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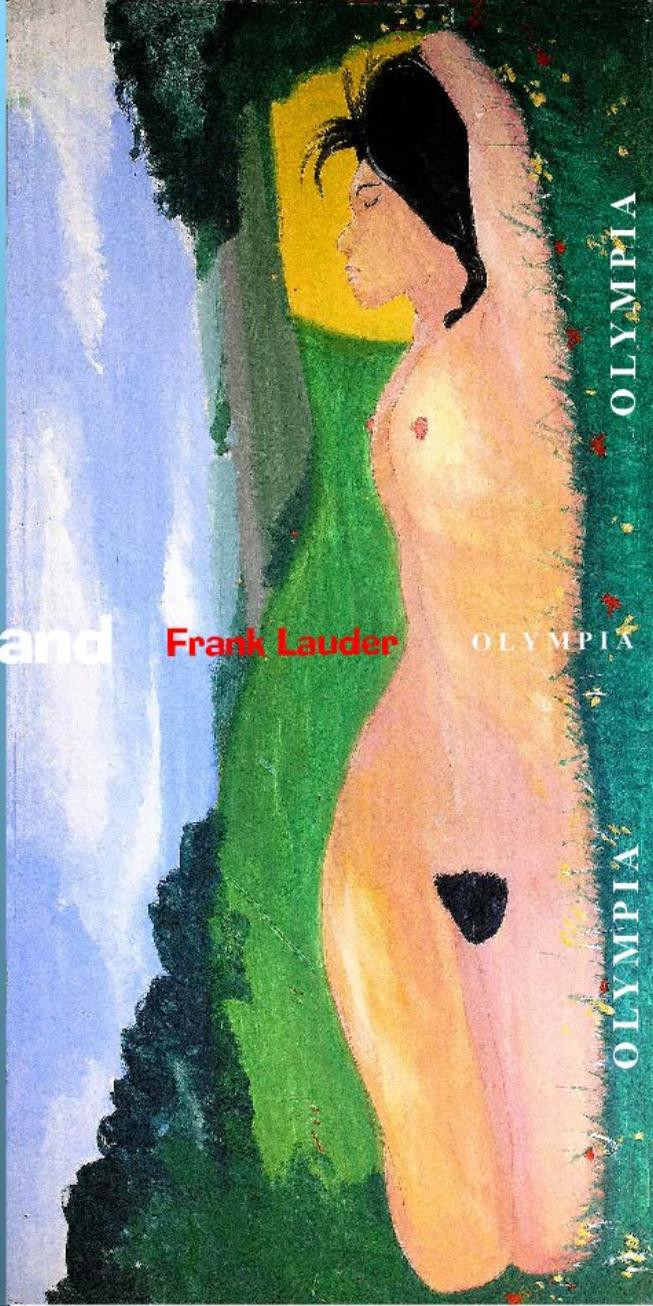
Frank Lauder

#Birdland

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... been she thought, all around her wherever she went in Europe.

Later she picked her way along the curve of a new discovery, an unexpectedly hidden Georgian square, the paving stones worn by time and thought into the radiating cut-out patterns and stone graphics of umbrae and penumbras. The light had begun to fade in the late afternoon, so much so that she expected to find at some point the colourful ranged scintillas of oil stains at her feet.

A passing casual glance might see her as a slightly faded beauty, a questioning eye see that actually she was occupied otherwise but by herself. In fact at that moment Christiane Moore was thinking about her erstwhile lost lover, PT Jones.

So Christiane Moore paced, while at the same time in her mind she was impatient, waiting, sure that sometime down the line whenever he arrived there, PT Jones would phone her, she was certain of that. So many days had passed since she had last seen him that the memory of him had developed into something unworldly, an agony, no, a controlled irritation, no, more a throb, like a continuing bruise of forgetfulness become recent memory become that fading grey day itself.

You see, in the mind of Christiane Moore there was still something real between them, she and PT Jones, two lovers distanced by time. A fact that had never before failed to bring them together. A fact. Again and again, in the centrifuge of their own space, like a restless emotional magnet, a pulse extended itself to claim them, a pulse that never failed to find another vital space for them.

She had questioned herself again and again. Sat in her room and creased her brow. What was this impulse and from where had it come? Was it romance, perhaps, sex, or in her real world maybe just the elemental savage force of her lust, desire that lit like a flame in her belly when she was with him and failed ever to expire when he was not there by her side.

PT Jones had become in fact her second obsession, the first in the now distant past fading slowly in her memory to merely a dangerous poison. Or, she conjectured, was it the straight function of her need, possession, and her requirement to control the subtle electricity, the power of her second lover? Nothing seemed clear in her life anymore, in fact nothing around her as well as those factors in her mind. And anyway, after a time of pain Christiane More had got to know that such thoughts are timeless, pointless and unknowable.....

An hour later, miles away, my phone beeps discord. There it is: she loves me, she loves me not: *'Cheep, cheep, cheep; speak laterrrrr honey bunny'*.

Birdland?

Chapter 4

Café Society

A week later. Talking on the side of a busy street fringed by coffee bars and cafés and the like. She's forgotten it all ('til the next time) thank God.

Buses and cars filter by.

"What does he take pictures of?"

"Who?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten! Your friend, you know the one you're always talking about."

"I don't talk about him... it's that with you it hit a nerve."

"Some nerve."

"Leave PT Jones out of it anyway, he's just a character I know from somewhere who knows dudes like... photographers."

"So, how did you meet?"

"He takes pictures..."

"Girls... women... you?"

"That might be. But he takes pictures of all sorts, pills, Ferraris, shoes."

"That sounds like a good story."

"Why, are you worried about real things?"

"Nothing... much."

“Anyway, he’s always looking for a good story; who knows, you could be in the next one.”

“What’s his name, then?”

“I’ll tell you his nom-de-plume.”

“Go on, then.”

“Frank Réage.”

“Frank Réage? Have I heard that name somewhere?”

“Fashion Mags’ perhaps.”

“Oh.”

“He likes me.”

“He likes you?”

“That way.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll be straight with you-“

“Go on-“

“He’s an ex.”

“He’s an ex?”

“Well, I’ll tell you the truth and say - yes.”

“Dammit, I knew!” Nothing very profound about that but that he was jealous and sensitive and insecure all rolled-up into one, now.

“No, but you weren’t there, and I had to have someone to whisper to that night was the fact. You’re damn good at being holier-than...whatever.”

“Holier than thou.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So you should be.”

He hadn't been there; and it was down to him in the end. You lose your awareness; that way sometimes you can lose your life. He'd lost his awareness sufficient to take his eyes off the road; fact was he should have known much better by now. When you're in the air you're immortal. Simple? Obvious! But the fall is the thing, the thing you don't expect, the thing that meant once-upon-a-time that you were immortal - but now it's mortality is the thing, the thing that hurts, the speed, the darkness, the unexpectedness of it.

For a moment he felt taken over by some sort of anxiety, terror, the fear of falling uncontrollably. Suddenly remembering the sensation of speed, the almost forgotten cutting loneliness of the perimeter lights on a cold night, blue incoming, green and white outgoing, the pull as the jet strained against its brakes as he released them for the last time, the numbing galloping of the tyres and the wheels along the uneven patches of the runway, the blurred zebra-stripes, the unconscious counting of distance and speed against thrust, the metallic singularity of the fuselage as it quickly angled sharply and hit small cross-eddies and then thumped up, suddenly muscular, into the black dark.

Then the dwindling of the lights, the bang of the gear coming up, the crackle of the headphones saying farewell, the lost bonds of earth as the shackles of real things and time fell away, the swoop of the

stars, and the tiny regret that he always had as the jet wavered on the automatic pilot still deeper into the endless, deadly, forgetful firmament.

And then. One's memory has its own chosen speed, its own particular way of working, of selecting what should be bright on the screen behind your eyes.

Endless night, urgent radio chatter on the local wavelength with a disembodied voice and a confirmation of his height, speed and bearing to the next waypoint, then empty unforgiving hard forgetfulness.

Silence on area control, only the periodic metallic bleep of the carrier wave in the headphones; a million years to the next waypoint then - or perhaps never.

The stars rotated overhead as if they were waltzing to some secret music and it was then thus that flying was suspended for one more cosmic forever, for ever and ever, until it all stopped.

Over New Mexico, almost, and then their snowballed lifetime skittered forward impossibly into the speeding mystic.

Where they at once were, now on the hard sandy ground, the studio perfect acoustics where they walked ensured that this rolling waste of desert cradled sound and killed it at the same moment, a loud sound pitched outwards at this height would travel perhaps only ten metres until it was swallowed by a brief desert wind if it were started in a serrated dune or a soft outcrop; conversely, if a sound failed to

encounter something it could continue for miles, until it fell asunder for want of energy. It could not be real, could it?

The tube of the aeroplane continued in its mechanical rhythmic soliloquy, apparently almost soundless, the turbofans simply seeming just to mill in the transparent dark.

Down there were scattered settlements; you could see headlights cutting through desert glades, flittering settlements caressed by gentle arid winds, lights flickering to discover forgotten valleys and escarpments, brief whirls of sand rising high and mysterious and then falling as shadows shaped moonshadows way down there, and tracks where tiny ribbons of road met and crossed like critical veins, lost in a micro-fibre-fine set of enormously detailed rugged mortal wings unravelling in time.

The jet continued to track away, perfect and powerless against the forces which created it, somewhere overhead and at stalling point, the passenger door glued open by the vacuum of the slipstream, the cabin lights still distantly visible, the trim tabs flicking, sensing the airstream as it varied, the autopilot touching the rudder to keep it straight on track. Away, away.

PT Jones: a gap in his troubled memory.

The airstream was upward and he was falling almost vertically. Frozen in cold air and caught in the soft amber of pure sweet dark air.

Then he remembered Christiane.

For in this unreal world Christiane was there in the lens, swinging like a naughty frightened toy under the musty garishly coloured canopy of the parachute: afraid to watch as the desert floor became dangerous, closer and closer at swiftly snowballing speed.

In the silence of this underworld he could hear the stereo of the live desert floor, hear, unexpectedly the soft '*Paff*' of her shoes as they impacted the sharp sand of the desert floor, and her shuttered cut-off shriek as the parachute pulled her violently and bone-jarringly out of balance and was lost in the dark of the lost moon as it fell away into a gully behind her. She was left dazed, standing upon one shoe and with her ankles deep in soft sand, unhurt but flurried.

Back to logic.

