

Lauder

Woolly - Bully



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Woolly-Bully Frank Lauder

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My thanks to James Watts for his help with the cryptic clues in this volume.

*A glossary of the abbreviations used in **Woolly-Bully***

Q&E: Atmospheric Pressure at a distant place

QFE: Atmospheric Pressure where you are

ATC: Air Traffic Control

SQUELCH: identification number on ATC screen

Enroute: refers to types of airway maps

Jeppesen: standard maps used by pilots

NM's: Nautical Miles. Also used to note speed.

Knots: Nautical Miles per hour.

One NM 5240 feet. 1.334 Km.

ILS: Instrument Landing System (automatic)

VFR: Visual Flight Rules (not automatic)

FTR: Follow That Road. Humorous for VFR

Runway direction is referred to by the first two numbers: 25 = 250°

Height: called *Flight Level*: which is referred to by its first three numbers. 230 = 23000

Vector: direction of flight

Comms: communications

Nav: navigation / lights

Met: meteorology/weather

Book **1**
Icy Times

1

In the Beginning.

*P*eople would say that he had the insanity gene, though he would say that it might be that and a cryptic mind - why fight it - though on a stinking night like this he would be forced to agree.

*A*t three in the morning in the darkness of a freezing night, he disturbed the cat Ubu le Roi who was asleep by his head, took the worn uniform out of the cupboard,

twinned it with his short sleeved white epaulette uniform shirt, pulled the four bar striped blue cuffs onto the epaulettes, set down food for the cat and then left home, entered the icy street, levered his height into the cold seat and navigated the car with difficulty around the few slippery back roads, finally driving many miles on the somnolent motorway in icy darkness, and finally, after some confusion, as the wheels of the car lost grip sliding in the silver slush on the side roads, found the trampled print of the road and then the long perimeter fringed by netting and painted with a layer of freezing frost, finally turning the unwilling, skewing car into the gates marked 'Freight Operators.' The scent of Aviation 100 kerosene.

In the lattice of darkness fringing the headlight beams he could see wisps of frost blowing like tumbleweed across the perimeter track as he arrived and parked by the wire gates in the aircrew enclosure, nodding and showing his permit to the man in the window.

In contrast to the approach roads here, the office had evidently been buzzing all night. He caught the slight whiff of sweat in the flutter of the warmth of the yellow lights as he swung in, nodded at the man behind the counter, presented the data sheet with its references on it, checked the notice board, and made for the crew canteen to drink coffee or whatever and chew a sandwich before departure. There were hardly any other crews sitting there waiting - so they were either very busy here and the majority of crews had left, or else business was

bad - or you could just put it down to being a stinking arctic night.

He felt faded, sitting there with his drink steaming away in the grey pre-dawn light, opened his notebook thinking it was the powder-blue summary record of his log, and found his latest whimsy:

***Add to person who falls between question and sense.'*(4)**

Perhaps he was faded, certainly he was jaded, lonely, without the sort of person in his life that he needed. Well, maybe she would come up on the radar sometime soon, who could tell. He looked around for his friend and habitual co-pilot Sam, he wasn't there. Probably getting busy on the apron, then.

Later he swung up the metal stairs with feigned brawn to begin to wake the sleeping bird and found that it was cold in the cockpit, but yet the Brummie ground manager was wearing uniform short sleeves and was unwontedly cheerful at five thirty in the morning. Whatever, his fingers were painful with the frost in the air.

"Dawn as you take off, I expect" said the manager, "your mate's downstairs," as he left, clunking his

flat feet and his overweight down the frozen slippery duralumin of the stairs.

He'd hunched himself up in the jacket, signed the release form for the aeroplane and now was left to turn on the batteries and the inboard heaters and prime the motors for start. He could see only shadows on the hard standing, the ground crew probably hiding from the frost until they would be needed. There it was:

'User.'

He was too old for all this, he thought. At his age he should have a woman, a wife, if you like, a real lover, an accomplice of sorts, that luxury, a sole-mate. Oh, and dependants, and people he knew who saw him every day. He should live a pastoral life, have cats and a dog and compose cryptic clues for the Daily Telegraph and the Times' crosswords and have a reputation for something other than having his hand in some woman or other's pants.

Instead – well instead, he had become a rover, a player of sorts, who picked women like cherries from the places he passed, so to amuse him. To make things maybe worse, his habitual co-pilot, Sam, was someone who he'd met in one of those bars, one Friday night near St. Paul's in the city, a bar full of women who were too old for discothèques and yet too young and too lonely to spend their evenings in a pub, too lost to have dependants or strings of domestic friends and yet still had the

itch, the urge. Professionals, lawyers from the large Law offices near Holborn Viaduct or the accountancy firm's kingdoms near Chancery Lane... Here he was sitting at the bar nursing a Campari Soda as it was, between two winsome women (which is where he always liked to be) when the one nearest to Sam, whom he had not spoken to yet said:

“You travel a lot, don't you?”

What else could he say, he would never tell them that he was a pilot, that would kick-start a whole bag of tricks wouldn't it? Then the girl chipped in again:

“He's a traveller too” indicating Sam.

