

#77

Sunset

Strip

Frank

LAUDER

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A glossary of the 1950's slang used in
77 Sunset Strip appears at the end of the book.

Chapter 1 Some Like It Hot

It would be another hot day, he knew it:

even with his eyes and the curtain closed in back of his bedroom the Provençale light was already dazzling. Just lying there O'Reilly could feel the sweat on his skin beginning to well and then at once vaporize, as the hot sharp shards of new savage upcoming air, streaming through the jar of the window like the invading light, connected with it.

He remembered. Last night the gig with his band The Jazz Pioneers had gone well, even though Francine had bowed-out from singing at the last moment late in the afternoon and thus they had fallen back onto the reliable Tobias as the singer. Tobias was good though, with the dark male voice of a star in the making in his own right. Anything can happen, can't it?

But he felt as he arranged his floating side-men on the small stage that the audience was in the mood for speed and sharpness. That spelt Be-Bop and for that reason suddenly O'Reilly was all there, licking his lips, waiting for the flurries and the stops, the counterpoint balanced on an accent, the dark smiles and the colourful highs.

The trumpeter gave out with his brilliant zippy Dizzy Gillespie horn accents blowing the idlers away as the tenor horn came skittering in

like a brass landslide and skewed the rhythm so that suddenly they were flying, but on eggshells.

Danny soloed well, and O'Reilly took a couple of breaks as Jerry, the Monk look-alike negro American pianist picked at the keys and filled in the coruscating rhythms with deft touches of colour, followed by slick accents that held the crowd in his thrall. Adoring girls looked up at him as if they wanted to be possessed by his brightness and brilliance, his passion, watching his every movement with obsessive zeal. Girls! They were half the kick of the thing.

And then, cascading down the notes, the crackling electricity of the brass as the trombone, tenor and baritone horn slammed into it like they were desperate to bring the place down, and as the music reached new points of rhythmic sharpness and yes, power.

At the break O'Reilly was happy, happy; then suddenly felt that he had a new pair of

eyes on his back. He turned to find this chick, blond and quite skinny but with that expression which said: 'I want you to fill me out!' They swapped a few words. It could go this way or that, he knew.

Then later, as Tobias sang his last chorus, O'Reilly looked up from the brushes on the snare drum and saw her again. She smiled at him and sat down demur, waiting for his answering glance. She would wait for him, he knew. By then he'd had enough whisky to imagine what could happen next. Thank goodness Francine was not around to spoil the party. Of two.

That was last night.

Back to the morning. *She'd followed his car into the mountains in her Austin-Healey in a sort of two car convoy, helped him take a few of the lighter things into number seventy-seven. And then a coffee to revive, and then the*

delicate scent of her arms and her breasts and... what did you expect? That was at around three.

Then, later, but earlier that morning that he had woken to, the new stranger had arisen and left, around seven, with hardly a whisper, just a brief touch of those perfect lips to his brow - O'Reilly was not sufficiently awake to know exactly when. Anyhow, he felt the bed give, heard bare feet on the marbled floor of his room, she said something abstract, sang something musical, about his gite with a little tweeting laugh like a bird, a happy bird, was it - seventy-seven, something? And then she was just as fleetingly gone, while just as suddenly the almost familiar dent, with her warmth, her scent, was not there anymore. The door opened and closed. A flat sound. Clack.

He imagined her rough cut ash-blond head graphically flat, elemental and simple against the grayscale shades of the ceiling, like the spaces

and grainy rough pages of a newly drawn comic. That paper never lasted long; could they - would they? Too many questions.

A heartbeat, another beat, and he could hear a car starter whine and catch, the motor turn, deep, first slow and then powerful, nothing more. He fell back to sleep. Alcohol takes you to somewhere between nirvana and hell, and sometimes it makes you sleep as well.

A reverie perhaps, something urgent. A week later, and he was waking again. That girl again; in the back of his mind he knew that he had had a dream about her, the way she was with the shapeless swagger coat in blue, the square green canvas bag with the tan leather detail across the panelled side, the rope straps across the top. So casual, something out of Elle or Vogue or perhaps a Superman comic like that one he'd scanned when he'd met with Danny at *La Crystal* at Antibes last week, with the half-

calf length cuffed slacks in faded orange, the pout, the exaggerated laugh, so 'out', so BB, so playing cool and laid-back: the shock of blond hair cut wild and ragged.

She was a fuzzy duck okay, but she was so beautiful in that upfront Nordic way too. Last night in-between sets she'd leant against the bar real cool in that real new style short dress with those new unusual sharp stilettos she'd brought across Europe to catch him with, and threatened to bend just a little further so that he could need to see more - but instead skewered around and pouted those neon-red lips at him over her Campari-Soda. He was sure she was drunk, point was, he felt drunk on the sudden blast of hormones.

What the hell!

Later - when he kissed her as he waited for the manager to pay him, and watched as the dancers took to the floor for music from records

- the red pigment suddenly mysteriously took to the air around him reminding him of the smell of candles in church, and was so pleurably dense that he was sure he would find a trace on his collar.

Sure enough, afterwards that day he found it all over the pillow and the bed, a big randy mouth print in the centre beneath the serried dent where the pillows normally sat, which only served to sharpen his appetite.

Back again to the morning when he'd heard her stoop to clear her stuff from the floor as she left: she'd deliberately left stuff behind her, screwed-up lost pants forgotten somewhere in the sheets, an empty lipstick tube near the mirror in the bathroom where other eyes would get to see the female and men's eyes overlook the detail. Why was she in such a hurry? Besides, what would she wear in the car now, would she leave her fruit clear to the wind?

That was odd, because he remembered her yet again, just last night, fluffing her lines with musical accents that were in the wrong places, her 'cool' clouded by alcohol as he played around with the local argot. He remembered her blouse was almost square, lightest yellow, cut on the straight, without weight and almost too delicate, almost transparent, made light enough to float on an eddy as she shed her clothes for him, as he drained his coffee and she forgot hers, for their lust.

One thing: lust: he had had lust for her, almost pleasurable, somehow urgent. When would he see her again? Maybe never. Anyway, he was kind of taken, busy, wasn't he?

Later *that day when he rose and tidied a little, O'Reilly found that she'd also forgotten her *necessaire* and that anyway, in the incidental confusion, actually he'd forgotten her name, though he remembered the texture of her skin*

well enough, the perfectly-formed round shape of her arse as she presented it to him and faced away from him like his secret whore and made that coded sign on his virgin sheet.

But his loss of memory must only be temporary, surely. The thing was that it could anyway have been the alcohol, or it might have been the music; but anyway she'd decided one thing for sure and left a number scrawled in paint or kohl or something smudgy on the enamelled door of the fridge.

The necessaire containing various female essentials? She'd made a statement, quite deliberately left it on the stone of the bathroom surface to mark her territory, however temporary their time at the end of that fleeting decade would be; thus then he knew that she would be back once-upon-a-time soon, to take her chance and survey her new discovery for the second time.

What was her name? He still felt the velvet of the air that night, the divine madness that they had felt together, he could smell her scent on him, feel her legs around him not allowing to leave, finish until he really finished. How could he ever forget the loss of time and space and everything, how great was that!

But now, was the question. He rolled over, realizing how hot it was already and how hot the day would be later (it was late in July). In an afterthought - it would be still hotter in August. He wrapped himself in a towel, and slowly made his way shaking with fever or something, through the small living room to the main door, testing each footfall rather gingerly. He needed stability, for nothing to change, for the world to come to a halt today, just for him.

As he opened the door a tick to gauge the upcoming day, the wind shifted around and gusted, spilling sandy rough mountain soil onto

his feet - and the temperature hadn't heeded his wishes either and stayed in the thirties. Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, more. Jesus! It just kept on going up. What time was it anyway? He was sweating already, and he hadn't done a thing.

He turned the ancient fan on, lined it up against the door and opened one window to create a real draft. The fan protested as it clanked its way into life.

Point was, he had a plan now fresh in his mind, to go down through the enfolding hills all the way to the beach from his simple boxy, lime-washed gite up here on the edge of the rocky dangerous minefields in the woods, and check what there was to see before the day was over.

Besides, it was rising too darn hot for him here now, he'd just bake if he stayed. Still, some like it hot don't they? And anyway, who knew what could happen next.

Then, out of sequence, he heard Danny pull up by the gate of the gite, inside on the small parking area, driving Bibi's sports car. The gite was set almost by itself in a cul-de-sac, a situation which had elicited many jokes about his 'exclusive club', because not only was it quite separate and faced nicely into the Sun, but on what passed for the buttress by the front garden of the plot which faced south and thus had the sun all day, was fastened the usual bleached blue and white nineteenth century enamelled plate, anomalously numbered '77' in curly letters. Thus his friends called his gite '77 Sunset Strip', alluding both to the Sun's transit and to the new Television series he'd never seen, as he'd never had a television himself and still less time to watch anything much in his busy evenings.

While he was still poking around for coffee in the kitchen at the back, and before he had

had time to find the jar, he saw the swirl of the exhaust from the Talbot as Danny cut the engine, creating a small whirlwind out of sand, that would if the wind decided so - or anyway in time - add to the usual overall dusting of his spartan home.

Just a bedroom with his double bed, then a living room giving out into a kitchen of sorts with the usual dining table: a cupboard, a couple of tables in the living room - and then through a set of glass doors, the patio, equipped with a couple of the ancient standard Provençal chairs you see in Van Gogh's paintings, clustered crookedly together with a weathered, simple wooden table.

In the background of the sitting room that day his Rogers' kit was stacked all splendid in blue black and silver, by its side the usual running gear, pedal and hi-hat, with his assortment of cymbals, together with an empty music

portfolio, a bag of drumsticks and brushes and the odds and ends which he always lugged with him but hardly ever used, like drum keys and a couple of spare things.

And then a pile of clothes on one of the somehow illogically numerous chairs inside, his favourite long jackets, heavy shoes and blue jeans. Then among them, shoes on the floor, a carpet bag lying against one wall. O'Reilly was simply not the tidy type. Oh, and that description would be to ignore the fine salting of dust over everything, which is an everyday in the mountains of the South.

But that would take a few minutes or maybe even a few hours to register, he cared nothing for it; the daily refreshed layers of dust just lay firmly there until someone, maybe he, would come by and frighten them all away with a rag.

O'Reilly needed breakfast to feed his 6/1 bulk, and Danny, tall too, but leaner than he, needed food as well. So after a few minutes they decided to decamp for their usual spot on the coast, which would take twenty minutes or so on the Grasse road away from Grasse and down to Cagnes, then along to the right through the twisting by-ways along the backs of the beach sand dunes under the tall trees and along the now dust stained black strip of new tarmac edged by the lethal winking whitewashed marker stones of the coast road.

Lethal at night, that was. He'd seen the sad remains of many crashes on that road. It was rumoured that Albert Camus had been killed that way running off the road in a fast car after too much alcohol. Or was it James Dean in his little Porsche on some mountainous hairpin curve? Plenty around here for the unwary.

“How was it, O’Reilly?” Danny had to shout to be heard in the rhythmic, battering breeze. Danny was always curious about O’Reilly’s crazy love life - and he’d seen O’Reilly leaving last night with the Swedish girl.

“She was great, sweet, everything - but I can’t recall her name - she left her number on the door of the ‘fridge, though - name too, I guess!” Well, this happens.

“Almost romance, semi like, at seventy-seven... sounds like the opening to a song.”

“You write it then!”

“Betcha!” They shared a laugh.

It took half an hour for them to find themselves on the coast road, spying the blue of the sea and the lighter blue of the in between the ragged trunks of the pines and over the pale sand and shale of the beach. The sky was just blue, the heat rising, the girls, the daring ones, shrieking to attract attention and sporting

skimpy little bikinis a'la Bardot. But for the tick in the back of his mind he would say that everything was right in heaven. Almost. He laid his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

At length *Danny had found a strip of broken stone curb almost on the beach, down under the shade of some dense bushes and under the dark tree cover of the pines, big enough to park the Talbot under. Thus they strolled down the slight slope beneath the dappled shade of the high plane trees through the grasses and the detritus among the dunes, to the beach.*

Now the heat of the day was upon them and the usual expected August hot Sirocco was blowing. But the air-con was just fine in Coco's, his favourite beach café and O'Reilly could eat croissants and smoke a Gauloise in the cool confidence of being left alone while he watched one gang of tourists exploring the emptiness of

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another group of holidaymakers' minds as they compared their skimpy bikinis and argued and discussed and promenaded about nothing but their domestic desires on the long, broken strip of assorted pebble and sand beside the sea...

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Chapter **2** **Bibi**

Bibi: *Danny met Bibi that first time, at Tourettes sur le Loup. Lost in the clouds much of the time, especially in Autumn, it was a little place hidden high in the hills that only members and friends of The Cool School knew.*

And in keeping with its select nature, there was was a sort of open party that night and he went with a friend. He'd never thought to ask how she'd got to know about these secrets, or for that matter who had told her about the party: actually it was an old friend of

O'Reilly's, someone who knew her, Frederique, a tall chestnut haired Parisian. She'd met her on the beach. She had known both Bibi and O'Reilly for years since their days at the Sorbonne in Paris all that time ago, but she wasn't about to volunteer the information, Freddie wanted her relationships to remain as they were, small secrets, for her own reasons. Then later, Freddie 'took a powder' she was nearby but solitary, with another player. But that would be another story.

Were they aware, the both of them could say that in a way this bar was their local bar, after all it was actually the only really cool place for ten kilometres. It had the people, the atmosphere by night of a boîte, the cool, up-to-date Beatnik attitude of a French distillation of some kind of Existential Zen; the women cool tempered, cool looking, lighting their Disque Bleu or Gitanes Mais with expensive lighters or wax matches, scanning the others with disinterested glances. But underneath all that available, hot. Of course they were dressed in the latest vogue.

Whatever, they fitted-in well with the various players around the café, and the assorted thieves as well.

The vogue? Yes, following the crazy, cool fresh new ways this particular summer, and good in the upcoming heat, the better to stay cool - great colours, simple colours - yellow, red, white, black, grey, green, blue - airy blouses and great crazy, jazzy cropped hairstyles designed to keep you cool in the heat, as well. They called the latest hairstyle the 'crop' because all the girls liked to feel cool in the heat and be called a 'Fuzzy Duck'; why? That was a groovy kind of come-on of course.

Some in those new skirts, with clouds of froth supporting them contrary to the incoming new style, which he just knew would next be short, dresses and stiletto heels. He'd seen them in the magazines as the new crop of next year's fashions. But for now everything was pastel, sometimes orange teamed against Gauloises blue.

Then there were the dudes in their tight trousers and thick crepe rubber soled bumpers,

sporting tight Beatnik beards and smoking the latest American brands and speaking in the clipped, urgent way that real hipsters really affected. It attracted the girls was the thing.

At first, *were you there standing that evening and in that space where the road intersected with this small place, you'd see the facade of this tanned, brown, multiply-faceted hangout in the hills suspended over the river Loup, as a conglomeration of almost perfect comically arranged accordion-like folding doors, an ideal place for that, a sort of Feydeau farce of a bar - except that the farces and follies played there were real in a much more absolute way for its customers at those precise moments that night than indeed they ever would be again. Nights like that would be were still never actually spoken about in that time. People might get to know, and that could mean the end of a girl's reputation!*

Aah! It all had to do with the most ancient of rites. Simply put, sex was still a secret subject in those times, never openly discussed except with a friend - and that was odd, because they all knew about it, didn't they? - but never spoke about stuff like that in public for fear of being put down by the bourgeois older generation.