She found herself thinking of simple things, ignoring the danger, the chaos of what they were and where they were.

It was oddly workaday to be searching for a shoe in this quiet, closed huge landscape, the acoustics suddenly dull, near nil, like a gigantic recording studio- but it brought her quickly back to sanity.

She found that some glimmer had established itself and dwelt somewhere beyond the lost horizon where the desert and the sky had established an uneasy, dynamic mating.

She had been sprawled over, thus her horizon had been lost. Now she at length found her unbalanced vertical and began to search for the lost shoe in a moment of private childish frenzy, as at the same time her eyes swung upward and unexpectedly saw the printed snowflakes from the remnants of their brown cardboard boxes filtering through the liquid air, turned into gay vari-coloured confetti in the glimmer of something textured like a painting, as the distant jet all at once exploded in contumely, creating myriads of sparkles and unlikely colours among the sometimes faltering, falling tissues.

In the stress of the jump she'd forgotten the jet, but surrealistically, she still heard the battering song of the wind-milling engines.

Quickly then, the silent explosive balloon of anger and fragments and chemicals grew exponentially, far away in perfect wide-angle RBG colour and High Definition in the curved towering sky for a long sequence of moments, and then just as quickly folded-in upon itself, finally scything roundly inwards in myriads of furious silken billows of fire, livid three dimensional colours and folds of deadly finely detailed gossamer, before dwindling into streamers of elegant red sparkling gases and vanishing completely with an out-of-tune sound like an inverted trumpet

note, leaving only the navy-blue scent of dark dust, black powder and millions of sprinkled granules of burnt Aviation fuel as it reverted full-circle, back into the carbon whence it had come from.

Then at a remove of several seconds, the huge ear-splitting acoustic boom, no echoes, dead into the sand where she stood and from that height of four thousand feet, also clear to the next far distant horizon.

Transfixed by all the violence and anger and energy of forces, she'd forgotten everything, and then suddenly gained awareness as she saw the other chute; as PT Jones himself barely missed a rock outcrop, then tripped and cannoned like an out of frame Laurel, into the Hardy of a shallow dune. It was an image that she would never forget.

It took a few moments, his parachute billowing like a lost, torn flag, as finally he emerged from the melee rimed and ringed with dust, and saw for his part, her standing on that other smooth outcrop waiting for him, haloed in a finely atomized shifting cloud of orange and red, replete with those ghostly flittering, drifting shadowy glimmers - the reflection of thousands of the stiffly falling feathery birdlife of dollar bills.

"Do you remember?" She looked at him with wide eyes in the dark, catching the thought in perfect perspective.

“Remember?”

“How it was, that time we landed in the desert.”

“Could I forget it?”

“Could you?”

“Will you ever forget it?”

“How could you ever?”

“That’s what I mean!”

“How, then?”

“Landed in no-bird land!”

“No, it was *Birdland*, remember how we compared those dollar bills to little birds fluttering down in the middle of the night?”

“Amazing, and no camera to record the picture.”

“Seems about right”.

“That would have been a priceless image.”

Things change with time. He smiled. He’d do it in Photoshop once-upon-a-summer’s-day, one day, all he had to do was learn how to use the damn program.

“It happened behind me, I was trying to stand up without being dragged all over the place by the parachute and I was, like, shocked, I suppose - like that doll – what’s it called – all heroic!”

“Barbie *and* Ken?”

“Only, for real.”

“God yes! My parachute was drifting in, and then I saw you. You were standing there about a hundred and fifty yards away, like some Goddess out

of Valhalla, with the fire in the air just over and behind you, looking down at the ground as if you'd lost an earring. Not the kind of thing a Goddess does, is it?"

"Normal for this one."

There was humour with them now, something they shared, an end to contumely and rage.

"You know, *Ken*, don't you?"

"Not intimately!"

"Just Hollywood, then?"

"Kind of, I was confused, was all."

"And I wanted to kiss you. The Ken thing springs to mind; you Barbie, me Ken!"

"You talk garbage sometimes."

"Was that a smile?"

"You make me laugh sometimes, too!"

"Must mean something."

"No, I just realized that you're a darn good liar."

"Well, there are good and bad lies, my love."

"Oh, and a fool."

"A fool?"

"A lucky one."

"Then?"

"And actually, I'd lost my shoe, not my earring."

"Does that make a difference, then?"

"You and that man Frank whatshisname have both got a thing about earrings."

"Réage?"

"Him."

"A thing?"

“Just the symbolism, that’s all.”

“Eh –“

“Eh?”

“You’d need to walk, even in the desert!”

“Well, from where I was you could’ve been searching for anything. Your little chromed baby thirty-two weekend special, even. God! I’d just missed a huge rock, and fell into a bit of soft sand. I was scared because of what hadn’t happened - and then I realized that I was lucky too.”

He was remembering, he’d not thought about it before, and now the close escape from injury - the thought shocked him.

“We both were, Imagine what would have happened had we had an injury!”

“Yeah, I can imagine. Lucky, is what it was.”

“And the cash.”

“And the trouble.”

“Well, grief is what they say it is.”

“Grief was later.”

He thought a moment, chaos in his mind induced by her intelligence.

“Grief was an integral part of it.”

“Too true!”

“And fear”

“You never said that to me before.”

“I’m really a chicken-heart, not this macho hunk you see before you.”

She appraised him, scanned the conversation at length. He just sat there with his hands palms down in an attitude she hadn't expected, one of pain. She was taken aback by it, as she thought: '*Why?*'

After a minute, he shifted his feet and suddenly straightened-up.

"Well, really it's simple", he said, not looking at her, answering a question she had not yet asked: "I... I feel alone... without you. I reckon I always did, even before I met you."

Birdland

Book 2

The LONG VIEW

Chapter 5

Myopia

They moved onward, you have to; for a while she played with a sandwich, he with some carrot cake; the conversation became general, inconsequential.

After another half hour or so they walked out to get some air, freezing as it was for him used to the sub-tropics, down the street. Christiane smiled mock-casually, a grimace, really. The thing was uncomfortable; history had taught her that if she was to be chic, smart with men, she should be leaving anytime *now, if not yesterday*. *Now* was the time to leave. *Now*. After all, maybe he was just a loser for her after all, history told her so.

Thus the arithmetic said that if she were smart she should leave, disengage, leave forever, disappear, and become his *ex-lover*. *Now*. After all, no man has

any idea of a woman's ability for cynicism and casual cruelty, and he was no exception.

But on the other hand, she thought, perhaps this was how people met, got together, parted, started to love, started to despise. Maybe this was the battery that kick-started it all? *'Or maybe', she thought, 'it's because I'm lonely too, a woman, isolated always, sometimes scared, lonely as hell; and I've always needed his affection, someone's companionship and affection, it's in my damn genes, I'll never really know why, it's my fate is the fact.'*

As it was, *now* sounded fine to her, but yet there was that tic in her mind - she pursed her lips - unfinished business still to sort between them, chic was not it. For days and hours and months... a lifetime of frozen incomplete moments to sort. A container load of Chinese puzzles and lies in the mind - and in the end, loss - what to do?

The light changes.

Silence while she thinks. Then curiosity cuts in:
"Tell me about that thing with Grimme?"

He looks a little slant-eyed at her:

"How many times do I have to tell you - he died, he slid off a rock while he was trying to kill me, nobody but I know that because I was the only other person there and he saw that was perfect for him, he could blow me away one icy morning and nobody would

know that PT Jones actually had ever been alive at the wrong moment to embarrass him; he'd be out of trouble with the Corporate insurance, the stuff with the plane could come out, the stuff about the fake PT Jones could come out, no black marks, business as usual. You know. He could cover it just like that."

He stopped, surprised at the width of the risks; he'd never thought that much about it, after all it was a fact - he'd experienced the stone cold metal reality of someone trying to kill you, of someone coming after you to kill you because they thought you were at a disadvantage, because they were greedy, self-seeking, driven, a coward, so they could make even more profit (and power) out of your non-existence. He felt nauseous for a moment, as if he could throw-up.

Then nothing. She was speaking now.

"You stopped."

He had to get his breath back after the thought, had to rewind a little, dizzy, alien, sick, anxious. All those things. His eyes were blank, then he gathered his thoughts once again, took a breath:

"He was trying to get a bead on me with his rifle and he was drunk, nuts, in the damn freezing icy morning, damn crazy, dangerous." His eyes frazzled over with the memory. "Look - what do you know about killers? JJ Grimme was sure one of those! I have no darn idea how he knew I was there, I don't know how; because then he must've climbed up the rocks, a long way - I was very high on a bluff - he must have had it worked out some way out, to kill me, the

coyotes or something would eat me up and then there'd be no evidence worth talking about left - so maybe somebody I don't know about must've known - he had me trapped, I mean I'm useless at stuff like that, I'm not a Commando, God knows, he nearly got me a couple of times - bang, bang - then he slipped on something - lichen or moss or something - and fell into this huge drop."

"What drop?"

"God only knows that too. It was the side of a mountain I guess, near the estate... I mean I'd just got there and I was wondering what to do, then..."

At that point he began to see the picture, like a newsreel of his youth, with even a voice-over expressing the particular charms of British Columbia...

'And Daniel and his father find the craggy snowy peaks so charming that they want to take a photograph, and then Mary wants to join in , so...'

Then he continued:

"On his estate... I mean the Corporation's estate. You know what I mean. I mean I have no idea how he knew I was there, but he did, and he came up the mountain with a powerful rifle, looking for someone... Well, me I guess..."

"So then he takes a .357 hunting rifle, one for killing dangerous predators like Cougars and of course people you don't like.... Uhuh. And it's so charming that they want to take a photograph, and then Mary wants to join in but while she's taking a bead on the deadly target with her brand new forty-two megapixel

iPhone he falls off a frosted butte into three-thousand feet of empty air and smashes down into the scenic rocky river, way below. Head smashed in, back shattered. Suddenly his remains are Cougar meat! Bang! Just like that... "

He stiffened:

"Do you think...? Is anybody listening?"

"Why?"

"I hate being overheard, besides around here walls often have ears."

"Anyway. There's nobody anywhere near us, at least where I can see."

They took time, moved, and checked the back of them and then the sides beside them, locked in in some kind of complicity. She smiled, as if they were hiding some huge secret. Then he reacted:

"You won't leave off, will you?"

"Ahah, it's a woman's privilege."

"Well, life is even harder than the average housewife would know."

"You said something..."

"Death? It's all around you..."

