prosecution’s case, is it, before the defendant speaks?’

‘I should let it go, old man.’

‘Yes’, said Gloria. ‘Who’s for fruit, and who wants ice cream?’

‘Suppose I start by saying that if Susan and the other pretentious crowd of dealers and critics wish to gull the public of their money that is the public’s fault. But what we should really object to is the flagrant dishonesty. Ad hoc illustrations of some incoherent theory, incomprehensible even to its practitioners.’

Connolly was grinning, the eyes opening fish-like behind the glasses. ‘Why don’t you just stick to the point? We’re talking about this empty titillation that you use to repress what happened.’

‘We’re talking about deliberate fraud. Psychoanalysis postulates things that don’t exist, and charges a fortune for treatments that don’t work. Read the literature, look at the clinical trials.’ Some raw nerve had been touched and the words came out with venom. ‘We’re talking about Sunday sup-

plement intellectuals who think they can legislate on matters simply because they have the words.'

I was shaken, but something of the old spirit had come back. Connolly was being restrained by his wife, his eyes large behind the glasses. The women were scared. Pete Rivers kept putting his knife down as though to say something. But Jerry was wearing the admiration I won on my first Union speech, in those far-off days when everything seemed possible.

'You think that painting is easy. You don't know that we have to get the features correct to a pencil line. The smallest fraction out with the eyes, or the turn of mouth, and everything is wrong. Of course I can turn out convincing examples of contemporary installations, like everyone else.'

'Let's leave it, shall we, old man?'

'Why should I take up this pursuit, would you think?' I urged at the strained wall of faces. Christine was shaking her head uncertainly, but I added,

‘You set this up, so you can take the consequences.’ She began to cry.

I was well away, in full spate, when Pete Rivers got to his feet. ‘Patrick, you’re wasted here. You should go into politics.’ He paused, and the atmosphere eased. Someone laughed.

‘Very well’, I said, getting up to face them. ‘Just remember my brain hasn’t given out yet.’ I was about to start again, but saw the humour. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes the evening’s entertainment.’

After coffee I made excuses, and Christine collected her coat. Nothing was said on the journey back, though the words were still turning over in my mind. Connolly was right. I did have hopes that weren’t going to be satisfied by a gallery job. Reg Ecclestone took me out to lunch a week later, and even Georg went back on his warnings, but I wasn’t putting my head in the noose.

Stumpfl took the decision calmly. 'So there is nothing we can do to make you change your mind?'

'You've been most kind, but it would only interrupt my work.'

'Then we must find some other way to persuade you, mustn't we?'

I looked at him quickly, but he wasn't smiling.

CHAPTER SIX

I took Christine out to a local restaurant to celebrate the end of the commission, though my mind was elsewhere. Even as we'd walked to Jerry's place those weeks before, under the melancholy parade of trees, I was thinking of the larger world beyond the small towns and suburbs that were Christine's natural home. Nonetheless, a decent break was the least I owed her, and we settled on Spain. Reg found me a couple of short commissions, and my father, phoned about Marbella, immediately invited us to a week in the mountain town of Ronda, from which we should explore all

Andalusia. In May we took a charter flight to Málaga, and then the local bus to Marbella.

The first days passed quietly in this elegant and warm-mannered resort. Christine went out at nine to decorate the beach. I got up late and sat with feet propped on the balcony in front of the immense blur of the sea. A breeze lost itself in the tangle of palm-leaves, the air hummed with the hot sunlight, and there was an expectant stillness in the concrete and brightly-coloured parasols. Does it seem strange to be reading a history of the Spanish Civil War while guests splashed in the pool or disported themselves in bikinis on nearby patios? The text, which I slowly picked through in Spanish, brought more to my imagination than the coloured vacuities around me, and I didn't want company. Even the idleness, so unusual for me, was a holiday in itself. Later, when the heat made concentration impossible, I took myself off to small cafés on the esplanade, or to the dark interiors of bars at the back of town, near the citadel, where the older inhabitants watched television or conducted their

interminable conversations. Already I was sinking into another world, letting my schoolboy Spanish remove me from Botes and the daily grind of earning a living. Several times I thought of mentioning Stumpfl's strange reaction, but it seemed unfair. Christine was enjoying herself, and had accepted that we should take our lunches separately, only meeting for dinner or the nightclub outing.

Here she came to life as some celebrity moved in a security cordon. I nodded recognition, but was lost in the scene: the hot music, the lights, and the smell of happy bodies. Christine's good looks brought over the usual charmers with grey hair bursting from bronzed chests, but I was only entertained, not even watching as she bopped about. When the strobe lighting came on, and the cut-out figures moved in their staccato rhythms, I saw something more elemental than words or paint can describe.

You will humour me, but to understand the body you must have studied it in all its moods and dispo-

sitions. You must love the whole assembly, as dancers do, and the Greeks and Florentines did. Splendid and fleeting I was thinking when a woman stopped by the table.

‘Be delighted’, I said, getting to my feet.

‘You are not happy with me,’ she said after we’d gone round a couple of times, ‘but it does not matter. You have your wife to think of.’

‘Paloma, girlfriend. Just other things on my mind.’

‘Evidently.’ I walked her back, lighting the cigarette she extracted from a case. ‘So then,’ she said, eyeing me carefully as she blew out the smoke, ‘what brings you here, to this club.’

‘Nothing in particular. Perhaps I could ask you the same?’

‘Signore, this is my town. In the summer months I live here. I have not seen you before, so I wonder how you got an invitation.’

‘Hotel reception. I asked for a recommendation, and they came up with this place.’

The woman frowned, stubbed out the cigarette, and took me by the arm. ‘Come, we will dance more. Fashion, is it? You work in films? Something like that? Signore, dance with me properly.’

We went round again, carefully, not saying much. I saw Christine back at our table, but she was soon dancing again.

‘You will not tell me what you do?’

‘Signora, I’m a painter, a portrait painter, on a quiet holiday with a friend.’

The woman stopped. ‘You have a commission, which is private, and you cannot tell anyone.’

‘If you say so. Would you mind our going back now? I’ve enjoyed talking to you, but I ought not to leave my friend on her own much longer.’

‘I shall make inquiries. If satisfactory I shall invite you on Tuesdays. You seem a Tuesday person.’

‘Delighted, only I shall be leaving Marbella shortly. Perhaps when we get back.’

‘For where are you leaving?’

‘Ronda.’

‘No one lives in Ronda.’

‘My father does. Not fashionable, but he seems to like it.’

‘You are turning down one of my parties for Ronda?’

‘So it seems. When I find out who the mystery party-giver is, no doubt I shall be sorry.’

She stared at me. ‘I think you are telling the truth. You have not heard of Fiorella d’Acosti. Which means I have been stupid.’

‘Possibly at cross purposes. I apologize if I’ve been to blame, but have enjoyed our meeting.’

No hand was offered, and I had to retreat under that disapproving gaze to where Christine was now looking at me with a broad grin. ‘Got our come-uppence, have we?’ she said as I sat down heavily beside her.

‘Something like that. Let’s go home.’

The following day we hired a car. Christine eased her figure into a blue polka dot dress, and the two of us went for tours along the coast, stopping at the whitewashed villages where I sketched the locals and Christine sat herself in cafés and read. No one can say that she wasn’t understanding, even a latter-day saint, and perhaps I was becoming warmer to her, easier in myself. Towards the end of the week, on the Friday, we left Marbella and took the steep mountain road to the interior, even Christine looking anxiously out as we swept round its long hairpin bends. I’m a good driver, however, and was moderately pleased when we

reached Ronda by one o'clock. We stopped at a newsagent's to get a street plan of the town.

Certainly I didn't expect some charming house set in its own garden of roses and orange trees. My father never cared for location, and the address didn't feature on tourist plans. But the reality shocked me. 'Is this it?' said Christine as we looked at the nondescript blocks of flats that rose rectangularly near the railway station. 'Seems so', I said, returning from checking the names on the doorbells. 'Probably better inside.' We pushed through the heavy swing-doors, climbed the graffiti-daubed stairs, and arrived at the third floor. Christine went ahead, her sandals clicking on the terrazzo floor. I came lumbering behind with heavy suitcases. Inside was a small lounge, two bedrooms and a kitchenette. 'All you need at my time of life', said my father, as though reading my thoughts.

I humped the suitcases to the second bedroom, and then helped my father bring food from the kitchen. Christine sat placidly at the table, her good

looks out of place in these straitened surroundings. Gazpacho, a cheese salad and then some small bowls of fruit appeared: sensible and probably more than my father normally ate. He was delighted to see us. Had we noticed the television he'd put in our bedroom, and the paperbacks for Christine? I thanked him, if amused at the selection. A pleasure, he said, and if there was anything else we had just to say, though of course we'd be wanting to get out as soon as possible. Fascinating country: the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Moors: all had left their mark. He spoke as though the civilizations were only yesterday, perhaps still in residence in less-frequented valleys. Take any of the routes neatly pencilled on the map prepared for us, and we should run into towns packed with colour and extravagance, which were even now reflected in the everyday life of Spain. I glanced at Christine, but she'd stopped listening.

It was only the following morning, as I watched him walk carefully down the stairs, that I realized my father's age. Seventy-two. He had a good tan to

the skin, but with faded blotches now, and almost a transparent look to the wrists, the veins showing greenish-blue in the slack skin. 'Doing my portrait?' he snapped as he caught me looking at him later, when we were coming out of a café. Perhaps it had been a genuine request, but then we trooped into the dark interior of the old church of Santa Maria la Mayor, the Casa del Rey Moro and the Palacio Mondragón, and would no doubt have begun a street-by-street inspection of the whole town if I hadn't called a halt.

'Medical condition?' said my father, those sharp eyes glinting in disbelief.

'Looks the picture of health, I know, but that's what the doctor says. We have to be careful.'

He took off his hat and swatted a fly. 'Careful, you say, my boy. Right.'

He'd been planning the tour for years, perhaps from his first invitation, and wasn't going to let us spoil it. The excuse I'd given, the blatant lie that I

would have to explain to Christine in case my father probed, made me uncomfortable.

‘Only one o’clock’, he retorted as Christine plonked herself down on a convenient wall. ‘Much too early for lunch.’

I took his arm. ‘Listen. Christine’s like Pru. I’m fascinated. We couldn’t have had a more entertaining tour this morning, but we shouldn’t push it. History simply doesn’t mean much to Christine.’

He glared at me. After all these years he still saw his wife going around topless, flitting about with one or other of her casual lovers. He’d sold up and transported himself to Ronda, to be on call to Marbella, only fifty miles away, but the two never met. ‘Of course not. Your father can do what he likes’, mother had said on one of her short visits to England. ‘No skin off my nose.’

‘Give her time’, I said quietly. ‘She does like you.’

‘Really? Good of her to say so.’

But of course Christine had expressed no such opinion. If I was happy, then so would she be. The decencies and intellectual ramifications that made up my father's life were invisible to her, if they existed at all. But I could see my father was tracing the parallels. 'Yes, we'll take it gently.'

I wouldn't say there was a marked change in the days that followed, but I saw him slowly get over his reservations. He would consult Christine on the day's itinerary, wait for her sometimes when we were tramping round some cathedral or Moorish castle, question the waiters on her behalf when we occasionally lunched out. 'You know, your dad's really nice', she said as we sat on the warm stones of the old town walls one evening watching the sun go down.

'Of course he is. What did you expect?'

She'd been impressed more by the people he knew, and the unobtrusive care he'd taken to introduce us to the more interesting. We visited a schoolteacher, the owner of a minicab service and

a parish priest. We called briefly on a local antiquarian, whose unmarried circumstances made entertaining difficult, please to understand.

‘Why didn’t you come before?’ said Christine.

‘We’re here now. Enjoying yourself?’

‘I thought your mother died in Spain.’

‘Marbella.’

The blue eyes hardened. ‘You didn’t even go to the funeral.’

How could I? Mother had been buried in Málaga, only my father attending. A hurried little funeral for someone the world in its careless fashion had used and thrown away.

‘You could at least have done that, or got an inquest opened.’

‘Mother fell overboard after some party. Drunk, I expect. The authorities have lots of these people: the fun-lovers, the good-time set.’

‘You’re still bitter.’

‘I’m not judging her in the slightest.’

‘You have to forgive.’

‘Chrissie, will you leave it.’

She shook her head and then tentatively stroked my arm ‘Think that’s how you’ll go? Just disappear and no one care?’

Very probably, I thought.

‘You don’t have to do all this to prove yourself. There’s always me.’

‘For which I’m very grateful’, I said, biting my lip. ‘Really I am.’

‘You don’t always show it.’

I slipped my arm round her and we got awkwardly to our feet. The afternoon heat was fining out of the air, and above our heads the street lights had now come on, the round white globes glimmering in their ornate brackets. I wanted to stare at

them, lose myself in their shimmering stillness, but we sauntered over the uneven cobbles to stop where a seat gave a view over the surrounding countryside. A local shuffled past, and down below us in the gorge we could just hear two boys scolding a donkey that had slipped its halter. 'Sorry', I said. 'Just moody sometimes.'

She gave me a long stare, but only half resisted when I kissed her. 'You can be nice when you want to. You just have to keep trying.'

Yet Botes was never out of my thoughts, for all that it seemed unreal in this Mediterranean world of scorched whites and blue. Every house or hillside stood out in such clarity that what had happened elsewhere was unimportant. All those recollections that wouldn't fade had been replaced, piece by piece, by immersion in the history of his new surroundings, just as poor immigrants build lives out of a patriotism the native English find absurd.

‘What do you want to do?’ said Christine. ‘We have to confirm the reservation if we’re going back on Saturday.’

‘Haven’t given it much thought.’

‘They’re expecting me, and you’ll have something from Reg.’

We walked down the narrow streets that led to the centre and newer part of town. Here Christine left me to buy food for dinner. She was shopping on her own now, learning the language as she went along. Perhaps we could stay on, despite the rumpus it would cause. My father was sufficient excuse. He was spry, but wouldn’t last forever. We were drawing more together, making the family I’d never had.

You change, he’d said, as we sat in the ruins of the Alcazaba at Teba, among piles of sun-dried brick. We come in the end to find peace. I was surprised by the elegiac tone. My father is not literary. He’s astoundingly intelligent and can recite

from memory the lapidary monuments of half a dozen tongues, but I'd never heard him speak of the deep roots of personality, of the beauty of the world or its evanescence, those features that Georg kept putting his clumsy hands to as a badge of faith.

Christine was asleep in the shade of the car, a red dot below us. Perhaps she'd realized the men wanted to talk, or was simply tired of ruins. My father was sitting on a hillock of grass, his brown shoes perched on a block of masonry. He had his back to me, and seemed not to be alluding to anything when he started.

'You could do worse. You won't find everything in the one person.'

'What's Christine been saying?'

'Patrick, you're almost thirty-five. If you were nineteen or twenty I'd say do what you want, and damn the consequences. But not now.'

I'd been bracing myself for this talk, unavoidable once Christine's sunny nature returned. Because she was always laughing, that's what I liked about your mother. Loved would have been closer. He saw in Christine what he had never stopped looking for in the university canteen assistant he'd made his wife, even after she'd left him and disappeared in the boating accident.

'As for them,' he was saying, 'just stay away. The Stumpfls are not people to do you any good.'

'Christine has nothing to worry about.'

'She is not an educated woman, or perhaps intellectually endowed, but she is not a fool. She says this Natalie Stumpfl is eating you up, and I think she may be right.'

'There's nothing going on between us.'

'Whose doing is that? You can't short-change a woman like Christine without feeling some deep pull to someone else. You could have had an affair

and got it over with, like any other red-blooded male, but you won't and it festers.'

'We've stopped before it even began.'

'Have you?' My father took off his hat and placed it on the ground. Then he swung round to look at me and said, 'Suppose we start again. There was Rowena, the Scots girl you led on for a whole year. I know you made no promises, but you let her hope. Isn't that worse?'

'Than marrying her?'

'I was unhappy with your mother, desperately at times, but there were compensations. Perhaps you thought Penelope was my favourite. She wasn't. That girl could always look after herself.'

I stared at him as the memories came back.

'I've never held that against you. Your sister's drowning was an accident. You it hurt most, that was the trouble. The gifts were there, but you

wouldn't use them. They stayed locked inside somehow.'

'Because I made a mess of things at Oxford?'

'Do you know what Rawlings said when I went up to see him? Most underemployed brain in the place. Wilful, slovenly, and . . . deranged. He thought you were mad.'

'That cautious old codger would.'

'Bill Rawlings served in the Balkans campaign. What he went through there is enough for a book, or a whole sequence of books, I shouldn't wonder. If he couldn't make you out, then something was seriously wrong.'

'Is that what you think?'

'You're all I've got left from my marriage, and I can't for the life of me see what this painting will bring you.'

'It's all I've ever wanted to do.'

‘You could write. Or teach. Or do something quite different. There must be an opening for someone who’s personable and not badly educated.’

‘Even Christine understands that.’

‘She does. She’s very supportive.’ He paused. ‘So why don’t you marry her? She’ll put up with what other women would fight, and probably lose.’

Rowena again. The wee Scots brunette who had threatened and promised, dangling position and financial security until she despaired and ended it all one summer evening.

‘Write it off, Patrick, and build on what you have. If you want to paint stick with Christine. She’s a lovely and warm-hearted woman.’

‘I know that.’

‘Afraid you won’t be faithful? I think you’ll find Christine already knows that. She’s more sensible than you suppose.’

It was an odd comment on my father's part. He'd not been so tolerant. A social liability, I can remember him saying after a fracas at the university when a colleague had been coarsely insulted. My father had gone at once, even before Mother had been returned, still heavy with drink, to make a tight-lipped apology.

'And if I don't want to turn out like you and Pru?'

'Takes two to fall out. You just have to hold on to the larger share of happiness. Life is not art.'

'Perhaps it should be more.'

'So let me ask you something about this Mrs Stumpfl. Ever intimated that she'd leave her husband?'

'No.'

'Suppose her husband was killed or left her. Would she marry you?'

'Shouldn't think so.'

‘She sees other men?’

‘Women.’

My father didn’t change his quiet tempo. ‘Well, then, whatever’s drawing you on, it’s not happiness, is it?’

‘Not permanently, no.’

There was a long pause. Then my father said gently, ‘You’re not running away from anything, are you?’

‘Not that I’m aware of. Unless it’s been repressed and come out as an increased interest in women. But I shouldn’t think so.’

‘No, you’d know well enough.’

I took his hand, but didn’t know what to say.

‘A comedy for those who think, isn’t that how the saying goes?’ He withdrew the hand. ‘Stick with Christine and avoid the bewitching Circe. That’s not so difficult, is it?’

We would get back to the flat for the hot afternoon hours, and my father would potter off on some excuse. I don't have to repeat what should be clear from the life studies: how frankly and gladly Christine would give herself. So why not kick over the traces, stay here for good? The commission had been completed. Reg Ecclestone would be annoyed, but not enough to sue. Let him think I'd gone native. For the first time in my life I had the prospect of happiness, of simply being myself.

We made our way down to the car in a relaxed frame of mind. The picnic hamper was refastened, and we were off, bumping down the road that led to Ronda and the decision that was already being made for me. I'd even sold a couple of landscapes with one of the galleries near the tourist centre. 'I'll try them for a month', the owner had said, looking doubtfully at their sombre colours, the blues and smoke-greys that I'd used for the shadows as the sun goes down in this raw country of ochres and crumbling whites. 'That is all', he insisted. 'Many

people try their hand at painting. I do not know if what they do is good. I just run a shop.'

Soon he wanted more, my father told me. The afternoon of the same day a large German had come into the shop, seen the pieces, and snapped them up immediately. 'Just yours', my father repeated. 'He saw your work and liked it. As he should, my boy.'

I nodded, amused at the enthusiasm for what was run-of-the-mill stuff: professional, but still far from what Georg had meant: a feel for the country, a devotion to what bound the people to it, generation after generation. Increasingly I sketched the market scenes, the old gentlemen sat in its cafés, the shop-girls treading quietly across the square when the working day was over. No one bothered me. Indeed I hadn't realized that I'd been noticed until we went over to the minicab friend one evening. 'Sí, sí', said the man, grasping my hand vigorously. 'El pintor. Todo Ronda conoce a este pintor.' The friend's wife appeared, wiping hands on

an apron and took charge of Christine. 'You can talk to me. It is good for my English.'

There was nothing wrong with Mathilde's English, or with that of Ignacio, though we stuck to Spanish when father's tussle with the local church came up.

'Senor, you should hear them. It is an education.'

I could imagine, knowing my father's uncompromising views on the Papacy, the Holy Inquisition and a good deal else. There was no saying what he could have dug up, given his scholar's training and insatiable appetite for facts. At least it was Reconquista history, far away from the wounds of the Spanish Civil War. 'All over these hills', I remembered him saying. 'Hundreds of men. Thousands, probably. They haven't forgotten, Patrick. Never suppose that Spain isn't a hard country, or that it forgives.'

Paella appeared, Christine bearing the dish as Ignacio's wife smiled from the kitchen door. Then there were toasts, another bottle of Rioja, and some jokes that I couldn't follow. My father was in his element, making Matilde double up in laughter as he mimicked some of the local inhabitants.

He'd been hiding his light under a bushel. His flat was small and unwelcoming because he was never there. He had settled in Ronda, made a determined effort to adopt its manners, and the town had repaid the courtesy. Perhaps it had been that way in Bristol, before he'd made his disastrous marriage. As a boy I remember people being very respectful, even the department head who occasionally dropped in for tea. Just the marriage, the one gross mistake my father had made in a perfectly ordered existence.

A guitar was brought. Ignacio strummed and my father was asked to sing. If Christine was surprised, I was astounded. We'd all drunk far too much for it to matter, but the voice was clear and

steady, a light alto. Then he took the guitar and played something of Joaquin Rodrigo's, a haunting melody. Then another.

'You did not know Don Pedro could play?'

I smiled and said I didn't, and so well.

'He is an artist. All Spaniards are artists.'

'Viva l'España.' We emptied our glasses.

'So you stay with us? You and your wife to be?'

'There are certain formalities, and someone has to be asked. But yes, I think so.'

Christine shyly put her arm round and kissed me, at which there was a good deal more excitement.

'Sí, sí. You will not forget us when you go to Marbella and become a rich man?'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

‘You go like lawyers or doctors, careful to get good clients. Why you have not painted a portrait of Don Pedro.’

‘It’s because he hasn’t asked. Doesn’t think much of painters.’

My father picked out a tune, embarrassed by the attention.

‘You see’, said Ignacio. ‘He wants, but he is too proud to ask.’

‘We can put that right immediately.’

‘Entonces, Don Pedro. All your fears are unnecessary. These people who follow your son, they mean nothing.’ He turned to me. ‘Sí. These people who trail you, always follow you. Remind you have work to finish in Inglaterra?’

True, I had seen one face, Slav or east European. I’d registered that at once, even the resemblance to Stumpfl’s minders. It was only someone I saw occasionally, however, who showed no inter-

est in me. Once I'd tried to sketch him, as I sketched lots of people, but he had got up, paid the café bill and left. After that we saw a good deal of a blue Renault as we drove from one place to another, which Christine had remarked on, but then they were probably on the same tourist route, many parties following these popular itineraries.

We could start straight away, I told my father the following morning, while Christine was preparing sandwiches for the day's excursion.

'I think you know the face by now', he said as he settled by the window for the preparatory studies.

'You'd be surprised.' Christine came out, shook her head, and padded back into the kitchen. At ten we stopped, bundled the kit into the car and followed my father's directions to Ronda La Vieja, where another monument awaited us. As we got out among the scattered ruins, and Christine stared angrily at the piles of white marble and grassed-over theatre, I took my father aside. 'Beach tomorrow', I told him.

‘Yes, I was going to ask you. The twenty-second is my Málaga day, when I visit your mother’s grave. Christine’s coming. You will too, won’t you?’

I didn’t reply.

‘Perhaps I should have mentioned it earlier, but we were getting on so well.’

My feelings locked against the notion. No, absolutely not.

‘Look,’ said my father reasonably, ‘we’ll go down to Málaga, make a day of it, the three of us. If you don’t feel like coming to the cemetery, that’s to be understood. We can go on the beach for most of the day. Have dinner there, and come back late. What do you say?’

I was past all rational thought. My mother had wrecked my childhood and even now was dragging me back to those humiliations. ‘Well, think about it’, he said, and went to find his archaeological guide.

I remember that day as strangely intense. It was too hot to trail about for long, and by twelve we were sat in the shade of one of the few trees on the site. Christine handed round the sandwiches, my father uncorked the wine, and I took up the sketch-pad. Posing wasn't needed. All morning I'd been studying someone who was entirely at home with the past. It had been unnecessary and patronizing to see him otherwise, to suppose that he was anything but happy, and had been for years in these desiccated thoughts. What had failed in my father's life could begin again here, with a few guests who would afterwards holiday in Málaga or Marbella.

I tried a new profile, bringing out the sharp beak of a nose, the fastidious mouth and the large dome of a cranium, fragile and sleepy in the afternoon heat. A light wind picked at the corner of the paper and lifted the brim of my father's panama, a cooling presence that spoke of the sea and the evening coming on, of the incessant motion of people still going about their everyday lives, as had all the generations before them in this stone-littered site.

My father was at one with his thoughts, Christine was reading, and only I seemed for a moment to be aware of the imperishable goodness of all God's creation. That's what I thought, when they were strewn about me in the gestures of the living, on my last full day of childhood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Don’t waste your breath’, Christine said to my father the following morning. ‘He’s in one of his moods.’