Thus that cool scene one evening a few weeks later when O'Reilly and Danny had struggled up the hills manfully in the Deux-Chevaux, once having to free the slim wheels as they slid into the mud near a culvert on the road. But the Deux-Chevaux was a sturdy beast, which meant that in the end they were only twenty minutes late, whatever that indicated. No-one noticed anyway, this thing would go on for hours, could be all night!

They finally arrived in the gathering dark and joined the party, which had started

drunkenly, and proceeded no less drunkenly, the puzzle of doors changing orientation, closing and occasionally banging as the party became more animated.

Such that after a couple of hours drunks were everywhere, out on the long porch, entangled in the intricacies of the shuttered doors, necking in the roadside shrubbery, hands seeking inside skirts or blouses, caressing slacks or drainpipe trousers at the crotch, girls shrilly screaming as they were chased around by their prey on the dark quiet verges of the road which had wound up to there and from thence would climb to Coursegoules. Capture would of course follow. A perfect night, hot. Such pleasure!

Then, as the night progressed the dark curtain of stars came out and the blanket of absolute blackout came down. Ah! This was even more fun, such that Danny found himself all at once alone in the bar accompanied by the music

of whatever, as the glowing furniture of the jukebox played, with twenty drunks, nine or ten women and that amount of men gathered around it and in its shadow.

Danny was in fact was one of the less drunken drunks, and it was all his fortune, because then he saw Bibi again, and all at once the game had changed.

Weeks afterwards, with his usual slowness of uptake, Danny realized that Bibi had been the prize of the dance floor, small, around 5/2, eyes of blue - blond - just to his taste and his desire. How lucky he was!

He won her to the chagrin of the men around her with his fine words - oh, and maybe his modern look too, his casual jacket (altered back at seventy-seven that very afternoon by O'Reilly on a borrowed sewing machine) - his earnest eyes - you see Bibi too favoured men who wore the latest vogue; tight trousers, long

jackets and crepe-soled shoes, despite the midsummer heat - and Danny was well up to that - oh and Danny could talk the talk if he had to.

Actually, that night she was worse for alcohol, after all it was that sort of party; at any rate anyway he was not at all worse for anything apart from a lover, for once his head cleared it came down to the business in hand. Actually Danny disliked alcohol, having seen too many people suffer its vicious effects before in his life during and after the war - war creates people who want to forget; for some of them alcohol became the only way out.

As it was you see, to his eyes that night Bibi was lively and full of vim; intelligence and laughter sparkled in her eyes. Bibi was a real Parisian nana, cool, well attired, and with that secret flair that Parisiennes have for centuries

inherited from the streets and the café society of Paris as part of their birthright.

That particular evening Bibi was wearing a simple, classic, tight cocktail dress, part of her seduction uniform actually, which worked astonishingly well with her petite, female body. Danny would in time learn that Bibi was cunning in her feminine way, knew the score, and that she often wore these simple classic tight dresses in black, red, blue, yellow, white, which sold her well and which gave her the upper hand when she required it, the change of colour signifying a change of mood, of desire, perhaps. Dangerous - so you see, she scored but was rarely scored herself. Until she met Danny that was. That was a special moment for her, it moved her mind quickly onto the subject of making love, making love to someone gentle and reliable - and loving.

O'Reilly? Then there was the matter of her secret: O'Reilly. O'Reilly had never been able

to convince her that he truly loved her - yet, what was between them was a brutal, primal, vibration that she would never be able to explain.

It was a secret, was all. Danny didn't know it and they weren't about to tell, but the affair between O'Reilly and Bibi had happened those years ago when they met first by chance at the Beaux Artes in Paris, where Bibi declared she was studying (a fine thing).

Nothing had happened that time, though O'Reilly had found that he could not get her out of his mind, she lingered like a fire that would always refuse to go out, like an ember of pleasure of some sort of abstracted passion that always drew him back to it like some kind of junkie. Later, when it came to his relationship with her there was no sense, everything was madness, lust, delight, exhaustion, fulfilment.

Love? What is love? But there was desire, beauty in some form, trust, closeness. Maybe

love was there, but only time would ever tell - while for the moment what they had was a huge sense of pleasure when they were together, something warm and loving, and above all urgent and secret. Then they drifted apart, blown by the winds of chance and the lost eddies of forgetfulness and war.

Then chance: their relationship seemed fated, triggered by an even more amazing meeting later. For, first forgotten, it re-awakened unexpectedly down there on the coast one morning, as O'Reilly was walking aimlessly and half asleep along the Promenade des Anglais before his bus left for the hills that first time.

He'd arrived on the first train, the 'Train Bleu' from Paris, the sleeper, had no idea she was there; one of a thousand possibilities. That day she was eating a huge ice cream, which caught his eye. Fate? Crazy? He'd got on the

bus, and as it left he realized who had been behind the ice cream. Oh!

He'd waved, she'd reacted as he scribbled his putative address on a scrap of paper and caused a kerfuffle among the squabbling peasant women in order to get it through the window to her. She'd find a Parisian *mec* simply enough in the hills, in Vence, but he hadn't thought that. After all he'd stick out at least at first, like a sore thumb.

On the subject of scoring; you know Bibi knew O'Reilly. Yes, she'd scored *him* that time again, when she'd searched his address at '77' amongst the hills at Vence, at a petite '*mas*' found it, and managed to contact him by mail to invite him with the slender excuse of an *Ancienne* of the *Beaux Artes*. A party at Juan Les Pins. Relaxed, almost indifferent in demeanour that time, at least in words. But of course she was nervous. Would he still feel the

same - had he done what would be impossible to her, could he have forgotten?

In her mind was an urgent question, for this was her time, and it must happen now, they must become lovers now; time was forever short in a woman's life.

She sent him the address, he arrived late as she expected he would, a bottle of something in one hand, at the house which snuggled behind a screen of trees on the Rue Pigalle. Of course she was on tenterhooks, pretending not to have noticed, not to be phased, but suddenly with her nerves all in falsetto, all jangling like an out of register siren of breaking glass, screaming.

That evening she'd looked purposely cool in the darkness and heat of a late August night, abstracted. To that end she was wearing beach slacks and a boxy top, a sort of mad, painterly, geometrical blazer made with cocktails and seduction in mind. She had to make it seem so

that she had thus bumped into him again almost in an afterthought, but not by chance this time.

Suddenly it happened. Now she was blank in her mind, so driven that she felt that now nothing could keep him from her. That way they were mercifully absorbed into the unknowing laughing crowd, an accident which worked to her advantage.

And it transpired that the dream was shared: for like a chemical reaction their unconsummated passion suddenly re-awoke. When she thought back she realized that it had started at almost the precise moment of their meeting, after their first dance.

Not really a dance, more a shifting of veils, the matador's cape. She had desired him then, the way his body flexed around hers, liked the strong lead he had given to her febrile Tango, Not only that, fact was she'd just liked all of it. Well, she was right for it that day, she was

hot and needed what had then happened, in her body, in her heart.

Then, true to the story, a few weeks later the thing fizzled out.

Only God could know why. And her problem remained, which was that the contact that they had had could never leave her; it became an itch in her mind, a disease of desire and excess only partially exiated by meeting Danny. To have been known by a man like that was to be known forever. Well, that was how it was, and how it always remained in her heart and in fact.

By chance, one way or another, they would not meet, see each other for a long time, months actually sometimes. The way it went they never expected to; but the small society of the Cote d'Azur often acted like a centrifuge or a magnet, always whirled you back through space, higgledy-piggledy to where you were once

before despite what you ever otherwise intended to do. That way they got to know that neither of them could escape their passion for ever. What goes around comes around, and when it does it usually hurts.

The temptation was too much to bear.
For Bibi, times like that, when the itch would get too great, meant that she would need to be with O'Reilly - when she was at a loose end or lonely perhaps - or if she simply wanted to have sex. She somehow trusted him in that way, like a cloned soul. Then she would leave in the morning, and they would forget it. But one day sometime later she would bump into him by accident and the whole merry-go-round would start again; a glance across the room at a party, a chance meeting at the market, passing him on the Promenade at Nice. It could be anywhere, the Blue Coast is a very small universe.

How would you describe such a formless thing? An affair? Well it was, but not in any explicable way, it was as if their relationship was part of their lives in the same way that you fit into your clothes. In a way basic, simple, real, singular. What they had created was now a permanent part of both of them.

So neither Bibi nor O'Reilly said a thing about it to Danny. Why? Because as far as their world was concerned they had no relationship, and besides, it was nobody else's - even Danny's business. It had been created separate, different, hermetic, and private. Oh, and it pre-dated this time and no one else had a part in it. It was their private history at the turn of the Jazz Age.

Simple as that. No goofs.

One thing; though they enjoyed their sojourns together - well - Bibi had got to know O'Reilly, was now more wary of O'Reilly perhaps

from self-interest, but anyway, wary of the secret O'Reilly there behind the handsome face. She knew now, could read his moods and of course his movements, knew O'Reilly in some ways better than he knew himself and so was acutely wary of ever finding out more.

To Bibi O'Reilly was a product of his location: Paris at the end of war, Provence now. And like the ordinance in the minefields in the rocks of the hills on this coast, O'Reilly could well explode at any time. A dangerous man in a dangerous place in her dangerous, treacherous, mind. For Bibi that seemed to be too vertiginous. But still, it was too inviting to drop just yet.

You might think that, might you not? Despite fact, time, life, Bibi, like an addict, felt that there was however still something unchanging between them. It was her mind, at that place most primitive, most unchangeable.

Thus if challenged Bibi would never admit to her old desire for O'Reilly. Right now she was content with the way things were between them, the personal space she had created with her curtness, Besides - Danny was an excellent lover. There was nothing much more to be said about it, was all.

And then the thing with O'Reilly seemed to have semi-died again, was the fact: Bibi thought she'd moved away in her life - and she left it simply that way - her new thing with Danny suited her and stopped the pain of insecurity. And then? Well, one day the whole thing started again - but in each of them - without the other's knowing. That was the picture of it. Unchanging. Could you call it love?

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Chapter 3 Danny

That way, when Bibi visited Danny on the ragged coast at his place after their first few al-fresco meetings, she would turn up wearing beautiful, playful things, artfully arranged for his creative eyes and her vanity too, crop-legged tight linen slacks, a must at that moment, a jacket artfully arranged so that it looked as if she had just thrown it on, very modern and fashionable. Expensive, sensible, light clubby blue leather shoes on her small feet and a small handbag on a curb which was looped around her

wrist. Sometimes even a crazy hat, which she would have to protect from the wind as it blew along the coast. A nice foil for flirtation.

The latest, naturally, for herself, for she thought about these things a great deal and she would aver that she rarely acted out of instinct. As it was she had grown to like Danny's strength, his height, his weight and the fact that he was an artist as well as a very good jazz musician, a double-bass player.

Then after they'd made love that first night she'd left him sleeping in the dawn and walked naked through the adjoining door and into the studio which was connected to his apartment and which looked out onto the secretive hills close to Vence, and marvelled inside that someone could produce beautiful paintings like his; it occurred to her even then - and more so later - that she wanted to be splendid and real, woman and nude, in his paintings, to be his

dream, his muse. But she knew not why - later it took courage to even accept his suggestion that he should paint her body, and even more to strip and then see his eyes questioning her whole person as he worked away drawing her and later making one of a series of paintings. She could be part of this, whatever it turned out to be.

So time slipped bye, and Bibi was vain anyway; she soon lost her reserve, why, in the end modelling for him became something between a pleasure and a chore; sitting there was boring, she thought, but then later she found herself erotically involved in his art, discovered new, unexpected ways of posing this lithe, exercised body of hers, practising posing in secret at the one full-length mirror back at the apartment at Nice that she now hereafter always called her 'collection of quadrilaterals' out of some impulse of his creativity.

Of course then being a model became really simple, comfortable; after all practice makes perfect, and she had gained the confidence of the fact that she had got to know everything; his body, his hands and his eyes, as they explored her. That was some kind of erotic security, she knew him in a way that very few people ever would know what she knew, and the knowledge was hers to own, to enjoy - until the 'Next Number' - as Danny always said, laughing.

The next number? The next number is always waiting for you at the back of the stage somewhere is the fact, she knew it. He told her that a painting like his was fifty-fifty between the two of them, her imagination and her body locked together as a wellspring, his skill and creative input as a motor.

That way the idea took her over too, but in several ways, one of which was her self-interest in being made humanly wonderful,

immortalised like the Mona Lisa or one of Picasso's women. There was another of living an erotically charged inner life that she could secretly identify in just a glance at her own image, a glance which every woman knows well of herself - and one special thing among the others, that she could possess something existential in him; something that she had noted in tiny detail as his eyes feasted on her almost mystically as she moved naked in front of him, charming him as a charmer charms a snake.

The power of being female, perhaps. It's always been highly addictive, the flavour of the times; Modigliani, Matisse only recently dead and 'his' chapel near Vence. Then Titian, Picasso and his muses, the smell of ozone and blue air, the background of rollers lapping a beach. And then the warm wind - sometimes hot as if fanned onward from a fire. Summer was rolling bye, the trees creaked for want of water in the torpid breeze and Bibi was herself, focussed on security

now and some sort of fulfilment at last - well that was how it must be now, secure. Time was always short, wasn't it?

O'Reilly. Back to morning, and a warm, lost feeling in his mind for her. Bibi had been there again that last night, stealing his time. She had hardly said a word, just knocked on the door, entered the house, stripped to illustrate her thoughts, while he made the usual welcoming pleasantries and prepared coffee - drunk it after that first time - and then there was the next time. Her appetite for sex was unending, and so was his when they were together, and annoyingly, this thing with her became better and better the more they made this sort of love, because sex was a drug to the both of them, was what made real music music, in O'Reilly's mind as well.

She'd left at six seeing him slumber, at first jealous, then bad tempered because of her

lack of control over him and herself; she looked at him sleeping there for a few moments, blank, possessively, then just shut the door quietly without a word. He did not stir.

Bibi must keep her distance. She didn't want Danny to know ever - maybe this thing between them was a more special thing than she'd thought, and anyway time was getting short, she felt it, her age - so she wasn't saying anyway, you can't back out of the tunnel of time.

O'Reilly.

One thing was, O'Reilly suspected Bibi was rich, and not only sexual and sensuous but also loaded. She got parcels and boxes of things from her Papa and Mama in Switzerland - sometimes champagne, sometimes chocolates.

Oh, and Bibi was never stuck for a buck; he guessed that she never had been. One thing, she spoke perfect English (having been, she

averred, to Language school there at Bournemouth). Besides, she always wore beautiful, expensive things and always had a gold DuPont lighter next to her cigarette packet, a present from her father she told him, for her twenty-first.

It was music was in O'Reilly's mind that next morning, as he woke; the last riff he'd heard on the second-to-last number, as he was winding down in his mind from yesterday, and letting the memory of Tobias, slip away. Tobias singing his favourite song 'Jack the Knife' again just perfectly as the closer for the umpteenth time after the umpteenth set, while the last moments of the evening ticked away.

Point is, playing behind a band is something a drummer has to get used to; sandwiched somewhere between the stage lights overhead, which are straight in his eyes forcing

him to wear dark glasses in the middle of the night, and the blackouts at the back of the stage, and while attending intently to the two other members of the rhythm section with the ride and the clash of the cymbals holding the weak elastic cement of the tune together with taxing counterpoints and paradiddles. Thus, just as the pianist is the mother creating structure, a drummer is somewhere between a father and a bully, challenging them to perform better and better, soothing their performances with the web of his rhythm, and yet invisible.