"You're being flip again. Housewife!"

"Well?"

"A rifle?" Her eyes were asking questions he could never answer, but he was determined to nail this one:

"What do you think; a bottle of champagne and two glasses?" His voice had changed, taken on an edge. "It was tough stuff out there Darling. He was out

to kill me, he knew that whichever animals would come across my corpse would find my remains a nice meal, so there'd be nothing to find ever again, even if someone wanted to clamber into a no-name canyon out of bravado on some crazy mission to maybe rescue a nameless straggler from ..." he waved his hands around, "bloody somewhere!"

"You haven't finished yet!"

Chapter 9

Punters

She'd always seemed to attract what she called 'Punters', Players.

'What is it about me that attract these bit-players?' she would think.

She was attractive, was the problem, her body was great and she worked out two or three times a week, swam, ate the right stuff, and did the weights.

She was trim, so sometimes casual lovers or sometimes other men whom she hadn't actually slept with told her, and yet May and her other friends sometimes told her that she seemed a bit aimless.

That had nothing to do with her body though, more, it had to do with her mind. Pigeon toed was her name for it, Pigeon toed.

Anyway, that was the received image, that was the way she looked she figured; toned, schooled body, great underwear, nice legs, cool, kind of classic clothes, not pushy though sometimes a little calculating perhaps. Would you be surprised? There she'd be, on all the machines, badminton, spinning, with the Lycra; sweating sometimes. Fine. Men liked it, women looked critical because they secretly considered her to be a tart. Well, slag is the way they'd bitch about it, slut, FM cool, is the way they'd put it.

Could be the look, the coolness of it, with her not requiring work or involvement like almost all of her sisters - in everyday existence - money in the amounts she had, put you above all that, but what the people she knew hadn't detected - hadn't said - maybe hadn't thought - was that she was lonely: but what did you expect in a huge people mill like this - sensitive souls?

After all most of her lovers simply huffed and puffed and came in two minutes, left her uncomfortably in some sort of suspended state, either unsatisfied or trying to sleep in the wet patch, or both

- and then either one of them would take off in the middle of the night. That was the usual pattern. Back to the wife, the girlfriend or maybe even the night shift, or in her case back to her apartment, watching the street behind her.

If it were she, she'd catch the first taxi she saw, not wanting them to know where she lived, it would be onerous, and she wasn't good at fake excuses. She was a full-blooded woman and she needed just a fuck, it was simple as that, not real sex but just the rush of being used, masochistic, wanting to be used and then wanting the release. She'd enjoyed that for a while, but then became aware that she had become lost because increasingly there was nowhere else to go in her mind. And you can't escape your own demons. She had more than her fair share, plenty of them; demons in *spades*.

She had often thought that sometimes she would be content to pay someone to fuck her on the days when she was hot: it would be a simple cash transaction, no emotion, no commitment, no names: that way she could get rid of the fires of desire in a functional way. *Ahhh!*

She'd screwed a few of those punters just for that stolen, orgasmic release and now her problem had become that the awkward part was swopping venues: she couldn't return for weeks to a place where she'd pulled, or she would be recognized and maybe leaned-on, or worse, befriended, known to the

regulars with whatever motives. She thus realized that women forget such things quickly, because they think of them as just functional, whereas men remember these things for ever, which is where the whole sum would go wrong. No that would be stupid.

Point was, most of those people were men she'd met casually. The Curzon Street bar was a bar where there were a lot of hookers. She hadn't realized that though, in her naïveté. She'd found the bar by accident, signalled by the colourful people gathered inside: the women were attractive and passably well dressed and the men attractive too.

She began to frequent the bar at intervals, then slept with one of the men she met there because she knew he wouldn't be there again as he was just visiting the country, anyway giving him a wrong phone number.

Then one evening when she actually just wanted a cool drink, she got by chance to sit beside one of the women she'd seen there before, a thirty-ish woman called Sandra, petite, blonde and quite pretty; they spoke and she found that she suddenly she had made a new friend.

A week later she was with Sandra having called-in to Sandra's place via a casual call on her mobile as she was near. They were having tea, when the phone rang and Sandra had answered, given her a weary look, walked into a separate space from where she could continue the conversation. It was brief and full

of instructions, she could tell that by the curt nature of the conversation, and sure enough a few minutes later Sandra returned, opened her desk planner and entered whatever it was into her notebook.

From the tone of the conversation Christiane had suddenly understood what this was about: she asked, Sandra laughed and replied that though she was a Nurse, this was a much better way of turning a fast buck.

Christiane laughed, covering her realization that Sandra had thought that she was a hooker too; it had been something like the complicit understanding of two women, but no, it was not that, it was the eye-to-eye experience of two women seeking the same ultimate goal; peace in their lives, wherever that would be, in Curzon Street, in a bar in Soho, Hampstead, Bayswater, or a pub in Crouch End.

So you see, Christiane was happy that the players she slept with moved on and that she never saw them again; she was content, she just needed the sex, was all. That was how it was for her; they were of no interest to her apart from the moment, the fuck, the fight, the relaxing of one's limbs.

But then, the unexpected, the loneliness.

Like every other person she needed friendship and there were only two places that she could go to where she knew for certain she'd meet a friend who was not a player, and they were outside the centre ring, far from the other places.

Nights can be lonely, sometimes she'd spend all her evenings looking for a pickup; other times she'd spend a couple of weeks just being a virgin in her comfortable nearby places. And the negative point? Why - like all women, she'd noticed that despite her money, her security in real time, she felt as if she were permanently locked in some sort of bitch competition with every other woman on the planet. For them perhaps? No! Well, for who or what then?

Wednesday.

A different sort of day though, not like that which she'd thought about before.

Tactics.

This would have to be thought-out carefully.

First, she could never put aside the fine detail, the frisson of being naked with him, positioning herself so that he felt he could use her in some way, opening one leg as she lay on the couch, or even sitting back on the table and opening herself to him as if to say *'How about a taste?'* Playing the numbers as she did in the casino sometimes, but knowing, secretly in her mind, using her body so that he had access to her, whichever way he would want that to be. Like Baccarat, she knew the permutations, knew when she could score.

He had reacted; she knew that he would remember that pose of hers at least for a while.

Other times she would watch him, sometimes his eyes, for hours, shifting her eyes away when she detected the slightest change in his concentration. He should not know. He'd never reacted to or remarked on that, which meant that he wasn't aware of her complicity in this sexual domestic scheme. That way she might control him in a small way.

The fact was that loss was her anxiety, loss one more time, the pain and the fear of being alone. As she'd grown older she'd begun to narrow her focus, began to more clearly identify exactly what was required, what was needed, what she must have in her life to be in some way a success in her sole, female terms: then she'd allowed PT Jones access to arrive one cloudy day, and now his presence would never leave her alone; not that she didn't want it desperately now from time to time anyway. No, now she needed him almost as much as she needed her own blood, was the fact. How had she ever arrived at all this, the high and the low of it, the sound and the silence, the darkness and the light, the madness and the peace, ultimate peace?

How close to madness she was!

Later.

She remembered that afternoon:

"What time is it?"

"Who cares, it's mid-afternoon."

"How lovely, I was afraid I'd slept too long."

She leaned over and thought to toy with the curtains, got out of bed and then came around behind him, her thighs and crotch still a little sore after he'd used her, the way she after all that she liked being used. She reached around his waist, felt that slipper of fat on his belly and hugged-in to him because she wanted him to keep her warm that moment - and all the other moments as well. She grasped for, then caught his sex with her fingers, playfully, and started to toy with him.

“In front of the window?”

“You want the curtains opened?”

They both laughed. They were remembering that he'd taken a picture of her naked, her arse pushing out of the cover of the curtains on a bright afternoon, her hands maybe holding them closed around her body but her naked back exposed to whoever might like to see.

She'd checked actually, secretly glancing back over her shoulder, feeling cold eddies of air around her, thus doubly aware of how beautiful, precious and temporary her body was. And yes, there was someone standing out there, watching her, a gardener or someone; but she was vain enough to want more eyes sampling her secrets. Perhaps he had friends? Whatever, he would identify her as a woman, which was the important part, someone precious and special, even if he never saw her again.

And from the other perspective, not knowing that PT Jones had the picture in his camera, wanted to

make a print of her so that he would remember her body that way forever and ever. That word.

Her touch was as light as a feather, and he closed his eyes at that very moment, dizzy, between lust and ecstasy.

Just which chemicals make you love?

White noise, chatter, background. Such aberrations kicked her own receding time into sequence: this meant that she would remember everything of that particular time through sound, as if precise timed sequences were the signatures on the spines of very special books; later, even perhaps against her will, maybe for the rest of her life.

Now it seemed almost too late in her summer and she still coveted him, PT Jones, still wanted to have sex with him whenever she saw him, it was madness, she had her own mind, she was no victim, no slave, she was a woman of the world or something or other anyway, wasn't she?

Why, then?

And then, on a hot August afternoon, there she was - sitting outside one of those coffee-bar bookshops on Charing Cross Road - and then there was he, beside her, offering her a cigarette as the buses rolled by in clouds of smoggy dust, watching her closely for a moment, reading her body, knowing all the little details hidden by her clothes but privy to his

eyes, thinking that she appealed to him, especially naked: not a punter straining to see her crotch up her very fashionable, short, Desigual, tart-short skirt, but he, PT Jones, not having to strain at all for anything he might want, but not knowing it either, not that she would ever tell him that apart from when both sets of lips got loose and blurted out the truth in their own particular and secret ways.

Then: he puffed a maize-yellow Boyard making opera as the tobacco refused to flare, making an untidy mess of the tip and making a gesture as well, as if to proffer her one; she declined.

“They’re French.” By way of explanation.

“Uh, huh!”

“From Paris.”

“They’re yellow”

“Full marks!” He played with the match and burned his fingers, “Ouch!”.

“Too big”

“That’s what’s nice about them: shedloads of bite.”

“Ah, hah.”

“Where do you get them?”

“Bought them.”

“Where?” She looked around her as if the shop must be right there, next door.

“From that *Tabac* on the corner, next to the bar.”

“In Paris.”

“Well, of course. Rue DuPont.”

“Don’t tell me – you knew it well!”

“Actually, yes, from the days when I just walked the town: broke, I was, hardly a cent in my jeans...”

“That was clear as mud!”

“Well, I expect you to remember things!”

“Anyway, I’ll remember it now.”

“Cool.” He smiled.

“Ahah! I think you live in bars.”