They loaded their beach things into the back of my father’s Citroen, and were gone before nine. There was a bleat on the horn in the street below, but I was absorbed in scaling calculations and didn’t come to the window. By the afternoon I had blocked out the main features: Christine under the tree, the picnic hamper and my father staring into space with a book in his lap. I propped the canvas on a chair, and made some lunch. Then I worked

on, until daylight had faded: a full day, with everything else blotted out.

Some time later I watched a current affairs programme on the television, and then a thriller imported from the States. At the commercial break, I opened another bottle of wine, and wondered if I shouldn't cook something for the travellers, only they must be having that meal in Málaga, to be out so late.

It didn't occur to me that anything could have happened, even when the Guardia officer came through and stood glancing at the screen during what cannot have been an unusual visit, given the recklessness of Spanish drivers. '¿Los dos?' I repeated vacantly, as though not focusing, 'Sí, señor. Lo siento muchísimo. Los dos han muerto.'

It was the tiredness, as I say, or the unreality building steadily through the evening, that brought on the attack. I struggled to concentrate, and was spilling the wine the officer had poured. The pain started again. I noticed his hands, which had dark

hair at the knuckles, as he flicked over the pages in a notebook, waiting, giving me time to recover. How? I managed to ask. Of course I'd been in the flat, all the time.

I followed him down the stairs. There was a formal identification to be made. A few more questions. We emerged into the street, and a colleague got up from under my car. He shook his head, turned the flashlight off, and came over. 'Hasta mañana, señor' With a curt nod, the two climbed into the patrol car, which turned the corner and disappeared.

I went upstairs and switched the television on, and then off. The silence sat painfully on my skin. I lay out on the sofa as the blood surged between my ears. I got up and leaned on the balcony rail. A few street lights glowed in the distance, an intense bluish-green light that hummed across the empty streets. I finished the bottle and went in. The room began to spin, but I undressed and took Christine's nightdress into the sheets. The material and Chris-

tine's perfume, once so familiar, now seemed only tawdry, and there came a notion of a child's party where the hats and presents were only hateful.

My face aching but alert, I was at the police station by nine the following morning, where I ran into Ignacio. He gave his condolences, and then looked at the officer in charge, whom I followed to the interview room, sitting while he leafed through the file. Perhaps I could have the details, if there were no more questions? We would come back to that. The accident had occurred on one of the steep bends on the road up from Marbella. About 27 km out, if I knew the place?

'How did it happen?'

'Sí, señor. ¿Cómo?'

I found myself looking into a face that weighed me up with guarded interest.

'Someone must have seen it', I said.

'There will be an autopsy.'

‘In case there was a heart attack? Or the driver had been drinking?’

‘Though probably we shall not find anything.’

‘Probably? What sort of investigation is that?’

‘You have no enemies, señor? No one who follows you?’

No, I said as the officer made notes. No one. He went on to the next question. Nothing was disclosed in the interview, and I was tempted to read the file lying on the back seat as we drove over to the mortuary.

The Cementario de San Lorenzo was a new place, tranquil behind iron railings on the industrial edge of town. We went through the foyer with its grey and yellow walls, across the small courtyard with white columns, and into the mortuary. The attendant pulled out the drawers. Father looked irritated, as though this most careful of men had been caught unawares. Christine’s face was badly cut, but stared impassively at the ceiling. Then the

drawers were slammed shut, one above the other, a hard sound that locked my past into the care of others.

Yes, I said to Ignacio the following day, I'd prefer my father buried in Ronda. Spain had been home for ten years, and I couldn't think where else he'd want to go. I phoned London. Reg was cautious but said, 'Whatever you want. Two, three thousand: it's yours anyway.'

'A couple should do it.'

He took the details and asked. 'Want me out there? Help in any way, would it?'

'Thanks, but it's just a private affair.'

'Right you are, leave it in your hands. The transfer will go today. Awfully sorry, old boy.'

Ignacio handled the arrangements, though I had a short interview with Father Ramón. A peasant's face, with small eyes and a crafty look behind the smooth manner. The Church represents all types, I

thought as we sat on a park bench near the Iglesia de La Merced.

‘Your father was one of my parishioners’, he reminded me gently when I repeated my appreciation.

I stared at him, picking up the threads.

‘Received into the faith three years ago. He made his peace with God. We were pleased he could do so. For a man of such independence it was a true victory.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘Your father was a good man. Not very forgiving or accommodating, but that to a Spaniard is not a great sin. You wish him buried here?’

‘If those were his wishes . . . ’

‘More yours, are they not, my son?’ He smiled, deprecating the evasion. ‘It is as Don Pedro said. But Heaven understands and forgives us. You haven’t been to your mother’s grave?’

‘I haven’t found the time, no.’

‘The attendants will look it out for you. It’s well tended. Your father went every month, as you know.’ He paused, and then got to his feet to show the meeting was over. We shook hands, and afterwards I walked on to the cemetery again, across the railway bridge and past odd factories, a refrigerator works and gleaming car-dealerships. This time I went into the cemetery, staring at the plaques and plastic flowers where my father’s ashes would be interred.

I walked on down to the level crossing which looked across the rails to the old station, where General Varela had arrived in September 1936, his troops shooting the braceros while my father and the Republicans hid in the hills. In his range of interests my father had been an outstanding scholar, but in other respects he was conventional and tiresomely English. What was Christine doing mixed up with that, the generous figure laid out in the steel drawer and soon to be immersed in for-

maldehyde for its journey home? On the first opportunity, after my visit to the police station and aimless walk about the town, I had taken the car down the Marbella road. The spot was obvious, the fenders ruptured near one of the steep bends, but no skid marks or other clues. My father wouldn't have been going at speed up the steep gradient, and I couldn't see how he'd crossed the path of oncoming traffic. I walked the ten minutes back from the parking spot and scrambled down the slope. There were some fragments of window glass near the road, and a bruising to the vegetation further down. The wind flapped at my ankles and the aromatic smell of juniper came off the slopes. Otherwise there was nothing, an emptiness, and all that came to me in the nights following was a giddy sense of events rushing thoughtlessly on.

Inevitably I thought of Natalie. Remember that my real attachments are to women. I thought of my father, that last time when we sat talking at Ronda

La Vieja. Was he disappointed, on his return to England, that the sacrifices had come to nothing?

‘We tried, Patrick. At least we did that.’

‘In a capitalist war?’

‘I think we’d given up those notions by then. I wasn’t surprised to hear about the concentration camps, or the spy trials later. That is how we are.’

‘Even when you were captured in France?’

‘I’ve never talked about that period.’

Not everyone has a Resistance hero for a father, however, and I wanted the portrait to reflect that courage. Every day I concentrated on the picture, barely finding time to scramble into the dark suit I’d bought for the funeral. I arrived as the mourners were going in. Not our party, explained Ignacio as he took me upstairs to a small reception room.

‘I suppose a few more will be coming, won’t they’, I asked in English, looking at the five men

who now shook hands, awkwardly, not knowing how to address the visitor.

‘Señor, these are his close friends. This is best.’

‘As you say.’ Ten years in Ronda and only five come to the funeral. No lying in the Iglesia de La Merced for the usual twenty-four hours, and now this bare ceremony.

Our turn came. The casket was carried in to the small chapel, and the priest said a few words. We knelt, there was a prayer, and the casket disappeared behind the curtains. Dully I stared at the words embroidered on the cloth ‘Yo soy el camino, la verdad y la vida.’ What way? I thought angrily as we came out into the sunlight.

Ignacio shook hands, the last to do so. There were no more cremations that morning, and I saw the priest climb into his battered Fiat and drive off.

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection, as our burial service puts it, and these words came to me as I stopped on my way back to gaze at the

surrounding mountains, the dusty fields, straggled lines of poplars that led to red-tiled farmhouses. Rowena, Penelope, Pru, my father and perhaps even Christine had now been slotted into the past.

A week later, Christine's sister and brother-in-law flew out to collect the body. Christine belonged to them, and would have done so still if she hadn't taken up with Patrick Hugh Staunton. Dave had almost said so, awkwardly, words failing him. 'They were engaged', said his wife quickly. 'Dave?'

'I heard you, love.' We got to our feet when the flight was announced, but even then I thought he'd take a swing. His wife stuck to old-fashioned formalities and said, 'Perhaps we shall see you in England sometime.' I made the usual reply, and tried to help with the luggage, but Dave shouldered the last bag and the two went through into Departures. As I watched them walk to the plane, I couldn't believe that it was Christine in the aluminium box, and that this commonplace scene would

be her last appearance, trundled across the tarmac under an ordinary blue sky.

An hour later I walked back to the old town, and let myself down the wall on its far side. I'd come this way looking for some painterly view of the cathedral, but now I took off my jacket and lay out on the ground. Between dozes I saw myself back in the garden at Bristol on those long summer evenings when my father would sit reading in the hammock strung between the trees, and mother would bring iced drinks, the warmth around seeming kindly and everlasting. Penelope would have her nose in a book, but I'd be looking at the world, absorbed in trying to understand it. Now once again everything had been snatched away, to remind me that life was fragile and beyond my control.

I slept badly again that night and was working on the painting from first light—too early, as my efforts had to be scraped back when sunlight returned colours to their proper tones. I was still at

work when Ignacio called, late in the afternoon. He stood for some moments staring at the picture, and then poured himself a drink.

‘Now we must work’, he said, placing a briefcase on the table. I moved some drawings, and joined him as he laid out the documents.

‘There’s not going to be much left’, I said, mentally converting the balance into pounds.

‘Unos doscientos mil, señor.’

‘A thousand pounds is not a huge sum, but perhaps there could be some memorial to my father.’

‘It is not necessary.’ He took out a ledger, my father’s account of events. ‘It was a long time ago’, he said. ‘You will remember that?’

‘So which side were you on?’ I asked, half sensing trouble.

‘Me? I am not born then. But my father was Nationalist.’

‘And mine was Republican?’

‘At first.’ I stared at my painting, that depiction of courage and straight-dealing. Perhaps it was not unexpected, but my eyes hurt as I looked away. ‘Ronda remembers those events still, does it? Won’t forgive?’

‘It is God who forgives, señor.’

‘Then why come back?’

‘It is in the book. What Don Pedro write.’

Because he had nowhere else to go. His daughter was dead, and his son was never home.

‘Sometimes he go over to Marbella, but I do not know if he see his wife.’

‘How did you meet him?’

‘He not tell you? He help me. One day in hospital he see my daughter. He take her to Madrid, pay everything. That is what he do for me.’

‘Which is why you’ve fought to get him cremated here? So his ashes can stay in Ronda, with the past we don’t talk about.’

Ignacio smiled. ‘The dead cannot hurt us now.’

‘You think the ashes should go somewhere else? To England?’

‘Perhaps to your mother’s grave. If that is possible?’

I shook my head as the anger tightened in my stomach.

‘Claro’, said Ignacio gravely. ‘You no make your history yet.’

Georg had used the same words. The past we live in, what we make for ourselves.

Ignacio looked at the painting again. ‘That is fine picture, señor.’

‘No need, Ignacio. I understand.’

‘No, you listen. After the war my father is in Seville, and he hate Republicans, but even he say it is too much. Executions night after night, months and months. The Republicans were wrong and do many evil things, but not to kill so many. Maybe I am not good Catholic, but I think men must forgive themselves.’

‘Why did my father switch sides?’

‘For a wife or sister or beautiful woman, everyone understands. But not that creature. The Spanish feel life, but there are limits. Even I, because I am taxi-driver and know everything, even I think that.’

I tried to continue, but mostly I sat in Ronda cafés, now beginning to fill up with tourists. Someone would occasionally attempt a conversation, but I didn’t listen. Even when the chauffeur-driven car pulled up, and Stumpfl made his way over, it was again a scene I was not wholly part of.

‘You have no objections, Mr. Staunton? Perhaps another coffee?’

‘No thank you.’ I gazed at Stumpfl, casually dressed in slacks and T-shirt, knowing why he was here.

‘I thought I should call to give my condolences. It was in the local papers, but you may not have read them. There has been an inquest?’

‘Not yet.’

‘And of course I was here in Spain.’

‘Business, I imagine.’

‘Natalie is looking for property and saw the article. You do not know how it happened?’

‘Do you, Herr Stumpfl?’

‘So when will you be able to change your mind?’ he continued. ‘About the gallery.’

‘The answer’s no.’

‘Or the other matter we talked about.’

‘No.’

Stumpfl finished his coffee. ‘Then I must not detain you.’

‘Good of you to come’, I said mechanically, and watched him walk over to the Daimler, settling with a newspaper before the car drove off.

Portraits need understanding, and several times afterwards I picked up the ledger and read the introductory page. I have decided to write an account of my part in the Spanish Civil War, it began, to understand myself, and to explain how certain things happened which should not have happened. All that I would offer in mitigation of my sins of omission—or, more grievously, of commission—is that I was young, nineteen and barely out of school.

I went for odd walks during the day, and sometimes long into the night. Ignacio called, and two more of my father’s friends, but the meetings were

difficult. I began to lose track of time as sleep became more erratic, troubled by dreams, which were always the same.

I was fighting for breath, the waves throwing me against the rocks, with my little sister somewhere below, a tiny figure lost in the swirling water. Then there was darkness and I was sprawled out on the beach, my lungs aching and my nose dribbling into the sand as a crowd gathered and a policewoman led me off. It wasn't my fault, she said again, which they repeated at the station, though remarking on the dangers of leaving children unattended.

All through the inquest, upright in her coarse finery, my mother sat unchastened, as though her philanderings had been in no way responsible. We came home, changed from our Sunday best, and my father looked at us, not saying anything. I had failed. Pru he could understand, but not the son who couldn't even look after his own sister.

Some nights gave me no rest at all, and it was almost with relief that I turned to my father's diary.

That the friend had been called Hugh was no surprise. There are no Hughs otherwise in our family, and I can't recall my mother ever using the name. The original was not military material, and even on enlisting an incident occurred that didn't go down well. Then came something close to a court-martial when Hugh had been discovered at a local bar rather than on duty. I think only my father's good Spanish saved him from the Russian commissar and execution.

I do not know how Hugh was captured by the Nationalist forces. He may have been ill or injured on that 16th September day when Ronda was taken, but I have a feeling something discreditable kept him in the town as troops overran the outskirts and arrived in angry knots on the streets. Then came the extraordinary part. My father wrote that he resolved to go to Ronda and collect his friend. He didn't get near General Varela, but the soldiers he surrendered to were sufficiently impressed to take him to officers playing cards in a local café. An

odd meeting, but Hugh was indeed dragged in for questioning.

Why shouldn't they both be shot? an officer enquired as guffaws went round the table. My father said he would collaborate. Set Hugh free and he would help them. They did. Hugh was preserved for a slow death in the terrible offensive of the Ebro, and my father went round and pointed out the chief collaborator. I read the passage over again, but there was no mention of coercion. He simply kept his word.

In the rented car was still my painting gear, but I rarely hauled it out. England I couldn't contemplate, and in Spain I had no contacts. What else could I do? Natalie phoned from Marbella late one evening, and at four the following afternoon, having settled the remaining financial matters, and not even waiting for the inquest, I drove down the Málaga road, on past the accident spot, where even the broken fenders had been replaced.

Couples were taking aperitifs at the hotel when I arrived, and some business deals were being wrapped up in the lounge, but at its far end, sitting impatiently in one of the large ottomans, was Natalie. She rose, took my hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. All had been calculated: the severely tailored dress, a simple hairstyle and the small earrings. I had only to play my part in a charade that Natalie didn't try to hide.

'Been staying at this hotel long? Looks rather comfortable', I started.

'We could have dinner here, but I would prefer to eat at the villa. It's all ready, just a matter of turning on the oven. Would you like that?'

I didn't reply.

'Tell me about it later, when we are more comfortable. You are not blaming us for the accident, are you?'

'No one knows what happened.'

‘Look at me. Say you do not want me, and we will forget about the gallery. I shall be sorry, but you will have no further obligations to us.’

‘Is that all you can say?’

‘Do you know how many times I picked up the telephone and put it down again without calling you? Only terrors have to be faced, and I ask you again. If you do not want to come back to the villa tonight I will book a room for you here. You can decide what to do in the morning. There will be no recriminations.’

‘All right.’

‘All right what?’

‘We’ll eat at the villa.’

There were no voices in the air or shift of the ground, but I knew I was now far out of my depth. We collected the car from the hotel forecourt, and ten minutes later I was driving Natalie through the northern edge of town, the smooth face of my

nightmares just a few feet away: beautiful, smiling to itself, and more dangerous than ever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Natalie entered the security code at the villa entrance, and we drove up to a house in the Spanish style set with palm trees and a large swimming pool.

‘You unpack while I get dinner going.’

She showed me to the room, and I collected the suitcase from the car. Twenty minutes later I was in the kitchen and preparing a salad, which I took through to the dining room. The table had been set for two, with candles, and the wine already cooling. There we sat, almost formal, while I described my time in Ronda, my father and the funeral.

‘Patrick, can we talk about happier things?’ she said at last. ‘How is the painting coming on?’

‘You’re sounding like an old Polish friend of mine.’

‘Then perhaps you should listen to Georg Michnik, and concentrate on the work.’

I stared at her.

‘Of course we know Georg, just as he thinks he knows us.’ She laughed. ‘Look, please go for a swim or something. You do not need trunks, and there are towels in the bathroom.’

Natalie leant over to give me an uninhibited kiss, and slipped out. I cleared the table, and went out to the pool, swimming several lengths before taking a shower, scrubbing every particle of myself and turning the temperature down until I was chilled to the bone. Then I towelled myself dry and, like a Greek god come into his inheritance, knocked on Natalie’s door.

She was sitting on the bed, happily undressed, the light from the table lamp throwing an absorbent shadow on her figure. As men of any experience will tell you, it is not the sensual pleasure we remember most of women, but that first unguarded view of intimacy. After many trials and disappointments, the body is open to us, and we see a creature neither flaunting herself nor ashamed of desires. Natalie was leaning on the padded headboard, her legs drawn up and loosely crossed. Afterwards I would recall the firmness of the small breasts, the softness of the hair and the delicacy of her movements, but all I did initially was to hang over and sense her nearness. For a long time she didn't move, as though dissolving into the expectation. Then she lifted her head, smiled and closed her eyes. We kissed, and when her breasts nuzzled my chest I took the trembling body into my arms.

More I don't remember. Even at the moment of satisfaction, when I saw the eyelids flutter, and the mouth open as though drowning, it was the attitude

of Natalie as a whole that stayed in my mind. There was no grasping for pleasure, no contortions, but simply a deeply ingested pleasure. Natalie's large eyes opened momentarily, with a startled look, then she lifted her arms from my shoulders and the two of us fell quietly into the sheets.

It was still early when I woke and heard Natalie in the shower room. A half-hour later she came in, smartly dressed in slacks and top, to sit on the bed.

'Patrick, I am sorry, but I have to go into town for a while. Do whatever you want: go for a swim, play some tennis with Julia. Marga will make you breakfast. Lunch is usually at two.'

'Julia?' I said suddenly. What's Julia doing here?'

'She was out partying last night, but she will emerge around eleven. Be nice to her.'

'You might have mentioned this.'

‘Please do not be difficult. We will have plenty of time later.’

She kissed me and went out. I heard a car drive off, and then snuggled down in the bed still warm from the night’s exertions. You will say that some guilt, or at least remorse, should now have fallen across my thoughts, but I report what I felt, and that was exultation and deep joy in my prospects. The breakfast table was set out by the swimming pool, and I sat there until the soft scrape of footsteps announced the maid, who asked what I wanted. Anything, anything at all, I said.

She shook her head, almost as Mrs Wylie had done. ‘Entonces, Don Patricio, que le gustaría?’

Breakfast arrived. An hour or so later a woman appeared on the far side of the pool, hung a towel over one of the plastic chairs, and walked over to the diving board. There was a sharp crack, the figure spun into a tight somersault, and jackknifed cleanly into the water. The woman swam vigor-

ously and then clambered out, a robust and sun-tanned figure.

‘Hi. You must be the latest.’

‘And you are Julia.’ The hand was friendly. Then she sat down, shaking her hair out a little. ‘You still winning medals?’ I said.

‘Hell no. That was a long time ago.’ She lifted the sunglasses, and gave a wry grimace. The mouth twitched at the corners, and there were two pits beside the nose as the eyes tightened against the strong light. ‘Sure’, she said. ‘You’re not so bad. Natalie could have done worse.’

‘Thank you. So what’s a southerner doing in the art business?’

‘Honey, that is a long story.’

‘Not from what I can see.’

She looked hard at me and then shrugged.

‘Did you have a good time last night?’ I ventured.

‘You know Marbella any?’

‘Spent a week here. Miramar Hotel. Not smart, but all we needed.’

‘That’s the cheap end of town.’

‘As you say, but a friendly lot.’

Julia looked at me as though wondering whether it was worth putting power into the shot. ‘You English sure lay yourselves open’, she remarked.

‘I’m only making conversation.’

‘Try something else. Play tennis any?’

‘I wouldn’t be up to your standard.’

‘See you in fifteen minutes. There are racquets in the changing room. You’d better warm up.’

She was right. Julia waited for my service with the trained attention that I recognized from my long-past club days.

A silent prayer was still forming when the ball came back, low and impossible to retrieve. I tried again. 'Love thirty, said Julia. My next was a good deal better, but Julia shot it back and then effortlessly tucked away my return. Game to Julia came up, and I faced her service, which was equally forthright. I was two games down, three and then another before anything like the old form returned. I relaxed a little, putting in some topspin, and venturing the odd lob and drive volley. We had long rallies in the fifth but I secured the set eventually, five to seven, and then sat on the concrete afterwards in the sizzling heat.

'Want to go on?' I asked as she stretched out. The sweat poured off her face, and the strong legs continued into blotched knickers. 'Getting a bit warm, don't you think?'

'You chickening out?'

Grimly I picked up the racket, but this time played to win, reading her strategies, countering them even before they started.

‘Julia,’ I said at last, my head thumping badly and the sweat stinging my eyes, ‘I’m quitting. That’s quite enough for me.’

‘You bastard’, she said, her face angry.

‘Perhaps it should have been a more friendly game.’

When she didn’t reply, I walked over to the changing rooms and sat on a bench for several minutes. Then I dragged a stool into the shower and slumped there as the water roared in my ears. A foot appeared, and I looked up to see Julia standing on the edge of the spray, the water running down the breasts and glistening on the strong boss of hair.

‘Julia, just go away.’

‘Got the shampoo?’

‘On the top there. See you at lunch.’

A half-hour later I walked unsteadily back to the villa, where I lay exhausted on the bed, grateful for the shade and the cool breeze that lifted the muslin drapes. Natalie was tickling my ear when I came to.

‘Patrick, we are hungry.’

‘Can I have those back please?’ I said, snatching at the underpants hung in front of my nose.

‘He’s kind of shy, isn’t he?’ said Julia. The two laughed, and went out. I pulled on fresh shorts and made my way to the lounge where Natalie was talking to the maid.

‘I’ll have some salad, please.’

‘Makes himself at home, doesn’t he, the bastard?’ said Julia, handing over the tongs.

‘Wine anyone?’

‘Patrick, put that down and listen. You were not nice to Julia this morning.’

‘Her fault. I don’t think there’s a muscle in my body that doesn’t ache.’

‘Hand’, demanded Natalie.

‘And the other’, said Julia.

‘Well, this is charming, but it’s not helping my lunch.’

‘Now if you want to be friends with us,’ said Natalie sternly, ‘you will mend your ways.’

‘Julia’s just a bad loser.’

‘Give her a kiss and say you are sorry.’

‘I’m not in the slightest sorry. Which I’ll show this afternoon.’

‘Don’t kid yourself, honeybunch.’

‘We are going to have a siesta together, and you are free to do as you like’, said Natalie. ‘There is a drinks party later, but that is not until nine.’

‘Then I’ll take myself off to the old town, and do some work.’

I found a quiet spot near the town walls, but the thought of Natalie with Julia unsettled me. Two hours later the driver took me back to the villa, where I first changed into casual shorts and shirt, and then found something smarter when Natalie and Julia paraded their party finery.

‘You’re going to get serious attention in that.’

‘Tell him not to be a lounge lizard’, drawled Julia.

The villa resembled Natalie’s, and many others I got to know in the weeks following: large grounds, an eclectic mixture of architecture and high-security walls. Natalie led me across the floodlit lawn to signora d’Acosti, who detached herself immediately. ‘Ah, il pitorre’, she said, giving me a powdered cheek to kiss.

‘The mystery party giver. A great pleasure, Signora.’

‘We shall see. Natalie, I’m borrowing your man. There is a silly discussion going on about Tanguy, and I want a professional opinion.’ Her voice dropped to a whisper when we were out of earshot.

‘Killed in a car crash,’ I said, ‘but you know that.’

I was going to say more, but was presented in French, which I hadn’t spoken since Oxford days. A woman joined us, handing me a drink, but I took the opportunity to walk over to a livelier crowd on the far side, whose laughter I could hear above the restrained chatter.

‘So what do you do here?’ said one of the women, grasping my arm. ‘Haven’t seen you with Dragon Films, have I?’ She drew her head back and squinted theatrically. ‘Don’t think so.’

‘I’m here on holiday.’

‘On our own, are we?’

‘Staying with friends. Look, would you mind if I found our hostess? I’m supposed to be consulting with her.’

‘You can consult with me if you like.’

‘I’ll be back.’