Of course that was how he'd met Francine, she had had a talent for singing, and he spotted her nervous approach and instinctively supported her shaky plus/minus attack on the songs she sang, with a strong raft of energy and a rhythmic strapping that lifted her initially weak attempts such that over the course of a couple of weeks she had begun to blossom, and at length

after more time, months, turn into someone unique - herself - which was what she needed. He could feel her need in all that. And then one evening she decided that she wanted her prize.

Yes, it was the drummer: drummers are often singer's fine darlings; after the performance and even before the applause was through, she leaned over the drum kit and breathed through a fog of alcohol: 'what's a fucking wonderful drummer like you doing in a dump like this O'Reilly!?' Jack, the bass player rolled his eyes, and smiled. O'Reilly had been single for a few months during the winter and thus was hungry - so she'd pulled an easy one.

They made drunken love back at O'Reilly's place after the set, she was hungry too, but for other things, for new fuel and new places and besides she was getting old and she needed new air between her legs, the oxygen of esteem and a fresh way for self-love - which is what she got

from him - and in time she realized too that there was something unusual between them, not exactly love - but what the hell, the sensation would last until it began to pale of its own volition, of its own nature; maybe never - how was she to know? It must have been Karma, that's what it must be.

Breakfast was finished and O'Reilly was in Danny's car again as it ran fast and slippery and dangerous on its three good and one bad tyre along the old coast road, the one that is inside the band bordered by the main road and the houses on the curve of the beach and at times intersects with the railway line that proceeds from Ventimiglia to ultimately the Gare de la Est in Paris. Danny always liked to live dangerously, so he thought.

The focus of his thoughts shifted as the car crested a rise and then dipped, running parallel for a while to the breakers and the

strand. The afternoon wind was incoming, lifting wafers of sand and salt and drifting them many yards inland like clouds of some perilous gas, much of it prematurely ageing the sun-soft new black tarmac of the road.

The Talbot slewed and corrected as it cut at an angle through a long section of heavily sanded highway, losing grip. Through the windscreen O'Reilly momentarily saw swimmers, surfers, and women in bikinis who couldn't swim but who liked the buzz, the Karma, walking along the beach and then running into the very gentle froth of the swell and screaming in pleasure.

But anyway he concluded that the heat was too great for him and so was content and lazy enough to let the roof of the car shield him from the ultra violet. O'Reilly faded back into a reverie in his seat, letting his elbow balance him against the gravity created by the car.

At length they had arrived somewhere that Danny had decided upon as a default. O'Reilly rolled half sleeping, out of the car to meet a new afternoon. Peter's beach café wasn't any great shakes. Well, what do you expect on a beach that seems to continue almost forever in both directions?

Let's face it, owning a rundown beach café and expecting a repeating colourful life is like trying to catch flies in a fishing net. So there was no special crowd of exciting people there, rather a scattered shrill crowd waiting and hoping for the unlikely, someone exciting to raise their lives just a tweak, make something of it that they had so far completely failed to do themselves.

The ragged edges of the awning around the roof flapped in the occasional wind as if to warn-off flies, which maybe they did by default, and the faded canvas of the structure such as it was

created an ever changing ululating set of shadows in the rhythm of the sky as the Sun rotated powerfully and dizzily in its out-of-focus deadly brazen socket overhead.

*But there was relief for O'Reilly's eyes behind the Hollywood sunglasses now, after all. A bevy of girls in the latest cotton bikinis - no longer swimsuits - for they were becoming passé after the pictures of Bardot lying on her belly in almost nothing and raising one eyebrow for the camera - bikinis blached by the sun. Fruit colours and red, grey, orange, faded sky blue, dappled green, polka-dots including virgin white and hungry yellow, among all kinds of other colours to dazzle the senses and the imagination. In the background he could hear a disc: *Blue Suede Shoes*. And then *Jailhouse Rock*.*

Some girls had made the café their headquarters for that few days and lay gaily twittering, sometimes in the direct sun so that

they could tan and then sit alternately under the scattered shrubbery and the palms listening to the surf, perhaps tempting others' eyes on the edge of the beach, or swopping watchful, idle conversation with whoever, or sleeping after a busy night.

The eyes they communicated with would inevitably belong to Peter or to his 'friends', arranging themselves artfully on the concrete fringe of the café itself, discussing philosophy whilst their eyes took a tour or two of less abstract things while abstractedly tinkling the ice in their glasses. It brought a new soft accent, a novel timbre, to the dangerous edge of life as a musician - and that was pleasant, O'Reilly had to say. Yes, the sound that women made together always brought him to recognize their elemental kind of energy as if it were the sound of birds singing, though then later that day or maybe in the next few weeks it would become almost inevitably packaged together with the

darker hues of desire and sadness and deceit. But what the hell. For today at least, the Sun was out and the sky was blue, there were no negative beef's in anyone's mind today: and besides, desire was in their eyes, all of their eyes, and usually desire is blind.

But zigzagging back to the moment. O'Reilly needed to discuss the next night's music: not only that, but the ever-fading payment that he'd warrant for the gig. Managers and owners had begun to open their conversations with him with 'Cash is tight, it isn't as good as it looks!' but, hey, this was about to be high summer and the cellars and boltes were busy and packed with sweaty nubile bodies wanting heat, music (and more). Surely this would be a good time to ask for more cash?

Nevertheless the problem was forever there: had been there for a couple of years - just how long could this continue - and what

about the winter, when the cafés would close and then only a few of the more popular cellars would remain viable? Those new discotheques were a problem too; cheap because all you needed was a decent hi-fi and some records; he'd even seen people one time, dancing round the bloated golden lights of a Rock-Ola juke box, inevitably looking like something out of a Sci-Fi novel or a comic book. What would all this come to next!

He borrowed Peter's phone, Peter gave it him from behind the bar on a long lead and O'Reilly found a quiet spot at the back somewhere and discussed the impossible with that rascal of an agent; their next gig. The phone line pinged with the heat while the crackles on the wires were smoothed by the swoosh of the low breakers collapsing on the beach. At least next week they would be playing a small dive again, one of his favourites, located down by the port on a lonely cul-de-sac near the curve which fronted the 'Bar Crystal' at Antibes.

*He liked the Bar Crystal, he'd sometimes sit there quietly over a *Bière a la Pression* and a *Croque-Monsieur* on a winter's night and listen to the wind whipping up the sea out-of-time, while the rain scattered showers of sharps and flats over the enclosure of the glass at the front by the street where the enclosure met the concrete and stainless steel - and while the waves battered the narrow sea front as if they would help it tear itself apart with contumely at the slowness of business.*

Now the crowd *came back into focus, the twittering girls advertising their string-strung triangles of pastel-tinted wares, while the whole assembled crowd swayed, expectant, this way and that, with laughter, waiting for the next blast of humour.*

O'Reilly, sitting at the rear of the café on a knoll of sand was visible from the parking, and when he heard a high motor horn beeping

outside in the parking lot he looked through the assorted moto's and ramshackle vehicles there and suddenly realized that it was she, Francine, sitting in her old but beautiful sun bleached Baby Blue and Lemon yellow panelled Nash convertible, with the roof down so that her hair could play out in the wind on the highway and challenge everyone to a duel of jealousy in her oneness, in her independence and apart-ness in her female world, so special, so intricate. There was a waft of music that he could hear, too; he could hear 'Rockin' Robin' with its great backing, playing on her radio.

It was cool was the fact. The radio was a cool thing to have, and she was cool too, waiting for him, showing how special and select she was, how lucky he was to have slept with her, how lucky he was to have scented her, breathed her breath - how lucky to know all of her. How had she known that he would be there?

#77 Sunset Strip

Chapter 4

Some like it anyway

The Blue Coast in the Jazz Age

had many outlets for jazz. That way O'Reilly made his money organising bands for gigs. Most times up to now clubs had paid well once you'd got yourself some kind of a reputation. His was of the hardworking rhythm-merchant - the patient drummer. O'Reilly had played in most of the Jazz Clubs and Cellars from San Remo in

the east through the long indented span of the coast, Menton, Cap d'Ail, Nice, Cannes, and even Cagnes with its famous blue light area and cellars full of whores and their customers more interested in the meat than the music.

Next, Cap Ferrat, Antibes, Toulon, St, Paul near Vence where he now lived, even at the famous Colombe D'Or, or two hundred clicks further into the midi, to Marseilles, even as far as Montpellier in the far west which included a host of seaside villages and train stops almost on the beaches of insignificant and precious unknown flyblown places like Saint Tropez and Juan-les-Pins, now being made famous and desirable by people like Bardot.

People in the know said that he'd made records, played in London, Paris, New York even, but they weren't going to spill the secret any time soon, and neither would he, after all it was part of his aura, so said Francine, and who was

he to change anything like that and spoil the buzz?

Joints and upmarket venues, women with diamond necklaces on their expensive throats, diamonds decorating their ears, while some it was said had diamond clips pinned through their clitorises if they were really cool or just very demanding and secretly expensive, after all.

Hipsters in wrecked, worn jeans and frayed shirts, middle range whores on the make, high grade whores on the way down, or just maybe taking a break: poor little rich girls like Bibi, Lovers and Thieves, marineros escaping from fascist Spain and Portugal, adoring faces - drunks out to get someone for something - they couldn't remember why.

Yes, the jazz scene was thriving on the coast that summer, embellished by the heat. By night the jazz cellars' walls would be running with sweat, but the girls were ready for that

and anyhow wanted that to nourish their fantasies; they wouldn't have come all that way for anything else from smart places in the Alpes-Maritimes. Rich Girls from big cities getting their kicks and the lowdown on the low lives - and getting knocked-up to boot - Country Girls from the mountains of the Massif-Centrale and City Girls 'Tres Schwet', tired with Urban manners, from Paris, Perpignan, Montpellier. Girls with foreign accents from New York, Barcelona, Sitges. Girls who'd got past the threatening Guardia Civil at Port Bou on the Spanish frontier for fares measured in centimes, in wooden third class carriages on worker's trains. And girls from Rome, Frankfurt and Berlin, Brussels, Basel, Copenhagen in Pullman Cars; francophones from London - because they wanted to feel the sweat on their faces, smell the men's sweat, imagine the weight and the scent on their hips, between their legs, in their eyes, though they'd never say

it. The air at night in those cellars was thick as a Summer cloud, almost turned to steam.

O'Reilly shifted his sunglasses to better grasp the scene; he sensed a moment in time NOW! - That would never return; and yet he was there helpless, powerless in the midst of it, right this moment - in the stream, right there in the impossibly surreal, dense air of Never.

#77 Sunset Strip

Chapter 5 Semi-Detached

O'Reilly.

Quiet times, summer light falling behind the screen of trees as the day waned. He'd spent some time cooking and talking idly to Danny, then Danny had pushed off to get the car and O'Reilly had finished finally in the kitchen and was now eating an unseasonal but easy pot-au-feu with a stick of bread, a fragment of local, delicious, 'Batard' in one hand, sitting out on Danny's semi-detached patio overlooking the ravine, when he heard the phone ringing in the house.

He called out for Danny expecting him to be home by then, and then checked down over the creeper covered hanging rail overlooking the fall over the quiet valley, and called out again but there was no answer from Danny, just the ticking of the crickets beginning to fall back as the cool air advanced. So, as the phone kept going, he answered it. It was Bibi. Impersonal, now as befitted their new relationship; impatient, slightly angry and aggressive, her nostrils flared as if she were in that sort of mood. After all this was a new time, as if he hadn't slept with her a few weeks ago! Bibi, the eternal student, still studying at the University of Nice, perhaps? No way! Bibi had other irons in the fire - actually Bibi always had irons in the fire - somewhere or somehow or other. Sometimes he'd been visited by her late at night, and she had told him drunkenly that she'd left her 'friends' in the Casino in Monte Carlo to come up to his place just for a good fucking.

'Well,' he thought with the razor of ennui, 'Bibi must be pushing thirty. Maybe more than that now. Ahah! That was it, Bibi was on the prowl - of course - time was short!'

A moment of silence while the ageing line ticked patiently with the day's heat. A reaction - not quite surprise - but then recognizing the fact:

"Hi, oh, O'Reilly... it's you... always meet you when I least expect to...!" She was lying, he knew it, plain as that.

They both laughed, abstracted almost, disappointed even, of course, she just didn't need the new contact with her forever new, old lover. Such things would bring back still lingering memories, some of them fonder than she required in this new moment: and anyway, that had started years ago. Don't feelings age? Well?

She still felt disquiet about her faithlessness with him, how it persisted: but she

hadn't seen him for weeks anyway. So why? Sometimes she would lack control, just need him inside her. That should read: needed him inside her. Past tense, of course. Point was, it hadn't been something she wanted people to know, was the fact, because, well because despite everything that had never really happened between them, she always held a little randy itch for him down there in her belly when she was feeling down, and that must simply never be allowed to get out. Again. And not now. No, that must not disturb the thing she had with Danny.

A beat as the line twanged again as she breathed, and then:

"Where's Danny?"

"He was here a moment ago... he'll be back soon."

"I need to speak to him."

"Urgent?"

“None of your business!” Sharp, discordant, as in ‘leave me alone and get your hands off me! Our thing is separate, and when I say, know what I mean? Fegafe!’

“Oh!”

He told her he’d get Danny to call back and hung up.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Danny came puffing up the path and barged through the door.

“Damn Talbot is giving trouble, oil I think. I’ll have to fall back on her Fiat.” Bibi’s Fiat? O’Reilly had no idea she owned the Fiat as well. There were a lot of things most people, he too, didn’t know about Bibi, he thought. There would always be secrets with Bibi, whatever chaos that created in both their lives. Well, you know how women are with cars, they buy the radio, not the motor. Anyway she (and Danny) had the

battered blue Fiat, reliable and workaday to fall back onto, didn't they?

The wind had changed; it suddenly blew hot and strong inland, into his eyes. Now he fancied that he could hear the shuffle of a steam train puffing along the coast. It must be his imagination! But no, it must be the wind:

"Is that the train to Paris?" Danny looked at the watch on his strong wrist, put it to his ear and then shook it like a cat would shake a mouse. O'Reilly had almost forgotten:

"Maybe. Oh, Bibi called." He felt a twinge of something, though it was far from him now. Jealousy, perhaps?

"Thanks. Always when I'm out! Well, then it must be around eight, the Train Bleu to Paris leaves Nice around then." Danny shook the watch once again. Peered at it: "Oh, it's working, it says eight-ten."

He felt a twinge of jealousy that Danny would be sharing his bed with her. What the hell! She was his all through her skin and in her blood they never had to think about sharing,!

Somewhere, way down the valley O'Reilly heard the pop of a shotgun.

"Fuck. Damn peasants, always shooting anything that moves. It's like the war all over again." He had always considered the daily pointless slaughter of songbirds by these 'stupid peasants' in these now silent hills as perhaps a proof of the fact that the local farmers actually hated everyone else - paranoid about their own insecurity and with never enough money under their beds - they killed anything within reach of their guns as if to warn each other and the rest of the world to stay away. Now that the war was over ancient hostilities had been resumed.

"We should go; better to be there early - and I can phone Bibi."

“My kit is in the Deux-Chevaux, undo the roof and we can get the bass in there too.”

Chapter 7

Think Of Something.

O'Reilly. Time to remember the old times, which was why he used the old roads, he could think and talk to himself as he drove.

Years ago, it was, he'd met her. He'd almost lost the flavour of it now, but yes, here it was still frozen in time; he could locate it and taste it like metal in his mouth.