“You don’t remember?”

“Of course I do!”

“I live in bars!”

“You have that look, sometimes.”

“Sometimes? Boyards?” He proffered the outsize Dark Blue pack with the white edges and the word *Boyards* punched into the cardboard so that it stood out, white as well. Simple, not an advert in sight, sticks in the mind, though.

“In your dreams!” She nodded her head and smiled, remembering their precious shared intimacy in a different way and not wanting the waft of a powerful cigarette anyway.

“We’re not.”

“What?”

She gestured.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“You know.”

“We were lovers there.”

“Doesn’t mean a thing!”

“Come here and say that!”

“You kill the romance?”

“I froze, walking naked under that dress on an icy night, for you – I suffered, my body suffered, for you, I was frozen almost everywhere!” She thought a moment. “But it was worth it in the end.”

“And I had to get you your stuff in the morning.”

“*Oh, poor baby!* That was all part of the deal, or I’d be walking around Paris and everyone would know that I was naked, I would be yours indoors, but a feast to a million vagrant eyes in the street, in St. Michel, at Montparnasse Bienvenue... see what I mean! Obvious – it’s different in daylight, dummy, clear, crystal clear!”

“You laughing?”

“I wasn’t then, my min was cold.”

“Now?”

“No. Well perhaps. Right now? No, just cool, relaxed.”

“I can’t tell.”

“Well, I know.”

“Fine.”

“Good!”

“That’s okay then.” He inclined his head and smiled, watching her move, it gave him pleasure to remember her when she was naked, sleeping: and then in his mind it was first light and he was peeking secretly at the colour of her form versus the colour of the sandwiching sheets in the bleached weak Sunlight

and imagining it as in a snapshot, part of a landscape somewhere far away.

Spring flowers, no, better, wild flowers and their scattered spots of colour. He imagined her nude in a painting, like a dream. Beautiful!

He clicked back to today...

"I've not thought about it before, but when you are asleep you remind me of a landscape; horizontal, like..." He gestured with his left hand, making a soft continuous wave of some sort as if placating a powerful orchestra.

"You can be just – insipid, sometimes."

"Because I think of you as a body; the sweat, the scent of you?"

"Can you love a fool?"

"Can *you* love a player?"

"Well?"

"No?"

"I'll have to think."

"A painting... nude."

"Well?"

"Never thought of myself as that before."

"What's his name? *Modigliani!*"

"Modigliani?"

"Just perhaps."

"I wouldn't have thought there was anything better than that."

Stop, then:

“Players lack humour, maturity, sincerity – they’re in panic is it, maybe I was a player once upon a time but then I grew up!”

“How about - I just love you *like* a fool.”

“I knew a player called Richard one time... he just kind of hung around.”

“Did he score?”

“Oh, sure, all the time; the chemistry kind of worked, somehow.”

They stopped again.

He said:

“The birds are singing for us... was that a lark or some... ”

Then, in some unforced, unconscious way they both simultaneously made that somehow secret grimace, an expression in perfect harmony: a shared suppressed laugh that looked more like a show of aggression than a friendly manoeuvre.

“That was the Heimlich manoeuvre!”

“Was it?”

“No, I’m lying, just sounds good, something about choking, no idea what that means!”

There was a silence.

After all, they had seen the same moment at the same time; it was theirs, they should reach.

Then:

“Anyway, waiting for someone?”

He leant forward to summon a waiter then realized that this wasn't Paris, or Mannheim. He signalled through the window, wildly, as if he were drowning.

Then:

“The unknown man?”

“You're so witty.”

“Makes you sick?”

“*That was it!*” A gesture, perhaps of resignation or maybe frustration, or even both.

“Is the man unknown to me or to you?”

“Both of us, in fact.”

“Don't know, he's always been more of a rumour to the taxman, chased him for years.”

“Like, words?”

“Words... and then pictures and then back to words.”

“Uh”

“Just like that!” A wide gesture with the hands.

“No, tell me, what is this man like?”

“Like...” speculating, “...the other side of forty...”

Then –“

“His shoes are not worn”, she said.

“Well, that's okay, then.”

“Easy to check!”

“Ahem!”

“What else about the unknown man.”

“Don't ask!”

"Tell me"

"Digame?"

"So you speak many tongues!"

"Just two and a bit, you know that."

"Just two and a bit?"

"The bit's the useful bit, when I've been dropped into a desert on the border of Mexico from a great height, without a clean set of knickers for thirty miles and a few million dollars and a bunch of makeup bits in my handbag. The tongues..." She sounded as if she was becoming increasingly exasperated. After all, this was not the first time she'd explained all this to him!

"You could use after."

"You can be just really crude."

"You thought it!"

"I meant languages, I was thinking *zunge* in German!"

"Ah, yes! No, but it was your thought."

"You sound like a professor cogitating before a lecture."

"Could be, who knows, do you?"

They stopped, sizing one another up suddenly as if they were competing, though they were not.

"So anyway, you played what you had, no aces, just bits."

"The odds are always good when it's the only hand you've got."

"You need good cards, don't you?"

"Sure."

She thought for a moment.

“You play poker: don’t tell me: The world is overflowing with lost Kings.”

“How did you know I was going to say that?”

“Oh, it was easy.”

“Easy?”

“I’ve played Baccarat, Poker, you know, all the other stupid games: I’ve heard that somewhere before, is all, the thing about Kings; it clicked.”

“You know, when you’re not yourself, when there’s passion around - actually you don’t exist when you’re passionate, you’re just a cardboard cut-out to the other person.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s like a drug, your brain is all taken up with the idea, and actually, you’re mad!”

“You find out when you’re alone and you see other people doing the ‘Dance of the Toreadors’ right there, in front of you.”

“You stressed?”

“No, thinking, is it.”

“Well?”

“And if you’re like that, then the other person is not themselves either – you’re each playing some sort of game to please the other - that’s why they call it the Dance of the Toreadors.”

“Is that what we do?”

“I’d hate that.”

“Hate manipulating, maybe?”

“I already hate that in case we ever do it.”

While he was not looking she looked at him, sharply for a moment, and then someone exited the main door of the coffee-house with an impossible handful of full paper coffee cups with plastic tops in her hands and staggered along Charing Cross Road like a drunk, wobbling on impossibly high heels. Christiane segued the enquiry into a panoramic glance which he didn't notice.

"Will she make it, do you think?" He had caught the scan of her glance and was looking now, lifting his Ray Ban's a tad.

"As long as the wind doesn't change!"

Later.

*I love u I love
u I love u I love u I love u I love u I love u I LOVE
YOU SO MUCH (inlove) Speak laterrrrr honey bunny.*

It was all fake. It was all her imagination. Perhaps she must learn to forget him, go on to something, somewhere or other else. Her heart suddenly accelerated, thumped protesting in her chest.

She closed the computer with a feeling of bitterness in her throat and a tear in her eye.

Chapter 10

Moving Pictures

Back again somewhere deliciously neutral.

Paris: how could they be anything less than lovers when they were *'Tout sol'*, she aggressive and warm, he serious but loving?

This time they had hidden away at his favourite Hotel, the improbably named 'Hotel du Grand Citroen Garage'.

He'd thought maybe they'd walk a bit, visit the Luxembourg Gardens, then perhaps a walk to the Rue de la Montparnasse: he liked the night clubs in the corners where he always found them; and then there was the Rue du Racine, where you found the Café Racine, full always with students and shop girls by day, then ballerinas and strip tease artists by night: the smell of stage makeup and sweat and sex. There was always even (in his time) a man sitting there in a permanent cloud of blue Gauloises smoke, a man who had been in the *Legion Etrangere*, and looked that way.

But anyway, it was not to be that evening, for she had other simple plans for him, more complex imaginings for herself, first dinner and then a movie.

Thus this evening they were soon at the movies shifting to a secluded area on an empty row to be private, the cinema itself almost empty because this was the last night of the run.

It was a warm night and after their dinner in the *Quartier Latin*, at a down-at-heel restaurant which somehow managed to be very good, after pointless discussion they found the cinema in the Rue Maine that was Christiane's favourite. She would go nowhere else anyway, remembering the scenes in Bertolucci's movie with Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider's:

Last Tango in Paris that had been mostly shot within a few hundred metres of there, in the Apartment house on the Rue Jules Verne where she'd once stayed followed by those surrealistically cold, clear, most vertiginous scenes shot in opalescent glass clear light as Schneider walks away from the troubled Brando under the iron railway arches only a couple of hundred metres away from where they sat.

But today she'd found that there were no Bertolucci movies available so she'd insisted that instead she wanted to see a Buñuel movie for her own reasons; actually, he was neutral one way or the other, content to go along with her wishes. There were some people in the far wing of the back row, but the darkness of the room and the darkness of the movie combined to make them almost invisible as were the two of them. The movie was by Buñuel, *'The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie'*.

And ahh - but she had a plan!

That was the charm of PT Jones: because, whatever, there among the spectres he was as usual in his own abstracted way intent on the screen, watching the crazy antics of the main couple of characters in the garden of the house, when he suddenly felt her hand hard against his, her fingers forcing his somnolent fingers so that now they rested on her upper thigh.

This would test him.

Without knowing it, he rested his hand for a moment.

With the back of it he could first feel the fine alien fabric of the sheer metallic dress bearing its decoration, while her now newly moving, restless hand began to push his fingers with the weight of her will, further up her thigh and over the smooth aquiline shape of it as she angled her body like a yacht heeling over, gently towards him.

Deliberately, now she changed position and tempted his fingers to enter, and nearly succeeded as he was now almost at the entry to that moist place between her legs, but then she squeezed his hand with the muscles of her thighs as if it were that he dared to enter, as if she were surprised, as if all at once to invite him: *'Take a chance, big boy!'*

Then she secretly shifted, made space for him as she simultaneously shifted her mouth to the dark shadow in the region of his ear and then panted into it to awaken his lust. She waited a couple of moments to make him catch-on to her plan.

The *bourgeoisie* in the movie were unable to decide where to go: now they were half undressed and yet trapped on the edge of the lawn: when just then the bishop, or somebody, made to enter the garden so they made to dash behind a bush, the man then futilely rushing towards the house in some sort of macho intention to succeed, to cover his lover's

embarrassment - the woman cowering behind the bush, naked...

Christiane required attention, she had other nakedness to explore; besides, Paris had been quiet that evening, even the bourgeoisie weren't out and about, and she had her own subtext to work on.