‘Signore,’ said Fiorella, ‘you must sell yourself more. I shall take you round properly.’ Protests were ignored, and I was introduced to the guests, among whom it wasn’t difficult to recognize Stumpfl’s crowd. There was polite interest in my skills, but I was glad to be walking into a nightclub two hours later, where we were shown a table near the dance floor.

‘Ask Julia first, would you?’

Perhaps it was the wine, or the forced invitation, but I found the woman difficult to handle. First she seemed determined to lead, and there was a struggle before the music changed and we could dance independently. ‘You happy, partner?’

shouted Julia over the racket. You sure don't look it. Here, like this.'

She grabbed my hand, and we were away in the strenuous jive that Christine used to put me through. Back at the table, Julia was laughing, and forcing my arm back, and saying something which I couldn't hear, and then Natalie hoisted Julia to her feet and out on to the dance floor, where the performance was electrifying. They jived, twisted, bopped, did a dozen variations, and all the time the bodies followed each other in perfect coordination. I was still mesmerized when we left, some time after two, and were motored home.

The chauffeur reversed, the gates closed, and, still laughing, we tottered through the grounds and past the swimming pool. Natalie took our hands, and we jumped into the water. Clothes were being shed in the struggle, and we were then swimming with the cool water dimpling our bare skins.

Was I concerned? I didn't seem to be. The deep blue tiles wavered beneath me, the moon length-

ened on the water, and there seemed only an abounding happiness in our movements. Ten or fifteen minutes later, when Natalie was cold and made for the steps, I hauled myself out, went inside for the towels and then carefully dried her as she stood shivering at the poolside. Julia emerged a few minutes later, dropped the clothes she had rescued, and then lifted her arms to display that sturdy figure. I dried her the same, only rubbing harder at her back and between the legs. I myself was then pummelled dry, the women taking turns and laughing. With wet clothes in our hands, we trooped into the house and stood uncomfortably in the unlit corridor.

‘See you in the morning’, said Julia, but Natalie pushed us through. ‘He is coming with us.’

Maybe we were unsteady with drink, but not completely drunk, and our dancing before had been a good deal less inhibited. If I remind you that life studies are not usually pornographic but show a figure in calm acceptance of itself, you will under-

stand how quietly I placed an arm round each and kissed them. Julia's response was reluctant and blunt, Natalie's softly yielding. But whenever I attempted more, my hands were placed round them again, until I was folded into those contagious longings for each other.

That Natalie was not to be detached by such intimacy, I understood the following morning, when we used the same shower without embarrassment, and trooped out for breakfast by the pool. My part had been only minor, a homage to their private rituals, and the door was never opened again. Drawing did restart, though, with portraits of the women—mostly in grey chalk, with a little pastel added for colour—and these were hawked about by Julia and Fiorella, who eventually presented me with a sizeable list of clients. Introductions were made, and I worked contentedly in the villas and apartments that were increasingly thrown open. Women were sometimes coy, the men amiably compliant, and children I refused to draw.

While I worked on my commissions, Julia ran the small gallery rented near the town centre, and Natalie continued her property business. Sometimes I would find brochures by the pool telephone, but dealings were restricted to an office on the outskirts of town, to which I was not invited. Around one we met for drinks at the villa, after which would come a shower, a simple lunch, and an extended siesta. Occasionally we ate out, but clubbing was kept to the weekends.

Perhaps because she was evasive, leaving aspects that only imagination could fill, Natalie slowly became indispensable and then an obsession. On our first night, though I had been strangely moved by the small body and the delicate way it gave itself, the experience had not been different from so many others. So this is Natalie Stumpf, I kept thinking as I poured every feeling into that soft body. Increasingly in the days that followed I would recognize a familiar gesture, a look that I had filed away into memory, and these images would resurrect the longing a thousand-fold. Even a small hand

placed in mine, or her lips pressed softly as the rapture grew, or the tightening of the body around me, were enough to drive out the knowledge that she was married to Stumpfl and loved Julia more.

Often I wondered where any of this led, and for a couple of weeks I gave up my battle with Julia, paying only lip-service to the chatter and high spirits. Usually I sat some distance from them on the seafront, absorbed in my surroundings. The town appeared warm and friendly in the late October sun, and there was a mellow fullness in the air that I found reassuring. In the afternoon the sands turned to a dusky pomegranate, the sea darkened to deep blue, and the palms lost the hard edges to their thick tussles of leaves. A warm wind idled about the esplanade, ruffling the flags of the big hotels and lifting the menus on the café tables.

We are all entitled to happiness, I remembered my father saying at Teba, and the remark, unconnected with what we'd been talking about, came back now with biting force. How much happiness

had he enjoyed? The original Hugh had been an indulgence, and the adventure had ended in tragedy. For a few moments I saw him as he'd been at Bristol, when he could afford an hour off to take us to the shops or park. Then had come the divorce, and his move to Spain. He had walked along this same esplanade, I had once said to Christine, and now that recollection also came back.

What had I done for the woman? All she had wanted was my company and a little attention, but even that had been grudgingly given. For the first time the cruelty of my behaviour became apparent, and I looked away. 'Patrick, we will see you at the car around eight', Natalie was saying again, and I nodded vaguely.

When they'd gone, I paid the bill and blundered my way through the last of the summer visitors. In Spain my father had lost the only two people he had ever cared about, his wife and his soldiering friend, and in the same country I had murdered the only people who had cared for me. What was I

doing in Natalie's affections, complicit with her shadows and deceits? My lungs hurt, and there came the sharp pain of guilt. A few couples walked by, and their happiness only increased my sense of being a traveller in a world to which I lacked even entry papers.

You will say that I have only myself to blame, and that for all the passion of our lovemaking, there was still an air of fantasy and make-believe. Natalie did not mention the future, but increasingly left me in Julia's company. When the woman was out at tennis lessons, I looked after the gallery, selling the odd piece, but leaving her to complete the paperwork and delivery. All the time I was aware of being sidelined, of interests being directed through Julia, who would ask leading questions that Natalie repeated in our siestas together.

How was I drawing her away from Julia when Natalie's nearness was so sharply felt that any movement passed from rapture to a scarcely bearable pain? Some of that solicitude even passed

over to Julia, much as I fought it. With Natalie leaning over at a café table I would be fearful for her breasts, and with Julia, a tougher proposition altogether, I would sometimes imagine the buttocks squashed by the metal chair. That anxiety did not go unnoticed, as often Natalie would stretch a hand over, or give me a slight smile.

If anything, I was drawing closer to both, I realized in despair one day, sitting in one of the half-deserted cafés. And with that feeling came a new awareness. It wasn't the earnest concentration of the waitress, which distracted me, or the fingers bent back around the pencil as she held the pad a few inches from her nose. The girl was astonishingly alive.

'Only a coffee?' she said.

'Yes', I said indifferently, turning my gaze to the beach beyond.

How shall I explain to readers who no doubt have sensible lives and itineraries? Painting has

never been inspirational for me, but method and discipline. The affair with Julia and Natalie had loosened the concentration, and Natalie was brutally extending the horizons. Each doubt not only drove me deeper into Natalie's surroundings, but showed me a world more intriguing and resplendently beautiful. In the morning, when I would sit out by the pool as the dawn flared in the sky behind the villa, I was aware of something I had not understood before, and for which I cannot find an explanation.

The usual words—happiness, joy, contentment—do not answer to the experience. Sometimes in the afternoon Natalie and I would be curled up on the bed, the curtains half-drawn for the last of the autumn sunshine to flood into the room and give our retreat a shadowed intimacy. By now every part of Natalie was a fearful wonder. In the rapture of passion her small fingers would be probing everywhere, as though they could draw off and absorb the astringency of the attraction. Afterwards, when she was quiet, it would be my turn to

caress the small of her back, run my hands continually between her thighs or press her nipples into my hands until the palms ached.

That she was young and ambitious I could understand. Of course she would have trawled the Moscow bars and discotheques, learning how to dress, better her languages, and carry herself in the larger world. But a phrase struck me. What do you expect of Troika hostesses? she'd said once in a fit of annoyance. The remark was not followed up, and for a long time I thought no more of it.

Then came the truth. All those comments about her fellow restoration students living in poky flats, being beaten up by vodka-bloated husbands, living as cheap prostitutes—they were not colleagues, but Natalie herself. For a time she had lived just that life. Her stepfather had not paid for her education in Moscow. She'd left home to escape his attentions, and had supported herself in the only way possible. What she so vividly remembered of those

bestial acts, practised to survive, she was now effacing from memory by re-enacting them with me.

How long had it taken me to realize the obvious? I was appalled, and then angry with myself. What had she said in Frankfurt? If what I've done, or still do, disgusts you, then we can forget the whole thing. You are not in love with me. The thought that I was still not seeing her properly grew on me as I went down to the esplanade and sat for a long time over coffee, staring at the sea.

'You do not remember me', said the waitress.

'You're the girl who served me before.' What had caused the change? Then we had both been embarrassed, and she had slipped the coffee sideways on to the table to avoid presenting herself again.

'You live in Marbella?' she continued. 'You work here?'

'You won't believe me.'

She laughed. 'Everyone tells me lies. You can try.'

'I'm an artist. A portrait painter.'

'Claro. Of course.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Maybe I believe you. That why you look at me.'

'You're a pretty girl.'

'Mentiroso.'

'And you're a dancer, or training to be one. You point your feet out.'

'Still I do that? La Isabela does that?'

'I wish the señorita every good fortune. That she will be successful, and happy. One artist's good wishes to another.'

'You not want to draw me?' she said as I tucked a note under the saucer.

Years ago, in my first term at Oxford, I'd gone up to the best-looking girl I'd seen at lectures and simply asked her out. She laughed, but we had a good evening, and ended friends. If she'd not done the obvious and turned me down, why should I be less charitable now? Or so I told myself as I took Isabela by the hand and walked down on to the beach.

'You are loco, señor', she said, half in indignation. 'What I say to my boss?'

'Isabelita. We shall go back in ten minutes and I will do a poster for the café. It will be stupendous and cost him nothing. Tell me about the dancing.'

For an hour, like adolescents, we sat on the beach and shared everything. She told me about the school, her mother, the boy she was keen on. I told her about my life in England, about the accident, and about Natalie at the villa. I even mentioned Julia, and was about to elaborate when she touched my hand and said shyly, 'You think I do not know? Because I am only a girl?' For an over-

powering moment, I wanted to take this trusting creature into my arms and say, 'Could not life start again? Forget all that's happened and start again, just you and me.'

Of course I did nothing of the kind, but led her to the car, got out the sketching gear and sat her on the sea wall while I did the portrait. There was no boss hovering when we got back, but to provide cover I did a portrait of the other waitress, and promised to call again. Natalie was out when I returned to the villa, and I sat vacantly by the pool. Some fresh air had blown into the affair: the feelings were more discrete, and possibly saner.

Perhaps Natalie also felt the need for company. One Friday, I came back to see a familiar figure, his great dome of a head already pink and projecting from the deckchair. 'Hello Reg', I said, going round. 'Didn't know you were coming.'

'Didn't know myself until yesterday. No, let's have a look at it', he said, reaching for the sketch board. 'Not bad at all.' He propped it against the

side of the house, and went to see from a distance.
'Patrick, you really are coming on.'

'Hope you're getting the usual percentage.'

'That's why I'm over, to sort out the details.'

At first it was generalities that were discussed over dinner in one of Marbella's out-of-town restaurants. Stumpfl would supply the capital, Reg would act as consultant, and Natalie and I would be directors, responsible for overseas purchases.

'In what areas?' I said to Reg the following morning as the two of us sat at breakfast.

'Keep extending the market. That's how it's done.'

'Suppose we came back with a pile of socialist realism: you'd be happy with that?'

'If it was good.'

'No you wouldn't.'

‘Patrick, you have the practitioner’s eye for quality. You’re not blinkered by names and labels. For a new field that’s important.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘You know how many canvases we sold at our last exhibition? Six. Two of yours and some landscapes. No one can survive on that, not with rents as they are.’

‘Well, perhaps I shouldn’t say this. Heinrich Stumpfl’s been good to me, but lurid stories do go the rounds.’

‘Now see here: if I thought the Stumpfls were behind the accident, then I’d have nothing to do with them. They’re not, and you don’t think so either, or you’d not be staying here. Not that I’m judging you. Truth is I’ve never seen two people so overwhelmingly drawn to each other.’

‘We try to be discreet.’

‘You behave impeccably, but it’s obvious. And you’ve changed. You’ve grown up. The charm is still there, but the shambling enthusiast has become more assured, more the gallery director. If Herr Stumpfl wants us to go ahead, then I think we should.’

‘Nothing to do with the mortgage on the house?’ I ventured, thinking of Sibyl’s conversation.

‘Since you mention it.’

‘In short, we sell his loot.’

‘Stumpfl’s a legitimate businessman. Manufacturing, shipping, textiles.’

‘Armaments and cotton: those vast fields in Kazakhstan where people are worked to exhaustion to fulfil quotas. Stumpfl will have some under-the-table deal with the authorities.’

‘We don’t know that.’

‘What happens if one of the pictures is claimed by its rightful owner?’

‘Patrick, do drop this inquisitional tone. If anything is not kosher then Stumpfl bears the loss. He supplied it, and he takes it back. Anyway, this has more to do with Natalie Stumpfl, doesn’t it? A beautiful woman who arrives out of nowhere. No connections, no family.’

‘The stories don’t stack up.’

‘Shall I tell you something? I couldn’t make you out at first, this tall figure with his fits of enthusiasm and wild clothes. We had a little chat, remember, when you brought your portfolio and we discussed terms. I wasn’t hopeful.’

‘You didn’t like my work?’

‘Now it’s very good, but it wasn’t then. Your father phoned to ask if I thought you had talent. He was against your career, but said one thing. If my son has set his heart on something he will do it. I didn’t give you much to begin with, but you’ve made good. Those portraits of the Stumpfls are

excellent, astonishing some of them, though you have to work on the backgrounds still.'

'I know that.'

'Patrick, I wish I had a tenth of that talent, or I'd stuck at painting in the way you have. There was some promise, but I wasn't making any money, and I desperately wanted to get married. The girl's family obligingly stumped up the funds, and I started a gallery, in Bolton of all places.'

'Wondered where you and Sibyl came from.'

'That was someone else. Sibyl is a dear, but not from the same stable.' There was a pause, and he said, 'I'm telling you because I worked damned hard to get the gallery going. Now a rich businessman comes along and offers what took me thirty years to earn, a directorship on a plate, with a pretty wife thrown in, and you um and err.'

'It's not the job.'

‘You’re not marrying the woman. Act honestly, take reasonable precautions, but don’t suppose you can change the world. I’m also going to say something that should be obvious, but may not have sunk in. We both like you, Sibyl and I, and to the extent that we don’t have children, we’ve always looked on you as the grown-up son.’

‘Reg, that’s very kind’, I said, suddenly confused.

‘So you understand how matters lie? The Stumpfls venture has its risks, but in my book there’s little alternative.’

‘Heinrich Stumpfl asked you to make this pitch?’

He paused, and the boyish grin made a slow return. ‘One of my little tasks. And to work out the details of the partnership, which we’ll do when Natalie gets back.’

To give him his due, Ecclestone did put the full weight of his enthusiasm behind Natalie’s suggestions later that afternoon. Some of his remarks still

hurt, but that was a salesman's strategy, a superb salesman. Afterwards, there was time for a brief stroll along the esplanade, Ecclestone wandering along in striped shirt and panama as though the English still owned the Mediterranean. A friend, and a good deal more, I realized, as we saw him off on the seven o'clock flight.

A week later, the chauffeur drove me over to Ronda. Only two months had passed, but the town was already losing its familiar aspect. Ignacio was busy. My father's plaque looked raw and out of place. The accident spot was still further away, wind-filled and indifferent. Even a sudden trip to my mother's grave in Málaga, undertaken on a sudden whim, ended in disappointment when we found the cemetery gates locked and no one to ask.

'Of course I don't have other plans', I assured the women over dinner that night. 'Quite happy to carry on like this.'

'That is not true, is it?' said Natalie. 'You are getting restless. First it is a little waitress, and soon

it will be someone else. If you can't have someone entirely you will not have them at all.'

'Natalie, that's not the case.'

'You have to decide. Are you going to take the gallery job or not?'

'I've told you.'

'Are you sure? Because Heinrich is sending the jet on Thursday. Julia and I have to go on to New York, but we can drop you off in London.'

Nothing further was said, and I went to bed bewildered and on my own. In the morning I joined them on the beach, where it was too cold to sunbathe though we walked briskly along the shore and afterwards sat in one of the larger cafés, sheltered from the wind by glass panels. Natalie was elegant as always, but the cold had thickened Julia's face into lumpy disappointment. I picked up the bill when the conversation petered out, and afterwards walked with Julia.

‘So that’s it, partner,’ she said, ‘you’ve lost and I’ve won.’

‘We shall see.’

‘What did you expect? You know how long I’ve been knocking about with Natalie? Four years. Decent apartment. Gallery that I run. For a girl born on the wrong side of the tracks that’s not so bad.’

‘Which you’re not going to give up.’

‘You’re darngorned right I’m not.’

‘Or share.’

‘Natalie ever kind of intimate she might leave Stumpfl? With someone who can’t commit himself?’

‘Is that how you see it?’

‘You just don’t get it. Who’s going to New York? Not you, is it, honeybunch?’

I took Julia’s arm, but she shook me off and walked back to the car. Marga had finished the

packing when we got back, and we were driven to the airport. For most of the flight Natalie was silent, refusing questions. Only when the aircraft began its descent to Heathrow did she remark, 'You can work on finding somewhere suitable for a gallery, can you not? Ring me at Botes in a couple of weeks: I should be back by then.' She paused, and seeing Julia's amused expression, added, 'Or if not I will phone you from New York.'

CHAPTER NINE

On the tarmac I hugged Natalie, and took Julia's hand briefly. There were no customs formalities, and twenty minutes later I was sitting in a minicab fending off the usual questions as the west London suburbs rolled past, the light doodling on the streets under a wet October sky. At Belsize Park I took the bundles of canvas through to the porch and returned to pay the driver. The front door opened after some jiggling with the key, and I was back.

Uninviting it was bound to be, and for an hour or so I attended to the mail, unpacked and tried to avoid the lifestudy that looked at me, frank and

unnatural from the studio easel. Even with flowers from the local supermarket the flat couldn't be jollied into life. With a games show on the television I packed Christine's clothes into a bin liner, and took them out to the dustbin. The lid I wedged down firmly, and then went to bed, taking two whiskies to hasten sleep.

Perhaps I wasn't much improved in the morning, but went steadily through the agenda. Georg wasn't free until the following day, and Reg was away at a sale. It occurred to me to check my bank balance, but Natalie's retainer had gone through. I had a leisurely breakfast in a local café and then toured the rental agencies, taking lunch in one of the trendy Hampstead bistros. Some of the strangeness was wearing off, and I chatted to the couple at my table, feeding myself slowly into the current scene. Two weeks later, when Natalie phoned from New York, I had a decent flat in west Hampstead, and a shortlist of gallery possibilities.

‘That is fine,’ said Natalie, ‘but in fact we have beaten you to it. “The Russian Slot”. On the right as you go up. Roshan Kamath is in charge at the moment, but she will take orders from you.’

‘So I’ve been wasting my time?’

‘I am sure there will be something for you to do.’

Close it down, I thought the following morning. A florid nineteenth century piece hung in the window, and inside were muddy landscapes and some botched Modernist works. I stared at them in dismay until a voice said, ‘Is there anything in particular you were interested in?’

‘Where’s all this from?’

As the woman went off to get the book I had the chance to size up my new assistant, whose strongly made-up features shone with a metallic brilliance. ‘The prices are reasonable, as you can see’, she said on her return.

‘That’s not what I meant. Roshan, isn’t it? I’m Patrick Staunton.’

‘I know. I had a call from the owners yesterday.’

‘Well, it’s very nice to meet you. Do call me Patrick.’

‘I have placed the new arrivals in your office. It’s this way.’

‘Right’, I said, looking at a bare room with light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

‘Can I get you a coffee before you start?’

‘It’s not necessary. The machine’s where?’

‘Across the road. We get them from the Greek restaurant.’

‘Well, in that case. And get one for yourself, would you? We ought to have a chat.’

‘I should be pleased to do that later today, when I’m less busy. You will find correspondence on your

desk. Mrs Stumpfl has asked that you attend to it straight away.'

'Just bring the coffees.'

It was an unsatisfactory meeting. I had no idea what such a high-powered executive was doing in an art gallery, and phoned Natalie that lunchtime.

'Roshan is extremely efficient. She has been with Heinrich for years.'

'But no art training?'

'Was there anything else?'

'Roshan's said something about all expenses going through you.'

'Yes, you are only the acting manager at present.'

'Then as the acting manager I'm having this place done out properly. I'll get people in this afternoon for quotes. And to get the rubbish cleared from out the back, for Christ's sake.'

There was a long pause, after which the voice said, 'Why are you doing this, Patrick?'

'Because the place is tatty, and there isn't a single piece worth selling.'

'Please send the quotes to us.'

'With pleasure, if you'd be kind enough to send me a copy of the director's agreement.'

'Take care, Patrick.'

The agreement didn't arrive, but the gallery had a decent look within the fortnight, and the first customers started appearing. We even had an opening exhibition, with a guest list made up of college friends and names Reg reluctantly supplied. Sales were not good, but Roshan went almost daily afterwards to the Hampstead reference library, and I beavered away on a new catalogue, helped by a couple of specialists who had to be dragged in to identify some of the smaller pieces. After much effort, half the work sold, even the Cubist pieces, which I couldn't get a provenance for.

It was now two weeks to Christmas, and I was still having trouble with the 'glamorous man-eater', as Jerry called her when we had lunch after his call.

'Efficient, is she?'

'Robotic.'

'Why not the "Roshan, what a beautiful profile" routine?'

'Is this a request for an introduction?'

'It's a reminder of the work you promised Sheila. You've got a decent studio now.'

'And not a moment free.'

'What about your Polish friend?'

'Georg has got no money, and he doesn't do life-studies, though I suppose his Co-operative might.'

'Then you could find out, couldn't you? For an old pal?'

‘It’s on your own head, Jerry.’

Surprisingly, Georg came back with the news that a group of them would take a model, if cheap enough, and I turned to more pressing matters. The new catalogues were held up in the printer’s, and then there was our office Christmas party.

‘Anything’, I said to Roshan.

‘Possibly after the exhibition?’

‘Christ almighty, Roshan. Book whatever you think is suitable. We’ve both worked like Trojans, and I’m sure the Stumpfls won’t begrudge us a little appreciation.’

No doubt I should have given it more thought, but my mind was on the looming disaster of the next exhibition. We had a better selection, with some Hungarian paintings I had tracked down, though we were still stuck with the wretched Cubist works. The printers hadn’t actually promised catalogue delivery on time, and only half the guests had replied. Nonetheless, the exhibition was a smash

hit, thanks to Reg and Roshan, whose persuasive patter outdid even my efforts. 'It's a new departure', I could hear Reg saying. 'Come and have a look at this piece. Hungarian. Not a well-known name, but that is authentic painting. Where I'd put my money. While we were indulging in Victorian sentimentality, these people were in tune with what would develop into Modernism. Ah Roshan, my dear, could you show Mrs Williams the other Hollósy piece? It's out of this world.'

The Cubist works stayed unsold till almost the end, and I don't know why I didn't recognize the voice that said quietly, 'We will take numbers eighteen and nineteen.'

'Ah,' I said, not looking up, 'the Neo-Cubist pieces. Excellent choice.'

The voice laughed, and I found myself looking at Natalie, who stood there in a tight-fitting tweed jacket. 'Patrick, I have not come back from the dead.'

‘I’ll just jot down the buyer’s details.’

‘Roshan will do that. Take me round.’

Afterwards she said, ‘Are you pleased with it?’

‘We’ve sold twelve. I ought to see everyone out, but that’ll only take half an hour. My place isn’t far.’

‘I have got nothing suitable. All the luggage has gone on with Heinrich.’

‘For what I had in mind you don’t need much.’

She laughed and tapped my hand, the finger staying a moment on the knuckles. ‘Darling, just be patient. I am going to say goodbye now.’

‘You’re not spending Christmas at Botes?’

She gave me a wry smile, and was then talking to the last of the guests, shaking Reg by the hand and giving some instructions to Roshan. I expected her to turn at the door, but she sailed off.

‘That’s it, Mr Staunton’, said Roshan a short while later, when I’d not been a great help. ‘Two more from the last guests.’

‘That’s fantastic, Roshan. You’ve been absolutely wonderful.’

‘So you’ll invite me out for the drink? To discuss the Christmas party.’

I trailed after her, towards the wine bar where she sometimes went for lunch.

‘I’ll get them, Roshan.’

‘If you’re feeling up to it, Mr Staunton.’

‘Patrick, for Heaven’s sake. You’re a good-looking woman out for a drink with a colleague who in his proper mind would probably fancy you rotten.’

I felt myself colouring as she stared at me.

‘Sorry, must be all the champagne’, I mumbled. The bar began to tilt, and I could see Roshan’s

drink swaying in front of me, and then the heavy body in a dress that I was noticing for the first time that evening.

‘You shouldn’t have had the other drinks after Mrs Stumpfl left. You really that fond of her?’

‘It’s not supposed to show.’

‘You should be careful, that’s all.’

‘I expect you’re right. Everyone’s right, except poor Patrick, who doesn’t know what’s he’s doing.’ I sat down in the chair again and said, ‘I think I ought to go now.’