So that old past day he took the old road, because habits died hard and despite the fact that while he was still new to the natives here he was old to himself. Wrinkles around his eyes from the sun, which is, apart from the fact the chicks liked them, why he'd got the Hollywood sunglasses.

*As it was, after so short a time he already knew a hundred turn-offs along that road where you could have a snack or a coffee or a *pastis*. Why hurry? There were times when, during your cruise down to the coast, you could just rest your feet and listen to an old nineteen forties seventy-eight of the Quartet of the Hot Club of France, Reinhardt and Grapelli spilling the beans as the disc shuffled along under an old parched needle, and tip a little water into the *pastis* to make it cloudy before dropping it into your mouth.*

Why did he do that? Because somewhere in his skin he was sure that soon all this, all of it, would be gone, all be already history. He knew it in his bones, more's the point.

The old road from Nice that progresses past Coursegoules, the D2210, is a winding, climbing, uneven one, and nothing much had happened to it in the last fifteen years that made it better than it had been before.

Think of a road of lost opportunities and secrets, age and youth, savagely blue sky and precipitous curves and you're there, in-between your dreams and the occasional nightmare. It winds its way under vaulted, rocky villages set for defence in the Middle Ages upon high savage bluffs, and then processes into the dwindling middle distance and crevasses, the rocky serpentine curves and sudden chasms. He must think now, think something.

Treacherous by day and suicidal by night, much later then, in the real world the road realized its advantages and began to rotate its energies around the farming of spreading fields of various unlikely plants - ultimately flowers.

As you approach Grasse you see more and more flowers, for Grasse is the city of flowers, most of the crop for the world's finest perfumes is cherished in the fields around this rocky citadel, choice perfect flower extracts after all being, together with reality, at the heart of a classic perfume.

O'Reilly pushed the Deux-Chevaux faster and faster along the uneven broken inclines and the stones towards Tourettes. If it had not contained the full weight of his drum kit and some extra stuff, it might have rolled over far enough to tumble over the precipitous edge. The engine coughed on the low-grade petrol but managed to stay alive, chugging softly, well

mannered, as the front wheels bit on the corrugated surface.

He began to see the main carriageway, the battered ribbon of uneven tarmac ahead of him, as the old road merged with the new and he left the last kilometre post behind. And then:

“Hey!” Ahead of him a classy chassis as a girl struggled over a rocky edge on the highway and then sat on a post marking the new road and pulled off one of her pumps to examine it, her sunglasses dangling from one spare finger. Seeing the Deux-Chevaux chugging up the hill, she put a thumb up in the air. Autostop, the international code for a lift. Artful? Probably.

He pulled the car over, recognizing the face from somewhere - clocked the babe but couldn't place her - but she was... well, nice.

“Hey!” She was talking while she chewed the arm of her Film star sunglasses; then she placed them carefully on her nose with a delicate

set of fingers whose nails were dressed in bright red varnish and began puffing on an American cigarette, a Camel. Expensive. She took her time, exhaled luxuriantly, watching his reactions out of the corner of her bright eyes, with the beginnings of a smile beginning to break around that mouth. So promising.

“Ahuh?”

“I’m driving to Tourettes, you want a lift?” He could see that she had been waiting for his reaction, the right one on this one-way route. Perfect.

“That was where I was going.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Tourettes? Huh! Besides, with flat-top hair like that, and those Hollywood sunglasses how could I ever turn you down?”

“It’s cool.” He gave his smile, like in the script. When he thought about it, her full skirt,

with huge white polka-dots on a faded red background, was not exactly the right equipment for long walks uphill in the foothills of the Alpes-Maritimes in all that heat, even that cooler evening - and the rope loafers... 'How do women walk in those?' She smiled disarmingly, as if she had been expecting the lift all along. She kind-of had.

"Got a radio?"

"Of course, madam." He smiled his Technicolor smile again; all the girls seemed to like that. But anyway, the two of them were already laughing, light hearted. It must be the summer heat. Drunk on bubbles, perhaps?

She suddenly wanted him to touch her, so without saying a thing she reached across and turned the radio knob, breathing across him, brushing her form against the back of his hand in a sudden mad moment. Sweat and Chanel. She'd seen his smile, too, reminding her of that

new actor Jean-Luc Trintignant. A Trintignant smile. How could she ever forget that? And he felt the heat of her, could pick up her scent in the heated air given off by the interior of the car, just.

Think of the moment, think of something. Click! He found the tuner and clicked it. The wave drifted like it always did in the hot evening air and meandered this way and that, finding weird harmonies here and there in the ether:

“Think of something,” he said to amuse her as he tried to attach the receiver to a wave, finally finding Radio Monte-Carlo which daily blared out the latest Blue Coast popular music and jazz.

Here, high in the hills, the strength was especially good on Medium Wave. If you looked at the landscape falling behind them you could almost see Monaco from there, right in your sightline. Yes, he registered down below them in

the far distance the arc of blue water and the sparkling pink stone of the harbour at Monte Carlo, beginning to discolour as the light began to die.

Odd that he registered that moment, but there was something indefinable in the air at that time, perhaps it was the evening beginning to quicken as the forgotten iridescent pearls of light began to slowly die on the ocean way over there. Then the moment stamped itself in his memory as he faintly heard for the first time the first strains of this moment's music - which swiftly had become their moment's music - the last from that moment, forever. And then the wave strengthened, O'Reilly was lost in the hugeness of the cosmos for a few seconds. Rock and Roll, pulsing and tuneless and rolling, the girls rotating their bodies; powerful and loaded with their emotions, the force of their movements, tread-perfect, smiling: but not in

amusement. "Like it?" She had watched his eyes, followed them, not understanding.

"Sure."

He liked her too, the dress, the top, the look, like Audrey Hepburn with a deep tan - or at a stretch Sarah Vaughan - the little smile seeking to become broad, attaching, attracting, slightly perverse, the legs beckoning him like a mad bad... And amidst the deep fall of the landscape behind here, the tall trees, the bleached hills.

Today's music? How could he dare not like it?

'Volare, oh, oh,

cantare, oh oh oh oh!'

She? She was Francine, tall, dark haired and delicately lipped, typically a Latin type, passionate and aggressive when she was in love, withdrawn and critical when she was not - and

he was about to meet her, want her, in the colours and the broad vogues of the south - which she in her small way encapsulated.

And besides, Francine favoured the brightly coloured, fresh, new, expensive clothes of this time, her time, as he did. Rare, often coarse and heavy, air and sun faded imported Levi 501's, which she had had to shrink by sitting in the bath, legs shortened by the shrinkage; worn tight with a leather belt. A short blouse which moved free on her body, cut straight and boxy enough to leave a gap which displayed her midriff but didn't disclose her brassiere, flat loafers and a small bag draped around her shoulders, which sat uneasily on one hip.

Chapter 9 Getting There

“Seventy-Seven Sunset Strip,

dun, dun.” Sang someone, clicking his fingers.

So O’Reilly re-focussed his out of focus eyes and there was Alexei, actually, all out of tune, somewhere near C Natural. Then that slightly disengaged, crazy laugh; and -

“I had hopes for you, yeah!” (Hopes?)

The Russian, Alexei, now newly shorn of his cool Van Gogh sharp beard and now kind of round-faced. Not so sharp, but still cool of look, so anyway still a hipster of the Cool School.

And still ruddy though - for the moment anyway - snuggling into a coat far too heavy for the summer heat, but still looking comfortable. (Impossible). 'Well...' he would say, '...you have to look cool, is the thing, lean on the bar at a certain angle, the babes buy it; you dig?'

You had to remember that, to be a Cool Cat like Alexei was. Next, Alexei lit a cigarette and leaned forward, as if discussing something confidential, which it was.

"Well?" O'Reilly, expectant.

"You listen to me, it'll work. I had hopes."

"You sure?"

“All of us peoples need money, and I saw that playing in a band means that you just cover your costs, that’s all, I know that you see. So I mean I watch, I seen you, all that time, hard work, and then just a few lousy fifties.”

Alexei looked lordly for a moment, stood with a straight back and sucked-in smoke;

“I mean I’ve got plans in my life, like you got with that babe, you know.”

He clicked his fingers. Very cool; click, click, click. Seventy-Seven Sunset Strip. Like that character, cookie. Oh, Oh!

“We talked last week, didn’t we?”

“Sure.”

“Good.” O’Reilly’s heart was sinking: unaccountably, pins-and-needles from his toes to the calves of his feet.

“So I got our first operation, you know. Like bought data, know what I mean?”

“Okay.”

O'Reilly shrugged, getting a handle on Alexei that way. Gesturing. It was cool and it was language; the gesture coming from O'Reilly meant, 'I could use some cash, not some hollow promises.' Evasive, empty, subtle even maybe but somehow masterful. Well, that is what it seemed to be to him at that moment, anyway.

“Okay” cautious.

“Like concrete cash, real bread, know what I mean?” O'Reilly looked purposeful.

“Oh, here's some.” Apparently as an afterthought, Alexei suddenly got up, shrugged against the imaginary cold with his hand scrunching around like a wild thing in his pocket or like a fisherman scrabbling in a net as if he was after something he'd seen, and then shelled O'Reilly out a handful of dollars. Quite a few bills, actually. O'Reilly didn't count them, just

put them straight into his pocket as if he'd expected that all along.

Cash was good, it felt like new lettuce in his palm, it even crunched slightly, like lettuce. You could buy a beer with it, get to go to a nice hotel with it and fuck a babe. Who knew?

"Yeah." O'Reilly started and then stopped and thought. "Bought?" He was Irish after all, forty pieces of silver? It put a cold shiver down his back.

And there were even more things that frightened him even more stupid about all this than at first he'd thought. So in the end he decided to just keep on going. O'Reilly figured he needed the money after all, and besides, he felt thick, really thick; it was his childhood malaise creeping back, the inability to see numbers and figures apart from each other: something to do with cognition, he'd spent fruitless hours discussing it at the university. Dyslexia was what

somebody had called it sometime in one of the Sorbonne lectures, and now all the data was gone, like his patchy memory (except that for music of course.) O'Reilly started again, casual.

"Tell me how you see it?"

"What? Oh, simples, I told you, plenty of bent money on the coast, I roll them, I get data about it, I get the money, I fuck-off quick, you waiting in car, I get in, you burn rubber, we disappear on road, we get lost, they've lost us, we're out. Simples."

It all sounded so simple that it must be impossible. O'Reilly simplified things yet again for himself and started at the bottom of the pyramid of his doubts.

"You got to research the marks, to figure out..."

"Marks?"

“You know like, the characters you’re gonna hit.” He was getting into this, beginning to talk the talk while Alexei was walking the walk. It was kind of cool that way. He clicked his fingers like Alexei had, tuning into the jag. Very cool, click, click. “You’ve got to research them good.” He was talking like Jean Gabin in ‘Pepe le Moko’, now, grating the words through his teeth almost as carefully as he would grate the Parmesan over his spaghetti; maybe it was all part of the thing. Anyway Alexei hadn’t noticed anything. He glanced at him and then lit another Gauloises, offered O’Reilly one. That way O-Reilly kind of had the feeling, felt like he was in there. Okay, cool, part of the thing already.

“Well?”

“Oh, I check them - yeah I got good information, I got papers with numbers on them, also I got info on some of them that’s got lots of dirty money they think no-one knows about.”

Alexei was on rewind, and O'Reilly could tell, he could see too, because Alexei was repeating stuff as if he wanted to get it straight.

"Old Nazis."

"Old Nazis?"

"No that was like, yesterday: they've all flown... No, new, like new crooks, they look just like us look, you know, hipsters, kind of cool."

"Well, maybe this could work, then."
Why'd he say that?

"No, new, what?" Confusion.

He stopped for a moment; he was thinking: 'I don't actually have to get my fingers dirty if I just drive, do I?' Now he was on rewind too. It took seconds and then he felt Alexei's eyes.

"Old Nazis?"

“Later maybe. I heard they on Spanish Islands, Barcelona, you know.” Alexei was getting slightly irritable. Next. Now Alexei was looking at O’Reilly, expectant, he was thinking that all his grand plans could hinge on this boy, you’d have got to have a driver who knew all the roads: so many unknown roads, almost pathways, higher up in the hills here which crept, even overflowed, among the broken stones through overgrown stony ground into unknown ancient gites, old domaines.

Point was, Alexei was thinking: ‘...this guy knows his way around after years back and forward from the hills. Oh, and he’s really hungry, like me.’

So Alexei was getting there, after all, getting to figure how easy it was to lose yourself in this wild country. He figured that out. Part of his plans. O’Reilly’d walked most of these damn hills anyway. Mind you, once upon a time

when Alexei the clochard had been walking, he'd stopped at a really remote crossroads - just a muddy track really, to have a pee - and the next thing there was a traffic jam from all directions; all the drivers laughing themselves silly at his antics. Well, lookit, that could happen on a heist too, you had to know all the tracks and roads, and he, Alexei, just didn't, so you could say O'Reilly was kind of special. Needed, just like any heist point-man.

Alexei looked at O'Reilly not knowing yet, but as far as O'Reilly was concerned anyway he'd definitely, definitely, decided that he needed the money. Simple, really. But still he had the instinct to finish.

"So how do you stop them knowing who you are, clocking you?" O'Reilly gestured vaguely at his eyes with his fingers.

"I got a contact... informer, reliable, like."
Alexei somehow looked confident.

“Well, maybe this could work, then.”
O'Reilly was thinking again, talking it out with his dyslexic self, wearily, scared really, repeating the mantra: *‘I don't actually get to get my fingers dirty if I just drive do I, fuck it?’* He found himself almost half in agreement. And whatever, ultimately O'Reilly knew darn well that he had no idea what he was getting into anyway. So he just thought to himself - *‘Just Think About The Cash.’* - Like, be real - the beef is Dollars, Swiss, Pounds, Francs, Salad.

“Ouch, who gives a damn?” Fuck it all.
“Oh, thanks for the bread, man!” He put his hand into his full pocket and could just really imagine it scrunching in his pocket like salad; just like the stuff he normally had in there scrunched, but was mainly, like, stones or crumbs from a Baguette actually. No, be logical, salad, is what it was; like salad. Just think about it like that. Ah! He must be getting there as well, it felt like the idea fitted.

And music? O'Reilly was a muso, after all, logically he should have his head full of notes, the whole item, the whole nine yards, flats, semi-breves, mezzo, molto presto, not molto fresco, not scared to death, not quaking in the closet waiting for his treasured kit to be seized.

No. Fucking freedom was the fact; he needed to actually buy time to get into the new cool stuff, actually buy time: maybe change numbers into something fresh for the new trend; change his clothes to something more cool; like change the music, get fresh new sidemen when he needed them to give the set a new look, a new polish, nice slacks and even a kind of loose uniform: change the style, be bolder and more creative. Whatever. Money.

A new kick was what was needed; and failing some sort of personal breakthrough for him, he was sure it must arrive any time now, the damn year was getting middle-aged, the

standards they played were becoming well, bleary and even boring, and besides, there was no time now because next year was worrying him, stuff was changing, and that must be just uncool and he just had to be stay cool, that was the thing, that's where the chicks were, the babes the... birds; he'd heard that new name for babes somewhere. Well, okay. Money, then.

God! Money, time, cash, bread, salad. How else could you get to it; in the end it was just all fleeting, was the fact, dammit. I mean tomorrow was a yawning question. Huh! Tomorrow is the Question! Always the question. And he'd seen it on an album cover somewhere.