Now there was a quiet passage in the film: this would inevitably lead to a hiatus, that's the way Bunuel would always plan it. They seemed to be the only people in the cinema now.

But anyway Christiane was still not getting enough of *his* attention despite the fact that his fingers were teasing her: so next she squirmed - at the same moment drawing back slightly giving a little squeak, casting for his attention for a moment while giving his mind access in suggesting otherwise, moving her body so that his fingertips found, without expecting anything, that she was naked under the dress, she his were he to require it, *now*.

Her subtext was working; now she opened her legs scissor-wise sideways, enticing the slim width of his hand to explore between them, at the same time hardly shifting in her seat, but yet freeing enough of her interior space to allow his fingers simpler entry.

Then as he began to explore her she breathed ever harder into his ear, at which he steered his head

around in the darkness but only to see her face registering a slight excitement, a slight flaring of her nostrils - then a slight arousal, perhaps a slight swelling, a deeper more florid colouring of her lips - as she breathed a little hoarse, opened her mouth a tad, breathed with more volume and harder, for him to hear her excitement, scent her arousal.

To anyone else in the cinema her eyes would appear fixed on the screen. In fact his fingers were already exploring, orbiting, gently squeezing her clitoris, circumnambulating those more secret lips now, at which she gave a brief sort of squeak, jiggled her legs and squeezed her thighs around his fingers in answer, this time tightly and then slowly as if to say *'Don't stop!'*.

Now she juddered unexpectedly, forcedly, and relaxed as she finally came. She lay back for a moment, luxuriating in the feast of sudden colours inside her and then started on this journey of hers once more: struggled and then lay back as if sate. Or perhaps not, for then he realized that this was yet another way for her to excite herself about the movie – and him.

He continued to caress her for some time, picking-up her vibration, managing to co-ordinate the dislocated swirl of his fingers with the rhythm of her breathing and her desires.

At last she seemed to fall sleep, slumbering with her eyes half closed, her mouth a little ajar, breathing almost silently, until at the end of the movie

she suddenly awoke fully, looked around as if awaking from a deep slumber, grubbed around in her pockets and her bag, and cleared her eyes with a tissue, inspecting them with her iPhone using it in a way that only a woman would devise, as a makeup mirror.

Finally she licked her lips with assumed great theatrical panache, and applied a little tactical Kisprufe lipstick, before beginning her next strategy. She was now relaxed, the house lights had come on and they were alone as the auditorium emptied:

“Naughty me.” She smiled, pleased, fired-up by his hands and hungry for much more. She looked up at him as he touched her cheek in tenderness. “Now, take me home and fuck me.”

* * *

The next day late, and they at the airport, having just heard that the flight was delayed: that way they could have a coffee while they waited. Delays have their good points when you’re in no hurry.

She was jaded, he was his usual neutral, sphinx self.

She stood close to him, well within the ambit of his arms, spoke to him in a theatrical whisper.

“I’m alone without you.”

“I told you I love you.”

“You should be bloody emotional!” Piercing, high notes, somebody heard them and then looked away. A lover’s tiff, perhaps?

“Not at the airport Darling, they’ll lock us up!”
He laughed.

“You don’t want it to work, do you?”

“Wouldn’t you want to know the secret?”

“Maybe not.”

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t know you can unravel the puzzle with your imagination, go further faster and with less inhibitions and then discover what really happened, which way the elements in the puzzle really created the situation with their arrangement in time, how the whole thing worked together...”

“Oh, and I could stop inventing lovers on the phone.”

“And we could meet”

“Pretty please”

“And kiss”

“Later”

“Well?”

“The birds know when it’s time to go.”

“Like some out of tune poet said once-upon-a-time...” He saw her reach for the thought – then -
“*Midnight sings a low cost song without the pleasure*”

of your mouth on mine” Recited almost without intent or feeling. “...saw that when I was at the library the other day.”

“You mean that?”

“Incredible?”

“I can if I so please.”

“You’re beginning to get creative: I hope it’s not about that.”

“You think so..?”

“Fuck you!”

“I’ve invested a lot of my time and my life in getting us together... I’m...”

“You make me really mad, you’re so self-referential it’s ridiculous!” She became irascible, got up, straightened her skirt, stamped her foot in the FM’s, checked the heel was unbroken, and then sat down again.

“Fuck”

“Yes?”

“What?”

“Well?”

“Because it’s both of us who are in this: it’s not just one imaginary punter against the world and I’m not just a quick full-service telephone tart in some crummy hotel in Paris, or London, or anywhere. *Gel?*”

“Hey, they’re calling the flight.”

She was crossing Knightsbridge a few days later around three in the afternoon, when something struck her about a face she dimly saw in a restaurant across from her, perhaps thirty metres away. There was something about the way the man moved, something about the way he used his hands. It was a shimmering memory, out of focus, un-sharp, and anyway memory sometimes plays tricks on you at a remove, but, no, someone out of a forgotten time, someone she knew...

He turned and for a moment the face was full on to her. Could that be Volker? She'd almost forgotten that he existed, perhaps this was a bad dream come to visit her?

She shivered like a cat. Then allayed her thoughts, after all at times she considered herself a naïf, perhaps sometimes and in some ways she was just plain simple, which is what had got her into the mess she'd been in for so long and was even now extricating herself from.

She stopped half way across the Knightsbridge crossing, dodged a passing car, gained her balance on the other side and told herself that that had been a wisp, a fragment of a thought, that that could not be - then hurried on to her appointment, expelled the idea from her thoughts.

She had almost forgotten – and then a few days later she was walking through Kensington Gardens,

hastening to phone PT Jones as, she always seemed to do, when out of the rose garden from behind a bush stepped a man with his arms open, as if welcoming her. There was no time to resist, it happened so quickly.

And it was Volker, he told her in his rich Berlin accent how he'd heard about her being in London, how much he'd missed her, how he'd looked high and low for her, found her by accident, realized that she'd got an apartment around there... and then, completely by accident, saw her walking into the garden.

Actually, now she was a perfect patsy, tongue-tied and seduced by her own thoughts: Volker took her to a bar, asked her for her forgiveness, told her that everything had gone wrong... She was in revolt inside herself but too much in suspended surprise to comment, even to react or question this unexpected situation: then he pushed aside her betraying, protesting hands and invaded her, kissed her.

For a chaotic moment she was betrayed; it was like it used to be in her mind - because after a few drinks she had begun to forget everything - and anyway something about Volker had always meant that there was no longer a need for talk, Volker knew that and she knew that; there could be no logic to this madness.

She couldn't resist him - never had been able to from the first time she met him - she shook all over

when he touched her and couldn't push him away, sweated, shuddered all over with fear when he was with her, was all over cold like ice when he wasn't: she trembled and then remembered the times they kissed, remembered the places they'd visited on the Weinstrasse, weekends on the edge of the forest, lost afternoons exploring dreamy meadows and forgotten streams, surreally green meadows and streams and little patches of woodland and evenings spent drinking the finest Pfälzisch wines in dark corners of country inns, smelling of old timber. Sitting where Doctor Faustus sat in the ancient settlement of Maulbronn, eating where he ate... The Pool at Bad Dürkheim where she'd first seen him naked; Shepherds Lounge, he in her favourite bar at Heidelberg, swimming in the summer at the Freibad, talking on the banks of the Neckar with all the other student pals of hers, the Pfälzischer Wald, their walks in the forest, the café-klatch she'd had with her friends and his friends at weekends: remembered everything except the lies and the betrayal and the mind-numbing humiliation and pain. Anaesthesia. Forgot that depth of pain in the tsunami of sensations come to betray her, knock her down, after all pain is impossible to re-locate and besides, she was somewhere else between the choirs of heaven and screaming hell, now.

Friday turned to Saturday, sensations, music, some sort of laughter; warmth, the remembrance of caring, of love perhaps. Then Sunday, a day of brightness and shadow. Volker writing emails, she

lying in bed wishing he were in her, and then.... And on a possessive, girly, impulse she made a note of his typing, memorising the fall of the keys. She'd developed that skill years before.

Then Monday, early.

Christiane awoke at four in the morning, Volker asleep beside her fast asleep, breathing deep, so deep in sleep in fact that she thought it must be that it was with the aid of something more powerful than mere tiredness. She'd seen him toying with something in a tin, some powder, the night before, before they'd made love, he with the strength of a wild man.

And now he slept without moving, deep, deep.

Now she had to leave. Unexpected panic had sprung at her: she left soon after, leaving her forgetting tights and underwear just where she had thrown them the night before. That was it, they damned her now as if it were a fact, whatever it was she should forget, as if they might be programmed to tell tales about her.

She left wearing just her dress and shoes and coat, getting out quickly before the guilt and the chaos in her mind got to her, took a back-stairs lift to leave the Hotel, walked the length of the street before she caught a taxi home her mind all confused, saddened, angry, her body sore and feeling like it was bruised.

What had happened to her, what had she done?

Chapter 11

It's me.

Escape?

She's sitting in the dark, as if it could cloak her, make her invisible. Then:

'I like his hands', she thought, 'I remember them well - but then I guess I always did'.

Christiane sitting at her Second Empire gilt antique desk with the leather inlay and the scrollwork feet, wearing just pants and thinking about stuff while she toys with the computer. Perhaps she's mad, she thinks, yes, she must be!

A mangled chinoiserie version of Chopin on her mobile phone, then PT Jones, sounding a little strained:

"It's me. Where are you?"

"I'm in my apartment."

“Where’ve you been – I called but no answer.”

“I had to ... go out of town with May, her mother, you know, urgently.”

“Uh, how’s she now?”

“Who? Oh her mother, oh, she’s fine, now.”

He accepted that without a thought, apparently: he was anyway somehow urgent in himself, perhaps he’d wanted to have her that day; only she could not... not this way...

“Well, you’re back!” A blank moment.

“I love you.” Is that a statement or is she lying this time, or is she just damned?

“Me too, you. But why –“

She chips in to stop his dangerous question. An excuse:

“Where shall we meet? We should talk.”

They meet at that coffee place at The V&A Museum – where else? And that way too she can toy with a sandwich and think, her back against the wall, can have a conversation that perhaps will not betray her.

She’s been sitting here for some time before he actually arrives, thinking about what they would talk about exactly - that they should split, perhaps? Disaster always seems to be part of her, and she knows that that way would be madness, the end of all her dreams. But, she thinks, whose woman is she – just how could she explain that she had been making love with another man what seemed only a few hours ago - well the day before - it was part of what she thought

could be her plan - what plan? She had to get out of this mess - but how?