‘The cab is on its way, Mr Staunton.’

‘Mr Staunton again, is it? Well, I shall make my apologies to you in the morning.’

Possibly she came with me in the taxi, as someone was talking about Natalie Stumpfl and her affairs, but it could have been fantasies, though I remembered the low-cut dress when I woke up on

the bed, swallowed four aspirins and took a cold shower.

‘You don’t object to dancing, do you?’ said Roshan when we sat, two nights later, at the Italian place she’d found for our Christmas party.

‘I insist on it. We can nab the wine waiter as we go past.’

‘He’s busy now, Mr Staunton.’

‘Patrick’, I said, taking firmer hold of her. ‘Tonight you call me Patrick. Are you afraid of me?’

‘I’m not used to dancing this close.’

‘Roshan, tonight we’re going to enjoy ourselves. Tomorrow we can go back to being at each other’s throats, but this evening is different. All right?’

‘If it is just this evening.’

‘I’ve apologized for the other night. You are an attractive woman, but no one in their right mind has an affair in the office, do they?’

‘Suppose not.’

‘Besides, there’s the husband. You’re married, aren’t you?’

‘Was.’

‘But you’re not seeing your ex over Christmas?’

‘I’m staying with a girlfriend. Someone I used to work with.’

‘Otherwise you could have come for Christmas lunch. Add to our small party.’

‘I could come Boxing Day.’

‘It’s nothing marvellous,’ I continued, leading her back to the table, ‘and you’ll probably get a better offer.’

‘I’d like to come.’

Gradually she thawed, but it was only after the meal, when we sat with liqueurs, and not dancing much, that she said, 'Am I really at your throat?'

'I'm not much better with you. I'm sorry, but it's your Stumpfl training that gets me.'

'You knew I was PA to him?'

'That you used to report on Natalie, until she got you fired, and you came here? You think I'm blind.'

'You are rather.'

'I'm compromised. I know Natalie has other men.'

'A Junior Minister. He's useful to them.'

'Don't tell me.'

'But it's you Natalie Stumpfl has fallen for. Why she won't see you.'

Georg had insisted I go round to his place for Christmas, and there perhaps I should have mentioned Roshan. She came early on Boxing Day, however, and was setting the table when Georg came into the room. He stared at her, dumbfounded, so that I had to remove the overcoat by force. Afterwards he sat on the sofa, knees pressed together, talking only to me. He was equally reserved throughout lunch, saying little to Roshan, even to her questions. After coffee, he picked up the bottle he'd brought as a present, stuck it in his coat pocket, and left.

'Do you want me to go too?' said Roshan when I returned from seeing Georg into the street.

'Not on my account.'

She smiled, and we stared at each other for a while. 'I'm not compromising you, am I?' she said, easing herself more comfortably into the sofa.

'Not at all. More brandy?'

'It's a nice place. Natalie will like it.'

I went over to sit with her, forcing the pace. 'Now I don't ask you about your affairs, do I?'

'There's nothing to tell.' The face stared back, heavily made up but not flinching.

'I don't know', I said, putting an arm round. 'Someone with these sultry looks must have some extravagant stories to tell.' It was a dangerous tactic, but I thought she'd turn tail.

'Is this how you started with Natalie?'

For reply I drew her close. She was unresponsive, though I could taste the thick lipstick, which was cloying and slightly bitter. Then she bent over, and I was drawn into her heavy warmth. 'Should we be doing this?' I asked when I'd caught my breath.

'He's not coming back?'

'No. We can talk.'

'Talk?' she said, annoyed and sitting up. Perhaps she'd go now, but after a moment's hesita-

tion, she put her arms round and gave me another suffocating kiss. 'Wouldn't you like me to help you? With Natalie, I mean.'

'No.'

'If you help me with my ex-husband. He keeps threatening me.'

'Sorry to hear that, but try the police.'

'You'd be better.'

'No immigration papers?'

'Say you'll do it.'

'No thank you. I'm not getting involved in other people's marriages.'

'Kiss me properly and say you won't.'

'I won't.'

'What do I have to do to get you to help me?'

'Roshan, if we can be a bit nicer to each other, I will have a word with this husband of yours.'

‘If you like.’

‘I mean in the office. Now we can talk or watch television, or I can take you back to the station.’

Eventually she did talk, and I also told her something about Christine and Spain. By then she had missed the last train, and I therefore put her up in the spare room, making a simple breakfast in the morning. Afterwards we went to the Tate, and had tea in a local cafeteria before walking to the bus-stop. She turned when her bus appeared and said, ‘Perhaps it is better this way.’

‘Expect so. See you on the second.’

She climbed aboard and I caught a last glimpse of the strong legs under the coat.

There were more important matters to think of, and around eleven the following day I called round to see Georg, who had been drinking hard.

‘Can I stand you a spot of lunch?’ I said after the usual enquiries about his work hadn’t kindled any conversation.

He shrugged off the suggestion. ‘I must go to Southwark.’

‘Ah, the Co-operative. Why don’t you invite me down? We can take the car, if there’s somewhere to park?’

Georg conceded a vague description, and we found a space in an adjoining street, empty in this quiet period of the year. ‘You people don’t do much on presentation, do you?’ I remarked as we went through the old printer’s works.

Georg didn’t reply, and after poking my nose into his studio I went round to meet the others: a youthful, well-intentioned crowd, as I agreed, standing in the improvised kitchen over a cup of tea afterwards. ‘So how much does it cost to rent a studio here?’ I asked him.

‘You have to be invited.’

‘So you’ll talk to them, will you Georg?’

But even Roshan was doubtful when I told her later.

‘In Southwark?’

‘Getting the place sorted is the first step. That’ll set me back a few thousand.’

‘Are you bailing out?’

‘It’s a contingency plan, and that doesn’t mean I won’t go and see your husband. When you’ve set up the meeting.’

‘I’m trying for next week. Meanwhile you’ve got someone coming to see you. A Miss Reynolds. She’s on her way.’

‘Leave the door open, would you? And keep coming through with coffees or papers.’

The first thing Sheila did on being presented was to jump up, and close the door.

‘So we can have a private talk. Isn’t that cosy?’ she said, wagging her bust in its striped sweater.

‘Not really.’

‘Maybe I’ll just go, and you can take the consequences.’

‘Please yourself.’

‘Only you won’t know, will you?’ She looked at me confidentially and lunged forward, resting her bust heavily on the table. ‘It’s about what happened when you did my portrait.’

‘Nothing as I recall.’

‘Jerry, he doesn’t know that, does he? He could turn nasty.’ When I glared at her she added, ‘You have your own studio now.’

‘Which I’m much too busy to work in.’

‘Maybe I could cook for you, or something. You know.’

‘Thought you were at the Co-operative.’

‘I freeze my boobs off down there for a measly five quid an hour.’

‘Modelling never pays. Like painting, for that matter.’

‘You seem to do all right. Everyone says Patrick Staunton is going places. That’s why they’re taking you into the Co-operative. I told them you’re not as snooty as you seem.’

‘I’m going to ask my secretary to show you out if you go on like this.’

‘Miss Curry Pants? Good, is she?’

‘That’s it.’

‘No, you’ve got too much class.’ I held the door for her as she pranced out. ‘Remember the offer, loverboy.’ She blew me a kiss as Roshan banged the shop door shut.

‘Thanks for looking after me’, I said when Roshan brought in the coffee.

‘I was on the telephone. The meeting’s for next Wednesday. Eight o’clock in Hounslow.’

No doubt it was the arranged marriage, or the troubles with Immigration from which Stumpfl had rescued her that left matters this vague. A little talk can’t hurt, I thought, making my way along the backstreets from Hounslow station, though I wasn’t so sure when a surly Yugoslav answered the door and tramped up behind me on the stairs. In the bare room sat two Indians cross-legged on the floor. Somewhere public would have been safer, I realized when one of them angrily cut across my opening remarks.

‘What my friend here want to know is what you bring from Roshan.’

‘I thought we might talk things through’, I said, addressing what I supposed was the ex-husband, a large man with glasses and an unhealthy, pock-marked face. Cooking smells came from the kitchen, where I could sense people listening.

‘He no speak English. You tell me. What Roshan offer?’

‘I’ve been asked to say that Roshan is very sorry the marriage hasn’t worked out, but these phone calls and accosting her in the street aren’t helping.’ Not a diplomatic start, I admit, and our Yugoslav friend hung over menacingly.

‘Why you waste our time if you no make offer?’

‘I’m not here to make an offer.’

Here it comes, I thought, but the Yugoslav backed off at a look from the husband. ‘See. He is ill’, the man continued. ‘He need money. But Roshan she not send any. Promise but no send.’

‘Is this some marriage settlement?’

‘Is what Roshan she owe our family. What he give her and she no return.’

‘I’ll go back and talk to her. I’m sure something can be worked out.’

‘You no escape like that!’

‘Look,’ I said firmly, ‘I think Roshan’s had a hard time too. She didn’t like being beaten up, whatever the disappointments.’

I barely had time to duck as the blow came in, but I swung round in getting to my feet, and caught the Yugoslav in the solar plexus. Two more punches bent him double, and the body fell heavily on to the floor. ‘I’m sorry about that’, I said breathlessly, and was going to say more, but the Indians had disappeared. Cautiously I walked down the stairs into the street, and made for the nearest main road.

Perhaps I lost my way, or it was further than I had thought, but trouble was soon with me. Only two were waiting at the end of the street, but there were sounds of more behind. I looked for an exit, but saw only terrace houses with front doors opening on to the street.

I strolled on slowly, pressing doorbells as I went, a ploy that worked until spotted. Then I was up against a front door, giving as good as I got. Whatever is shown in the movies, one man is not a match for five, however, and I could feel the strength going out, an aching pain in the left cheek and blood dribbling from the nose. Two blows came in at once, and the second landed. The street lights did a somersault, and the momentary weightlessness was stopped with a hard pain in the back. Still curled up, protecting my head, I rolled round, hoping the police sirens I could hear would arrive before real damage was done. They didn't, and I felt my face drag on the pavement before I blacked out.

To none of the police questions at the hospital did I give a sensible reply. 'Look, Sunny Jim,' said a constable, 'we can get you for affray. You wouldn't want that, would you?'

'Caught beating myself up?'

‘Now don’t get funny with us. What were you doing down there?’

‘Seeing a friend.’

‘Whose name you can’t remember.’

‘Concussion I expect.’

‘Right, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re letting you off. But—are you listening?—if ever we catch you on our patch again we’ll throw the book at you. Is that clear? So just give the hospital a contact so they know who’ll collect you.’

I managed a grin on that one.

‘And remember you’re on our records. First Spain and now here, Patrick Hugh Staunton.’

That was sobering news, but I was more concerned about my appearance when the ambulance delivered me to the flat a day later. I picked up Roshan’s note as I pushed open the door, and was surveying myself in the hall mirror when I phoned her.

‘I’ll come round straight away.’

‘No need. Just have to tidy myself up a bit.’

Roshan was there at lunchtime, and again in the evening. ‘The least I can do’, she said as she took the soup bowl away and surveyed the patient.

‘Probably looks worse than it is.’

Gently she removed the pyjama top and felt some of the bruises. ‘How did they do that?’

‘Not important.’

‘You don’t want me to stay? As before, I mean.’

‘I’m not a critical case.’

‘Just temporary’, she said the following day, as she took the spare room.

‘What’s all that for?’ I said as one dress after another was unpacked and hung up. ‘You’re not moving in?’

‘You want me to look decent for the weekend, don’t you? I’ve made a booking at the Greek place for Saturday night.’

She smiled, as she smiled many times in the days that followed, appearing more provocatively dressed each time before disappearing into her room.

This is just stupid’, I said eventually.

‘Nothing’s happened, has it?’

‘And it won’t.’

She marched off, but on the Saturday, after returning from the restaurant, at which I’d stayed sober, if only to get to the bottom of the troubles with her husband, which seemed more intractable than ever, she sat on the bed in a short black nightdress and said, ‘Patrick, since you won’t ask me, I’m going to ask you. Please come to my room. I want to talk.’

‘What’s wrong with here?’ I said, putting down the book I’d been reading.

‘If you like.’

‘That’s not what I meant’, I said gently, as she removed the nightdress top.

‘Will you make love to me?’

‘No.’

‘How can you say that?’

I ran a hand down her back and under the briefs. ‘You’ve tensed up. It’s not going to be so wonderful.’

‘Patrick, if you get me there, I’ll help you with Natalie.’

‘No.’

‘I’ll hate you even more if you turn me down.’

‘I’ll risk it.’

‘Think about the office.’

‘Roshan, please don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

It was hopeless, as I admitted the following morning, sat on my own in the small kitchen. Especially painful were the memories of Roshan throwing herself at me and then growing cold and tense again.

‘Not saying sorry to the wife, are we?’ said the florist later that morning.

‘Overdoing it, you reckon?’

‘Pretty pricey, those.’

‘Just half a dozen, then.’

Later that morning, in a quiet moment, after Roshan had flung the roses into the waste-bin, I said to her, ‘Do you want lunch?’

‘The gallery has to stay open.’

‘Perhaps a drink this evening?’

She didn't reply. In irritation I felt like shaking the woman, and shouting that I'd done my best, but in the end I shut her out and went back to my papers. The whole week was painful, and when on Friday evening the telephone rang at the flat, it took a moment to transfer the expected apology to Natalie's playful voice.

'That would be nice', I heard myself saying. 'We could have lunch together. Wherever you like.'

'Patrick, the room is 241. Mention my name at the reception and then go up. Any time after two.'

Perhaps the eagerness showed, as there was a smirk on the face of the booking clerk as he handed the keys over. 'Mrs Stumpfl will join you as soon as possible, sir.'

In fact, Natalie didn't appear until half two, and I should not have phoned room service.

'Yes, sir. The usual.'

I smiled bitterly as I put the phone down, and went to look out of the window, into the quiet street with its occasional shopper. But then I'd always known.

'Just pour me a glass, would you?' said Natalie when she arrived. 'And help me take these off.'

I must have stared as she sat in bed with me. 'Lost your tongue?'

'Can't believe it's you.'

She kissed me gently and said, 'Remember me now?'

'I've never forgotten a single moment with you.'

She looked puzzled, and then shrugged, half turning away. 'Please,' she said, almost inaudibly, running a finger down my back, 'just don't say anything.'

I didn't, for whatever hours that followed, when I was beside myself with happiness, dissolving into that small body, repeatedly, until the vexations of

Roshan, the gallery, my present circumstances, all of them were gone. The bottle was empty, and I realized it was dark outside when Natalie reached for the watch on the bedside table.

‘We have to be going.’

‘Get a bite to eat, and come back?’

‘Please do not build too much on this.’

‘I’m not.’

Natalie looked reproachfully at the Veuve Clicquot. ‘There is only one other, if you want to know. Why make it so difficult?’

‘On the contrary, I make it only too easy. Is it going to be another six months, would you think?’

‘You are not being asked to stay celibate. You can go out with Roshan, or your ex-models or half of London for all I care.’

‘I don’t particularly want to.’

‘Do not fence me in, Patrick. That is all I ask.’

‘Look, I promised myself not to talk work, but we’re still getting those wretched Cubist paintings.’

‘They sell, do they not?’

‘Well, they shouldn’t. And I’m supposed to be doing the selecting.’

‘Talk to Heinrich.’

‘Natalie, I’m giving notice.’

‘Now you are being silly.’

‘Unless you talk to Heinrich about buying trips. Plus the agreement, which I still don’t have.’

‘If you want.’

‘Oh for Heaven’s sake!’

‘Patrick, I will see what I can do. I promise.’

Roshan gave me a curious look the following morning, but perhaps it was just my happiness, something that stayed with me for weeks, even

following me into my studio on Sundays when I was again working away, transferring the images to pictorial reality.

The months passed. Natalie didn't get in touch, and I had long ago discounted Roshan's help. All that did come were calls from Jerry, repeatedly, until I agreed to meet him in a wine bar of his choice.

'Going to get me a drink with all the new-found wealth?' he said.

I called the waiter over and ordered a Rioja.

'Not a bottle. Got a wife and family waiting when I get back. Or did have. And a girl you might know.'

'Come on, Jerry.'

'Listen, I'm going to give you some advice. You know why we're having this old chum's reunion, don't you?'

'Difficult day?'

‘Jerry has had a splendid day. Sozzled at lunch, insulted an important client, propositioned the tea girl. I’ve had a splendid day, thank you.’

‘Right.’

‘A certain barmaid, Sheila by name. Hear a little tinkle in the memory, do we, old chum?’

‘Jerry, we’re at cross purposes. Sheila phones occasionally, and comes round to model on Sundays. Professionally.’

‘It takes time to see the snake in the grass. But then we’re not thrown out of home and hearth every day of the week, are we?’

‘Jerry, I’m sorry.’

‘No, you’re not. You panic, but you’re never sorry.’

He still looked his jaunty self, one hand on the bar, the small boy’s expression quite unchanged.

‘I see that’s struck home. Don’t like the truth, do you, Paddy boy?’

‘Jerry, you invited me to the fancy dress do because you thought I’d be useful. When I didn’t have a convenient studio, I had to make it up to your girl.’

‘You did that all right, only we’re not so accomplished as we think. Not everyone falls for Staunton’s charm. There are decided chinks in it. Gaping holes, I’d say.’

‘Jerry, let’s meet some other time. Okay?’

‘Not okay. Not in the slightest okay. Jerry Howard is going to tell you a few home truths. You don’t have any real way with women, you know that? You’re just a stuffed shirt, a self-satisfied, heartless poseur. An amusement for them, that’s all you are.’

‘Just leave it, Jerry.’

‘You know something else?’ he continued, working himself into a temper. ‘That wee Scots girl

didn't kill herself on a whim. It was because I told her the truth for once. That's why she had to talk to you.'

'Rowena?'

'You had to call her the following day, but I didn't give you the message because I knew you'd only string her along.'

'She killed herself because I didn't call?' I was beginning to tremble with anger. 'Is that what you're saying?'

'Wouldn't have made any difference.'

'You bastard!'

'Anyway, it was your fault . . . ' he continued, lurching towards me. The mouth had opened again when I hit it. Jerry looked astonished, then bewildered, and would have changed further if I'd not been restrained. 'Want him dealt with?' said a voice behind me as I struggled.

‘No. You hop it!’ said the bartender coming up and absently wiping the counter. ‘Got that, mate? Piss off.’

I wasn’t unruly, or perhaps even noticeably strange in the hours that followed, but swayed about as though stunned by the recollection. Later, when the pubs had closed and I sat in a clip joint, I still couldn’t take it in. ‘What are you doing here, dearie’, said one of the hostesses, but I ignored the offer, and then found another place, even more tawdry. ‘Going on somewhere, guv’nor’, said the cabby when I stumbled out some time after two in the morning.

‘Just bed, I think.’

‘Anyone in mind?’

‘West Hampstead.’

He whistled. ‘Cost you. Forty at least.’

I stared at him wearily.

‘We can do better than that. Get in, mate. Only a few quid from here.’

‘All right’, I said, as distinctly as I could. ‘Take me to the Meridian Hotel. If you would.’

The cabby looked at me curiously, shoved my arm from the window, and pointed to the back. ‘You’re the boss.’

At reception the clerk was barely polite. Had I stayed here before?

‘No, but you probably know some friends of mine. The Stumpfls.’ I spelt the name. ‘Or Mrs Stumpfl, anyway. Natalie Stumpfl?’

One moment please. He went over to the computer and came back with a registration form. A bulky figure with a sharp look stared back from the mirror as I lurched down the stairs towards the bar, where I ordered a whisky, smartened up in the lavatory, and then sat doing nothing. One of the usual company threw me a long glance but I chatted only to the bartender, who pretended to re-

member me, as all good bartenders do. Around three I took the lift and, tired, shaky and not quite of this world, went to bed.

Of course the place was hopelessly beyond my means, but in a stouter frame of mind I went down at eight-thirty and ordered a full English breakfast. My Thai friend appeared, but went quietly about her business.

‘More coffee, if I might.’ The coffee was renewed. ‘You’re on mornings now?’ I said as she came round again.

‘Yes sir.’

‘Does that mean you get the odd evening off?’

‘No sir.’

‘Can’t blame a man for trying.’ I smiled, but there was no recognition, just a blank look of politeness. Later she came with the bill, which I paid by Visa, adding a cash tip and my business card, on which I wrote ‘Love to see you. Do please call.’

But receipt and the two cards were returned a few minutes later, and I took myself off.

‘Doing rather well, from what I hear’, said Reg Ecclestone half an hour later as we sat in his back office. The usual bonhomie was absent, and he shifted uneasily in the chair.

‘With no time for my own work.’

‘You sold at Frankfurt.’

‘Reg, what’s going on? I had my arm twisted to join, with all kinds of promises—time to myself, a say in the buying side—and none of that has happened. Just rubbish coming through all the time.’

‘Everyone takes precautions, but some dodgy stuff gets through even the best galleries.’

‘There has to be some documentation.’

‘Don’t jump down my throat. Talk to Heinrich.’

‘I can’t get hold of him.’

‘Well, look: things are a bit dicey at the moment, so we don’t need someone rocking the boat. If there are real problems, please talk to me.’

‘You’ll sort something out?’

‘Your part in it, yes of course.’

We smiled, not easily, and after some more talk about Frankfurt I left to walk down to Piccadilly and across to a quick pasta in Soho. Over coffee I took out the receipts and made the usual diary jottings. I looked at my watch. Time to be off if I was to arrive in Hampstead by three.

Then I saw the message. In neatly folding the receipts I came across, printed on the Visa slip: ‘7pm Monday. Bond Street tube.’ I stared at it, wondering if it was not some hoax or misunderstanding. ‘But who cares?’ I said to the puzzled cashier, handing over a handsome tip and sauntering out.

At least I had the sense to go carefully with Georg, who was genuinely pleased to see me. We

hugged and patted each other on the back. I opened the schnapps I'd brought, and Georg put on one of his old records. For a while we sat listening to the dance tune that filled the small room.

'When they're in London next', I said to his repeated question.

'You think this Matynia woman will come back from Moscow?'

'Didn't know she was there.'

'They kill your father and your girlfriend, and now they keep you, like some fat grub to lay their eggs in.'

'Very nicely put. Georg, I just want the truth.'

'That you will never get.'

'So what's it to be?' I said at last. 'Stand you a meal?'

Georg blinked through the wire-rimmed glasses and then looked away.

‘Go somewhere over the weekend?’

He didn’t respond.

‘Call me if you change your mind’, I said, closing the door behind me sharply and taking the narrow stairs.

On the Sunday I went for a drive, stopping after a mile to check the brakes and steering. At four, with the chilly afternoon already turning dark, I found myself on the far side of the Chilterns, staring towards the grey smudge of the Cotswold Hills.

A few days later, my Thai waitress appeared with a bustling chaperone. Mae Ying, she told me, clutching hold of my arm and grinning rapturously through her butterfly frames. ‘Ah so handsome, your friend’, she declared to Sompong, who extended a tentative hand.

‘Two for the price of one. Aren’t I lucky?’ I said, and muttered something about a meal.

No doubt my response was paternalistic, perhaps even sexist, but the two women promptly took me off to Chinatown. Once the menu had been disposed of, the briefest formality in this well-practised routine, I wondered whether I shouldn't simply go home. Mae Ying wriggled excitedly on the chair opposite, energetically pushing her glasses back, taking hold of the conversation and pushing it into awkward cul-de-sacs. Sompong said nothing, and only when her friend went off to the toilet did I take her hand and start properly.

'I'm sorry you didn't like the food. We could have gone somewhere else. You only had to ask. Or I am compromising you? You have a boyfriend, a husband?'

'What you want?' she said softly, almost inaudibly.

'I'm a portrait painter and I need a model. That's all. Respectable, but not exciting.'

'How much you pay?'

‘Seven pounds an hour usually. With you I might go to eight, since you’re very attractive.’

Sompong half rose from the chair, and then snatched her bag as Mae Ying came forward with the coats. Only stopping to check their appearance in the vestibule mirror, the two strode out, leaving the doorbell to clang behind them.

‘No happy evening?’ said the owner as he brought the bill.

With the exasperation eventually came some common sense. I patched up things with Jerry, and left Roshan to close the gallery in the evenings. She was more than competent, and I knocked off now at six. Several long Saturdays went on getting my Co-operative studio sorted out, and I made a point of working on Sundays in my own studio, even without Sheila, whose heavy innuendos were becoming tiresome. Occasionally I thought of taking up the offers, but sanity intervened.

The weeks went past, until, one Wednesday morning, I answered the telephone and heard myself saying, 'Well, if you think we have something to discuss, yes, of course, Herr Stumpfl. You can't make the gallery?'

'Today in St. James's Park. Four o'clock. There is a restaurant near, though it is for tourists. On the bridge, if that is possible?'

Strangely, an hour later, before I had even spoken to Roshan, Georg called to invite me to lunch.

'Sorry, I have to be up in town this afternoon.'

'My friend, I will come with you to meet Matynia.'

Something went cold inside me, and I muffed my words.

'We have lunch?' he continued. 'At the Polish restaurant. You know?'

Georg was already there when I walked in at two. In pressed suit and tie he had an earnest, almost comical appearance, like those Eastern

Bloc trade delegations of years past. He looked pleased with himself, and then disconcerted, as he started bunching the red cabbage on his plate.

‘Suppose you do come,’ I said, ‘how’s Stumpf going to react?’

My friend’s gaze vanished into the thick glasses. ‘He will understand. I will be go-between.’