There the fact was. Even now in his mind's eye he could imagine Francine's eyes lighting up when he took her away from here, somewhere, maybe a weekend in the mountains, alone. No musos or music or pretentious marks around. Quiet, no notes, just her body and his together

somewhere. Cash in his pocket, Francs, a whole roll of the salad. He could imagine it, she'd say something like, 'Hey, that's far out', because Francine always had that restless urge to be cool, to be right there and in, cool and with the trend, whatever it was.

And O'Reilly knew that behind all that of course, Francine was terrified of falling behind, just as he was secretly too, of becoming un-cool, thinking old, losing her grip with a restless unstable world that would never forgive her but that would surely forget her - all of them - in a flash if they weren't slaves to it - burning their lives like essence in a Deuce Coupe like the one they'd seen on the Promenade Des Anglais' that time, a baby magnet, a real collector's item.

No question then, to keep the 'Trend', whatever that turned out to be. His mind was turning back to music, then to money, and then

to this incipient paranoia. Or was that just his imagination? There was an inevitability about all this somewhere, wasn't there?

Whatever, O'Reilly had no idea what he was getting into anyway. 'Just Think About The Cash, Dammit'. Dollars, Swiss, Pounds, Francs, even D-Marks, who gave a damn!

He repeated to himself that he could imagine it scrunching in his pocket like stones; just like the stuff he had in there now scrunched, but was mainly, like, stones. No, be logical, salad, is what it was; like salad. Just think about it like what had he thought that time. Yeah, man.

As for the music? Don't ask! Nowadays it had begun to repeat on him like indigestion. Secretly, though.

And, wickedly intersecting in his head, think about it, fucking freedom!

Point was he needed to buy time to get into the new cool stuff, change tracks, dump the slacks and get American jeans for the next trend. T-Shirts, even those beautiful heavy leather Texan boots. Shit! What would come up out of the mire next!

You needed bread, you had to buy all that stuff. The next trend? Not the Italians with Volare any more - or Amami Se Vuoi or Ciao Ciao Bambina or St. Tropez Twist, not Rock Around the Clock anymore - no, that trend was dying, he was sure the new start must arrive any time now; would it be like, cool? One thing was for sure, he was sure that it would arrive just when you least wanted it, like a tidal wave.

Shit! The heat was beginning to oppress him; thank goodness August would soon be over and the temperature would begin to fall. Huh!

The damn year was already getting middle-aged, the summer would be bye in the wink of

an eye and next year was worrying him, stuff was changing, and that must be just uncool.

Money? Alexei?

Oh, and he and Francine: not that they weren't loving, randy, when they were together anyway, but it could be like, cool that way.

He'd never told her, but he always thought of her as that amazing living shape lying on his bed on her back resting after they had sex, almost still, except the puffing for oxygen, sweaty, her body almost flat on the bed, arms by her sides. It was then that he could have the luxury of seeing the puffy shape of her bulbous pubis, the scant mouse-coloured pubic hair breaking above the aquiline flat shape of the belly and the legs, the hip bones seeming to rise above the belly itself. Gorgeous.

And that scent of hers, her body layered with something almost like scented warm water, her solitary secret flavour as she lay on her back,

still on heat with her eyes just fluttering, her legs slightly parted to release some of the animal beat within her, breathing deep, letting the power seep out of her. Luxury.

At times like that then she would silently, languidly, always want more, turn on her side to find his eyes, communicate the idea to him, steadying the torsion of her body with a questing upper leg as she rolled and with that question mark in her eyes. And the time when she had answered the phone while they were still entangled, he still in her from the back smelling her skin as it gently perspired under his weight and with his energy all around her, especially when he was inside her. And she that time pushing his prying, hungry fingers away from her clitoris, slapping him lightly on his fingers so as to say, 'hey it's my Maman, right - behave yourself - anyway that's for later!' as she spoke into the great big black battered antique

Victorian instrument: 'Ah oui, Maman; oui, 'suis toute sol!'

Why was he there? Karma?

One, he liked her, liked her skin, remembered her scent on his skin and his mouth long after he'd showered, remembered the light textured touch of her pants, her slip, against the taught skin of her exercised body, glowing with the half-hour of sun she would take a couple of times a week on the shale at Cagnes-sur-Mer. That made him want to reach out, grasp her when she wasn't there. Two? That was a secret - but anyway, they would tell you that a package like hers was rare, a real 'Mount of Venus' - rare as Hen's Teeth; his eyes had found it but not believed it, and then later, luxury! His fingers had led him there. Perfectly shaped, firm, built for power, no - use - strong, sculptural, like marble, yet soft like robust formed rubber

*at the same time; delightful. A secret weapon.
His secret.*

And it was true, for when he saw her in the Levi's jeans she had had smuggled in from America that first time, there was this almost surreal, burgeoning roundness behind the buttons on the fly, filling the jeans as if her crease was bursting to escape, which it kind of did when at first they awkwardly disrobed, and then later when they ripped the clothes from each other's bodies, what with the haste they were possessed by. That was the first time he'd seen a woman formed as perfectly as that. And whenever they made it together after that halting first couple of times, she would scream like a banshee as she came, like she was being murdered by pleasure. He felt sometimes that he had mastered that absolutely perfect slit, wow, how he lusted after her perfection! How perfect can perfect be? He must really love her, or something.

Moments had traversed and Alexei was looking at him a little cross-eyed. Maybe O'Reilly was looking blank, he told himself that he must be positive. Think money, luxury, survival, stuff. Stop all this dreaming. Alexei was talking:

"You start as driver - okay. You drive my car, it's a black V8 Pilot, and it's powerful, fast and heavy. Okay?" He could've said, 'black, like in a gangster movie,' but he didn't.

But what the hell, if it meant more cash under his socks in the ancient chest of drawers, then O'Reilly was going to buy the damn idea.

"Sure." (Gulp!) All at once he sounded as if he was laughing - or was he crying? No, choking instead. The space by the bar was so noisy that were beginning to have to shout at each other.

"You know all roads - yeah." Shouted Alexei. That was his selling point, jealously guarded.

"Of course... I drive all the roads all the time, for work - I know this place like I know the back of my hand." He had to sound as if he had some sort of authority now, be cool. He took a slug of the Campari Soda and manoeuvred and jiggled the ice and the slice of lemon so that the glass rang a little, even in the rising din from downstairs. His throat was beginning to get sore with the effects of the ice and the cigarette smoke and the necessity to shout against the raucous voices of the crowd in the bar and the drunks heaving around here, by the counter.

As a woman jolted against him and glanced up in the crush, trying to catch his eye, he could scent her makeup. So then she knew that she'd registered in his universe, looked up at him, smiled to register again and then turned around, all the time animatedly talking to her friend while she rubbed her behind against him excitedly to seal the memory, and warm his ardour. Hands off, he'll soon be my property, you see!

Alexei's voice broke back in suddenly, unexpectedly, in a typical Russian bass, which reminded him of the archbishop's declaiming in 'Ivan the Terrible'.

"I figured. Anyway I need good driver, stealing is hard work!" He offered half a laugh, then O'Reilly joined in, such that they both laughed. Then he shook O'Reilly's hand as if to seal the deal.

O'Reilly looked around him; at two in the morning the crowd were either too drunk to pick up on their conversation, or eyeing each other up anyway, the unclaimed girls either randy and seeking solace, babbling the while, or down in the dumps. That's how it is. Anyhow, nobody had heard a thing the two of them had said, less likely even the gorgeous satin of the clunky bass voice with its short range. Was O'Reilly relieved? Well Alexei looked relieved for his part that they had sealed the deal, anyway.

“It’ll be a blast!”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. Nice!”

“Uhuh.”

Say nothing, he thought to himself, wait, do the job, don’t get caught, just count the palooka, the salad, the bread, the cash, the Swiss Francs: then dodge the lead. Something out of a bad movie, a comic book noir, except that he was living it now. Ha! Ha! Merde!

*What the hell, how’d O’Reilly gotten himself into this? He’d had time to think now, point was that he had his life to get straight, crooked as it damn was – what with damn boring rehearsals, the market starting to fall (he felt it more each day, and it would be inevitable; everything changes was the fact after all this time); failing money deals with the owners of the *boîtes* – pussy-cats like Ulla tiptoeing into*

his life and mangling it; the music and Francine's unknown secret weapon, her package - and nightmare, nightmare - a constant flow, a never ending storm, an avalanche of pretty women and their bodies.

Ulla, music, money, who? My Squeeze? He broke out in a sudden sweat, malaria perhaps? My God! A whole nightmare carousel of minefields waiting for him, on the beaches and among the rocky hills of Provence: Achtung Minen! - You got to be joking man! Simple was all. Fuck! 'Come home with me?' she'd say; and he'd go, wouldn't he! Time for the next number. Music everywhere!

O'Reilly was beginning to hate cellars, clubs and boîtes: he was beginning to be middle aged, suffer from claustrophobia was what it was, fear of small spaces and all those women, bending over in stilettos in the new short dresses, mini skirts, to let him see their pants. God! Phobic!

He was beginning to hate the effete Coté D'Azur, the faded beaches, the tan women, the sideways glances of the rich homosexuals in their freshly pressed linen ducks and their rope-soled pumps, accompanied by their nasty cheap bargain-basement boyfriends mincing along the Promenade des Anglais' at Nice. Endless, the blue sea and the sky, the Corniche and the palm trees, the Casino at stinking corrupt Tin Soldiers Monte Carlo and the club-goers and rich men with scarred faces and dead eyes buying disposable, good looking girls to use them, ream them and dump them. And the 'beautiful' empty, people. He was beginning to hate them all. The marketplace, with its spills and smells and cold bloodedness was almost upon him.

O'Reilly would say, were you to ask him: 'Fact is, show me a beautiful woman on this coast and I'll show you a man who is either riding her until she fades or is fed-up with fucking her and then paying, after all its tit-for-tat and in

his turn he's getting fucked by her demands as well. O'Reilly would say, 'Just who is fucking who, in the end? Does anyone know? Do they have any sensation down South?'

There it is in front of your eyes - and there it continues forever, the Carnival of the Chemically Challenged - know what I mean? What people get up to hereabouts is beyond me - who's laughing? Huh! Who's got a life? I've given up calculating: look at this scene on the coast - who can make sense of it - people visiting, women coming here as if it's a honeypot to get screwed; women coming here to screw men out of what they've got.

Sex parties up in the gites back of the coast and up-market fuck parties in so many Villas in the hills around; the girls are there for the bread, not because they like the punters. Who knows, in a few years we'll have all these grown-up people who weren't actually the

children of their fathers at all, but actually children of someone their mother met at a cellar like *The Main Squeeze*, or *La Poubelle*, or *77 Sunset Strip*, down the coast at *Antibes*, or in a *boîte* like that one across the road from *Bar Crystal*, on a drunken hot night this August, when some babe who had fire in her pants that night figured that *Mr Wonderful's Villa* was just right and anyway he was unbearably rich, so she'd just have to say yes to him on the rocks by the beach.

Memory is what it's at, because all that the most of those women will ever carry away are forgotten, faded memories of a few wild hot lost days on the *Cote d'Azur*, that's all. That, or something in their bellies, of course. Not the nice part but the real part, the *jism* someone else they never got to know put into in their bodies. Let's not forget that, that is after all at least a part of what they were really there for, their imaginations. Nature had them by

their short and curlies. Survival is the word. Ego is the way.

Then back home: and then the fact, that's it, the real stuff that real facts are made of, all those numberless kids who are looked after not by their fathers, but by those well-intentioned suckers who think that they are their offspring. It's just a semi-crazy world we all live in, isn't it?!

O'Reilly, and Alexei?

Ah, there's the trick you see; in a way pure sleight-of-hand. That really was it - pure sleight-of-mind actually - except that magic, it wasn't. You see, O'Reilly had become aware that actually Alexei was all about violence; and O'Reilly was his co-worker, it wouldn't ever affect him. Though it scared the shit out of him if he ever bothered to think about it.

No, it was violence that seeped from Alexei's body as he walked. It was in him, O'Reilly figured, at a molecular level. He even knew it, you know, hinted at it. Alexei had even told O'Reilly it was part of his Bolshevik background. Fact was that in his turn O'Reilly knew that his forefathers in the Revolution lived by violence, self-interest and dissemination. Alexei told him in a moment of clarity about Beria and the other Jewish comrades who made up the most part of the Bolsheviks themselves. Well, Alexei had figured that he was half something or other. Point is, he was one of those people who you feel comfortable with when they're your amigo, but if it was that he wasn't your friend and you didn't stand in his shadow at those times, well then you just wouldn't want to be there much.

That was the story. Wow! Survival. Back of which, with his Parisian background O'Reilly knew that Alexei knew all about that kind of

stuff, even if only by default. The Bolshevism of the bourgeoisie, the cliques of the Jazz age, how to recognize the snap of a stiletto on a dark night so that you could avoid it.

Anyway, I, O'Reilly, didn't need that - know what I mean? -which is where it all began to go wrong.

But that comes later.

#77 Sunset Strip

Chapter 10 In 4/4 time

Dark night, sprinkles of stars and then it was me, O'Reilly, and oh, I nearly forgot, Alexei the Russian gorilla, in this lumbering black ex-American army V8 Pilot, driving flat out along the D22 near Mougins and then starting down towards the coast; I could just imagine the blue sea sparkling in the darkness even in the middle of the night, like it would in a few hours' time in the noonday Sun. Lots of happy Parisians laughing and fooling and thinking about visiting the cellars, the boîtes like

Bataclan, Le Kilt, La Poubelle, and dancing to the music and not thinking about the two up here, robbing crooked people like flat out, to make a buck.

I took the Hollywood sunglasses off my nose and slipped them into the top pocket of my cool tweed jacket, couldn't see a thing with them on, and anyway, I was working now, must be serious.

Almost sounds heroic, put that way. Don't you think? Crooked people...to make a buck.

There had to be more to it than just that. And what would the crooked people think about it? Our first gig together, get that, how nice! Lovely, it wasn't. But we did share something, a hunger for bread, cash. I pulled the Pilot into the sloping impasse he indicated and stopped the motor.

Alexei was looking around him, as if he'd lost something, looking in his pockets, around his feet on the floor, and then:

"It were here," said Alexei, finally digging around in the glove box of the battered Pilot, camouflage green inside, black just about everywhere else. "I had it here!"

Well, this O'Reilly had to get some air. Couldn't breathe. Less evenings in the clubs, less smoking, more time with Alexei. Not exactly what he'd envisaged. What was it he'd thought, do you think? As long as there was hard cash at the end of it, well, hell... But: this O'Reilly? I was out on the cold stone of the street at that very next moment. Something someone said about Claustrophobia.

Then Alexei started to swear, in Russian maybe, his arse stuck out of the car, one foot on the slippery old stones of the sidewalk, cursing

in a crooked Russian song, something mellifluous and guttural at the same time.

Finally Alexei had found what he was looking for, clunk, scrape! Dragged it out backwards, muzzle first. I saw the cold worn black steel, the silver wear marks on the metal, traces of dust and sand and you can figure out yourself what next, attached to the barrel which looked downright as if it hadn't been cleared since... well, then. Even in the uneven rhythm of sluicing light and the dry wind of darkness it still looked deadly.

He said: "One for you, one for me" handing me the canvas bag, disestablishing me from actual physical force, but still making me once again completely complicit in 'Our Thing', pocketing the shooter backwards as he bundled it into his pocket.

He straightened-up and brought the door too, but hard, bang!

I didn't bother to lock it, there was no-one around to see us, or even to partake of the car. Merciful, I thought, we maybe looked simple minded, to whoever passed by on an empty street, though we were anyway about as innocent as a whores knickers.