She felt that it had ever been that way, there was something sealed in stone about this, an inevitability, as if you had caught a moving door as it opened in a high wind, taken the risk to swing yourself inside and then discovered that the unknown was after all just another part of your own body.

She'd felt it jarring her in her belly. Felt it in her deepest womb, as if it had always been there, even before she was born. 'How mad is this?' But it was the madness that had saved her, saved her from the insane curve she was on that time, that led nowhere through a jungle of sensations, all drift in the wind, all gone now, all forgotten, never even spoken about, for it was only she who could know all the data of it, the rich bad data of her forgotten lost self.

She catches his glance; he smiles and closes his eyes. He brings his cup to his lips without seeing it and licks at the cream on the coffee, like a cat.

She's been watching him because she's trying to work out what she should do; the thought has occurred to her that maybe this is the end of it; but no, that is only crazy!

They've lost time again.

He can't fathom what she's about. But then, the only time he ever was able to control her was

when they were in bed, and even then only when she was approaching orgasm - not a lot.

When he returns home some hours later he turns on his computer; that's after she's spoken to him and told him that she has to go meet her friend Arianne. Well, there's not a lot to do so early in the evening.

[26/09/2--- 17:14:34] Chris: sense of satisfaction

**** Missed call from Chris. ****

[19:52:42] Chris: you are not there...busy bee ur....anyway I just wanted to tell u I love u....ah yes just rememebered

[19:54:19] Chris:remembered that George and curry is on the menu tonight....I wish I was 4 desert...I love u honey loadz...enjoy evening with your friends

[21:31:00] PT Jones: I've got you written down for desert breakfast elevenses tea and dinner, just don't you forget that.

Could be a bit sore afterwards. Life is full of fun things isn't it.

[22:10:10] Chris: hi honey I was in the bath when u called...saw phone messages ..but this message above is some message...ur so hungry my darling...I thought I heard you sayin' u do not eat much...sweetheart I do

*not get sore ever as I did tell you before that I have luck
2b moist in all right places or should I say fertile and
moist as good organic ground so you can feel me under
your feet if you wish so honey..Speak 2u later my
hungry darlin'...I am leaving skype on so call me any
time I just might b in the kitchen shortly.PT Jones I love
u*

*Sleepy head, you smile,
The time between us only
Forgotten empty space*

She's with Arianne and May now. Arianne is being disappointingly neutral:

"So, what will you do?"

"Well..."

"Leave him?"

"Volker or PT?"

"Decision time, baby!"

"Volker, I have to, I'll lose the spell but I need the love, not the using, I'm not going to be his toy any more."

"PT's difficult to read..."

"He's lonely, alone; I don't know what!"

"Confusing?"

"I've got to be sure of myself."

"... Everybody's difficult to read," said her friend May.

"Are you?"

She laughed:

"Are you joking? Ask anybody!"

"Hey, they are a mystery to me because they're so simple!"

"I don't...this is madness!"

A couple of men in fashionable brogues were looking at them as if to say 'Hi!'

"He always accuses me of being bloody minded"

"They always do, it's them playing the usual tune!"

"Well, I'll see him tomorrow, anyway."

"Listen, I need a drink."

"Let's sit in the corner and they'll leave us alone."

She phoned him in the morning, her voice at first doubting something or other (so he felt, perhaps that was his imagination), and he gave her an address and told her catch a taxi and finally found himself with pleasure again in Old Brompton Road, then minutes later, in his favourite place, the Troubadour Café, originally styled in the nineteen-fifties, founded by a Dutchman and still full of the same sort of people that Michael would have wanted to be there and that it had been full of, most days since sixty-plus years ago.

Old fashioned, if the style of twentieth-century forties/fifties seems old fashioned to you; what the Dutch call a *brown* café, an oasis in a desert of want-to-do modernity. Amber walls, redolent of a haze of

French cigarettes, stucco and wooden beams, old metal objects on the walls and hanging from the ceiling: people outside smoking those same flavour-fresh twentieth-century black tobaccos, Gauloises perhaps, the flavour of the smoke blowing back into the café, the main saloon crowded with the usual suspects; old-ish women, women who would have flirted here as young and randy *mignonettes*; young men in worker's caps pulled theatrically down over unsullied brows, looking as if they were old but being gauche and stupid, actually young - and even now learning the ropes on being players - at the bar; lovers without a place to go yet or perhaps just beginning their sex life together, caught between thoughts and actions and a shared confusion of words, glances and social ungraciousness as they plotted their way through the web of their desires.

From a far corner near the warm steam of the ancient coffee machine, Chris waved to him as if she were drowning in a choppy sea composed of sleaze and rumour, as he wound his way to her through the throng.

Despite the closeness of the air he could scent from a distance that she wore his favourite perfume; when he had given it her he had told her to put it between her legs after showering; perhaps she had. And despite the cloud of competing scents she was

playing her usual waiting game - or perhaps not - because she was after all waiting only for him.

They kissed briefly, left, right, one, two, and three. The fashionable way to greet in public now.

She had to be fake, that was important, nobody must know until she could sort things, so today Christiane Moore was being a chaste version of herself, the seductress's makeup was gone, leaving her fresh-faced and seeming somehow unprotected, her skin a little raw, while she wore a sweater of very soft pure cashmere the colour and texture of warm chocolate. A scarf of bright silk finished the embellishment of her charms perfectly. Only she knew how soiled she was, at that moment.

"Thank you for coming"

"I was half asleep, still am."

"This is our place, isn't it?"

"Our get-away."

"I love you."

"I want you more than ever."

She itched. She shifted uneasily in the chair.

The chair next to her tilted back and a rotund face smiled at them as if agreeing to their greetings, speaking in Russian it seemed, just checking his eye line in fact.

"This is the place I should have been in when I plotted my early life."

"I can imagine only that you would have screwed up."

"Well, I had a go at it!"

She flushed deep inside herself. She was a lousy liar was the fact, but what else was there that she could say? Besides even with the Troubadour, she'd omitted to say that she'd discovered it herself before they'd even decided to meet in London. Years before on a student holiday, before Volker and the screw-up that was her life with him. Coincidence was that.

"After I found it, by chance, I sat here for ages, many days, waiting for you to walk through the door – and you didn't."

"I was at Auto-... at the office."

"Nice one!"

"Anyway, you didn't know me"

"Was the reason maybe?"

"I'm not avoiding anything."

"I didn't say that."

"Oh."

"Because that was where all the lines snarled-up and anyway we met via a not-very-poetic tangle, a filigree of lies and deceit and accident, just later and somewhere else." His accent suddenly unaccountably shifted, twanged with a flat Northern skirl. He waved, suddenly turning as he did so, recognizing a friend, or another earlier lover or whatever. She didn't see, thinking, wanting to think only of he. Suddenly she felt a foetid tide of fear or hate or distemper or deceit, any amount of unpleasant things, rise in her throat. She

dropped her face and looked direct at the marble top of the table as if questioning her memory, but had halted mainly because of the sudden flow of bile in her throat: she was almost throwing up because the rottenness was all about her and she was drowning in the rancid torrent. It took a moment, but he didn't notice, lost for a moment in his own musings. Then she controlled it and just flushed, hardly broke sweat;

“What a complicated way to say such a simple thing.” That was to slow it a little, she grasped for perspective.

“But it was that?”

“Yes, it might have been.” Control, control, control.

“You were good at that – at lies.”

Lies become a culture, after a while you believe your own deceitfulness, and among the women she knew, lies were part of the currency: instinctively she'd found herself sensing if any statement she heard was in fact a lie - or some variation on a distant truth - it had to be that way, the ungentle urgent psychopathy of survival in her group, in the end depended on shaping the body of reality your way, which was why AutoPass was such a breeze; lying had never felt so truthful, so good, so positive and wholesome.

“It had to be that way, neither of us were in control, it was JJ who controlled everything at our end, is the way I saw it.” And today was another start to another set of lies, cruel lies made from greed and her

weakness. But today, weirdly, it didn't feel good or important, or a good excuse, any more, it just felt fake and wasted and nasty and bitter: she shook her head from side to side to clear the fog.

"But you were darn good."

"Good?"

He was giving voice to the fact that she was better than he would have thought at it, at lies, without knowing it. After all the pattern of this was all a construct in real time that she'd thought up, a virago. And just to prove that, he hadn't suspected or for that matter detected a thing about what she had to hide, about her deceit with him, with Volker, and before his arrival a month before with any one of a lengthening string of casual lovers or Friday Night Fucks she'd had, and sometimes enjoyed.

If she'd been caught somehow by some perverse twist of fate, she would have to excuse herself of course, say it was because she had been alone, said that it was down to the alcohol or something; let's face it you have to lie, don't you – to get along, to smooth the way, find your lover... don't you? And anyway, she was thinking about him as she came. Well, that was why she felt okay about it.

But unaccountably she was suddenly sweating with the thought; a drop of sweat had started at the nape of her neck, then found its way down between the twin glans' of her shoulder blades beneath the vaulted strap of her brassiere, to the serried islands of her backbone, from whence it cleverly exchanged

spaces where the small of her back gathered the dense salty liquor, so that it then became like a vertical pool suspended somehow at an errant point, challenging logic and gravity with its milky thickness, as energy then measured it drop by drop down along the final interstices of her spine so that it finally ducked beneath the elasticized T of string suspended over the hollow gap of her arse and ran into the cleft of her, the sense of it giving a cruel edge to her thoughts about dissemination in its passage.

“Enough!”

“Enough?”

“Okay.”

She would have to stop there, for anyway her stomach had had enough. She found her way to the toilet, half blind with a sudden attack of migraine or something, and just sat there propped between the toilet bowl and the wash basin for some minutes, retching, though nothing actually came up, finally wiping her mouth and brow with some tissue.

A visitor enquired after her wellbeing; she shook her head and smiled, then looked at herself in the mirror and saw that she had gone a touch Sea Grey.

Thank God for makeup, he must never know!

She repaired the damage as far as she could with faltering shivering, suddenly agued fingers, left the toilet and found him reading a newspaper, waiting for her; she must take the initiative to control the flow

of talk; she clunked her bag down and started all in one moment:

“Anyway. You know - did my apprenticeship in lies and deceit!”

He laughed and she joined him as they bent over the carrot cake he’d ordered, without even remotely understanding a thing that was going on in her mind, and shared this day’s deceit with her, its creator. This was evil, schizophrenic.