But Georg was nothing of the sort when, a few minutes to the hour, Stumpf appeared and walked towards us. The two men, both in overcoats and fur hats, shook hands. Russian pleasantries over, Stumpf then took my arm and left Georg to trail behind.

‘It is what you have requested, is it not?’ repeated Stumpf.

‘A long time ago, yes.’

‘You would like to see Natalie again?’

‘Possibly’, I said as the pain brought me up short. We walked on and I stopped to lean on the

lake railings. The grey water lapped against the bank, and a moorhen dabbled in the shadows. 'You're sure your wife will join us?'

'That is what I have said. So here are your tickets, hotel reservations, and a little money for two. It is normal for a business trip, no?' He smiled and added, 'We will meet more when you get back: that I know.'

CHAPTER TEN

Reception at the Kempinski Hotel was a formality. The registration slips were collected, and the keys given over to the porter.

‘Message’, I said to Georg. ‘Ask if there’s a message for us.’

‘Nothing at the present,’ replied the reception clerk, ‘but I will let you know the moment one arrives.’

The apartment door opened stiffly, and even Georg was stunned by the lounge, small study and two bedrooms. In the adjoining bathroom we stood mesmerized by our multiple reflections in the mir-

rors and gleaming tiles. 'Why we want this?' said Georg. 'It is stupid.'

'We're not paying for it', I said, nodding to the porter.

I rescued the second set of keys, and went through. There I unpacked, hung up my clothes and went back to find Georg had locked the connecting door.

'Expecting someone?' I said jauntily. 'Come on, there are plans to make. I'd like to see something of Moscow while we're here.'

The Kremlin tour was obligatory, and we went on to the Tretyakov, which Georg did not find to his liking. 'These pigs cannot even respect a home.'

It had been a gallery for decades, I reminded him as we toured the rooms of icons and then started on the late eighteenth and nineteenth century work. For all the skill, the same figures stared out from their gilt frames: brutal and self-satisfied.

We walked on to another set of rooms, when everything changed.

Painting goes beyond words. Georg came up, braced himself in front of 'Evening Bells', and stared rigidly at the canvas. For several minutes he didn't move, and was still in the room when I came back from seeing the Shishkins, Savrasovs, Kuindzhis, and the others I shall not bore you with. 'A Russian and a Jew, and he can paint like this!' said Georg.

It wasn't just wonderful, it was heart-rending. I am not demonstrative, and I am not a landscape painter, but the sight of so many canvases known to me only in reproduction brought me close to tears. I was maudlin and rambling with Georg for a whole hour as we sat afterwards in a nearby coffee shop.

'Young man, you do not know what you're saying.'

‘Of course I can see why you switched to landscapes.’

‘Nein!’ he shouted, banging his fist on the table. The coffee spilled, and I was surprised to find he had me by the lapels. ‘Now you hear me. You do not tell me lies!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ I said, freeing myself. ‘There is real depth to your etchings. Something extra.’

He looked at the table. ‘Maybe once. When I paint Renata, that I know.’

‘The etchings, the landscapes, Georg.’

‘You know why?’ he said. ‘Because I love her. Like you love this Stumpfl bitch. That is why I destroy her. Why I kill her like I hold pistol to her head.’

‘When you left Poland, you mean?’

‘Ach! Of course my wife was having affair. Always she have affairs. I know that, but I not like

people laughing at me. So what I do is tell them what they want to know. Though it is evil, ja, I know.'

'These things happen.'

That was it, the last stroke of obtuseness on my part. He swore heavily and with a pawing movement at the air slumped into the chair. 'Georg,' I said to him when he had recovered a little, 'I'm sorry. I really am sorry.'

I got the story in the end. He'd been a tear-away, but not wildly so, just a high-spirited, independent young man who had haunted what few bright spots there were in a Warsaw gradually being rebuilt to its pre-war outlines. I don't think Renata was any more impossible or impetuous: a good-looking woman who became more distant as Georg's infatuation grew. All she did was discover her freedom, the strange power she had over men: flirting with them, and then plunging recklessly into affairs with intellectuals whose publications began to litter the flat. She taunted him, made scenes in

front of his friends. Hesitating, drunk with grief, Georg one night slipped the incriminating lists into her bundle of samizdat literature and made the phone call.

Afterwards he couldn't believe what had happened. He hung on until the cold-shouldering became impossible, and then applied for a transfer. It was late 1967. The 'March' bout of intellectual and Jewish repression was far from over, but Georg was useful elsewhere. He was sent to a Czechoslovakia enjoying a new-found independence, and was penetrating student groups when his wife died in prison. Only then did the grief overwhelm him, and when tanks rolled in to crush the Prague Uprising, Georg joined the exodus.

It was four in the afternoon and almost dark when Georg finished his story. About following events I hardly needed to ask. With Renata he had stayed in love, and the poison of that failure destroyed his marriage to Marie, and much of his painting afterwards. Georg sat awkwardly hunched

up at the café table. Outside in the street Muscovites were starting their homeward trek, trudging back laden with shopping bags and plastic holdalls.

We went back to the Tretyakov gallery the following day, and to others on my list of sights, but the absence of Natalie grew ominous. Finally, stung by Georg's comments, I put a call through to Botes, when Stumpfl came on the line immediately.

'There is bad news for you, Mr Staunton. I am sorry to say that Natalie will not be able to join you. I shall be sending someone else shortly.'

'Your wife was one of the conditions.'

'His name is Konstantin Chernyshev. You will make the selections, and he will do the rest.'

'That's not what we agreed.'

'Natalie will be looking forward to seeing you when you return. Meanwhile you will find something to amuse yourselves with I am sure.'

‘We will’, I said to a less-than-surprised Georg. ‘Make fools of us, and they can pay for a little entertainment.’

It was more Natalie’s background I was wanting when we arrived at the Troika Nightclub around ten that evening. The lights probed the cavernous darkness, brightening the smoky atmosphere, the pulsating bodies and the tinselled glitter of the performers on their hatbox platforms. One of the girls slowly gyrated in front of us, her body gleaming through a costume transparent in the upward pointing lights.

‘Not too subtle, are they?’ I shouted to Georg as her finger came off the bikini brief and then touched a spangled nipple as she threw her head back and extended her arms into the shadowy darkness.

Georg was bewildered. Money came from toadying to authority, in Russia as anywhere else, but these were only small racketeers, minor officials on the take. The smouldering beauties on display, creatures more exotic than Georg had ever

seen, were simply there for the taking. Slip a note to the waiter and one of these iridescent creatures would come back with you, stay for weeks if you paid.

Desperately I wanted to commiserate, to tell Georg that I understood. He had watched and reported on me, come to Moscow because there was no alternative. The stories of Stumpfl's atrocities were fabrications, preposterous and obscene, but I'd not grasped their point.

'Let's have some company. I've had my life turned upside down, my family murdered, and God knows what else. Since Heinrich has given us a great deal of money, I intend to spend it.'

'You have been here before?' said the waiter.
'You have names?'

'You choose, explain what we want.'

Georg closed his mouth.

‘We’d like a little company for the evening’, I said. ‘Good-natured girls. One should speak some English.’

‘All our hostesses speak English. It is a rule of the house.’

‘Fine. Georg, you’re going to enjoy yourself.’

He sat rooted to his seat as the two girls, both in short skirts and lacquered hair, were presented and the champagne ordered.

They smiled archly, the lipsticks thinning over the polished skin. ‘You are here on business?’ said Tatiana, the tight dress pushing out the slim figure as she slowly turned round. She produced a cigarette, which the waiter fumbled to light.

‘You don’t smoke?’ I said to Elena, the other of our new companions.

‘It is a dirty habit. I think a man should be clean and strong and have good style. You agree?’

‘I’m sure you’re right, but would you do me a favour? Look after my friend. He’s old and awkward and has had a hard life. Will you do that for me?’

She looked contemptuously at Georg, who shrank into himself.

‘He’ll not give you any trouble, and he is not poor.’ I opened my wallet and handed him a pile of notes. ‘Spend it. Have a good time.’

Elena reached for the money. ‘You no worry. I will be babushka to him.’

‘As for us, we’re going out on the town. See you in the morning.’

In the hours that followed, as we went from club to club, Tatiana drunk and laughing and kicking her legs out of the taxi window, her body lolling open in the fur coat, I thought of the old man and hoped he was faring well. He would dance awkwardly at first, and then more gamely, with an old-fashioned turn of courtesy, and then perhaps, at some pleasant hour in the morning, tired and happy with Elena, go

home with his new companion, who would murmur sweetly to him and be everything the old man had ever dreamed of.

So I hoped, though all I sensed was the increasing stupidity of our antics. At each stop we made riotous exhibitions of ourselves. All the time, in brief moments of sanity, away from the winking rows of drinks, the lights and the returning tide of voices, when Tatiana would be pressed up against me in the taxi, and I'd be asking to go home, she would be saying, 'Later, darling. We have so much to try.'

Anyone with a grain of sense would end the chapter here, leaving to the imagination a drink-befuddled narrator being dragged up narrow stairs to a flat occupied by a grandiose bed, where, stripped and exhausted, he could stare up between the French draperies to see himself diminutively reflected in rust-speckled mirrors. An unedifying spectacle followed, though I have to say Tatiana, who was far less drunk than I had supposed, did her athletic best to give satisfaction. In the morning I

retained some memory of a splendid body in unusual poses, and soreness throughout my nether regions for which I was glad that I'd taken precautions. Tatiana herself, when she appeared from the small kitchen, was a slim woman of Asiatic appearance and pale topaz-coloured eyes. She studied me for a moment, sat down on the bed and leant her head against one of the ornate posts.

I was searching for the right words when a hand appeared. 'One hundred dollars you pay.'

'Pleased to.'

She swivelled round, annoyed that she hadn't demanded more.

'Two hundred would be fairer,' I continued, 'if you help me. I need information on a hostess who used to work at the Troika.'

She looked at me suspiciously, and then assumed an expression of indifference. 'Tatiana not know other girls.'

‘Voronov. Heard of her? Natalya Voronov.’

Hardly a muscle moved, but that slight tightening of the features said enough. ‘Before your time, I expect, but somebody will remember her.’

Tatiana got to her feet and started playing with the cord on her nightgown. ‘Is good, last night?’ she said, poking a small breast in my direction.

‘Certainly was. I have a commission, though, to make some drawings of her Moscow friends. That’s what her husband has sent me to do.’

To such a laughable idea Tatiana didn’t bother to reply. She wasn’t even persuaded after I’d sketched her likeness on the back of a cigarette packet. ‘Maybe you are artist,’ she conceded, ‘but you no have commission.’

‘That’s what her husband wants.’

‘You pay me two hundred and you go please.’

‘I could make it more.’

‘One thousand maybe you pay?’

‘Three hundred.’

‘Take long time to find out. You stay one week with Tatiana and she give you good time. You like that? One thousand cheap for you.’

‘I don’t carry that sort of money.’

‘You can get, I know.’ Coyly, she slipped off the nightgown and put her arms round my neck. ‘Money no important. You stay. Be nice to Tatiana.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Niet?’ Tatiana got to her feet and shouted something in Russian. Then a good deal more.

‘Happily, I don’t know Russian.’

‘But you understand me now, don’t you?’ said Tatiana, seating herself and suddenly speaking English with startlingly accuracy. ‘Now listen, my friend. I’m not helping you because Natalya Vo-

ronov is a bad person. She doesn't have friends, not here in Moscow.'

'I'm a friend.'

'Ah, my big foreign man, that's why you go with me.'

'Nothing's going to get back. I don't even know your real name.'

'They will find out.'

'So give me some other contact. Just a name.'

'The club where you ask for Akalina is not for foreigners.'

'Write the name, would you, so I can pretend a friendly taxi-driver gave it me.'

'You pay me five hundred now?'

'Two hundred. Plus another hundred when I come back to the Troika.'

‘Oh da, I trust you’, she said, taking the notes and counting them twice.

I won’t recount the troubles I had in shaking off Georg, or the nightmarish trip with its misunderstandings, changes of taxi, bribery and cajoling, or the painful conversation with the club manager who reluctantly had me escorted upstairs to a row of cubicles where the women came in with bedlinen for each change of customer. Even then, as my special request appeared at the doorway, I thought I’d been short-changed. A handsome woman said something in Russian.

‘I don’t know whether my needs have been explained, but I must talk to an Akalina.’

It was the jagged scar which ran across one cheek and cut deeply into the lip that I tried to ignore as the woman came up and said, ‘I am Akalina. What is it you want?’

‘Information.’

‘My services are not cheap. One hundred dollars they start.’

I handed over the notes, which the woman put away in a pocket of the tight costume. But she remained on her feet, a strong figure in fishnet tights, though it was the eyes that captured the attention. Astonishing eyes, giving the body a fierce confidence.

‘All I can offer is this’, I said quietly, taking two hundred from the wallet, ‘and that’s if we talk about Natalya Voronov.’

‘You pay five hundred for whole night outside?’

‘Just to talk.’

It was no use. Immediately on arriving at the hotel two young men emerged from the shadows, and I didn’t need the glint of steel to hand over the money and follow the woman to a large suite on the third floor. From a chipped cabinet she extracted a bottle and then sprawled on the bed. I

settled into an armchair but was dragged over. My tie was being removed when I stopped her.

‘Just to talk’, I said. ‘About Natalya Voronov.’

‘Why I know her?’

‘That’s what people say.’

‘Then you must ask properly.’

I went over to the bed and gently put an arm under the shoulders, lifting her closer until the face was only a few inches away, and I could see the makeup plugging the torn edge of the scar. ‘Is that enough? Can we talk?’ She shook herself free but the aggressive confidence had gone. Rummaging in the coat she found a packet of cigarettes, and then drew her legs up while she studied me more carefully.

‘Why we talk about Natalya Voronov?’ she said, blowing damp smoke in my face. ‘What she to you?’

‘A friend.’

‘Natalya no have friends.’

‘She has Kostek.’

‘How you know him?’

I explained as she stared at me. Occasionally she interrupted for details, mostly on Georg, but generally she sat intently concentrating, looking down at the bed on occasion. ‘So I need to know’, I concluded.

‘Then you very stupid man.’ She got to her feet and walked to the far side of the room, swinging round to say, ‘Unless you more than friend to Natalya?’

I ignored the question, and said, ‘You could get that fixed, with enough money.’

‘With what Kostek give you?’ She laughed savagely. ‘Ah da, but he will kill you.’

‘Just tell me about you and Natalya.’

I risked a lot on the last guess, but Akalina only looked sullen.

‘So you don’t want the bonus?’

Akalina’s look narrowed. She paused, and then came up and slowly removed her top and bra. From the second cup slipped out a mutilated stump, a horribly cut-up little pap of scarred tissue. ‘Now you know’, the eyes seemed to say, their pain filling the room as Natalie’s image turned harder and then into something else. At last Akalina said indifferently, ‘You want bed now?’

‘Just needed the information really.’

‘Then Akalina will sleep.’ She took off her skirt and quietly climbed into the sheets, burying her head in the pillow. A long while later, and more for want of anything else to do, I undressed to my underclothes and slipped in beside her, placing an arm round the sleeping body. Perhaps she understood the gesture, because she dragged me close

some time in the night and wouldn't be shifted until the pale light of morning flooded into the room.

We had breakfast downstairs, but didn't talk. Akalina made several phone calls, and around ten we took a taxi to the northern suburbs.

'Fourth floor', she said, pointing to a large apartment block. 'Flat 487. He will explain. You get out now.'

'I'd be happier if you came along', I said, reaching for Akalina's arm. The ice was slippery, however, and the car drove off in a sharp burst of smoke.

There was no lift, and my breath seemed denser as I climbed the cold staircase. The flat door opened on a first press of the bell, and an old man in frayed windcheater and jeans seized my hand. 'Evgeny Vasilev is pleased to welcome you to his small studio. Be so good as to come in.'

There was just the one room it seemed, with perhaps an attached kitchen, but on the walls were

pinned charcoal drawings, all variations on their author's angular cheekbones and wispy beard.

'What is your opinion, honoured sir?'

'A harsh view, but compellingly depicted, if that's a compliment.'

'This is Russia today. You will sit, please.'

'Perhaps everyone sees things in their own way', I said, folding myself into the one armchair.

'I cannot agree with you. Artists are the upholders of freedom. Theirs is a sacred duty to show reality so clearly that truth is inescapable. I can see that you have not read Vissarion Belinsky.'

'That's before our Marxist friends took over?'

'Belinsky, I do not hesitate to tell you, has been my guide and my defender.'

'Not much propaganda in your work, is there?'

'Realism in the official style? My dear sir, anyone can do that. Allow me.' He rummaged in the

table drawer and brought out paper and a short stick of charcoal. 'Here, you try. Whatever you like. Draw the proletariat toiling in the fields.'

'I need a model.'

'No, sir, you need a stencil. Here, let me show you.'

With a few blunt strokes he blocked out the main features. The woman was hoeing, and rested to smile at the observer. We are all familiar with these depictions, but this was better than most, and created in just a few minutes. I stared at the drawing, and then at its perpetrator.

'You look surprised. I told you: it is easy.'

'So why all the other drawings?'

'So they think Evgeny Vasilev is harmless. And we can talk, one painter to another.'

'It's Natalya Voronov I'd like to discuss.'

‘One of my former pupils. You do not have to explain. Please continue while I prepare a few refreshments. You are comfortable there?’

The old man fussed with tea as I outlined what Georg and I had seen in the days previously, though perhaps of little interest to an art restorer.

‘I am not an art restorer,’ said the old man with dignity, ‘though that was my official title. Many mere mechanicals have passed through my hands, but in all of them I have tried to inculcate a sense of the ennobling purposes of art.’

‘Have much luck with Natalya Voronov?’

‘What is it you wish to know?’

For the second time in twenty-four hours I recounted Georg’s stories and my own suspicions. The old man was looking at me kindly when I finished, and asked him.

‘About what, my dear sir?’

‘Could we stop this play-acting? Are these stories true or not?’

‘Would you like to see my studio?’

I had to follow him into the kitchen, where he unlocked what seemed a pantry door and we went through into a large studio heaped with canvases and painting apparatus. The cracked panes of glass looked over a featureless courtyard.

‘So who did these?’ I said, frowning at the work propped against the walls.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because they’re rather good. That in particular’, I said, pointing to Natalie’s portrait. ‘If that’s not first-class painting then I have wasted my life.’

Evgeny smiled. ‘Let us see what you think of a few more.’

So we talked. It was a lifetime’s work being shown me, and I was often at a loss to do justice to its quality.

‘But why give it up?’

‘I am one of the few of my class who are still alive. One or two may have survived the camps, but I cannot be sure.’

My thoughts went back to the books I’d read, and my own affairs seemed mundane.

‘I am an old man now,’ Evgeny was saying, ‘and though I should prefer to die peacefully, it is not important.’

‘Perhaps we should understand these things more in the west.’

‘Would you like to see my photographs? They may be interesting to you.’

He took an album from a bookshelf, and I slowly turned the pages. Student excursions, faculty meetings, and then several of Natalie, younger and innocent-looking. I asked about Akalina.

‘A later episode in Natalya’s life.’

Evgeny took the album back. 'Happier days, my dear sir.'

'Then why, for Heaven's sake, did Natalya get mixed up with her present company?'

'Natalya was ambitious. I may pride myself on speaking some English, but Natalya knew your English authors by heart at the age of sixteen. She was a great beauty. Why shouldn't she enjoy what she had read about in books?'

'At some cost.'

'I do not think we should judge Natalya Voronov too harshly. To aim high always involves dangers, in every walk of life, would you not agree?'

Perhaps he was right, this wizened old man who had been in love with his brilliant student. I thought of those late nineteenth century painters where the slightest failure brought an unimaginable destitution, from drink, syphilitic prostitutes or the empty promises of patrons.

‘My dear sir, let us return to what you have come for. Let us suppose there was someone or some company in Russia that wished to extend its operations to Europe.’

‘Does this entity have a name?’

‘Entity is a good word, a safe word. Let us call it that and ask whether a Pole calling himself a German, and apparently married to a Russian beauty would make a suitable president for such an international concern.’

‘He seems to think so.’

‘Perhaps the wife wants a younger and more attractive partner. Or she wants some business herself. What can the entity do but recruit someone to fulfil these requirements? Perhaps through an agent, who could be trusted, since the UK residence permit would be withdrawn immediately if certain unfortunate activities came to light.’

‘But Georg has been a true friend.’

‘Perhaps, in his clumsy way, he wished to prevent someone else being drawn into his own lamentable existence?’

‘Then Natalie would report back.’

‘But, my dear sir, she clearly hasn’t.’

I looked at him uncertainly as the pieces began to fall into place.

‘You do not need to be embarrassed. We are only dealing with possibilities. She cared for Akalina.’ He paused. ‘The attack is not to Natalya’s credit, but women, as you say, can fight like alley cats.’

‘You think the mutilation was Natalya’s doing?’

‘That I cannot say.’

‘You could make a guess.’

‘My surmise is that both would be capable of hurting each other. Probably very badly, given the depths of their feelings.’

Georg had not been wrong. Or the half admissions that Natalie had made in Frankfurt. I saw the scarred face and the mutilation, and again heard Natalie's voice teasing me at our dance together. Perhaps to escape the memories, I turned to Evgeny's paintings.

'Could I buy one of these?'

'You need to visit a certain workshop in Moscow, since you may see their productions in England. I hear your friend is buying them.'

'I'd pay whatever you think is reasonable.'

'My dear sir, I should be honoured. On condition that you visit the workshop.'

'Just the portrait, if you'd name a price.'

'My price is that you look after Natalya Voronov. That may not be easy. Life with Natalya will involve compromises with your safety or conscience. You understand me?'

‘Evgeny, that painting is something I should always treasure, whatever the outcome.’

‘Then let me give you the workshop address. You are sure?’

It seemed an odd agreement, and I was more perplexed the following day when, with Georg in tow, I was met by a tousle-haired young man who explained the enterprise. They were not pastiches of Cubist work, but contemporary demonstrations. If customers wanted an exact copy then one could be supplied, but generally they produced workmanlike examples from title and dimensions supplied. Many wanted these pieces. Proudly he showed me the order book, even pointing out Stumpf’s name and address, an unusual breach of confidence. Georg offered no explanation, and we afterwards found a small exhibition of etchings, which were more to his liking.

Konstantin Chernyshev turned up the following day, a small, nervous man in a brown suit, and the commission started. From house to gallery to dusty

warehouse we went on an extended inspection that kept us busy from eight in the morning till eleven at night. At the end of two weeks I'd seen more of nineteenth and early twentieth-century painting that I could ever have believed existed. Stumpfl's instructions were clear: twenty to thirty paintings only, and to be the best. Georg occasionally weighed in with some opinion, Konstantin handled the financial arrangements, and my task ended with the selection. 'Why is that,' I said to Georg, 'if not another little mystery?' But Georg wasn't forthcoming, and I was left increasingly to think of a disturbingly different Natalie I should now meet in England.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I got a call from Stumpfl within an hour of getting back, and arranged to drive over to Botes the following Sunday. The house already seemed another place. Natalie was evasive, taking her cue from Stumpfl, who seemed to be waiting his moment. After an awkward lunch, and with misgivings, I turned to the Moscow trip.

‘You see, I’d rather hoped to introduce the selections myself. Why I chose them, who the painters might be.’

‘That is conscientious, but I do not think it is necessary. We have every confidence in your abilities. Is that not so, my dear?’

‘You have been very professional’, said Natalie, getting up to sit next to me and take the coffee cup away. ‘Konstantin was delighted with the choices.’

‘So it’s just the other pieces.’

‘You will explain?’

‘The Cubist works that keep appearing.’

Stumpfl pounced. ‘First you investigate my wife’s affairs, and now the sources. With money that was not provided for the purpose.’

‘I’ve assigned those expenses to my account.’

‘That is not an answer.’

‘Would you mind if I discussed the matter with your wife?’

‘You will discuss it with me.’

I'd been tricked into going to Moscow, and now the man was tearing up the agreement. My voice was steady, but it came with a sharp edge. 'What did you expect? It's part of a gallery's job to check provenance.'

Now was the time for Natalie to come to my rescue, but there was only an aching silence. 'Natalie, you will explain to Mr Staunton, please.'

'Patrick, you are not being very helpful. You accepted the assignment and turned it into something else. That is not what we expected.'

The blood rushed to my head, and I wasn't for a moment aware of the pain, or perhaps that I was shouting.

'I think you had better go now. We will pay anything outstanding.'

To an extent that shocked me, words were still pouring out when Natalie looked to her husband, and the two sat waiting for me to make my exit. 'Very well', I said at last, taking my overnight bag

from Mrs Wylie, who had appeared at the door. 'I'll bid you both good afternoon.'

I was locking the car boot when Natalie reappeared. She came over for a handshake, the briefest of touches, before going back to join Mrs Wylie in the forecourt. The head turned and then hovered. For an instant I felt I'd seen that look before, in my nightmares at Ronda, but the image passed through me as I stepped on the accelerator and was shot into the afternoon sunshine.

Three hours later, and anything but calm, I dropped in on Georg, who looked at me warily. 'What is it you want, my young friend? Some advice? You stay away from Kostek Matynia.'

'Or they'll be more trouble?'

'Come back in a better mood.'

'I found the victim of one of your little tales. You hear me? And Matynia wasn't to blame.'

'So?' said Georg with a sneer.

‘Why wasn’t I told the truth?’

He turned round and blinked. ‘Two women they fight. What that matter? Go away. Forget this Stumpfl woman. She is not for you.’