Even the wind disagreed and suddenly blew Mistral, from the East, hot. And then stopped, waiting, perhaps. Dramatic?

Awful. That way we were walking down the slope quickly, away from the car and round the corner, fast.

Oddly the intersecting street was deserted, so no-one was there - quiet night perhaps but quite late - around four, though later when we hit it, we would find that the Corniche would be full of drunks from somewhere or other trying to find their villa or hotel, having been dis-located somewhere else by a whore or

someone almost seductive, or maybe just too many drinks.

On summer nights the visitors go on doing stuff all night, but in contrast the native Niçoise, Provençal's; the Southern French, are mostly like farmers, and get to sleep real early.

For the two of us on the street there were only the sounds of footfalls on the uneven cobbled surfaces, slippery and mired in late night moisture. Then suddenly I could hear the jazz wafting in the torpid wind from all this way off, C-sharps wandering around in the air from out of the cellar like lost B-flats, though the lights were only dim at that moment as they were fifty metres or more away. It struck me that the now grizzled Alexei must have some kind of a plan - *mustn't he?*

"See this place?" He indicated the corner on the far side of the intersection.

"Uh huh."

"You got it?"

"Sure."

"Right, go back to the car and bring it here in five - just on the corner, engine running, cut lights."

"Uhuh."

"Then we hit the road, maybe the Corniche, you know it?"

I'd thought of that; "Sure do."

"We go that direction, we don't talk. Like fast, schnell!" He sliced through the air with a massive bear-like fist.

"Sure." What was I getting myself into?

"Give me the bag."

I gave him the bag, actually half just to be rid of it. He was fussing with his pockets again, thumping them as if he'd lost something; well, not the gun perhaps.

The night was dark around the empty entrance of 'Le Chat qui Peche' and the yellow, pink and green glow of the neon's from inside the empty doorway made it seem deserted, like a secret lipstick factory just before dawn. Four A.M. and you'd think the excitement was over, the crowd gone home, or having sex round the back of the building somewhere among the palms or for the better off, in the back seats of their cars; quiet, hardly a sound, apart from, if you listened attentively, the occasional orgasm.

Ready to close.

All at once there was a discord from the band which sent my nerves through the roof, and then I took charge of my paranoia: after all possibly they were all drunk by now, or maybe a fight had broken out among some dyspeptic patrons - I'd seen it a few times myself - but I was walking away by then anyway, at intervals looking over my shoulder and wondering just what

*the hell all this was for, how it would all end...
a crescendo, perhaps?*

*The fact was that I was in too deep
already. Regrets? Not a few. Then I checked,
looked over my shoulder again and saw that that
crazy Alexei had finally found his perfect disguise,
a woollen hat with eyeholes, in his inside pocket
and had just entered the doorway.*

*I saw his shadow fleetingly as he descended
the stairs like a moth with big white eyes against
candle light. The music suddenly intensified as an
inside door opened, and then became muffled
again.*

*I went back up the steep little impasse,
got into the V8 and heard the contacts tick,
changed my mind and rolled it forward in second
gear. Then the big engine coughed on the poor
fuel and crashed into obstreperous life, fluidly
cracking the quiet of the almost-dawn night and
perhaps waking all the somnolent farmers. I*

hoped not. I three-point turned it and finally rolled it to the bottom of the lane pushing the brake pedal so that it was positioned nicely at the cross of the intersecting streets and facing east towards the distant corniches. I pumped the friction brake 'on'.

Classic getaway tactics, a re-run of all the re-runs of getaways I'd seen in a dozen bad movies; all kinds have graced my brain but those by Jean-Claude Melville and Jacques Becker were my favourites. And now we were in an outtake of Pepe le Moko and it was my turn to have fun, know what I mean?

I didn't have to wait long, because the next thing was that Alexei was back at the car, moving so fast that I hardly had time to react, as I saw just a flicker of something against the inconsistent backlights and the one streetlight as he opened the door, swung the bulge of the bag into the back of the car with one movement,

and said: "Hit it!" He leant sideways to resist the turn and banged the door too. I released the brake and the heavy sedan slewed as I took a corner too quickly, but as we burned rubber there were no signs of pursuit or any kind of risk and I snaked it up the silent roads until later we joined the major roads which would link at the rear of Mougins with the Corniche towards Monte Carlo, real slow in the pre-dawn traffic, neat and sensible even as we passed a Police checkpoint and they just nodded us through, and then chugging into Alexei's parking on time about half an hour later, me clicking my fingers in relief, in 4/4 time. Click, click, dah click.

#77 Sunset Strip

Book 3

Like Hot, nah?

#77 Sunset Strip

Chapter 11 Semi-Quaver

“Hey, Monsieur semi-quaver, you dig?”

Alexei was unexpected, suddenly there in O'Reilly's parking, walking towards his house door, waving wildly and gesturing as only a human gorilla could, excitedly flourishing the 'Nice-Matin' like an already tattered, fading grey and yellow flag.

Meantime, from the apartment O'Reilly and Ulla had heard the squeal of brakes and seen the dust swirl; so Ulla had decided that she was leaving, looking a trifle disturbed at the invasion of her personal space with him by the sudden

kerfuffle, but despite that, smiling that secret inward female smile that said 'I'm complete today, 'suis absolument plein', and smoothing her rumpled blouse abstractedly to disguise yester-nights passions and the fact that she was sated.

For one of his moments, the exhausted O'Reilly could see and then remember with still warm arms and open palms the full wonderful weight and shape of her left breast against his hand, and then yet still see the lace banding of the brassiere through the undone buttons of her blouse as she rotated and then she moved and the gravity opened the vagrant folds of the blouse to his eyes for a private privileged moment; another specially tuned something to remember about her.

The heft of her breasts, the shape of her arse, the arch of her perfectly formed back, the swoop of her belly, the run of all that delicate stretched spoilt skin, wildly swirling around her body, all of it busy, all of it working hard, all

supple and superb - poetry in motion. How nice is lust when it's free!

Point was she had told him just a few minutes before that she would have to leave soon to see her uncle, or something, down the coast at Menton: so five minutes difference can't have been that much of an imposition.

Then from the Parking Space, as she climbed into her car, Ulla glanced half-back at Alexei over her shoulder, dropping half a secret smile, reserving the full headlights for him when she turned the car in the dust of the parking lot and smiled at him again, this time with all the huge blinding brilliance of a new Sun, promising everything he had ever wanted that she could give him in their future, things that he'd never yet dreamed of in their time. All to look forward to. Wow!

Just a few days ago she'd given him a lift down to Antibes before turning her borrowed MG east towards Nice. They'd left together and it seemed to O'Reilly to be something romantic

that she wanted to tell him; instead he became aware that it was fated to be underpinned by a darker reality, and that he was not to be privy to that yet.

As it was, at any moment he had somehow expected her to stop at the next junction and drop him off - and yet that was not was in her mind, though she jiggled the gearstick as if it frustrated her.

She had a few troubles in her life which however were never explicable as far as he could figure out. She was in her early thirties, she told him adding:

“Time’s short when you’re this age and a woman.” He had no idea what she was getting at. “But they’re good folks...” she said in lieu of nothing. She drove away, not looking back at all, examining her lipstick in the mirror, repairing it after kissing him. That was all.

Anyway, back to the future: Alexei wasn’t listening - or watching for that matter - female Red Army sexual acrobats were a dime a dozen

after all, in his mind; today he simply needed to be listened to:

“You seed it yet? Look!”

The headline in the Nice-Matin read:

GUNMEN BRING TERROR TO STAR'S HOTEL.

Then: *‘Raiders escape with cash and valuables after tying up staff. Police suspect local gang.’*

The report continued: *‘Two masked gunmen brought terror to one of the Cote d’Azur’s most fashionable hotels today during a robbery in which they tied up and threatened staff before fleeing with money and various valuables. The armed raiders, who spoke with foreign, possibly East European accents, burst into the lobby of the fashionable Hotel de Gulf, frequented by stars of both stage and screen ...’*

“Is not possible to be foreign here and they suspect you of being thief, man?!”

O’Reilly was somewhat taken aback by all this, after wasn’t Alexei... eh, and wasn’t he, O’Reilly, the only living witness? *Living witness,*

Jesus wept, dead witness, what the hell, witness. Getaway driver, hoodlum, drummer. Lover, cop-out, no, faithless lover, lost has-been, unemployable muso, jerk. Jesus! It could get worse was the thing. Worse. How, even?

"Well..."

"I tell you because you my co-worker, dude."

"Well..."

"Me, I got French passport, my wife was nationalized French. You know. But I speak French good. Well?" He looked glum, opened his mouth and then stopped, screwing-up his eyes. Remembering something awkward or painful, or both. The thing was that O'Reilly felt minded to agree to whatever he came up with, if only for diplomatic reasons.

"Anyway," he asked before Alexei could react, lurch into self-doubt and finally Ivan the Terrible style Russo-Gothic depression. "You got something on the wires?"

"Hey man, you talk always funny, but I get it!" Said Alexei.

"Then?"

"Yeah, I got something new, let me tell you about it, dude."

"Uhuh?"

"Well, plenty of bent money on the coast, plenty of bent people got cash which can't go into any bank. Know what I mean?"

"Sure."

Alexei was about to start on something now. He shifted his feet as if he were learning to dance or something. He started, explaining.

"Now, there's a new deposit place in the hills opened about a weeks ago, they got cash stashed in there, like unofficial, like." This sounded kind of interesting. Something to do with villains perhaps? Anyway, O'Reilly was only the driver, wasn't he? Don't kill the pianist, etcetera - that is unless he's drunk and he starts on with the bridge half way through your solo.

Alexei was looking unexpectedly chipper for some reason:

"So, my friends told me. I found they stashed their cash there; the place - it's in a

new empty place, like a Commercial Estate they're building, know what I mean? Still constructing it - but the people got no time - they just hire boxes unofficial for their stuff to hide it away from the cops, the Flics. Get it? Cash, no taxes, connaitre. Get It? It's not official yet so the place is not set up proper: if we get in there fast they won't be able to trace anything because it ain't officially existing; know what I mean? Uhuh! So they had to find a stash because of le Flic!" He said this with Sherlock Holmesian expressive brows, and then rounded-off his performance with a flourish, his arms outstretched. "Da Daaaa!" With the butterfly stamp of a Spanish dancer. "Da Daaaa!" All at once he sounded as if he was laughing, but for what?

"You got the information?"

"Nice score!" Alexei said suddenly changing the subject, evenly, almost soberly as an afterthought, gesturing at the still hovering dust which the wind had thrown up as Ulla exited.

"Oh, Ulla."

"Latest screw, latest squeeze?"

"Well..."

"Nice."

"Good."

"Money?"

"Ah, money?" Alexei looked somehow expectant.

Things were going by so fast that O'Reilly had almost forgotten that he was the chief getaway driver of a criminal organisation. Timing is everything.

Alexei took his hand out of his pocket and O'Reilly gasped as dozens of notes fluttered to the fake marble floor. Alexei had a big paw, after all. Dozens!

"That enough?" said Alexei. Crime pays. No? "First cash. More. Later!"

"Well I..." he scabbled the notes up as he heard a noise in the entry on the floor above, as if whoever was there could see through concrete and would somehow get-it, turkey, anyway, maybe they watched his comings and goings. Well? He looked up at Alexei.

Alexei:

"I get to you in a couple of days, I get the plans of the heist - I'm arranging..." - he suddenly looked chipper at his newly discovered mastery of foreign slang - "and then we do the job. Professional, like. Okay?" He clicked his fingers. Very cool; 'click, click, click'.

"Is it cool, or is it cool?"

"No, yeah, it's..."

But Alexei wasn't listening, after all he was a real cool dude, a cool jerk, his brain was already onto the next plan, into his next broad, his next job, more bread than they had ever dreamed of, wasn't it?

Very cool; 'click, click, click'.

Chapter 12 Never scored?

“What’s happening - you never scored man? You looking depressed, Ha, Ha!” said the voice, laughing. “I saw you with that blond squeeze again yesterday, remember, dude!”

It was Alexei several days later, displaying the great weakness in his taste of women as he walked down the steps of the cellar towards him, followed gradually at an indeterminate series of binary intervals by a waif, a wispy little rag of

a girl wearing a thin black cotton shift which revealed everything (all bones as far as O'Reilly was concerned) and who didn't even see fit to change expression, just looking at O'Reilly with baleful expressionless eyes and then closing down and standing silently in the shadows behind Alexei as if she were lost in this cement jungle smelling of used-up cigarette butts, yesterday's lost orgasms, antique perfume and old sweat. History is all ifs and buts, after all.

Was she a child of the Beat Generation? Maybe. It was not difficult for O'Reilly to imagine her at 'La Rotonde' or that café 'Enfants Terribles' in Paris, or fashionably frozen in mid thought over a coffee and a pack of Gauloise somewhere deep in St. Michel, discussing philosophy while covertly exploring someone's body with her eyes and being surrounded by black bereted, duffle coated permanent students in clouds of blue tobacco smoke, arguing over the

meaning of life and the ascendancy of Heidegger over Nietzsche.

Of course, let's be real. In fact she'd be waiting for Sartre to fuck her or Godot to arrive, whoever got into her pants first. Could be Alexei, well, he'd scored her in San Remo or somewhere along the untidy ragged end of the coast, hadn't he! Well? O'Reilly shivered unaccountably: not him at any rate.

As it was, Alexei had something familiar and black and heavy in one hand. And as his shadow approached, sliding like a constantly changing solid over the furniture and the interior in a surrealist painting by Dali, O'Reilly realized that the shape in his hand was a semi-automatic pistol, actually a nineteen-twenty-eight model Beretta, maybe a leftover of the Italian Army whenever they had been on the coast; after all, he was only fifty clicks from San Remo, wasn't he?.

It took only a second for O'Reilly to recognize the gun despite his better feelings on the subject, because... How did he know that? He'd himself briefly owned one of these at the end, wiped it clean of the smear it had had on the once perfectly gun-metalled black surface with 'Regia Aeronautica' stamped in deep incision on the rear of the handle - then seen that the rag he was using to clean it had been left with red smears on it.

Blood? God, no! He'd put it down and forgotten it straight away. Plenty more in Paris, anyway.

"Got a new plan for our next job! Is that cool or is that cool?" Said Alexei, chipping into O'Reilly's thoughts as he helped himself to a couple of diminutive seats and sat down heavily on both of them at once in his thick coat, the attendant, silent, wisp orbiting around and then

perching on a bench at the other end of the room in her little shift like a witch - or maybe better - as if she were about to lay an egg. Broody perhaps.

He should warn Alexei; have more children - get more trouble - watch out for broody broods, man, that way you'll have to do more robberies because you'll need the bread, but after that you get less Roubles, Francs, in your hand, because more... expenses. And then she'll go off sex, tell you to 'go to a prostitute' when you're randy. 'I'm on a bad day!' like Catherine told him once upon a time in Paris. Come to think of it Alexei had blown it all once more before and he must know better than O'Reilly. Besides, he, O'Reilly, was beginning to think like Alexei spoke. Hay-zoos!

Berettas? Grenades? Shooters? Bombs? Knives? Rifles? Oh, all these old leftover killer's toys from the pointless war; the whole coast

*was awash with bits and pieces from the damn thing, rocky places in the hills around Nice which were bound to spend forever dotted with signs that said **Achtung Minen!** Lost rifles and dud bullets in the sand on the beaches, army leftovers, bayonets and commando knives for sale in the street markets, people offering him 'fusil, pas de cher, prix très économique' on an isolated roadside stall, otherwise laden with a selection of the latest fresh vegetables, tomatoes and flowers, halfway up a steep climb.*

Fuck it all, he was helpless, a leftover of the war, old enough to have seen boches who looked were deadringers of Heinz the singer being shot dead in the middle of the day on the Grands Boulevards in Paris at the end.