She was that, was the fact.

Once-upon-a-time she recalled, bizarrely, a friend of hers called Elke had sat with her in maybe the very same sheltered seat in this very same café and told her an Arabic homily in a slightly anxious way as if she were instructing her: *‘Call me your friend and cheat on me, call me your brother and kill me’*. She laughed, but at the time Elke hadn’t; Christiane had had no idea why Elke had said that at the time, though she would find out ***later*** –

But first PT Jones had something to say, innocently chipping away at the fabric of her thoughts.

“That was it!”

“Umm, that bit’s nice... I want it!”

“There’s only one way with lies and deceit”

“Before we were truly friends – as well as -” He looked serious for a moment.

“The Airport.”

“Johannesburg?”

“No –“

She had to move the focus in her troubled mind, keep it moving. He picked up the trace without realizing:

“Ah! The jet.”

“I’m still surprised you could fly it; it’s so small. from a distance, so huge and heavy when you’re standing by it.” Her breasts heaved and her eyes suddenly filled with tears that were wanting to form their own speech: she wanted to be emotional - but then he would know, ask why.

“I was doing an hour a day, usually lunchtimes... when you were...away; I bought myself an opportunity to play with the toys. AutoPass paid for my instructor. I thought it was just a freebie, but maybe, even at that moment, they had less friendly ideas. When you think about it, twenty-five grand for a hundred hours is cheap when the insurances’ will pay out a hundred and twenty million! Anyway, it was well judged, don’t you think, just so we’d die somewhere nicely tucked away out of sight and out of everybody’s minds, just nicely so that they could get us away forever out of their hair?”

Finally she could join with him.

“Nicely”

“And I could save stuff,” speaking lightly, naïvely.

“Well there’s that.” Her eyes had mysteriously cleared, dried.

For a moment they shared the thought, they were silent, remembering the cloying scent of Jet-A1 aviation spirit as the tanks were filled that cold night, the icy wind across the airfield, the radio chatter and then the silence as he found the taxiway and turned onto the bars at the holding point, the release as he pushed the throttles forward as they were given the release from the controller, the rage as the turbofans span up, the restless explosive energy of the thrust. Actually she was terrified, sitting there in the right-hand seat and watching the runway unfurl as the nose ate tarmac, then the ground fell away and she was terrified again because at that moment she had lost all control.

She bit her lip at the thought of the terror as the aeroplane steadied itself against the Milky Way and the instruments on the dashboard stopped rolling in the pell-mell way they had been. She had been up there among the last glimmers of light, locked into some sort of mad dream, either of escape, nirvana, and solitude.

Perhaps all that, and so close to fear and... then came the realization that this was something that only JJ Grimme could have worked out. Before that time she would have simply asked, *why?* And then cancelled the thought and hastened to her death, but then her intuition told her that had been no simple move... fact was, despite everything JJ Grimme was a master tactician. Which was what led her to explore the empty luxury of the cabin, what could have

become one of the most luxurious, most expensive combined coffins and hearses, ever.

A change of air for them both, they both breathed in and he smiled, then she copied him, watching his eyes, his response, damning her female smartness; smiled. *That's the way!*

Then, like a shared thought:

“Just air in your lungs”

“And then the free air.”

“I should take you to Vancouver. The best air in the world.”

“Freezing, in-between the peaks.”

“Free, where people like us are at last free.”

She could leave with him, go somewhere else and be the person she had always wanted to be. Could she? She checked his eyes.

“Oh, I don't know.”

“You would, honest.”

“Free, I don't want to get into a thing about being free, because we're none of us free ever, we just think we are, we're each going our way because we've been told to and we go through the simple acts of imagined freedoms and then...”

Silence.

“We could play a game or something, discuss Philosophy *'à la comme tu veux'*, I could admire your shape, imagine your body under all that stuff - lust after you.”

“You do that anyway- I get an itch sometimes when you’re looking at me, even before I know you’re there, when we’re meeting and I haven’t seen you yet at the pit of my back; you know me well, naked.”

“Makes it all the more fun, more privileged information, your scent.”

She was laughing;

“Too much information!”

“Never enough, remember I’m an explorer, and I’m just discovering you - could take years!”

-and to continue the story of the erstwhile friend, Elke and Christiane’s lover, of course. You must remember that they were, had been all along *‘Really good friends’*.

A few days later she found that she had an itch, but not of pleasure or expectation or sexual desire: no, an itch in her pants, a green goo; then next thing she was at the Sexual Health Clinic. She had now a green card *C90568*, which colour went perfectly and unpleasantly with the green goo from her vagina: she had become a number, thankfully, because that number had contracted Gonorrhoea. *But from whom?* Christiane’s boyfriend of course! Remember they were all *‘Really good friends’*?

So, the story was obvious, wasn’t it; when Christiane had fucked him she’d got it from him in the usual place - and in her gums too – as a result of the fact that her *really good* friend, Elke, whom he was also screwing, had got it from someone else she’d

popped with. Some Friday Fuck Elke had omitted to remember. What did *he* think about that? She never got round to asking him, he just stroked his moustache and got the hell out of there when she was in the toilet.

A merry-go-round!

My God was that awful!

The two of them, whatshisname and Elke, left soon after and she didn't hear of either of them until she ran across Elke several years later, this time again in the same café, almost the same place. Riveting, isn't it?

He was not there at the time, privately Christiane was of the opinion that he was probably organising another flying fuck prior to leaving, but anyway the two of them were still together, married this time and seeking political asylum from wherever they had been - thus they were en-route to somewhere else. She never saw either of them again, thank God. Perhaps God had helped Christiane achieve revenge and parked them in a freezing wasteland.

So, as it would, one day the pain left her and in doing so gave her space; that's a function of time, and this time quixotically, granted her enough time to create new pain in herself at London again, now much later. Now.

* * *

Pain? Something she was not new to. The point is anyway that pain is always unexpected, always bright shiny unpleasant - and new.

She sat in some kind of shock: the same place though a different seat, by the window, London a week later. Back at the Troubadour, a place like a drug you can never recover from. Silent, though the coffee machine gave a suppressed start and then fizzed contentedly into itself.

The problem was now. This was mad! Incredibly, she had side-tracked herself and defaulted into visible stupidity, becoming the fool on the hill, a slag, a promiscuous woman again, lover to both Volker *and* PT Jones after screwing endless others because she had the *itch* and she knew damn well that one day it would all go and leave her lonely. Damn real life, *damn it!* And in the same breath it was a *gestalt* of the truly bad old days; only at that time she'd become inured to it because there were no alternatives - she'd been the company whore – a job without a title, even without a face; because she'd be so easily superseded.

JJ Grimme had snarled that at her when he'd figured she'd got out of line, once or twice - duplicity twice, she'd shifted it into her schedule, bespoke it without knowing how easy it was to forget, and had somehow now defaulted into lying to both of them, it had become almost a way of life, no it *was* a way of life, it had been her way of life. JJ Grimme was not

beyond the cruel rejoinder: actually a psycho like JJ Grimme *was* both cruel and thoughtless, but she'd never seen it that way, until now, of course. Would he suspect? She had to shift away from this.

Lucky for her perhaps, PT Jones had much to say about other things, his mind wound up with his latest circumambulation; she was content for him to do that because that meant that he would not become aware of her duplicity - surreal and semi-detached - wrapped as was his habit in endless philosophical complications of his own.

An example: PT Jones:

"Where is the frontier? Extreme sports – huh! Extreme in whose terms – and when you break something – your neck - there's someone always calling on the phone for a helicopter... how free were you when you first got the idea, why, it was offered to you and you *bought* the gear and imagined yourself someone, is what! Separate we're only..." He made a gesture of pointless bravado.

"They made part of a movie here once-upon-a-time – it was called *'I'll Never Forget Whatshisname.'* Oliver Reed's first shoot, I think." He was pointing at the stuff decorating the walls. "The keys and things were all in the shot, like here on the wall." There were gaps in the collections of keys fastened to the wood on the wall, and marks and scratches where busy fingers had stolen them using other keys for leverage.

Time was passing, and she was its servant, its vassal, its prisoner. We all are, yet at some moments we are more aware of it than at others, we ride the razor's edge and then at some indefinable, undefined moment it cuts into us: there is not much made after that for us to survive for.

She'd been listening, almost gravely, lost in thoughts of her own, of her own making.

"Uh, huh."

"Honest?"

"Sometimes I think that that could be my anthem!"

"Not while I love you so much..." She said soberly, lying, meaning to lie, as if that were an unassailable right, a fact somehow engraved in granite - and unchangeable - as if she believed it, had it written on her heart - as if she could not throw the whole thing aside and just walk away one stupid afternoon. She couldn't control the whole circus in her body and her mind too, was the fact, added to which the fact the reality - that she would simply have to lie whenever she considered it expedient, or when it made things move forward in her world. Just like that. Well, she had to, didn't she - she'd had to get through, and she had a hard struggle but hadn't she got thus far in one piece?

But lookit, anything is possible in any narrative of life. After all she'd written -

'Hi my darling. First I miss so much not hearing your voice this morning. Smile inside and feel my love. I always think of u.

Honey I have to ask you to come out of my mind as wherever I go u follow me... how come darling??? Just to tell u that ur with me all the time... I love u darling! Only one thing I forgot... to tell you I love u. Let me know once u home.'

-and she hadn't meant a darn word. Well, no, she had an excuse, which was that he'd lied to her about stuff, which in her mind kind of gave her a kind of authority to lie, to disseminate; and yet she had to admit that it spoiled the thing. And then, well maybe not. Point was, whatever he thought, she was going to continue anyway.

"Why, it's -" she counted on her fingers at first gravely - and then just as gravely gave up - "Well, *several* years now." A gesture in the face of oblivion. What is a lie, after all; it flies away and then disappears like a moth you haven't identified.

As it was he felt that it had been some kind of victory; she suddenly looked to him as if she were about to count packages or teabags or something, whatever, and seemed momentarily almost absurdly domestic, which gave a new tenor to all their lies about their love, made the café unimportant, as if the history of his or her machinations in this-seat-or-that had all been irrelevant. Perhaps they had been.

“Several years. Yes.”

Then it came into his mind suddenly, some sort of corny line of prose dreamt up in the seventies by a copyrighter somewhere in London, though he didn't know that: *'You know it makes sense!'* It did this time, was the thing.