‘Do I have to spell it out? One word to the authorities and you’ll find yourself back in Poland. The facts, if you please.’

He burst out laughing. Coming up so I could smell the stale alcohol in his breath, he said in a rasping voice, ‘Now you listen my little friend. You know nothing of these things. Nothing. You leave business to real men. That is what I say.’ He jerked his head back, and made an obscene gesture as he lumbered over to the far side of the room.

In a moment I had him by the shirt collar and drew him closer, saying grimly, staring into the eyes magnified by the thick glasses, ‘Not so fast. You’re not playing the double agent with me. You think I don’t know who organized the break-ins to Christine’s flat and mine? Or who arranged the

accident in Spain, just the day after we'd spoken on the phone?'

The yellow teeth splintered as he snarled. 'You know who is chief suspect with Spanish police? Oh ja, it was heart attack, but not natural. The only person who could put something in your father's drink is you. This they know, so you be careful. You be very careful.'

'That's nonsense.'

The news was disturbing, however, and though I shouted to Georg from the street afterwards, where the Mercedes had now picked up a parking ticket, I was in a savage mood as I drove over to my flat, cutting corners and crashing two red lights in succession. That evening, I put a call through to Ignacio, which he didn't take well, though a week later he came back to confirm that a heart attack was indeed on the record, which was all he could say.

Meanwhile there was Reg, who surveyed me with distant suspicion when I called at the Cope Street Gallery.

‘Not more on the Moscow trip, I hope? Only I got a call from Stumpf, who wasn’t too happy with you.’

‘I’ve come to ask if you would take some of my work again.’

‘How’s it going to help if you quit the job?’

‘Reg, I’m serious.’

‘Do you know how much effort went into setting up the Hampstead gallery? Even to get you interested.’

‘You only took my work because of Stumpf? Is that what you’re saying?’

‘Try somewhere else. Lots of places out there.’

I didn't wait for more, but would have simmered down if the latest deliveries at Hampstead had been less provocative.

'Ten of them?' I said to Roshan after she'd got the coffee and was looking at me anxiously.

'I've put them in your office.'

'You'd better come too. See what you think.'

'They do look similar', she admitted, propping them in turn on the desk.

'Clones.'

'But your Moscow selections will be coming soon.'

I went over to the window and looked out at the beginning of a garden we'd made. The crocuses were over, and the daffodils just coming into flower, but I gave her the news just the same. 'I'm resigning, as of now.'

'You can't.'

‘I’ll recommend you take over.’

‘Couldn’t you hang on for a while?’ There was a pause before Roshan added, ‘Even for me?’ She got up and stood biting her lip. ‘If I invite you out for a meal tonight, will you put off a decision till then?’

‘We’ve tried that.’

‘Patrick, I just need understanding from you.’

‘From the Stumpfls, I should think. Unless you’re thinking of joining me in penury.’

‘I shall tell Mrs Stumpfl that I’m keeping you under observation. Out of mischief.’

‘Frankly, I wish to God I’d never set eyes on that woman.’

‘Why don’t you cook at your place’, she said, returning from letting another customer in. ‘Tonight, couldn’t you?’

The rest of the day passed in some confusion. I remember signing the resignation letter that

Roshan typed, and taking it to the post. The paperwork had to be done, and we sold another painting, around four in the afternoon, as Roshan came through to tell me. It was with some effort that I'd prepared a good meal when my guest arrived a little after eight. She slipped off her coat to reveal a low-cut evening dress.

But there was Dutch courage even in this. The reluctance didn't result from abuse at her husband's hands, or from the other excuses she'd made. She didn't like men, I realized, and all that I could offer would be a dutiful performance. An hour of effort and awkwardness produced the same results as before, but, after consoling whiskies in the kitchen, and still harbouring dreams of Herculean labours rewarded by eventual bliss, I went back to bed, finding the object of these fantasies now asleep, her head buried in the wet pillow.

Yet nothing if not determined, Roshan moved in at the end of the following month, an operation organized with military efficiency and celebrated

with something suggesting eventual success. I went back to steady painting. Several times in the previous weeks, when I was reorganizing the Co-operative, which even Georg insisted I manage, there were opportunities made obvious by gauche offers of an outside coffee, but the plan was kept to, relentlessly, though I did sidetrack to tea once at the Meridian Hotel, receiving the same look of cool interest. 'Sompong. Why you not call me some-time?' She wrote the number on the receipt, but I only smiled and didn't follow it up.

One at a time, the future said, and as compensation I would often work late into the evening. The Stumpfls were quiet. No interruption came when Roshan and I set up a Sales Office at the Co-operative, and made parking arrangements at a nearby lot. Even Georg, who dropped in sometimes, earlier unpleasantness forgotten, was impressed by Roshan's determination. Without her prompting, I doubt if I'd have had the nerve to phone round so much, or to keep phoning until we got results. I was chary of contacting Pete Rivers,

but he invited me up to the office the next day, and we sat over sandwiches after a brief tour of the studio.

‘So that’s what we do. Not looking for a position, are you?’

‘Thought you might need some high-quality illustration, that sort of thing.’

‘We are going to bid for these’, he said, shrugging and pulling out some sheets from a drawer. ‘You’re welcome to try. We can’t pay you, but if it wins the bid, we’ll give a commission. Say five per cent.’

‘That would be fine.’

‘Only it’s not likely. Take a copy of the specs. Just branding, remember: nothing to do with art.’

I grinned. ‘Sorry about that evening.’

‘Don’t be. Veronica enjoyed herself. You have a way with words when you get going, and the truth doesn’t hurt occasionally.’ He smiled, and as I

reached the door said, 'By the way, if you're not doing anything Friday, perhaps you'd like to come to dinner? Nothing special. We don't entertain like Jerry, not with three little horrors. But you could bring—whatever that girl's name was.'

'I can't really.'

'Well, bring someone if you want to or don't. It'll only be a scratch meal.'

Roshan insisted we go, and indeed the evening was a quiet success. Veronica treated me as the proverbial bad penny, and I entertained the children with cartoons until it was bed-time. 'You've made a hit', she said afterwards. 'Wouldn't take this on professionally, I suppose?'

'Not with your lot.'

'Very wise. But stay in touch. Tell him to come again, Pete.'

I'd be pleased to, I told them, and indeed needed contacts. I even went to another of Jerry's

dinner parties, seeing Connolly again, who now treated me with impertinent aloofness. The mood had changed, however. The hopes of Moscow, when I should be with Natalya in her native haunts, belonged to an existence that seemed to be fading by the month. Evgeny's painting didn't arrive, and though I could have written, having noted the address as I note everything else, I preferred to ignore the matter.

Moreover, I now began to feel old, to dislike the bustle of office workers, or laughter of couples walking through parks in the evening. The young live in another world, and, though the art college still sent invitations, I went to these events less frequently, without contributing. My life studies and portraits, now selling from the reorganized Co-operative, went on as before, planned ever more meticulously.

Another weary combatant came to see me later that year: Jerry, who now wanted a private meeting.

‘Living with Sheila?’ I said cautiously. ‘Bit of a turn-up, isn’t it?’

‘You wouldn’t understand. Not with that Russian fancy piece of yours.’

‘That’s over.’

‘Really? So who are we doing for company now?’

I pointed to Roshan’s portrait that hung in the living room of the flat where we were now eating. ‘Just a business arrangement. Helps cover the rent.’

‘Sleeping with the enemy I’d call it. I guess she earns her salary.’

‘Two salaries, actually, though the Co-operative doesn’t pay much.’

‘After last week’s effort, I should hope not. Pretty cheap, wasn’t it? Sheila rolling about in paint with all those flashbulbs popping. Why didn’t you stop it?’

‘Jerry, I had no idea it was on.’

These were Roshan’s responsibilities, and I simply stuck to painting, which now seemed more routine than ever. After many trials and failures, my father’s portrait finally turned into some likeness of the Resistance hero, and then I finished several of Christine. The best I hung in the studio, packed several away, and sent the last to Christine’s family. An appreciative letter came back, but I didn’t take up the invitation. In fact I hardly went anywhere, and only belatedly wrote to Ignacio asking if my father’s ashes could be placed next to his wife. The money requested was sent, and I heard no more.

In October I got another invitation from the Rivers. ‘You must come,’ added Veronica over the phone, ‘or the children will be most disappointed. With Roshan, if you’re still seeing her.’

So began what became a regular event. Twice a month Pete and Veronica would come over to our place or we would go over to theirs, and what

started as a gesture of kindness—we never met in restaurants, or at places costing money—grew into friendship. The women got on well, and it was at Veronica’s suggestion that I came to exhibit at an art fair outside Oxford and earn myself a few commissions. Since fees were the smallest fraction of what I’d earned before, I insisted on clients coming to the London studio, which is where Ann Havering presented herself.

Anyone more the countrywoman would be hard to imagine, and I was probably insufferably condescending through the three sittings. I never wondered why she made the long journey down from Yorkshire, or whether it was Yorkshire at all. I registered a north-country directness and not a hint of feminine charm. Possibly I chatted more than usual, but I can’t now remember.

The money was useful, however, and on the strength of that commission we invited Pete and Veronica to a restaurant. ‘Have what you like,’ I said as they pored over the set menu, ‘it’s not likely

to be repeated for some time. Not unless my designs win the fabled five per cent.'

'We didn't present them. Not your field, is it?'

'I suppose that's honest.'

'But we do have an idea. Tell him, Veronica.'

'Pete thinks we should do a brochure for you. Like an exhibition catalogue, but focused on getting commissions. You give us the slides, and Pete will do the rest.'

'Not much in the kitty at present.'

'That's where the ten per cent comes in', said Pete. 'We'll handle production and marketing for a ten per cent commission.'

'Ten per cent is awfully low.'

'We've got spare capacity, and we're not going to flood the market. Say a two-thousand mailshot.'

'Then we'd better make a night of it.'

If I stress the happy times it's because life was generally difficult. A few of the commissions did win repeat orders, however, and for these I consented to visit the client. I even got one from Ann Haver-ing, which I filed until all chance of a teaching job fell through.

Since she was paying, I took the train up, and was driven across moors and through picturesque villages of small houses with slate roofs and the sour air of hardship in the autumn sunshine.

'We'll put you in one of the cottages', said Ann an hour or so later as we forded a stream and approached a large cluster of buildings. 'Come up to the house when you're ready. Say about seven.'

'Righty oh.'

'And one thing. Dad's name is Patrick, like yours, but please call him Mr Havering. He prefers that.'

I made some equally flippant reply, which I regretted when the house came into view. 'Eight-

eenth century, is it?' I said to Ann, who met me at the entrance.

'This side is. The rest goes back earlier. Come through.'

Then appeared the second of my surprises. I looked for the squire in riding clothes but found an elderly man in farm overalls and boots. Even in the house he wore a battered cloth-cap, and looked me up and down like a doubtful auction purchase.

'Know the country life, do you?' he said.

'A bit.'

'Something I suppose.' With that he went back to the television, leaving Patrick's charm to fade into the dark room.

'Have I done something wrong?' I asked Ann as she poured drinks in another room.

'Take him his sherry. Just put it down on the side table. He won't say anything.'

‘So where’s the studio going to be?’

‘What about this?’ she said, taking me through to a small room. ‘It’s about the lightest.’

‘The north side would be better.’

‘We’ll clear one of the sculleries. Now you’d better roll up those shirtsleeves and start peeling a few potatoes.’

The first dinner can often be difficult, with neither side knowing what to say, but my host made no effort at all. ‘Beginning to think I’m in “Wuthering Heights”’, I remarked to Ann when we later washed up. She took it as a compliment, however, and afterwards we played Canasta until a little after ten, when I picked my way back across the farmyard to the cottage, my hosts not providing a torch.

‘If he can be got to pose’, I said to Ann the following morning. ‘Doesn’t seem overexcited at the notion.’

‘He’ll look at the portfolio when he gets back from town.’

‘We agreed a double portrait in the local setting.’

‘Which you haven’t even looked at.’

‘All greens and browns, but we’ll do something.’ I had tried to introduce warmer and more flattering colours in my earlier portrait of Ann, but had in the end opted for tweeds and leather. For the effort it cost me to hire the clothes, and get Sheila to model them, the two hundred pounds left little over. No, I wasn’t in a good mood as I hauled my box-easel out and sketched the front elevation of the house.

‘You don’t like us much, do you?’ said Ann when she returned from chores about the farm.

‘Just concentrating on the job.’

‘To be got over as quickly as possible.’

‘Ann, what do you want? It’s not a huge sum you’re paying, in fact the tiniest fraction of what I used to charge, but you’re not going to get value if

you go on like this. Please get your father to decide the pose he wants, and into the studio this afternoon so I have three hours for a preliminary study. Is that agreed?’

I’d spoken with some annoyance, but Ann only said, ‘Then we must see what we can do.’

In fact the portrait started well and continued so. Since there was no hope of producing what London sitters expect, I depicted each fold in that blotched and weather-beaten face with pitiless clarity. Ann’s portrait I completed with the same attention to detail, and finished off the background with a view of the house. It deserved the money, I told myself, though there wouldn’t be another, a thought that came with disappointment, as though the comfortless house had begun to make claims on me.

‘He’s happy with it?’ I enquired as the notes were counted over.

‘We wouldn’t pay otherwise.’

‘Fair enough’, I said, beginning to wind up matters with an appreciation for the hospitality.

‘Do you have to go back straight away? There’s someone else you could paint.’

‘Supposing they’ll sit properly.’

‘Ted will do anything I say. Of course he will.’ She laughed boisterously. ‘Didn’t you think I had a man friend?’

The possibility had never occurred to me, but she had, and I was pleased, though it was with mixed feelings on the way back to the station that I agreed to return in a couple of weeks, on the same terms as before.

Over the next few months I was often at the house, perhaps more as a friend than a painter. To an extent unusual for me, we talked and laughed, becoming an item of gossip in the neighbourhood by attending fetes and local events. Perhaps the house grew lighter and more welcoming as some of my suggestions were adopted. We even went to

a local ball, where I played the courteous stranger by asking the heavier girls to dance. One weekend, Roshan came too, though the women didn't hit it off.

'You going to marry Miss Bossy-boots?' said Ann the next time.

'You're sounding like my father.'

'Probably wants you settled.'

'He did.'

'You should have said.'

Against inclinations, I explained, just the outline to begin with, and then the details as she asked.

'You're going to have to sort it out with this Russian woman. Why don't you contact her again?'

'She doesn't want the past dragged up. Like your father.'

'What are you talking about?'

‘There’s not a single photograph of your mother about the place. Go off with someone else?’

‘She died of cancer. Father nursed her here, month after month, even when she was whelping like a dog with pain. I was away at school, and wasn’t affected much, but he changed. He wasn’t like this before.’

‘Very sorry. I didn’t know.’

‘Too much wrapped up in this Russian woman. You’ve got to do something.’

‘Who was saying I should settle down and get married?’

‘You could still continue the affair. Not everyone wants the standard package.’

‘Oh come on,’ I said crossly, ‘would you be so accepting? If you were married to me, would you be happy if I continued seeing Natalie Stumpfl?’

‘I’d accept it.’

‘No, you would not. Of course you wouldn’t.’

‘Patrick, I’d be very happy to be married to you. If that comes as a surprise you’ve not been too observant.’

I looked at the woman, who was adjusting one of the feed belts. If I’d thought she was joking, the steady look said otherwise.

I bent down and kissed her quickly. ‘Smashing idea, but not sure I’d measure up. Besides, the Stauntons are not the landowning class.’

‘Nothing very grand about us. But you can make excuses if the idea doesn’t appeal.’

‘You’ve no idea what you’d be taking on.’

‘You’d keep your flat in London, and what you got up to there would be your own business. Only here you’d behave yourself. Appearances count.’

‘For some freedom on your side?’

‘Complete freedom, though it’s probably going to be Ted. Could you cope with that?’

‘If your father does. What does he say?’

‘Thinks you’ll shape up, and be a change from the inbred Yorkshire blood. Patrick, I could have had any number of large farm-owners, but I wanted someone different. Someone who’ll let me run things my own way.’

‘No one could stop you doing that.’

‘So if you want to, you can order a lavish dinner at Frye’s in town, take me on to some idyllic spot and propose under the moonlight. Then ask my father. In fact you’d better do that first.’

‘Not for the moment.’

‘People like you. You don’t make much effort, but they’re not fools. In fact they’re going to lose money if you don’t say yes. Eleven to eight at The Bull now.’

‘Serve them right.’

‘You could have your own studio here, and we’d get you commissions. Hardly anyone around here we don’t know.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘Then you can invite me to Frye’s.’

‘Well, I don’t know we’d get a table tonight, not at this short notice.’

‘I said nine. So you can kiss me properly, and after dinner we can go back to the cottage, since we’re engaged, or almost so. All right, Patrick? You’re not going to cry off?’

But Patrick did cry off, and it wasn’t Roshan coming between us as I kissed Ann goodnight at her door and went back to the cottage on my own. In London the following day I phoned everywhere—Botes, Cope Street Gallery, even Julia in America—in a casual manner that could have fooled no one. Nothing came of it. My life with Roshan soldiered on, and Natalie did not reply to the longing sent halfway across the world.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Co-operative featured in trade articles, and its two shows proved a modest success, Georg selling a dozen pieces. In November he found a long-lost sister and announced a Christmas visit to Poland. A first trip back for thirty years deserved a special send-off, and we added Jerry, Pete and Veronica to his Art Centre colleagues for the celebration. Thanks to Roshan's organization and Veronica's high spirits, plus my determined playing of the genial host, plying more drinks than we could really afford, the party teetered into success. The women laughed, Jerry reverted to his engaging

self, and Georg came out of his shell to recount episodes of student life.

I walked him home, though we had offered to put him up for the night.

‘Because, my friend,’ he said, ‘I have something to give you. It is not for Christmas.’

It was a present to himself, or so it seemed: a coffee-table book on Russian painting. Since Georg rarely bought anything, I was puzzled at the sudden outlay, but agreed the illustrations were a vast improvement on his old Soviet editions.

Still flushed with drink, Georg said, ‘It is for when I go. Then it will be yours.’

‘You are coming back, aren’t you?’

‘I will go sometime. You see? I write inside.’

He had, and I was moved. ‘Whatever I may understand about painting,’ I said, patting him on the shoulder, ‘has been through you.’

‘Listen, I tell you.’ He motioned me to pour us something as he levered himself into an armchair, and then downed the glass in one, wiping his mouth as I poured another. ‘Now you are a better painter than me. Not before, but now, after this Stumpfl woman.’

I made some self-deprecating remark, but I couldn’t see how to escape without hurting the old man’s feelings.

‘Why I tell you this?’ he said gruffly. ‘It is because you start your journey soon.’

Perhaps this was becoming another lecture, but Georg’s performance suddenly took a sharp turn. He leaned forward, and the bloodshot eyes floated into the thick glasses. ‘A dangerous journey, my friend, though you do not know it.’

‘How?’ I said, suddenly disconcerted. ‘What are you saying?’

‘You trust no one, you understand?’ He wasn’t looking at me, but I have to say the atmosphere

was now extremely unpleasant. Melodramatic, but images returned of Akalina in Moscow, and of Stumpfl in certain moods. Even of Natalie at our last meeting. Puzzled and unhappy, I got to my feet. 'Better be going. I wish you a happy stay in Poland. We'll have a good chat when you get back.'

'Ja, this time I come back. But when I do not, you take the book. You promise?'

'Certainly, but let's hope that day is far off.'

'You stay an artist and the lies they not hurt you.'

He was probably still babbling when I gained the street. My earlier good humour had gone, and I walked back self-absorbed, saying nothing to Roshan when I did the last of the washing-up.

Georg returned just the same in February, wearing a new shirt and jacket when I met him at the airport. He looked relaxed, and our little talk was not mentioned, though the Christmas party had brought some returns. We started regular visits to

the Howards, who had got back together again, though Roshan didn't fit into Jerry's circle any more than Christine had.

In April came a house-warming invitation from Ecclestone. Sibyl had added her pleas to the card, and Henley was surely attractive in the spring, with its riverside hotels and neat provincial gardens. Perhaps I was in favour again, though I still hesitated. Twice in Ecclestone's road I reversed, and finally parked near the gate to allow myself a clear exit. There I sat, and wasn't immediately aware of the door being opened and a figure climbing in.

'Just drive', said Natalie with hair that seemed blonder, though the profile I knew with my eyes closed.

'Where to? Still a bit chilly by the Thames.'

'Botes.'

'Come on.'

‘Patrick,’ she said after I’d reluctantly started off, ‘you are not driving properly. Pull in here, and I will take the wheel.’

It was true, and after some argument I moved over. ‘Now,’ she said as we pulled away, ‘I am going to talk, and you will listen.’

‘You can start with Akalina.’

‘That is being absurd. Akalina got mixed up in gang warfare. It was nothing to do with us. You know what Russia is like.’

‘Or the accident in Spain?’

‘Will you listen to me? I am not a good person. I have never pretended to be a saint, but I am not inexpressibly evil.’

‘So you say.’

‘Patrick, please understand. I am taking you to Botes so I can explain. Surely your feelings will tell you that?’

‘I’m not answerable to feelings at present.’

‘Do you think I would do anything to hurt you? Look at me: do you think I’m lying to you now?’

Of course I didn’t. If lawyers need an intuitive sense of the truth, painters develop that skill even more. Natalie didn’t continue the conversation, but concentrated on the driving. Two hours later we were climbing the stairs that led to the Stumpfls’ section of the house, where Natalie unlocked the heavy pine doors.

‘In here’, she said, unlocking another door to reveal a small apartment. Expensive, and to a woman’s taste, was my impression, though hardly to be trusted in my current agitation. ‘My little treasure trove’, said Natalie, smiling as I recognized some of the paintings. ‘Men never come here, not even Heinrich.’

She slipped off her jacket and then led me by the hand into the adjoining bedroom. Carefully, never letting her eyes off me, Natalie smoothed out

the bedlinen, sat down and then began unfastening her necklace. She toyed with the blouse, but was then seized and almost pulled out of her clothes, my impatience tearing off a button. Annoyed and with her hair sticking out like a half-plucked chicken, Natalie pushed me away, but was again grasped. No diver with the bends could have suffered worse torments, but still I exerted myself, again and again, until Natalie shoved me on to the floor, where I lay exhausted before hauling myself up. Natalie was stretched out, and for a sickening moment I thought I'd hurt her. But she rolled over as I climbed back to bed, and kissed me impulsively in the mouth and eyes, repeatedly, until I fell asleep.

'It is all right', she said smiling, when I woke and glanced at my watch. 'I gave our apologies to Reg, but you should talk to Roshan. We can go back tonight if you want.'

I went off to make the call. There was a pause after I'd given the excuse, but then the voice simply said, 'I will see you when you get back.'

‘Sure, and I’ll explain’, but Roshan had hung up.

‘That was not too difficult, was it?’ said Natalie on my return.

‘Don’t be so heartless.’

‘She gets paid for it. Oh, just look at you. Do you think I was not going to keep an eye on you?’

‘That goes for the gallery as well, does it?’

‘Patrick, what is it that you want?’

‘You’, I said as the anger fell away. ‘You, without all the trouble.’

She had now put on a flowered negligee that only emboldened my thoughts. ‘You still think I will never leave Heinrich?’

‘I can’t think at all at present.’

‘At the right time I will.’ The voice was strained. ‘Patrick, you are supposed to ask me.’

I felt my eyes darken.

‘Listen, what else would you have done? Settled into harmless domesticity with Christine?’

Of course there were times when I’d felt bound to Natalie, but this was sharper, and more pungent. ‘So why continually warn me off?’

‘Because you will not come across.’

‘I might.’ I was lost in the smell from the sheets, and my hands ached with the impression of her breasts.

‘Patrick, think what we could do if we got together. Anything we wanted.’

‘What about the others?’ I said to the voices that tore at my ears, ‘Julia, your MP, God knows how many.’

‘David is just useful for the moment. No, it is you. You have to commit yourself.’

Not in my right mind, and having slept hardly at all, I got up early the following morning to take a turn in the grounds. The garden was unchanged.

The terrace had been repaired in places, but the redesign had not advanced beyond the long lawn and sloping flower beds. I struck out across the steep slopes and sat on a knoll overlooking the house and the rolling Northamptonshire countryside. The sunrise flooded the fields, the shadows shortened from hedgerow to hedgerow, and there slowly appeared the scattered farmhouses and buildings.

I walked on further, up to the high ground that gave a view of the house, which was now shadowed by approaching rain. Leaning on a tree, almost beside myself with deepening happiness, I brooded vaguely on what I still didn't know of Natalie, despite the intimacy and my portrait studies.

But where was my work? It didn't seem to be in the house now, though I noticed my studio had been kept on. Back at the house, I tried the room door, but found it locked. Perhaps I should have woken Natalie, or waited till the afternoon, when an ocean of pain could have been avoided, but pa-

tience and common sense were not with me as I shinned up the drainpipe and pushed open the sash window.

A portrait of mine was on the easel, and there were other paintings stacked by a wall. They were good, astonishingly good. I propped one on the table and looked at it from a distance, feeling elation and then a growing wonder. Yes, the real thing, I said thankfully, propping another on the table, where a Cubist work was being restored. It was only when I collected a third that my glance understood what it was seeing, and the pain started. Much of the covering paint had still to be removed, but I could see under the Cubist daubs an exquisite landscape, one I had selected in Moscow. There were two other such paintings, both undergoing cleaning, and a small stack of untouched canvasses.