Daytime nightmares that would never leave him, bullets zipping invisible and deadly, everywhere, as he looked down from the height of one of the blocks there and ducked almost

unconsciously, relaxed, as a bullet buzzed by too close for comfort, fired by a boche sniper. He must have been getting blasé, and that could have killed him. Too much that day, that last week, that next week. Wars always end in a terrible mess. One day Martin was dead, killed by something or other - he cared not what - he was taken by private grief that day.

Then a couple of American G.I's came into the apartment as it was - with a long black scratched and scored machine gun and a tripod. The apartment all that way in the sky at the top of the block was apparently abandoned, had been ruined by gas leftovers in the rooms and the additional corrupt scents of cordite and mortality. And then came more firing and the smells of burning, rotting flesh, antique polished wood, old burned-out sex, and sweat.

The G.I's traversed the weapon across the yawning wide space between the buildings, looking

for the sniper. Bang! Bang! Bang! A deadly game of stupid played across the chasms of the old stone blocks overlooking the boulevards planned by Haussmann in the eighteen-hundreds.

Next, he'd heard the swizzle of tyres on the cobbles on the road below, saw in his dangerous curiosity a boches van being driven zig-zag, pell-mell, bullets pinging from its bodywork, heard it screech as the driver, evidently hit, turned it on its side in a swerve... heard the flat, deadly explosion of fumes and the distorted crackle as the petrol tank exploded, heard machine gun fire and the sharp cracks, whistles and buzzes of more bullets poisoning the air. O'Reilly withdrew from the window, feeling somehow victorious but not wanting to see more than one death, as one of the boche sprawled dead or badly wounded on the crown centre of the boulevard. He left him to his fate.

As he did so he heard a sharp crack! Close to him, and then a wasp-like buzz and the sound of air moving as the youthful G.I. machine gunner reared over his weapon and bounced to the dark floor, dead. Silent, not even a cry. Unmoving.

Silence, uncanny silence, on a bright sunlit afternoon in Paris, the capital of romance. Then after a few seconds a whole swarm of fizzing, buzzing bullets, all at once breaking the still air of the room, ricocheting against the old brick and stone, snapping mechanically and unmusically through the old wooden panelling.

It was then that O'Reilly ran from there - panicking - down the long sets of metalled stone, then marble stairs, trailing the moulded metal balustrade with his palms as it transited metal to become faded wood, then later mahogany.

He was taken by some sort of disease of fear, some sort of apoplexy of danger and

violence and murder; fearing the smell of death, fearing death itself. He was, after all a non-combatant, worse, a coward. Why should he die now? That and the dying/dead G.I. It was an image better to be left alone, to be forgotten, though he betrayed himself and never could forget it, was the fact.

War? A continuing landscape of pointless nightmares. He found that he had begun to twist his face without knowing, remembering forgotten images about it all, now, here, in the warm tropic of the Cote d'Azur; which was why he was here, running from murder and fear.

"So!" said Alexei next, brightly, not noticing his sudden agony. "What?"

O'Reilly re-focussed.

"What?"

"I calculate our next job is what. I figured it out, I told you yesterday."

“Aah, yes!” This was real, after all, he must pay attention to it. Alexei continued, not looking at him, sort of reading it out of his mind:

“It’s bigger than I figured, but anyway a heist I reckoned when I saw them Mafiosi on the take in San Remo; you know, that heist from the hotel last week in Nice? They got to hide their stash somewhere, maybe even in a safe-deposit I figured, but they can’t use a regular one, I told you, you know detectives clock them, they got records.

It must to be a fresh new one. Know what I mean? I got a secret pad thereabouts and sometimes I take a break there, that way I get to figure things out, I watch them in San Remo and I’ve been as far as Torino, I spent a year under a bridge in Rome, I know how they operate - know what I mean?”

“Okay?” Cautiously. Then again - what was the point of being cautious in a minefield which had begun to stretch from horizon to horizon?

“That’s their weak point, they got to stash it somewhere, and I figured out where it was, I asked a few friends, I got information, I took notes, research like, know what I mean?”

The next morning O’Reilly awoke yawning around noon and decided to practice, first being a drummer, and then being a robber. Well, you have to be good at it or that’s it for keeps, isn’t it?

First then, sitting behind the kit he tried a few paradiddles on the snare; but somehow the blinding brightness of the chequered horizon he’d conjured up and even the underlying stress of the day had got to him, an uneasy beat in a vein in his neck. So he decided that after all the playing he’d done in the last six months he just

didn't need any more of that and he locked-up the apartment and drove the Deux-Chevaux to the car park where Alexei kept the Pilot, eased it out onto the road, fuelled it up and ran it fast over the old road, into the mountains and then down the bleached stones of the secret unmade way he knew, not finished for a hundred years, weaving the car between the rocky abutments of harsh crystalline chalk stone, powering down into the valley. The heavy sedan slewed again and bucked as O'Reilly took a corner too fast, entering a long narrow path that he didn't know, but this was practice after all and his driving style, prompted by his memory and the character of the Pilot itself, big and black like any other getaway car he'd seen in a dozen movies pleased him, struck him as fairly gangsterish. It was a great idea, thus then he turned in a wide swathe at the rear of Mougins - with his memory straining to find a new, new way as he hit the D2210 because he'd done almost the

same thing just a blink of an eye ago, but at night - dark, dark, night - linking in with the Corniche towards Monte Carlo, weaving slightly, cool even; dream motoring. He was in a dream, sliding the thing from corner to corner of the road, almost musically. But then the front tyre blew.

Dammit, it was the stone chips the unmade road was layered with, maybe after all they would be finishing it, tarmacking it sometime soon. Money from somewhere, some sucker, you know France. Faint Hope!

He had a spare - but when he turned-over the boxes and the stuff in the boot, found some loose rounds of forty-five ammunition and a worn mainspring for an automatic pistol, but no jack, dammit.

The car had stopped close to a corner where there was a small house under a huge spreading tree; ancient, perhaps a plane, but

O'Reilly knew nothing about such fine things. He revved the engine up, ran it up the crude banking off the side of the slope by the road and somehow made it so that the Pilot was sitting there like an egg-bound hen, with the front suspension supported by a large uneven fragment of stone which he managed to manhandle over from the site of a collapsed wall, tearing a nail on his hand with the effort. He could leave the car there for the moment, the punctured tyre and tube would not be damaged by the weight now.

It had taken some time by then and he now found himself lathered in sweat; blood running down from the torn nail. Heavy, dirty work. He cursed the Pilot's weight.

Now he had to find a proper jack, oh and a plaster for his finger. He winced as he crossed the road and made for the only house he could see, the one that sat fortuitously under the

ancient giant tree, with a vertiginous drop yawning on its other side into the deep valley formed by the edges of the fractured hills which descended into the flat lands far below. He was short of breath now.

He could see straight through the shade under the tree and into the little garden, clear over the stone walls over the hump of a parked blue car under the deep shade of the tree, and thence into the abyss, could see the scorching air welling up from the abyss like an impossibly monstrous wave of transparent billowing liquid gas, moving unevenly in ripples, distorting the view out, even from there.

Fast moving points, shadows, birds, Swifts, rode right now on the invisible liquefied currents as if they were real muscle bulk, snapping up the countless defenceless flies trapped on the billows of the dense hot air. Good cuisine for them.

Could they be he - was he trapped on a billow of something he didn't understand? Or was this something created out of the place he was made from, Serendib?

He dismissed that with a smile and a shrug. Besides, the heat was getting to him now; look, every day he lost litres of liquid in this damn dry wind.

His reverie was broken by a crackly claxon and a squeal of burned-out brake pads as a farmer's ancient Simca van struggled round the corner, saw him in the middle of the road, evaded him with difficulty and then continued chugging slowly down the treacherous incline.

#77 Sunset Strip

Chapter 13 In the Hills...

The hills where the chasms cut into the hard limestone of the foothills which later become the Alpes-Maritimes, here feel their way out to impossible gorges and bridges over appalling drops, lead through to a honeycomb of roadways and isolated mountain passes intended for steam railways, blasted through billion year old sea beds by opposing armies in the eighteen hundreds. There, today and yesterday, and for thousands of centuries, the ticking of the pine

trees and the raucous music of the cicadas has takes over as soon as any humans have passed. If you perish in the jungle of these lost highways or if you survive to tell the tale, is not the question, for close to these steeps is a corner among the hills where Bibi had a hideaway which she had kept secret, never mentioned to a soul, behind the hidden elbow corner of a lonely winding road by the side of a hideously sharp, angled deep bluff falling to the river 'Loup' many hundreds of feet below.

Bibi was fortunate - lucky, actually - she had inherited the little house and its fruit trees and grapes from an aunt who herself had lived a wild life; a life wild enough to have been lived in Switzerland, Rome and Algeria, which meant that she had never settled down and thus to have died single. In the end, the ownership of the house and its attendant cats and plants filtered down to Bibi, who had not seen her dear aunt for many years. To make it still more

secret, the house was cradled beneath the bowers of an ancient giant Southern Plane tree, which shielded it from almost any weather inclement or otherwise, having settled its roots deep into the rocks at that point of the crag hundreds of years before.

Thus the house was a natural hidden haven for Bibi: she hardly ever mentioned it to anyone. It was her secret, one of the few she had. It sometimes reminded her of the film 'Les Amants' (The Lovers) a movie by Louis Malle she'd seen in Nice recently, where the main characters could isolate themselves... her favourite character in the movie was the one played by Simone Signoret, what a wonderful woman she was. And then this secret place, where she was sure Signoret and her lover Yves Montand would always love to go for solace and solitary musing once they had finished playing Petanque, boules, with their cronies on the sand in the place at St. Paul on a summer's night

like this would be, way down the hills and in height, just fifteen kilometres away as the swallow would fly. She'd seen them there, it was more like a family party than a small town square, just metres from the Colombes d'Or where she had often arranged her summer tristes until only a while ago. Just like Simone Signoret would think, she was sure this benighted house was her escape from a cruel world.

Then one day, one afternoon actually, she heard the squawk of a rusty claxon in the receding heat and dust of the day, a squeal of protesting brakes, and a few minutes later found someone knocking at her door in the dappled cool of the deep shade of the tree.

Bibi had been in the house overnight and was just preparing to leave for her apartment on the coast, her bags in her hand to load into the Nash, when this man knocked at the door. Almost at once as she opened it she recognized

him; yes of course, her almost-ex lover, O'Reilly, handsome under a thin coat of dust and sweat and with a cut-bloodied smeared hand and a troubled expression.

O'Reilly:

"Bibi I never..."

Bibi:

"What're you doing here, O'Reilly?"
Schoolmarm like, a note of alarm; against her nature. *Why?*

"My car's got a flat, and there's no jack... so."

Bibi motioned him into the cool shadows of the house as he moved forward.

"I didn't know you had a place in the mountains!"

"It belongs to a friend," she lied, "I was just looking after it, relaxing here, you know,

like when we were... together; I would take off and disappear for a day... Remember? Know what I mean?" She could smell his sweat now, in the enclosed space which had become unwontedly rich with her desire; suddenly, unexpectedly out of control.

O'Reilly? He saw that minute change of demeanour changed, despite the surprise of seeing him she was all at once as he remembered her from before, ready to go out now, lipstick-ed mouth, short hairdo, bright wide smile and earrings, perfume even.

"Sure." O'Reilly dared not believe a word that she said as he saw that change - as quickly as that - but he could remember those absences mysterious though they seemed, and anyway was perfectly capable of joining-in with her lies or fantasies, or for that matter both. All this seemed mired in an uneasy mixture with all that. Maybe all this was true. Well?

Moments passed and they were frozen in some sort of amber; they had hardly moved after first seeing each other. The door felt its way to.

Click, click. While they were speaking she actually drifted closer to him, imperceptible as it was in the intervening seconds in the cool half-dark, her smile all at once more alive and roseate, her fingers active and moving as if she had something important to say as he advanced into the house. There was something in her eyes.

Now she was really close, almost to the point of touching him - and then she was backing-in to the main room completely stupidly - as if defending something invisible - you would have thought defensively, guarding something he hadn't seen.

The fact was that in her mind the thought was that she must keep him much further away,

she must stay away. Things were too complicated already.

But in the darkness Bibi's eyes were telling another story: and her body readily corroborated it; she'd felt hot all over her belly that morning, she'd been sweating through a relatively cool night, kicked the covering sheet away from her - all of which meant to her that this day she needed male company, sex - and now her ex-lover had walked out of the bright blinding haze of a hot summer afternoon, and yes, she still felt excited by him. Irritatingly, her chemical memory refused to forget him, could pick-up his scent even through the coarse shirt, the odour of his sweat even as the door had opened and the fine wafting breeze blew and brought all that baggage of hers in with it, in the afternoon haze.

Chemical? What was it then? Of course he could not be aware of the fact that that was the first element that had attracted her to

O'Reilly when she first met him; he had a subtle animal presence - perhaps that was it - anyway, he had something, had something about him that was incredibly difficult to understand, a naïve, basic, animal. But why bother to understand, anyway? This was a pure accident today, and today her pretensions had suddenly flown, for despite everything she could not resist the impulse to scent him as if she were wild, picking the scent up out of the air like a Fox, a Vixen. She found herself wanting to sniff, to scent, as she would when she first was left alone in his bedroom after that first night, when she had spent stolen minutes sniffing her way around the bed, the room itself, demented, jealous of any strange suspicious scent that was not hers.

Absurd, but at the same moment she knew she must resist him; it was weird, the moment was weird, the muscles in her face sang their own dishonest song as she held her nose in

a way so that she could scent him and he could not know her desires.

Mad, but she wanted to: she had to stay separate from him - she had to push him away - and yet she had known him, all of him, had that something, ancient and constant in her feelings for him deep down, which she could not deny.

Could it be just the moment, the heat of the day, the sudden chill of the darkness inside the house, the yawning chasms of air spilling hot and dense like invisible, irresistible waves and resorting the air moment after moment, down in the gorge? It simply could not be the sweat, the tiredness on his brow, the finely muscled arms; it had to be something, maybe within her own body, the heat.

She knew that anyway her chemistry had suddenly gone crazy. Her temples had suddenly developed a throb, like a heartbeat, throb,

throb. And now her face was hot and maybe he would see it and read her thoughts.

'No!' she quickly put that out of her mind, they weren't on some distant planet, he was after all her ex-lover, and that was a long time ago and she couldn't start that again with him. Where had the thought come from anyway? Why, Nice was only twenty kilometres away down the winding road, and Danny would be waiting for her later. She must phone him.

But instead, she said:

"Get a wash, O'Reilly, you're all sweaty - oh - And let me fix your hand". Not meaning a word of that, wanting her will to clear his body, resisting her nature. She rummaged in the cupboard in the short corridor, found and then threw him a towel, looked the plasters and a tube of something out, and passed it through to him, opened the door a crack and saw his body

naked once more. Backed away, like a witch from a spell.

He washed in the bathroom using this old towel and she made him a coffee and something to eat. When he came out, the water on his body rendering his clothes all damp, she suddenly felt the heat creep savagely all over her so that she became aware the her nature was minutely vibrating, like a tuning fork; and then as she came near him the vibration reached a new, buzzing, hot, almost audible, maddening chord so that finally she could not resist but brush against him, and then later after making the coffee, mad, rubbing against him like a randy cat would against her admiring toms, the moment accelerating to almost a crescendo: and yes!