Point was, that it was out of his domain, because he'd slowly become aware in his mind that this version of Christiane was not the one he recognized, and that it was driven by something female, furious and primordial which ignored any extraneous elements - even he sometimes - and concentrated upon the facts as nailed-down to survival and naked energy by nature - and *her* hormones, *her* grasp on the here-and-now.

You see he knew that he had been pinioned in his turn by *her* with her inherited inability to control her own reactions. Reactions to him, maybe because she was subject to an unwritten, ancient set of hard-wired rules which had been set into her by her nature. That must be so - perhaps those same ancient laws willed into him as well by his mother's mother and her Earth Mother's cells all those millions of years ago. And now those whispered conversations on the phone or on Skype, or on some chat line in the middle of the night - by the sighs and cries and the now, the erotically pointed, elegant electronics of the Dance-of-the-Seven-Veils behind which she could morph her nature almost at will without even knowing it.

Like a spirit straight out of the darkest forest in BC, possessed of an inbuilt power with which she could summon forces that neither of them would ever be able to understand, her being, her elemental self, down to the root of nature itself, the forest, the double X chromosomes of serious, hard, inherited live fact.

Let's face it, that was perplexing confusing illogical but real in his corrupted, plastic version of the real world.

He could never change that, just as he could never change his love for her, frightened as he was even to say it.

Travelling can be torture.

For later, a few days no more; they had arrived back in London, a week gone and she was aware that there was not enough time, there was never enough time: Christiane.

Chapter 12

The Razor's Edge

The next day she had to meet Volker.

"It's impossible! You say you love me and that I'm yours, but I have a lover who's true to me, you never were true to me, you used me. This is crazy! I can't continue this way; I'm going to stay with him."

"Are you crazy, baby. You're mine, we were made to be together."

"You never even used a rubber – how could you expect me to trust you after such a long time?"

"I was fresh out, besides, you can trust me."

"I did time for us – you!"

"It was a screw up!"

"And then you walked out on me, left me to rot in jail!"

"I was lost... I couldn't communicate with you because... you know."

"Because you were screwing someone else, maybe?"

"Don't say that, baby. And now I have plans for us, I have a new enterprise set up here in London, we're..."

"I'll think about it!"

* * *

Christiane left the house and hurried away theatrically as if all the hounds of hell were onto her. It was crazy, the messes she'd managed to work her way into in this mad life of hers.

And now another. Thank God that he didn't have her address, close enough as it was. Too close. She'd have to move somewhere where only real friends would know where she was. Some impulse had told her when she'd met Volker that last week that she must protect herself, even against him. That impulse or her amygdala had been right.

But she still found herself in some kind of ferment, tripping over stuff, narrowly avoiding colliding with a white van in her haste while crossing the road.

Finally she found a taxi. She had to get back home, then no, *then...* she changed the directions to the cabbie enough times to exasperate him.

His name was Lennie she learned, a drummer, who just didn't look like one.

"You're like a singer at the wrong club on the wrong night!" He said in his sort-of-comic Jewish accent. She failed to understand a single thing that he'd said.

Finally she arrived at the Troubadour. She drew a breath, PT Jones was not there. She could not have faced trying to sort her mess and talk to him at the same time. *'Thank God for that.'*

She found a seat beside the coffee machine again, absorbing the warmth and nursing a milk-and-a-dash, and began to sort her thoughts. Then the cook who had nothing better to do, came and sat by her and started a conversation that she was unqualified to partake in. After a while they found something in common and he began to amuse her, which took some of the stress out of the air. It was a Lego day, she decided, only the most peasant of logics, square pegs incapable of fitting round holes. Useless in this real life. She pulled the tablet out of her bag and logged-on to the Wi-Fi.

First she must find this business that Volker had spoken about. Just what was he doing? She had no trust in him anymore, and this sexual thrall of his on her was beginning to ebb a little. Imagine lifting a heavy weight which has pinned you down for an

absurdly long time? It was like that, she had to leave it and him, behind. And a condition of that was that she must talk to him again, not in real life, she would never be strong enough, her body was too weak and it would have to be on the phone or by email, if anything.

She began to think of texting him, telling him it was over, and then realized that that would leave her mobile number with him. She would do it from a new chip, then throw the evidence far away from her. She had his email anyway, she'd memorised it when he'd left the laptop on in the other room and opened his file of letters: not knowing that she was there, thinking she was still in bed, waiting for him. There remained the password.

Then she thought of something; if she tried she was sure she could recall the keystrokes upside down as she'd become used to doing at AutoPass all that time ago, photographing the keyboard, rehearsing the fall of the keys and the position of the fingers- and at a remove then - the position of his hands as Volker typed into the laptop: first upside down as she'd photographed it, then working round; she played with the result on a pad of paper.

There was only one way it could go, she found - *No, it couldn't be!* But it *was* – seemed to be - her name in some way as the password, and his straightforward name before on the mail address.

Next, the tablet. On the pad she tried a few combinations of what to her was become the diaspora, the pattern of her name, alpha-numeric,

underscore, whatever, played around with the combinations and uncertainties mirrored in the photograph in her mind, and swiftly narrowed it to *christi4ne*. Why her name? She flipped the sheet, then tore it off and ripped it up as if it contained a Nuclear Secret.

Then her fingers gave her away somehow, she weakened amid the verdant barrage of telemetry, then halted: it was as if she had become a thief. She put the tablet away from her, in its bag.

But, hey, she would have to check in order after all to be responsible for her own security. She was in the badlands of her soul, in the wreckage of a past she wanted to be a world away from. It was a dreadful moment of stress - which lie to tell and to whom and for what reason – something rough-caste out of weakness.

Then she pulled out the tablet, checked in to the Wi-Fi and keyed in Volker's email address, and filled the blank areas, finally entering her new discovery, the password. A moment of helpless unbelief, then:

My God! It went through.

Christiane felt a shiver on her spine and hastily looked around her as if she were hiding some critical nuclear secret, but nobody had noticed her being busy on the screen. She mistrusted everything now, even the walls of this place: she closed the screen; she would do this again later when she was sure she would be absolutely alone.

Chapter 13

Mean Streets

How does this bring me, PT Jones, to where we are now, sitting in a side street listening to accents which we do not understand contemplating a late, gentle Monday afternoon at the beginning of winter?

There were times like that on Mean Streets I'd walked: letters I'd written and then forgotten and then once again somehow found, I wrote this to you:

My history is painful and so is yours. Many lies, many deceits. Sometimes in the fog of the pain it all goes wrong for us. Now those two damaged histories are yesterday, because we're here today together, not for any theatrical reason, this is not a soap opera. And anyway perhaps they always were, for now we have a richness we can share and a love which we are shocked, surprised to discover - and that makes it ever so difficult to face.

Explorers are shocked and surprised when discovery means that unacceptable things have been uncovered. Discovery presents problems, but also offers huge opportunities. That's what has happened to us, I hope.

Hope. I hate the word hope because it means that that, whatever it is, is absolutely not there – now you have to engage a thing called imagination, and you can't eat imagination. We've come out of our pain to discover a blue sky, a green sea and out of the shadows enabling me to find that person who is live forever in your eyes, the 'you' who is a part of that rich tapestry that we make together when we weave our bodies, then our minds, together.

Yes it hurt, yes it was worth it. Yes, we've found love, if we don't suddenly fumble and just break it, that is. Love is all that anyone ever needs to make their life whole, a dream that people are prepared to die for. In the end nothing, and everything because it's an ideal. That's what they say, but they'll never be prepared to

stand by their statement and swear that it really works!

Well perhaps this time we have made our love, this experience that we share like the pain of deepest pleasure. Which means... I imagine, that I love you more now than I can say...

What the hell was that about?

This was me, after all:

'Why are you so upset? I pretended he was you, was all: you weren't damn there; anyway I was thinking of you as I came...'

Who was she lying to...? Herself perhaps.

[02:15:35] Chris: Just woke up so I thought to tell you my dreamyou were fucking her and she was enjoying it....and I know why I dream about it again because I have very strong intuition. It is not my insecurity at all. She had a long legs and she had sexy underwear....you even wrote about it...It was not just her there are many of them but they are hidden behind the curtains. Your voice and face had cold look...look of a cold calculated player who likes to be in a charge and move in a secretive way. You played with her because her face was covered in my dream. I think she like others isn't even important. The point is you were enjoying it because you were in charge.Anyway

what kind of a stupid question is Were they enjoying it?? It was just a dream anyway ONE LOVE ;)

[02:17:41] Chris: P.S. Enjoy your female party and stick with bussiness....as always... ;)

*[02:20:39] Chris: u know what I mean.....sweet dreams
PT Jones*

[02:21:06] Chris: (angel)

[12:07:37] Chris: Got your message and I know that you miss me in a way...and I miss you too because I know I am worth it....and I would be the best for you...but I am struggling with trusting you....and naturally I want to be loved and missed in the BEST WAY but all these here and there woman and your bussiness propositions with them makes me think....Am I getting to the point...You said you were player....so you know the game and how to play it...Remember one thing that I am smart enough to understand talk and walk. Just be aware of this and do not play on me as it has started with me and bussiness proposition.

And yes I love you nad miss you very much so and you try not to mess it as I said to you temptation is around all the time and you being a player will find intrigued and may try to go for it in secretive way.

[12:10:28] Chris: I thought I was the one who has stuff going but actually we all do have baggage . It is the art of it how we handle it. I love you my darling and will always give you honesty.....

....The cliffs of Dorset are broken at intervals by a honeycomb of rough rocks and marble outcrops and unidentifiable bits accompanied by a legion of half destroyed decayed buildings and broken shoreline and miles of chalk. They trekked until they were exhausted then sat down to eat some food, and then carried on. The sky was blue, the gulls were loud, and the cliff edges were threatening but beautiful.

Occasionally they broke through a screen of bushes and beheld a vista of wild ocean and broken clouds and spray driven in by the gusting wind. Once they sat in a deserted mine where Portland stone was quarried, and heard the natural sounds that must have been resounding there for a thousand years.

Their situation was not at all unique and she was happy about that, he didn't know a thing anyway, which was good. It meant in summary that they could find their way out of the darkness of their situation while she found her way out of her confusion. When would that be? How wide is the sky from the Durdle Door, from Chesil Bank? How deep is the distant ocean from the point of Portland Head?

Sometimes they had the scent of a quarry in the wind off the downs. Slightly salt, damp, maybe.

They walked what felt like miles down the winding path. Finally they were there.

“Almost!”

“What?”

“No, that one!”

“Well, at least it’s a long way from anywhere at

.....

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