Who had painted over the originals, my tousel-headed friend or Natalie? It didn't matter. Natalie's hand was in the restoration work, conducted pro-

fessionally as I could see from the array of tools and little bottles. Smuggled out of Russia and bought again in London, the paintings were as neat a piece of money laundering as you could wish.

Technically I was party to the deception, and could hear how it would go. You, the lover of the accused, a consummate craftsman and the one who made the buying trip to Moscow, tells this court that you had no idea of the plan, not the slightest inkling that anything was amiss. Let me take you through the improbabilities of your statement. More than that, I realized, now angrily brushing my trousers from clambering down again, I had been made a fool of. The clues were not so much thick on the ground as deliberately strewn in my path, from the very first lie about Natalie's hair appointment.

I went back to the bedroom. Natalie was asleep. She had shifted to my side, and lay with the bedclothes exposing the soft abdomen and a breast, which lay there vulnerable and adorable. What

could I do? Wouldn't there be time later to find the truth, when we were sitting at lunch, recollected and sober? Natalie smiled and sleepily extended an arm, and I undressed and slipped quietly into bed. She pressed up against me, gently at first, but then luxuriously, with an insistent bluntness. Far more than Natalie, I was surprised at my tears, at the torrent of grief and longing that I poured into that body, which absorbed them, drew them on into its depths and wasn't assuaged with anything less than the complete saturation of its needs.

It had begun to rain. The drops splattered on the pane and ran in thick ribbons down the glass, repeating my own longings that had thrown Natalie into a dozen paroxysms of pleasure but were now ebbing away into heavy contentment. Natalie was too exhausted even to thread my fingers into the last strokes of pleasure, but lay sprawled across the bed, one hand near the pillow with its palm open. For a long time, an eternity during which the rain beat ferociously on the window and the darkness in the room seemed apocalyptic, almost a

judgment of God, we both lay between the present and what the future hazarded. When the storm finally died away and grey light filtered into the room, a different Natalie appeared with tea and buttered toast, not a fallen angel, but a purposeful young woman.

Perhaps she didn't hear me at first, as I was not so much speaking as letting the words drift out, or she may have made some response I didn't catch, but my first awareness was only of the familiar, 'What is it you want?'

I didn't want the truth, but I must have said something, as the voice was still matter of fact. 'Will you just let be, Patrick? It is being done for you.'

'How's that?'

'How do you expect me to find the money? Go on the game or something?'

'You're not far off it with David.'

Of course I was angry, and when she didn't reply, and I lifted my head from the pillow, I saw Natalie standing over me as a pillar of incandescent fury. Perhaps it was the uncertain light in the room, or the fierce concentration, but Natalya Voronov appeared a jinn, a demonic figure that would at any moment tear me from limb to limb. The eyes blazed and that sharp, wolfish look I had only occasionally seen tightened the face into concentrated venom. I sat up quickly, and was relieved, heartily relieved, to find the usual smile had returned. 'You do not understand', she was saying. 'We just need him.'

'You may.'

'Shall I make dinner before we go? I have to catch an eleven o'clock plane tonight.'

'What about an answer?' I said again as we sat in the small dining room. Did she have a hand in the deaths in Spain? She wouldn't say. Did she order the mutilation of her rival in Moscow? Surely none of these things were important, only what my

goals were now, my willingness to commit myself. I could go on painting, even painting her if I wanted, though the money would buy a dozen more accommodating models. Stumpfl didn't need her, and I could take his place. In fact I had already done so, being complicit in the money laundering.

'Don't you threaten me!' I shouted.

'Darling, what can you expect?' I stared at her and was about to attack again, when she laughed and continued, 'Patrick, please forget it. There is nothing to worry about.'

But there was suspicion in the cool look I got after that, and she was unusually quiet as we loaded plates into the dishwasher for Mrs Wylie to find in the morning. By eight we were dressed. I took the wheel and we left Botes through the flooded forecourt and headed up the winding estate road.

Once on the M40 it is not a long drive to Heathrow, and I kept to a modest speed, turning over the questions that still hung between us. Occasionally I

glanced at Natalie as traffic passed, but the profile gave nothing away. We had reached the last road before the motorway, and a half-hour was all I had. At first I took it quietly

‘So what’s agreed,’ I said, ‘supposing I do join you? About seeing each other.’

‘Later. Everything is possible at the correct time.’

‘Only this morning you were saying that you would leave Heinrich. No more subterfuges.’

‘Please watch the road.’

‘I’ve never said this before, but life isn’t much without you.’

Natalie was now pointing, and I admit we were going fast. The car was mine, however, and I could get better terms than this. I put my foot down.

‘Stop it!’ she shouted.

‘Now I want some answers. What have you got planned?’

‘Nothing, I promise. Patrick, slow down!’

‘That’s no answer.’ I gave the accelerator an extra prod. The car lurched forward as a dark expanse of road opened round another bend. Only it was not road, but a stretch of water, several stretches of water, which glinted in the lights of approaching traffic. Quickly I decelerated and applied the brakes, cautiously at first. ‘Patrick!’ shrieked Natalie. I pushed her away, but now the car was beginning to aquaplane along the road. Natalie had probably put her head down, but I concentrated on correcting the skid, sensing the tires grip and then slip again. Perhaps the steering was coming good when I wrenched the wheel round and pulled hard on the handbrake. We’d roll, I thought, but the car righted, and juddered awkwardly to a halt. I could see the approaching traffic, coming at us fast. Natalie stared, and was suddenly out of the car. I saw her figure explode into

the headlights, and was about to open the door when the car was knocked sideways. A moment later came a splintering jolt, and then only weightlessness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the emptiness that followed, when I was barely conscious of the food trolley or the nurses and the endless medication, of visitors turning up, of the doctors and specialists stopping and disappearing, there was one image I could never reach. Even the police who appeared occasionally at the bedside seemed not to understand.

‘In your own words, sir.’

‘What’s happened to Natalie Stumpfl, the woman I was with?’

‘The speed, sir. What speed were you doing when you hit the water?’

To my few words I added always that it had been an accident. As were the other deaths, which were on the record anyway, so why keep pestering me for details?

‘Procedures, I expect,’ said Ann, who appeared out of the haze one afternoon, ‘but you’ll make a full recovery.’

‘Please stop it.’

‘You’ll soon be out of here.’

‘Ann!’

‘They’re pressing charges. Attempted murder.’

I went cold.

‘Natalie Stumpfl has accused you of trying to murder her. Or the two of you together in a suicide pact she was not party to. I think that’s how the lawyers put it.’

‘Can’t be. Just driving a bit fast.’

‘Why you haven’t seen anyone. They’re going to be witnesses.’

‘Who are?’

‘Reg Ecclestone, Roshan, Stumpfl’s people.’

‘That’s absurd.’

‘Why Roshan’s left the flat. That’s the solicitor’s bill for furniture storage.’

I studied the letter as she continued, ‘What you need is a decent defence team. We’ve asked Tony Hislop, as a favour to us, but you can make up your mind when you see him.’

Sir Anthony Hislop didn’t appear for several months, until well after the initial hearing, when I was brought into court in a wheelchair and released into the Havering’s care. One morning a large man in his early sixties turned up at the farm, and I knew from the starched exactness of the voice that my future was again in trouble.

‘If you’ve got all that’, I concluded, after he’d listened to the story I’d insisted on giving in full.

No notes were taken, and I didn’t like the bluff features, or the faded eyes under the dry tufts of eyebrows.

‘That will be all for the moment. Good morning, Mr Staunton.’ He gave me a brief nod and was out of the room.

‘Oh, he will’, said Ann afterwards. ‘He knows his job.’

‘That serious, is it?’

‘We have to find evidence to cast doubt on the truthfulness of Natalie’s Stumpfl’s account. Either discrepancies in her story, or reasons to doubt her motives.’

‘Only Sir Anthony won’t want the affair brought up.’

‘We have to stick to the evidence.’

‘Like the papers, you mean? “Society painter and the millionairess beauty.”’

‘Why don’t I go over to Russia? I’ve got the contacts from your notes.’

‘You’d not get anywhere, and it’s not safe.’

Ann was away three weeks. Surprisingly, she did find Evgeny, though he wasn’t helpful. Akalina had vanished. Our tousle-haired friend was turning out new forgeries, and couldn’t remember a Stumpfl or any visit from Georg or myself.

‘So what did you expect?’ I said to her angrily, if only to hide my disappointment. ‘You shouldn’t have gone.’

‘We have to do something. You’ve got three character witnesses, a petrol receipt to show you drove to Henley on the Saturday, and nothing else.’

‘There’s the crash. I brought the car under control, didn’t I?’

‘In the middle of the road, facing the wrong way.’

‘Purposely to get us killed?’

‘You opened the door on your side. That’s how you got knocked into the path of the lorry.’

‘Not such a skilful driver after all. They can’t have it both ways.’

‘Patrick, the police evidence isn’t going to help.’

Nor did a visit from Sheila, who arrived unannounced one hot July afternoon. Ann brought her over, giving me a curious look as the woman wriggled off her jacket to reveal a tight blouse.

‘You still at it, loverboy?’ she said pointedly, waiting till Ann left the room to peer at the canvases that were stacked up in the cottage I’d converted into a studio. ‘With her, too?’

‘What’s this for?’

‘Because you’re going to need me.’ She pulled out several of the paintings and said, ‘Suppose I could give you some real evidence. Wouldn’t that be handy?’

‘Just be careful with those. They’re not dry.’

‘Suppose someone tailed you into a hotel with your Russian bit. And then asked questions of the staff.’

‘Sheila, it’s got to be a misunderstanding.’

‘Aren’t you going to ask who?’

‘Unless you hired a private detective, which you couldn’t afford, it would have to be Roshan.’

‘No, loverboy. Stewart’s not only a bouncer. He’s got hidden talents.’

‘Gone back to him, I see.’

‘What do you expect?’

‘Look, I know it’s well meant, but my counsel would probably have kittens at the thought. Let’s go over and see if my hosts will invite you to dinner.’

‘So we’ve phoned him. Told him he’d better come clean at the trial.’

‘You’ve threatened a minister?’

‘Says he wants to talk to you.’

‘I bet he does.’

The call came a month later, when I’d almost dismissed Sheila’s story. We arranged to meet on neutral ground, at a craft show outside Chesterfield, which Ann drove me to with great reluctance.

‘Your counsel know?’ asked David once we were seated on our own in the refreshment tent.

‘Not yet.’

‘I should leave it like that, if I were you.’

‘You’re not going to testify to your affair with the blameless Mrs Stumpfl?’

‘I’m warning you, Staunton: I’m not going to be blackmailed. One remark out of turn and I’ll see you get sent down for life. Just take the medicine. Co-operate, and maybe the Cope Street Gallery will continue to sell your work.’

‘On your sacred word?’

‘Staunton, I’m not going out on a limb for you.’

‘That’s clear enough. I’ll see you at the trial.’

‘Not a good meeting?’ said Ann when I joined her in the car. She looked anxious as she started the engine.

‘Just a warning.’

‘You will take it seriously?’

‘Do you think we could call in on the Stacey’s, see if they’re going to commission something?’

I kept busy in the months following, building a portfolio of portrait drawings and paintings, and often driving myself as the stiffness wore off. One

old buffer asked if I planned to finish the commissions from inside, but the impending trouble seemed not to affect orders. We went to the usual events, and it was the girls who came across to ask the limping stranger to dance.

Unhelpful meetings with Sir Anthony continued, although I asked Pete Rivers to obtain a second opinion, and then travelled down to London to spend a frustrating couple of hours at the Inner Temple. The new counsel did not inspire confidence.

‘We could take the case for you, of course, Mr. Staunton, but you’d have stop employing Sir Anthony.’

‘I just want to know if he’s doing the right things.’

‘He has an excellent reputation.’

‘But can’t he get more evidence, start a proper investigation?’

‘Well, as I say, you would have to settle his fees first, and then we’d look at it.’

‘And how long could that take?’

‘Some months, I expect.’

‘With no guarantee that you’d do any better?’

‘Mr. Staunton, a change of representation is not to be taken lightly. Even this meeting, let me see, has cost, yes, about four hundred pounds. I suggest you think about it, and let us know.’

‘Well,’ said Pete, as he saw me off at the station, ‘I did say they’d be expensive.’

‘And pretty useless. But thanks for trying.’

The visit was explained to Ann as problems with the Co-operative, and, some eighteen months after the accident, I walked stiffly past the crush of photographers into the Oxford Assizes. The Stumpfls made their entrance shortly afterwards: Heinrich in a dark business suit, and Natalie quietly dressed in a pale primrose outfit with matching gold earrings.

The court rose for his Lordship, and settled down to preliminaries.

The prosecution outlined its case: the Stumpfls' unfailing kindness to the accused, his unreturned feelings for Mrs Stumpfl, whose scrupulously correct behaviour he had basely misinterpreted. There had been a quarrel in the car. The accused had urged an affair on Mrs Stumpfl, which she had vigorously declined. The accused had become threatening, and finding Mrs Stumpfl unyielding, had wilfully tried to kill them both. By an irony of fate, only the accused had been injured, but Mrs Stumpfl feared for her life and had felt obliged to protect herself by reporting the matter. Except the crash itself, the evidence was circumstantial, but the prosecution would show how the Stumpfls had been abused, and would demonstrate the dangerously unstable nature of the accused.

In contrast, I have to say that my defence was woefully inept. The accused's affections for Mrs Stumpfl were not denied, but she had unwittingly

done much to cause these misunderstandings. There was not a scintilla of proof the crash was anything but an accident, though it was only natural for Mrs Stumpfl, badly shaken by the incident, to suppose otherwise. Or that she should wish to protect her reputation from unwarranted imputations by distancing herself from the accused. At this point, Sir Anthony looked steadily at the press, and wound up matters by saying that witnesses would be brought to show Patrick Hugh Staunton's fundamentally good character. The court rose, and the first day was over.

I saw Ann to the station, where she took the train to her aunt's flat in London. Afterwards I walked back to the small hotel given me for the trial, and waited for Sir Anthony, who insisted on our retiring to my room.

'As much for your benefit as the jury's, Mr Staunton. I'm sure I don't have to emphasize the need to keep within what can be proved.'

‘No accusations about Natalie Stumpfl’s affairs, or picture dealing, or money laundering?’

‘Not if you want to be acquitted.’

‘Right.’

‘Mr Staunton, I’m giving you the benefit of thirty years at the bar. Ultimately it depends on whom the jury believes, you or Mrs Stumpfl. I can suggest that their witnesses may not be disinterested, or would perhaps not wish to contradict the Stumpfls who have been kind to them, but I cannot win the jury over if you attack Mrs Stumpfl. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Abundantly.’

‘So we can we leave it at that? There are many things for tomorrow I should prefer to be doing.’

‘You want me to say that I have never had an affair with Natalie Stumpfl? Under oath?’

‘I am asking you to use your common sense. We have adopted the only defence possible in the

circumstances, and the prosecution will do their best to dislodge us. Whether they do so depends on your stamina and self-control.'

'Ability to lie.'

'Mr Staunton, for the last time, let me ask you. Do you have any proof that you were intimate with Mrs Stumpfl? Solid, incontrovertible proof that will stand up in court?'

'No.'

'Or that she ever wished you to be?'

'No.'

'Would you repeat that for me?'

Sir Anthony took his leave, and for the rest of the week Patrick Hugh Staunton was a model client. He kept an imperturbable calm as one after another of the character witnesses were called: Reg, Mrs Wylie, Julia, Marga and the chauffeur in Germany. All spoke of Natalie's straight dealing and unfailing kindness. Just as agreeably, Sir An-

thony went along with this charade, only opening up the possibility, the faintest suggestion, that these good folk were in many ways the beneficiaries of Stumpfl's employment.

He was no more effective against the main thrust of the prosecution argument. Mrs Stumpfl had been keen to advance the career of a talented but little-known portrait painter, said Reg Ecclestone amiably, and had offered him hospitality at their country house and in Spain. Of course the proprieties had been observed, and there were always other people present. Yes, Mrs Wylie said to Sir Anthony's careful questioning, she remembered exactly. The accused had come over to Botes on the Sunday in question, when she had served them both at lunch and dinner. She had no particular recollection of the occasion, except that it had been informal but correct.

Roshan's testimony began so much along the same lines that I was hardly listening. Then counsel said, would you repeat that, Mrs Kamath?'

‘I am withdrawing my statement.’

‘It is not true the accused left London on Sunday morning? And that did you not hear from him afterwards?’

‘No.’

‘You made a statement to the police that was not true.’

‘Patrick left on Saturday, and phoned me that evening to say he was staying over at Botes.’

‘Would you be kind enough to answer the question as put? You lied in your statement?’

‘I’m not now.’

‘Mrs Kamath, would you answer my question. You lied in your statement to the police?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is your relationship to the accused?’

‘Business associates. We worked in the same gallery.’

‘You were lovers, is that not true?’

‘Yes, but it’s not the point.’

‘Mrs Kamath, I put it to you that matters entirely unconnected with the truth have intervened to make you alter you original and correct statement.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Kamath. No further questions.’

Now, I thought, armed with the petrol receipt, Sir Anthony can get to work. To my consternation and then fury, however, my counsel simply said, ‘No questions, my Lord.’ I glared at him, but there now appeared the police evidence, which required all my attention. No fewer than five witnesses had been found to prove that I had been driving recklessly. Criminally so, said the last, and the police expert only reinforced the impression of danger.

‘As though wishing to get themselves killed?’ suggested the prosecution.

At this point his Lordship intervened, but the press had no such scruples. ‘Millionairess beauty on hell ride’ declared one paper the following day. ‘Millionairess subjected to horrifying ordeal’ said another. Even more glamorous photographs of Natalie Stumpfl appeared, with graphic pictures of the wrecked Mercedes from which I’d been extracted by the emergency services. Everyone in the country now had a mental picture of a fragile and beautiful woman being hurtled towards her death by a deranged admirer. With growing impatience they awaited her turn in the witness box, and they were not disappointed.

Natalie appeared as the quiet Russian beauty, demure and unaffected in a simply-cut white outfit and small pearls. No one could doubt her earnest and forthright replies. I saw the jury nodding to themselves, delighted to find in this beautiful woman only gentle correctness.

Even I might have been won over, had there not been lodged in me some of my father's awkward passion for truth. Of course I was worried, and part of me was registering the testimony, noting how carefully it had been put together, but with the stress of onlookers and newspaper coverage, my mind began to wander. Wasn't this how the thousands of Russians had been forgotten, I thought to myself: repressed and then liquidated by a regime that our intellectuals continued to see as only a misguided attempt to improve man's lot?

In that scale of suffering, my case was nothing, obscene even to be mentioned in the same breath, but here was the same need for simple pictures. How many in England realized that Gorbachev was an appointee of the KGB, that he'd begun his regime by increasing the gulags and crackdowns? Who cared? The world went on the same, absorbed in its cheerful self-interest.

Perhaps it was to fortify myself against these thoughts that I looked again at Natalie. Make the

eyes a little more open, exaggerate the lift of the eyebrows, and accentuate the ears, and Natalie would come over as someone supremely indifferent to her looks. This is how I am, the face would say, and all I can tell you. There may have been episodes in my past which people speak badly of, and perhaps I was present at them, but that has nothing to do with the entrancing woman who stands in front of you now.

The case adjourned for the weekend, and I was left to thoughts that grew gradually more dispiriting as I wandered aimlessly through the old haunts of student life, or sat morosely in my bedroom with the daily newspapers. Almost in a dream I heard Pete Rivers give his testimony on the Monday, describing someone I might have been glad to accept in happier circumstances. Good-natured, entertaining and honest. Yes, the accused had been troubled by incidents in the past, but that was surely natural. Prosecution could have seized on these points, but then I knew nothing of court tactics. Jerry Howard was the better weapon, the

more as the man doggedly tried to rebut the relentless probing. Not unstable? repeated the prosecution over the affair with Rowena. Still angry enough fourteen years later to attack you in a public house? Sir Anthony looked at his papers, and I could see we weren't doing well.

Sheila's appearance was the one shaft of sunshine in these grimy events. 'No,' she said, rounding on the prosecution, 'Patrick was a real gent. Don't get many of them, I can tell you.'

'This is a professional model speaking, Miss Reynolds?'

'So? I don't do anything wrong. It's art.'

'You posed for hours, sometimes without clothes, and nothing happened. You did not have an affair with the accused, and he did not make any improper advances to you?'

'No, worst luck.'

'Would you care to expand on that last remark?'

‘No thank you, I wouldn’t.’

‘Do you wish to intimate that you would have agreed to an affair with accused if he had asked you?’

‘Wouldn’t you? He’s a good-looking bloke. Which is more than can be said for the stuffed shirts round here.’ The jury woke up; there was a titter of laughter in the public gallery, and possibly a sharpening of scribbling in reporters’ notebooks, but the flank had been turned.

‘Did the accused give any reasons for not wishing to start an affair?’

‘It was the Russian bitch who’d got her claws into him.’ She pointed to Natalie, who gazed at her with indulgent kindness. ‘You don’t mean to tell me she hasn’t taken her knickers off for him.’

His Lordship called for order and Sheila was excused. She gave an indignant stare at the press gallery and pranced out. The prosecution made a

few notes, and Sir Anthony had his head in his hands again.

My turn came the following day. What had seemed unreal now became strangely threatening. I took my place as a new contender does in a tennis tournament, aware that the ball may come from any direction. At first, by some tacit agreement, Sheila's outbursts were ignored and I was able to give level-headed replies to questions about the accident. I had driven a little faster than was usual on the road, but had no reason to expect flooding. Even after the heavy downpours? Perhaps other things were on my mind. My attempt to coerce Mrs Stumpfl into an affair? No, I said: to concentrate on what Mrs Stumpfl was offering.

'Mr Staunton, we have already established that Mrs Stumpfl did not want an affair, and had indicated to you most vigorously that she did not want to continue your association. What was it that made you press her when there was nothing, I

repeat nothing, in your past association that could possibly have persuaded you that she did?’

Here I should have retreated. I should have said simply that I didn’t know, and that it all had been a misunderstanding. Perhaps it was the rough handling of Roshan, or Sheila’s testimony of the previous day. Or I thought of my father, that man of limited affections, but upright in his way. Or the others: Reg and Mrs Wylie and Julia, who had lied to the court, but with whom I would feel ashamed if I lied in my turn. Sir Anthony had given me good advice, and was now following my words with affected indifference. Yes, I was coming to order, but then I thought of Akalina and the injuries done her, and of Evgeny, who seemed for a moment to be with us in the shadowy recesses of the public gallery. I remembered the lies and expedencies with which the west had allowed the Soviet system to continue, and knew I was not in my right mind, even beginning to see Akalina, who had joined Evgeny, and was now staring at me.

‘Very well, then,’ I said angrily, ‘I shall now tell the truth, the whole truth of this affair, even though my counsel, with my best interests at heart, has advised me to present it all as a misunderstanding. It was not. I was in love with Natalie Stumpfl, and in some ways no doubt still am.’ At this point I caught sight of Ann, but her strained look only made me blunder on. ‘And I will say this. If it was Natalie Stumpfl who started the affair, I have never for a moment regretted the time with her, not for a day, not for a second. Natalie Stumpfl, or Natalya Voronov to give Mrs Stumpfl her real name, is a beautiful and intelligent woman. Unfortunately, and it does not alter what I feel for her, she was a call-girl who used her talents to get where she is now. Natalie Stumpfl acts for illegal interests in Russia, and offered to live with me only if I joined a money-laundering operation she runs with her husband and Reg Ecclestone.’

The hearing was adjourned. Mrs Stumpfl was not on trial, and such assaults on her character were not going to be tolerated. My conduct would

be addressed the following morning, when the court reassembled, but meanwhile I should consider myself fortunate to be still at liberty. Ann was already leaving the courtroom when his Lordship finished admonishing me, and I stepped down to a melee of confusion and excitement. I was strangely exultant, but also fearful. Instead of heeding his counsel, I had done exactly what Sir Anthony had warned me against. Far worse, I had humiliated someone who had stood by me steadfastly all these months. I hobbled out of the courtroom, but couldn't see Ann, even at the railway station, where I hauled myself up and down the platforms until late in the evening. Equally dejectedly I returned to the hotel, knowing that a conviction was now inevitable.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Against expectations, I found Sir Anthony in a jovial mood the following morning. ‘We now understand counsel’s advice, do we, Mr Staunton?’

‘No need to rub it in.’

‘You will be pleased to receive this, however’, he said, unrolling Evgeny’s painting. ‘Your Russian friend is here, and a certain Miss Stepanov, whom you know as Akalina.’

Perhaps I wasn’t hearing him properly.

‘You will have seen them in the gallery.’

‘They can testify?’

‘I should have thought so, under some restrictions.’

‘So I don’t need to mention a certain junior minister?’

My counsel’s voice didn’t change. ‘The message, as far as I can understand, is that you have earned their support. Your friend thinks you have saved Natalya. Mr Staunton, are you listening? Please get yourself smartened up. We’re on in half an hour.’

First came his Lordship, who explained the unusual circumstances bringing the last two witnesses to court. ‘And just as I have directed you to dismiss the accused’s outbursts of yesterday, I am here telling you to treat with extreme caution the testimony that may be presented now.’

They were needless worries. Evgeny said merely that all artists were changeable, it being their duty to remain open to experience. ‘You can be sure,’ he continued loftily, ‘that the skills of an

artist in making a successful painting are no less real and demanding than those of a surgeon or engineer. Or even of an advocate.'