She was standing almost too close, well within his span, for then they kissed by default almost, randy, crude, hungry. She found she was now in a tearing hurry, pushed in to him, parted

her legs - riding up on his thigh as they stood there kissing - rubbing the peak of her pubis against his thigh with a new found mad urgency, to make herself hot because that was what she needed, instant heat, instant high.

This was no time for manners, and besides he had known her almost too well for such a long time; there was nothing that he did not know about her, her body. Why had they ever broken away from each other? Hell!

Then he above her and his mouth seeming to be directly down on hers as he simply put his hand up her dress and yanked her pants down. She didn't resist him, she wanted this, his rough injured fingers against her lips, opening her to him right here on the floor, her back against the rough cord of the old carpet, incised with the sandy dust of the coast, a burn from the cord of the floor like rope-burn coursing right through her back and her rump and along the length of

her legs in the wilderness of her movements and her blazing desire. One leg straggling along the carpet width, the other manoeuvring to allow him whatever he wanted: bruises high up on her thigh, pain. But pain can also be pleasure. Now!

At that moment of total abandon she had this screaming in her to have him, shrieking for all of him, for his stuff inside her, over her, around her.

What heaven, what lost innocence!

Chapter 14 Semi-Semi

“You do it like this.” Alexei

gestured in a professorial kind of way as he reached across the compartment, took the wheel in his right hand and savagely skewed the Pilot into the narrow impasse which lead into the village. Close!

It was a balmy night and the small village with its gaily coloured houses and bright clay coloured main street was deserted as they passed through, turned up the hillside a bit and then

turned hard left into a cleared space, timber on one side, bricks and masonry on the other, a cement mixer ahead of them through the wire fence. This place was what Alexei sought, had scribbled drawings of, had hunted on the map, and O'Reilly distantly remembered finally, and so had found in the mess of the scattered unmade roads up here.

Despite the fact it was really late, early in the morning - the temperature was still in the high twenties - hot, and with those damn thick gloves on O'Reilly's hands were alternately cold, hot, and then just sweaty, slippery. Robbery was never easy, despite what Alexei said.

Now at last the dusty Pilot screeched to a halt stood outside a compound which was obviously still a building site, a place in the mountains faced with security gates which Alexei proceeded to break into with a huge pair of US

Army surplus bolt cutters and then twist a skein of lost wire to give it a temporary closure after they rolled through - thus the appearance of not being breached, to the uninterested eye. There were no onlookers that night, and the night was gathering darker still, only stars overhead.

Next, puffing because of the heat, salty sweat running into his eyes. Alexei:

“Quickly, in quickly!” Three in the morning, a Saint’s day, therefore no-one much in the little town three hundred metres away down the up-slope because the townsfolk were celebrating some religious mumbo-jumbo somewhere else.

Huh! Anyway, now he and Alexei were in the back lot of the upcoming ‘Zone Commercial’, looking for the only complete building in a sight composed mainly of banks of parked equipment and piles of builder’s dirt, cheap bricks and bendy metal partitions. This building, which had been

of course Alexei's target, was actually the only finished building there with an occupant, and let's face it, that showed.

Presto! And the only thing that moved apart from the Pilot as it chugged along softly among the piles of sand and stuff at the back of the lot were the trees, and they only slightly.

"No, not semi-semi!" Alexei pointed across him, suddenly grabbed the wheel out of O'Reilly's hands again and wrenched it round once more, the Pilot throwing up a clattering spray of fine dust and gravel and bits as it skittered through ninety degrees, recoiled onto two wheels for a moment and then smashed into the invisible wall which was in deep shadow round the back of the structure.

No fairy touch from Alexei, then.

One further nuzzle, as the Pilot jolted slightly backwards in neutral and the recently made but prematurely middle-aged tacky

brickwork of the narrow stretch of wall between two buttresses twitched, began to display powdered cement trickles, and then crumbled and finally collapsed in stop-go slow-motion in a cloud of dust, leaving a dark gap between the structural pontoons of the decayed structure of the wall which would give the two of them just sufficient room to push through into who knew where.

“Semi-nice!”

O'Reilly gingerly picked a couple of bricks from where they had fallen on the bonnet of the Pilot while Alexei, clumsy in his gloves, was consulting yet another plan he'd sketched on the back of another sheet of used-up packaging paper. God knows where he had got that from but it was yards long, like a lost take out of a Marx Brothers movie perhaps. Anyway...

O'Reilly was all paranoia suddenly: the silence was almost oppressive and he realized that

they must have made one hell of a clatter. *Le Flics*, the cops - they must move or it would be curtains for him, like in '*Pepe le Moko*'

Darkness; where's the torch? Ah, yes. Now Alexei, snatching up the capacious canvas carpet bag from the dark floor of the Pilot, hefting it like a barbell, clanking, with something heavy within.

But first they had to move straight through the hole in the brickwork; O'Reilly now dragging the barbell-weight bag along the floor, muscles protesting; and then... Ah!

At a remove of half a pace, they strode straight into a yellow something which flexed as if it were resisting them. Alexei flashed the torch, the membrane moved as if the flaccid wind were trying in its turn, then he gave the something a giant nudge with his friendly sledgehammer. *Bang!*

They were quickly straight through the back of the plaster wall which had decided finally to explode into clouds of bright, finely sifted fragrant dust: dancing dust and falling traces of yellow. Summer Fairyland in the torch light, sticky as treacle and thick as a pea-souper.

The theatrical shower of plaster had taken O'Reilly by surprise - and then the cloud of fine powder blinded him - made his sweating face under the choking balaclava a perfect layering ground for the constantly thickening coat of plaster dust, turning them both into a procession of animated scarecrows.

So they blundered all along the corridor, ghostly empty offices to right and left, O'Reilly tripping over the carpet bag with its clanking contents, following the jiggling torch beam skidding over the linoleum and the busted remains of the plaster in the dark, until he saw the number '42' reflected crookedly in the internal reflections of the thick green bullet

proof glass of an otherwise innocuous door at the end of the short corridor. Alexei puffed along behind him and then hefted the sledgehammer and banged the lock plate playfully, a few times.

Finally the metal door crashed open and the thick green glass pane which had made it look so impenetrable bounced out of its mounting and slithered down mutely between the open door and the wall. There was a light in the bag too, Alexei took it out and pointed it at the ceiling of the windowless room.

Now. There were he and Alexei, looking like two abominable snowmen in the raw cement square of the room, mouthing oaths, wearing balaclavas which made their heads look as if they were formed out of thick yellowish lava, their eyes blinking in the black slits until they could clear them themselves.

Alexei was suddenly lame, staggered to the carpenters bench that was by the centre table and sat and began to pick plaster out of his eyes with a probing little finger as O'Reilly shook himself out, managed to take a lungful of air

and then straightened up and took a look at the room itself.

*Glittering somehow tawdrily in the reflected torchlight, it was lined with metal key slots, each side constructed of strong steel safe-deposit boxes in tight fitting metal racks, rising from just above floor level to around head-height; on one side with red, numbered tags; the other sides green, blue, and yellow. Around fifty boxes per row, five deep, he counted. That made, to his reckoning, around two hundred and fifty locked boxes each wall: a thousand in total. So, according to Alexei there was a fortune to be found in one of them. Cash? Diamonds? Only God knew, and the problem was, could they find the right box, break the lock, then transport the money, the jewels, the stuff whatever it was back through the hole in the wall before someone found the car, covered in fashionable yellow dust and nosed into the brickwork of the one complete building in the trading estate at a strange angle, detected the break-in and called *Les Flics*? Oh, and could they do it all in total*

darkness? No time to goof. No time left for anything else much either.

“Figure something out!” Said Alexei. Peering at him with one eye closed as the torch beam ran riot over the zigzag formations of dust, wool and sweat on his face.

O'Reilly looked at Alexei: thinking ‘Now look at the fine mess you’ve got us into Alexei!’

“Hey man,” said Alexei, now hip and somehow buoyant in his flat-top crew-cut (he’d given up with the disguise because there was nobody there anyway and also because anyway it was too darned hot; so you see the hood was at his feet now), “Don’t, like, flip about it, it’s under control!” Alexei dragged out another of his scraps of paper, this one the back of a butcher’s receipt with pictures of a happy cow and a friendly horse on either side at the head of the sheet. He began to read something, apparently scrawled in Cyrillic in coarse heavy pencil, turned the sheet around as if it could be read from any direction, thumped the paper with his hand and then removed his gloves as he

cleared the left-overs of the plaster from one eye with his free hand.

“Here.”

This was all as clear as mud to O’Reilly.

“What?”

“It says red twenty-two. Oh and blue twenty-two too”

“Red twenty two?”

“That end.” He gestured towards their end of the room; sure enough the number twenty-two was right there just a couple of metres away, punched into the coloured steel of the door flap. Alexei bent to the carpet bag on the floor and produced a couple of jemmies, a huge lumpen cold chisel, the bolt cutters and something swathed in old shirts and a bit of scurvy towelling which unwrapped to become a small and blue-black package with bands of yellow on it, which seemed clammy to his eyes, he could see the bloated drops looking as if they were somehow permanent. It came up in his memory as if out of a deep well:

“My God! Nitro Glycerine... and sweating, Jesus!” Even O’Reilly knew that was, well, deadly.

“We use the jemmies first, if that don’t work, the chisel and if that don’t work - the Nitro - I made it myself yesterday, it’s nice and fresh.” O’Reilly was so much in awe of Alexei’s weird skills that he could do nothing but follow his instructions.

Well, you could say that Alexei was smart. Or pretty soon they could be in little bits all over Provence. So first Alexei selected a random locker and worked at it with the longest jemmy. After a couple of massive heaves the flap flew open to reveal an inner door, chamfered close by the edges of the structure. He heaved at that but the problem obviously was that it was on some sort of internal set of steel rails: the idea being that only the owner of the key to this particular lock could open the lock and slide the drawer out, while in the meantime the structure of the whole wall, being of metal, would hold each section together and reinforce the other

sections. Smart? Well French metalwork is not that good actually and anyway, ah, but Alexei figured he was smarter. He broke the door flaps around their target locker and he banged at it with the chisel and the sledgehammer: this seemed pointless to O'Reilly until, unannounced, a crack appeared in the edge of the honey-comb and suddenly number twenty-two sprang out of the wall as if propelled by springs, bounced twice on the linoleum and then skittered to a halt by O'Reilly's feet. So Alexei was smart, after all!

O'Reilly looked for his watch, wiped the plaster and sweat from it and realized that they had already been at this for one and a half hours.

Next the blue box, which took only a few minutes now that they had the secret. The two boxes were heavy and rather than open them then they'd take them some place where they could open them at their own speed.

So, next Alexei thumped the frame with the chisel and the sledgehammer and suddenly the air filled with currency notes: one of the other boxes in the frame had cracked and the

floor was now layered in money, some Swiss, some Dollars, some pounds. Noticeably no Francs. Well, that was the latest informed commentary on the watertight French currency, then. On impulse O'Reilly began to stoop, fill his pockets with the heavenly confetti, but then Alexei caught his hand and motioned: their strong boxes first.

They humped the boxes into the carpet bag, dumped the equipment on the floor - when Alexei suddenly decided that they should blow the place up.

"Destroy evidence, no?"

What could O'Reilly do? Alexei had a time switch, a battery with little rotating brass buttons on it - and besides, the Nitro was sweating, sensitive to the slightest movement, and would blow anytime soon anyway - so let him wire the thing up and that way they would both get out of here without blowing themselves to pieces. Destroy the evidence. Anything is possible, you know.

They were out back before he realized that Alexei had wired the Nitro to the switch or something. Suddenly he was gripped by fear, urgency, nightmares in his imagination.

“When’s it going to blow?”

“Long time, dude. Half hour.” Alexei looked at his watch, the Pilot was in reverse; O’Reilly crashed the gears into first, sweat pearling around his collar because he didn’t believe:

“About thirty minutes, maybe the timer...”

Bang!

The roof of the building behind them shook, the earth shook and a cloud of little pieces of shredded banknote began to descend on the site like printed snow in midsummer, as the two of them began to shake in the surprise of their close escape.

He managed to wrest the gate open with unsteady hands, then accelerate the Pilot down the slope away from the gates and into the rough dangerous mountain roads among the deep

*hills, and the darkness of the flittering shadows
in the gathering dawn.*

“You think I calculated wrong?”

“You bet you did, Alexei!”

Chapter 15 A moment...

The P.A and its speakers were being tested

making the sound very loud in the cellar. As it happened O'Reilly was waiting for the band and setting up the kit for a run-through, when, at the loudest part of a crescendo he heard something noisily 'bing!' off the wall, clattering around the room and then prettily zizz-ing the cymbals, finally landing on the horizontal skin of the snare drum with a flat clatter. Clack. Snap.

It was as if you'd shouted something but and then had it drowned out by a loud bang. A moment, the zip of whatever it was, accented by a faint, growing smell of burning. Well that was how it seemed to him; O'Reilly looked around and his memory whirred.

One day at a party long ago in Paris O'Reilly was resting on the back of a sofa trying to get the ringing out of his ears while the usual shenanigans went on around him. Huge din.

The couple who sat on the seat of the sofa itself were shouting at each other, obviously very much in lust and quite drunk. They laughed and joked and as the music changed and then started again she opened her mouth and shouted to her lover at the top of her voice: 'Do you remember we had our first fuck to this record.'

Only that, at that precise moment there was a sudden cessation of sound - everything stopped - and she bawled it at the whole crowd

in a crystal clear, almost icy silence. Then the party immediately restarted and the din grew in intensity again, and everyone but the lovers forgot what had happened. O'Reilly? He never could, not that it was notable, you understand. Well, that was one party joke they wouldn't find easy to tell.

Back to the loud noise, the clack, the snap. O'Reilly was at first taken aback, he was a couple of metres from the kit at that moment but still had seen something small, kind of shiny, yet dull, misshapen yet round with a trace of pink paint upon it from the ceiling (he guessed) - rotating with the last of its energy expelled on the dappled dirty grey of the drumhead. Now he realized what that must have been. He'd seen it before, after all: two hundred and thirty grains of lead, maybe a little less, with the couple of ridges it had left in the walls showing their pale plaster base and plaster dribbling out in the slipstream of the vibration of the P.A.

He reached over and picked up the bullet, which was now mysteriously cold, having lost all its energy. He was left just standing there for a moment, any object in the club being half-in and half-out of the cellar's darkness and the only lights being that of the glaring unshaded ones that they used to be able to clean the place.

Then, like someone out of a movie by Godard, all questions and no answers, O'Reilly suddenly saw Alexei, half in the dark, half in the glare of a bulb under one of those dented green tin shades, at the place by the stairs where the passageway wound away from his eyes, holding out one hand as if he were about to over-balance, looking a bit taken aback, shaken, with smoke coming out of his coat as if he was on fire, and a large hole charred in the front of it spoiling the once really cool looking, heavy mottled Italian tweed. The latest thing. Invisible mending possible? Who knows?

Alexei was looking down at the hole, enquiringly. O'Reilly shouted across to him, the bang seemed to have made O'Reilly suddenly deaf, there was a whistling in his ears. Fortunately there was nobody else there; the cellar was mercifully empty.

"What was that?"

"The damn gun just went bang!" Alexei shouted back and then inspected the muzzle and finally peered at O'Reilly, half apologetic, kind of surprised.

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77 Sunset Strip'

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