From this unhappy choice, Evgeny was hurried on to what he knew of Natalie. Little now, he conceded, though it was common knowledge that she had been mixed up with the mafia even as a student. 'Her other failings no one will wish to criticize. Everyone lives by what they have. Natalya was a beautiful woman, and of course she still is.' Natalie half smiled at the compliment, but Stumpfl was now glancing round the court in fury, the smooth business manner turning into demonic rage.

'Why have I come now?' said Evgeny to the prosecution. 'My good friends, I should have come earlier. I should have spoken up years ago against a cruel and arbitrary tyranny. Thousands of my fellow artists have died, or have been silenced. Undeniably that is true. I have come now to make amends, and to persuade this beautiful woman to

drop the case. For the sake of the accused, and more so for herself.'

It was difficult to know what to make of this testimony, and his Lordship stopped the drift by ordering a half-hour recess.

Akalina Stepanov's appearance started with farce. She strode towards the witness box, but then swung round to stare at the Stumpfls. There was a gasp as she pointed to Natalie and then to the scar on her face. Stumpfl said something, possibly in Russian, but she laughed and drew a finger across her throat. Natalie had perhaps gone paler, but Stumpfl simply walked out as his Lordship directed Akalina to take the stand without delay.

Her association with Stumpfl was established by Sir Anthony, and then the events that led to the attack. Though there was excitement at this news, Natalie was not diminished by the revelations, but grew even more beautiful. I could see the jury looking from one woman to the other, not knowing whom to believe. His Lordship intervened several

times to pin the witness down, but she replied harshly, 'I know what I know', which was ordered to be struck from the record. Abruptly, Sir Anthony was finished. He had not brought out any damning evidence, and my spirits sank.

Akalina had been a provocative witness, and counsel does not like to be treated with contempt. Nonetheless, the prosecution would try to be considerate in its cross-examination, following his Lordship's guidance in stressing the need for proof, for incontrovertible evidence.

'Now, as by your own admission, Miss Stepanov, you are a prostitute, you will be skilled in conveying a simulation of affection where none exists. Of pretending to feelings that you do not possess. In short, of lying. Why should this court believe you now?'

This had to be translated, but the witness attacked at once. 'Oh da. Of course I lie for my work. Only I not earn so much money as you lawyers lie. It is a poor woman's form of lying.'

At his Lordship's rebuke, the woman dropped her gaze, and stood looking at the floor as the prosecution pressed home. If she had been attacked once, why was she not afraid that she'd be attacked again, perhaps killed, when she returned to Russia? I had been watching Sir Anthony carefully, and saw his mouth open with a smile.

'You ask that?' exclaimed the enraged woman. 'You want to know what I do for fat middle-aged men like you?' Counsel did not, nor his Lordship, but the graphic demonstration caused outrage among the jury. 'And for why?' she continued, the voice becoming a hoarse shriek. 'Why I do these disgusting things? For money. To pay for operation. To get back what this Natalya Voronov she steal from me. Expensive, but I save nearly twelve thousand dollars. But then doctors they tell me I have cancer. All my money I must give to stay alive. And to come here to tell Natalya Iridia Voronov that we love her. We still love her. But she must change.'

No one could disbelieve the woman, and several of the jury were in tears. Prosecution should have thrown in the towel, but one more folly was left them. It was his duty to point out, his sad duty, said counsel gently, considering the grave misfortunes that had befallen the witness, that this was hearsay only, that there was no proof that Mrs Stumpfl had been involved. The jury looked as though they might throttle the man, but the witness wasn't unprepared.

'Proof?' said Akalina solemnly. 'Oh da. You need proof. So then, you see!' With a sudden movement she tore off her blouse, and there, cruelly displayed, was the mutilated breast. 'That,' she said in a rising voice, 'is what Natalya do to her lover.' Astonished and appalled, the jury stared at her, perhaps not even hearing the voice that sobbed out. 'You think a man would do that? A man know what really hurt a beautiful woman?'

In uproar the hearing was again adjourned. The press were already in the street or dictating on

their mobiles when the two women walked out of the building and got into separate cars. Evgeny I saw strolling down one of the side streets, but he pretended not to remember me as a car drew up. Perhaps he was smiling when I leaned through the window and thanked him for the painting, but the car quickly pulled away.

None of the Russians appeared the following morning, or indeed during the summing-up, when his Lordship placed great stress on the quality of evidence. Do not be influenced by emotions. Ask yourself if there is evidence behind the assertions. Murder, if only attempted, is a most serious crime. The jury heard him out with ill-concealed impatience, and an hour later returned with a not-guilty verdict.

‘So,’ said Sir Anthony, rubbing his hands, ‘great is truth, and it shall prevail.’

‘Yes, I know the quotation.’

‘Which may even hold in your world’, he said with a frosty smile. ‘Who knows? But I’m pleased to have been of service to you, and of course to the Haverings.’ There was a pause, and he delivered himself with practised skill. ‘So I shall say goodbye now, in case we don’t meet again.’

Of course we wouldn’t. I hadn’t measured up. Yes, I’d been acquitted, and truth established, but there are more important things in the world that counts. Misfortune comes to everyone, and I should have borne mine with more fortitude. Expressing feelings for Natalie had been unnecessary, unforgivable to his way of thinking, and more to the Haverings. A crowd of photographers and reporters jostled when I came out, but I was too ashamed to say anything, either then or on my way later to the station, where I caught the first train to London. The late editions carried the result, but no one recognized the figure staring out of the window. Two hours later I checked in to a small hotel, and wondered what to do with the remainder of my life.

Was I besieged by reporters wanting my story? Did Reg phone up with a new contract, or Roshan appear, tearful and eager for a new start? You know the answers. Patrick Staunton had disappeared from interest. The one person who did stay in the news was Natalie Stumpfl, but the trail petered out in Germany, and she was then rumoured to be in Russia. A week later I phoned Yorkshire.

‘You ought to have your things back.’

‘I could come and pick them up if you like. Or would you prefer to ship them by courier?’

‘I think so.’

‘Well then, I owe you a great debt of gratitude. And your father.’

‘That’s all right.’

‘I’m sorry for the outburst.’

‘Patrick, don’t apologize. It was my fault. I tried to make something that couldn’t be.’

‘So perhaps we can be friends again some-time?’

‘We are friends. We’ll send you a slice of cake when it happens. When Ted gets his divorce.’

‘Then please accept my sincere wishes for your happiness.’

‘Patrick, that’s most kind. We’ll not forget you.’

Georg I hadn’t seen since the first days of the trial, and I wasn’t surprised to find he’d quit his flat, though the redecorating bill seemed high.

‘How am I responsible?’ I asked the Pakistani landlord again.

‘If you want what he leave you. See. Three hundred and forty-two pounds sixty-nine you pay please.’

I didn’t find a letter in the suitcase, but there were photographs, a few etchings and his book on Russian painting. The etchings I hung in the bedsit I’d found to rent only streets away from my first

place in Hampstead, and took Evgeny's portrait to be framed.

'They lost interest in Hampstead,' said Roshan at the improved Co-operative, when I sat in the front Sales Office a week later, 'particularly after the accident. A lot of things changed after that.'

'No more Cubist pieces?'

'No. Hard times for him,' said Roshan with a shrug, 'unless it's a staged retreat.'

I smiled, as I had at the two detectives who called after the trial, and gave the same answer. 'Could be, but I was never party to the money laundering. Just don't know.' Roshan didn't believe me, any more than they had, but it belonged to the past. 'You went back to the old flat?' I said. 'To your girlfriend?'

'Not in that sense. Patrick, I know you tried, but I just don't like men. It's got nothing to do with sex.'

'I guessed that.'

‘But did you know there’d been several enquiries about your work? We’re drawing up a proposal.’ She handed over a folder. ‘A business plan.’

‘Ten thousand for advertising?’

‘You have thirty pieces in the studio. If you sell only half of those you’re more than covered. Where are you staying now?’

‘In a bedsit.’

‘Try one of these.’

‘What’s the point?’ I said, turning over the flat particulars.

‘Thirty per cent. We set up a new company, Pete and I. You just concentrate on the painting.’

‘Can’t say I feel much like it.’

‘And have a word with Sheila when she comes off duty.’

‘Really?’ I said guardedly to the woman as we sat over a curry at a nearby pub. ‘Doesn’t Stewart mind?’

‘He’s chuffed. Sells them to all his mates.’

‘Right.’

‘It’s like you. You get a few people to see me in the all-together, but I get thousands, all getting off on me. That’s fantastic.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Just remember what you missed, loverboy.’

Though three weeks later I was invited to Jerry’s place, the lunch was almost silent. He’d genuinely tried to help, but had been made to seem shabby and dishonest. Even with Pete and Veronica, a week later, there was something cautious about the celebration, as if the trial should have ended with cleaner consciences, though Pete brightened up when we talked business.

‘Yes, we can do all that,’ he said at last, ‘but you have to find someone to replace Christine.’

‘That’s taken care of.’

‘When do we meet her?’

‘Pete, I want this to work as much as you do. I’m not the idealist I was.’

‘Should hope not.’

In fact I had only divided my life into stronger compartments, like any normal person, which I stressed to Sompong when I showed her into a decent restaurant one evening.

‘Now don’t go quiet on me’, I said. ‘We’ve both seen something of the world, but I need a model who is stunningly different.’

‘That all?’

‘Someone who can sit still and show those dark eyes, the snub nose and the extraordinary lift of the cheekbones. Someone like you in fact. As I’ve said,

the work is hard and doesn't pay well, but your portrait will hang in millionaire's homes all over the world.'

'How that help me?'

'That's all I can offer.' She said nothing till the first course arrived, when I tried again. 'It's just modelling. I'm only happy when I'm painting, and usually portraits of beautiful women.'

'Sompong know that. It all right.'

'You'll sit for me?'

'You have car? You drive me back to hotel tomorrow morning. We go soon?'

Sompong was in no way like Christine, and over the weeks that followed I understood what you have already guessed. Once I drove her to her ex-husband's place, waiting in the car as a sad figure appeared in the doorway and then slammed the door. 'Pig', she said, getting back into the car. 'Sompong stupid to come.' Later, in bed she lay

quietly beside me, doing nothing and refusing nothing, as on our first night and for long nights thereafter. On weekends she prepared her own food, or sat looking out of the window, taking no interest as I got something together for myself.

Sompong was a neat and self-contained woman. From the shape of the head and the tight coil of hair through to the extremities of the limbs there was nothing that didn't to a painter exhibit the most ravishing proportions. That finish, if I may call it that, extended to the smallest detail—the flare of the nostrils, the tight whorl of the ears, the neat tuck of the pudenda. But if Christine was energetic, and Natalie an exquisite, scarcely-to-be-borne intoxication, Sompong was for a long time only a brief contentment.

February was cold, and brought a dusting of snow to roofs and gardens. Mostly I worked at home, often with the heating off, repainting some of the Christine studies, and then adding portraits of Sompong for another Frankfurt show. In the eve-

nings I read: notes from university days, or books I hadn't seen for years. Something was shifting inside, and, stirred by this new-found interest, I took my sketchbook out of doors, and found the grey streets echoed my mood, speaking for a bruising numbness that was only now beginning to show. With the pain also came an intellectual toughening, as though the soft longings for Natalie were being replaced by something harder and more elemental.

Sompong's body was not Natalie's, and she was never spontaneous. But the pleasure eventually softened her cool efficiency, and I would come back to my bed in the morning with a cup of weak tea to find her still asleep, the long hair spread over the pillow in fluid lines that continued the smiling contentment of the face. These were the best times, what I remembered with the greatest affection: one body trusting itself to another's care.

If that contentment was not rapture, it was still something I could carry over to my paintings, which

sold at the Co-operative, though not at the Cope Street Gallery.

‘Shouldn’t let you in’, said Reg a few months later. ‘You’ve caused no end of bother.’

‘Customs and Excise?’

‘Two visits.’

‘Wasn’t very kosher of you and Stumpfl, was it?’

‘All in the past. Everything’s legit again.’

‘Not too enterprising though, is it?’ I said, looking round. ‘Why don’t you take some of my stuff?’

‘You’re much too grand for us now. I was reading a Telegraph article about you only last week.’

‘Well, it was only a courtesy call. I’ll be on my way.’

‘Patrick, you have my apologies for what happened.’

‘No hard feelings.’

‘Come up to the house sometime, with your Thai consort as the papers put it, so Sibyl can give her the once-over. She still worries about you.’

Another year passed. I was not short of commissions, and in time branched out to landscapes, rather thin and laboured efforts, though Reg took a few. I also began an extended series of self-portraits, as though I might understand the new man I’d become, but the paintings lacked substance, as though there was something I was not allowed to see.

We each have our destinies, however, and when the doorbell rang one afternoon I showed Heinrich Stumpfl into the large flat we now rented near Regent’s Park.

‘This is much better, Mr Staunton. I congratulate you.’

‘Thank you. Can I get you something? It’s a social call, I take it?’

‘Sadly it is business.’ He took off his coat, and folded it over a chair.

‘Then the answer is no.’

‘A commission. Let me show you.’ He clicked open the attaché case and I found myself looking at an architect’s drawing of a seven-story hotel.

‘Most impressive.’

‘One of many, Mr Staunton. This one needs furniture and pictures.’

‘Ask an interior designer.’

‘That is my wife’s department. You could travel round Spain with her. It would be for you to decide what to paint.’

‘I happen to be persona non grata there.’

‘That has been cleared up. One of my employees confessed to tampering with your father’s medication. By killing Miss Manderson and your father he intended you to leave Spain and per-

suade Natalie to transfer her affections. Of course it was not pleasant to bring the suicide note to the authorities, but one has a duty in such circumstances.'

'Suicide?' I said angrily, scarcely believing the effrontery.

'How is difficult to know, but perhaps he broke into your father's flat when everybody was out.'

'Did he now?'

'As for Georg Michnik, he is in Poland now, living with relatives.'

'On a modest retainer?'

'Akalina Stepanov has unfortunately died, but Natalie spent the last weeks with her.'

'The trial was your idea, was it?'

'More Natalie's, I think you'll find. Do you still wish to see her?'

'Possibly. Yes, I think so,' I said slowly.

Then I'll suggest she comes over in a couple of months. If she decides to stay, then I will do nothing more. You can keep her.' When I didn't reply he added, 'But I know my wife. It will be your last chance if you turn her down.'

I didn't trust myself to speak.

'In about two months. Goodbye Mr Staunton.'

You don't need to be told that for the rest of the day, and indeed the weeks following, I found it hard to concentrate. That he had arranged the murders in Spain was not news, or that he still controlled Georg. I thought of the old man and his exhausted expression after our farewell party. Now that past had overwhelmed him, dragged him in its undertow to some run-down housing estate, where the young took drugs and their parents smashed bottles against the wall in their domestic bliss. He had survived worse, however, and perhaps there would still be etchings sending out their green leaves into the sunshine he was personally denied.

But if the penury of a few years ago seemed distant now, our circumstances were still fragile. We were comfortably off, but the person I'd been with Natalie was still there, lurking behind the successes I took pleasure in displaying. In the study were long shelves of art books, far more than I could properly read. Sompong had given up her job, spending her time shopping for clothes and attending hairdressers and manicurists. Sometimes I went with Roshan to events, and sometimes with Sompong. Occasionally I sailed in with both, when we could be sure of appearing in the society pages. Sompong handled phone enquiries at home, while Roshan was tireless at publicity. I even appeared on a late-night TV show. 'A vast improvement on the tribal jeans and beard that we usually get', said the producer afterwards, which I understood in watching the recording later. Who was this handsome bohemian with the friendly manners that seemed so effortlessly to win over his opponents? Perhaps I had changed, fulfilling what I remem-

bered my father and Ecclestone and Natalie had expected of me.

Yet I wasn't sure. Weren't these the mortgaged hopes Sibyl had once mentioned? Everything depended on keeping to a well-honed formula. Was the work dull and repetitious? Sometimes it seemed so, even as the reviews became more respectful, the sniping from the avant-garde magazines disappearing as I took editors out to lunch.

'Patrick what is trouble with you?'

'This has arrived', I said, pushing Natalie's postcard across the table.

'It is up to you', she said, turning back to the magazine.

'I thought we'd have tea. Then Natalie and I could go for a walk, to talk about old times. Things dead and done with.'

Sompong didn't reply, and there was only a more loving attention in bed to show that she had

read matters properly. Once I tried to explain, but she got up and went to her room.

Natalie came a week later, the same person, though a little fuller in the jaw and more quietly dressed.

‘I have not changed so much, have I, Patrick?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You have looked after him very well’, she said, turning to Sompong, whose annoyance stiffened into hostility. Perhaps we were all on edge. ‘Will you show me round?’ she added. ‘We can leave Patrick to get the tea.’

Five minutes later I came back with a laden tray to find the two women sat in silence. ‘Like me to pour?’ I said.

‘I am sure Sompong can do that.’

‘Not just waitress here’, said the woman. ‘Family have big hotel in Bangkok.’

‘Yes, a lot of people come over for . . . training’, I said into the vacuum. Neither came to my rescue and I sat down again with the scones. ‘Time for a walk’, I said at last, when Sompong was again staring out of the window.

‘Anywhere in particular?’ asked Natalie when the driver slid open the glass panel.

‘Regent’s Park.’

Natalie gave instructions and we didn’t speak further until we were walking on the grass through a scattering of children and the out-of-work. Natalie put her hand in mine, and when I didn’t take it, clasped my arm instead.

‘You have changed, or you would not stay with that empty-headed creature.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Patrick, please answer me.’

‘No’, I said. ‘Sompong’s very sweet, but it’s not the same. Will that do?’

‘Why are you so distant with me?’

‘Natalie, of course I was in love with you. Could hardly breathe. I remember what you wore, what you did, what you said. Everything.’

‘Which Sompong understands?’

‘That I’m going back? But I’m not.’ When Natalie stared at me with those extraordinary eyes, I said doggedly, ‘Because it’s different now. Even the most ordinary things were an intoxication once, something even Julia couldn’t destroy.’

‘I am not seeing Julia any more.’

‘Natalie, I’ve told you: it’s all changed. When I conjure up the most intimate pictures of you I also see Akalina and Christine, and God knows how many other crimes. Even Georg and what happened to his wife.’

‘That was his fault.’

‘Possibly you have outwitted Heinrich. I can’t tell. But I do know that you’re still in that world, which I don’t have the strength for.’

‘Even with me to help you?’

‘As some toy to pick up when you’re bored? No thank you. Even this fool has learned something. It may not be much of a life, but it is mine. One I’ve created myself. Sompong isn’t you, but she’s honest and she cares.’

I had played this script a dozen times before our meeting, and it ran mechanically now. Without bitterness, Natalie finally understood, and we drove back to the flat. Some colour returned to her face, and she checked her makeup before asking the driver for the parcel.

‘So where is yours?’ she said, once we were in the lounge and Sompong had gone for an aspirin.

I led her through, and she selected a self-portrait to place on the easel. ‘At least you look happy.’

‘I told you.’

‘Ah, here’s Sompong. Could you unwrap the parcel and put it on the other easel? It is a nice one of me, I think.’

‘Is that it? You go now?’ said Sompong as we stood looking at the two portraits.

‘Sompong, there are a few things you ought to know.’

‘Sompong know everything.’

‘The trial and acquittal were Natalie’s work. She wanted to be out of Stumpfl’s world, and this was how she managed it. The publicity meant they couldn’t keep her on, or even murder her. So she’s free.’

‘But maybe you go to prison.’

‘Quite possibly.’

‘That terrible.’

‘Yes, it is.’ There was more to add, but I saw Natalie’s expression, the one that had struck me so forcefully after our first London meeting, and words seemed unnecessary.

Sompong started to cry. ‘So this why you play game with me. You go with her now?’

‘No. We’re going to be dignified, like something out of an old forties film. We’ll go down to the car, and my friend will get in. The chauffeur will drive her away. Natalie won’t look back, and she will never visit us again. I shall not see Natalie again in this world.’

Perhaps Natalie was close to tears herself as she hugged Sompong and then put both her hands into mine. ‘Take care of yourself, Patrick. Please.’

She settled the self-portrait carefully on the back seat, and the driver shut the door. I watched the car turn the corner, and stood there a long time, as though Natalie might change her mind, but she didn’t, even though I stood there hours or maybe

days later, until Sompong came to take me back into the house.

That is how it runs, because it's inevitable, how I am forced to preserve our small lives together. Whether Stumpfl will keep his word I do not know. Or what part he played in his wife's plans. But in dreams and recollections, Natalie will come back, and I shall picture her in Spain or Russia or wherever she may be. I shall not forget these outlines, even though they seem drowned or buried, the coloured flags spoiled by something that even now has not fully happened.

Natalie was looking at me, resigned to what I didn't have to explain. 'Yes, that is how it ends', I said, taking her hand for the first time. 'After all the dreams and plans, prosaic reality.'

'You are content with that?'

What else could I do? Bonds of honesty and affection held me to Sompong, as did genuine need. When I didn't reply, Natalie brought me over to a

park bench. 'You have not asked about my current friend', she continued.

'No.'

'But then there is no one serious. I am too busy.'

'I can imagine.'

'I've made a decent company. You have built a new life for yourself, and in two years I have done the same. Fourteen staff.'

'Really?' It was a good deal better than my efforts, though I'd found a public, and was working it as carefully as a high street store checks its sales figures.

'Neither is there Heinrich, in case you want to know. It is my work, and my life. I've done what you have done: concentrated on business.'

'Please, Natalie, let's leave it at that.'

'So you do not need to ask about Christine and your father.'

‘No.’

‘Or Akalina?’

‘Natalie, I’ve always known. Listen, it doesn’t make much sense, but I really don’t understand people, or why they go on living at all. I make another world, and that is all I’m responsible for.’

‘Which doesn’t include me?’

‘Who is beautiful and unreliable and in the end just a self-created illusion.’

‘You would not think so if you really lived with me.’

‘More than I did in Spain? With results we know about.’

‘I have never pretended to be a saint.’

‘And I’m just talking while we have a chance. Trying to understand what happened to people in Spain, or in Russia. Why we see more, and care less.’

‘They were senseless crimes. If enough people had spoken out they wouldn’t have happened.’

‘If that’s directed at me, just remember that I was chosen because of my shortcomings.’

‘That was Heinrich’s idea.’

‘Not entirely.’ I looked at Natalie in her quiet business suit, and couldn’t understand what I knew to be true, just as I couldn’t understand how so many had died in the Spanish Civil War or the Soviet purges. I thought of the books on Russian history that were piling up on my bookshelf, which I kept adding to, as if one of them might offer an explanation, though they had no more to say on this than I could provide for my own failings. Multiply my weakness through the show trials and there appears a mocking laughter over the shallow graves of Minsk, Katín, Madagan and a hundred other places in the glorious Soviet Union. There was no accounting for that, or for my falling for Natalie, though I knew that I would have done so a thousand times and gladly.

‘So you are responsible but not culpable’, she was saying. ‘Only you do not believe it.’

‘Natalie, I’m culpable through failings. Which is worse, and what I’ve always known. Patrick doesn’t quite measure up. Everyone’s very nice about it, but that’s the truth.’

‘Roshan liked you. If anything was going to get her to feel comfortable with men, your patience might.’

‘She said that?’

‘What is so difficult to understand? If I had needed power or money I would have stayed with Heinrich. I need something else, someone to show me another dimension to living.’

‘You’re still expecting me to ask you back?’

‘I am imploring you, Patrick, if you hadn’t noticed. To understand yourself, to accept what you could be.’

‘Natalie, I’m thirty-eight. It’s not likely I shall fall in love again, but if life is not perfect with Sompong, she at least brings happiness and safety. With you, who knows what to expect?’

‘Is that what you want when you start a painting? You have not asked Sompong either. It is playing big brother, that is all.’

‘I’m trying to behave responsibly.’

‘Patrick, I am only alive when I am with you. Have you not noticed that? That I laugh and chatter and am happy. Does that not matter to you?’

‘I’m not going to hurt Sompong. She’s been through enough.’

‘There are many types of love.’

I remembered my father, whose love for Hugh had destroyed his marriage. I thought of Georg and the betrayal of Renata, from which such a miserable existence followed. Of Rowena and Jerry, of Christine and her family. And of the violence that

war does to our affections, or their slow suffocation under political repression. ‘Anyway,’ I said at last, ‘it would have to be your hotel. Not at the flat.’

‘Hotel?’

‘So what are we talking about?’

‘It is you that have the independence now. You have the freedom to ask me.’

‘After I’ve spoken to Sompong.’

‘Speak to me, Patrick.’

Yes, talk to Natalie, about a life that hadn’t yet begun, or might never begin, being undermined by Natalie’s deceptions, by concern for Sompong, and by involvements with other women whose lives remained shadowy possibilities. But why take a step so against experience and common sense, and for prospects that were no doubt as illusory as anything else with Natalie? Because it completes a picture that was drawn at the beginning of this story, when I came to Botes in search of new op-

portunities? I think more because it gives me back that other kingdom, glimpsed in childhood, but filled with the shapes that Natalie has renewed with all the bright contagions of her imperative needs and longings.

No doubt that lies far into the future. More than Georg realized, all our creations are shifting and unfathomable. We are only bodies, an assembly of muscle, organ and nerve fibre through which we give ourselves a home in a world infested with matter that is no more selfless than our own. Natalie didn't smile when I took her hand, nor the whole time we walked slowly to the car. 'If you want to', she said again, but I wasn't listening, only sensing we had already embarked on a bewilderment of our own making, on a ordinary day in London, those first castles still lifting and filling around us with the undone promises we shall one day have to call our lives.