The man (Sam) leaned over to speak. For Sam it would be after all part of the routine, he could spot a player a mile off and now this other bloke made it easier to score these two randy women. They could share the weight of them. Like *'Which one do you want?'* Something else, too, which could come later.

“You travel?”

“Kind of.”

“Tell me?”

“Fly.”

“Well, that's a surprise!”

From that moment they had become firm friends, flown together now for a couple of years. Sam was not only a player, but also a rover like he. How unfortunate. More wild stuff over the globe, more hours in Sam's small but impressive log book, and his too, of course. Yes, Sam had declared that he had to collect hours, and his way of working meant that Sam would do that for sure. Both of them. That, and score and score. More forgotten names and empty numbers in his phone.

*T*ime had passed and the Sun had begun to show itself like a shy debutante who would later take over the entire stage. The mobile stairs shrieked protest and then rolled away into the remains of the ground mist as it cleared. Now he unlatched the small window on the port side of the bird, getting a sudden whiff of kerosene, and leant out and signalled the ground mechanic to remove the engine covers, and then latched it closed again against the eddies of cold wind.

The rough, worn, navy blue serge of his second-hand uniform jacket was always a poor shelter against the change of elements between the crew lounge and the cold metal of an aeroplane, such that it took a few icy minutes for his body to adjust to the cold after leaving the CAA control office desk where you checked-in with your licence and log book; but the uniform cap helped a

little, keeping his balding head from freezing for the moment anyway, except that you had to stow it once you were moving. Still, that only took a few minutes.

There was movement under the nose. Ah, yes. Sam was there already, frozen in the wind as it eddied, checking the pitot heads. Right now, he'd been out on the hard standing with a member of the ground crew for many minutes: it is the co-pilot's job to check the body of the plane, kick the tyres, wrench the flight surfaces, visually check and test the fairings and covers, anything else he can think of, before he ticks and initials his part of the pre-flight checklist. Then there was the cockpit checklist, to ready the controls and the electronics, indicators and equipment, tick, yes, tick. Something on the tablet? Search with your finger. Tap, tap. Just the headings, the GPS to be checked against the information plate set high up on the side of the berth facing him, and the waypoints to be set later. This took quite a few minutes. He checked his watch. The take-off window the Tower had given him was creeping up.

Then a last hasty bland tasteless hot plastic cup of coffee from a thermos, brought on board by Sam, rubbing his hands together.

He fingered the starter relay switch and the star-board motor shuddered, hummed and then developed power, spraying-out a little frozen ice and then steam. The ground booster wagon backed up and left trailing

long shadows. Then the port starter, using the power from the starboard motors rotation. Bang, bang, fizz. A cloud of pungent metallic scented white cold smoke, the carbonised oil signature of which he could smell in his seat right at that moment. With a metallic whine the engine rotated and the thrust meter climbed into green.

A slight sensation of vibration. Now they were almost ready. Stow the uniform jacket and the cap in the locker by the door, rub your arms to bring up the blood circulation. Half a conversation. A laugh between them. The heater was working well for a change on this bird and there was no frosty breath in the air now. Good.

Sam had finished punching-in co-ordinates on the transponders and gestured at what he must read, handed him the tablet with details arranged in red, white and green across the glass. He digested the information and slid the tablet into its niche, pushed the paper with the waypoints written on it on it across the console, clipped it low on the instrument panel and waved and gestured at the ground mechanics; *Thumbs Up fellows, now it's time to pull your headphone jacks away.*

He clipped his headphone jack in securely on the console, testing: *"Bye-bye folks!"* Sam twisted his mouth into half a laugh.

Sam had found the temporary numbers and pushed the button for local control. A couple of minutes

early. Good, again; he found the comms button on the unfamiliar right hand curve of the stick.

Click:

“Good Morning Tower. This is Pan Bulgarian 241. Ready to taxi.” Breath or steam in the air over the cold instrument panel. A moment’s pause while the Tower waited for their taxi number to come up. *‘Your SQUELCH is PB9631.’* Then: *‘Inform us of your primary vector, we have 234 here. Over.’* Something in the headphones, wavelengths of area control copied into the radio. QFE local atmospheric pressure, the expected, 1013. Distant transponder Morse numbers later.

Sam leaned forward to adjust the flaps and set the altimeter. Then in his cold headphones, the Tower, smart as a new pin and with perfect diction:

“Coventry Tower. Good Morning, Bulgarian 241. Proceed to hold at twenty-nine Right. Local control on one three three decimal six.”

“Bulgarian 241. Thank you Tower, noted. Initial heading 234. Indicated flight level two nine zero.”

“Coventry Tower. Roger, Bulgarian 241. ”

Sam bent his head to set the frequencies on the radio consoles.

*H*e pushed the throttles forward a soft click as the bulk of the freighter first jerked slightly as it gathered energy, then proceeded to slide rapidly away from the loading ramp. He eased the throttles forward again for a burst and the brakes sighed off as they had now swiftly left the area of loading bays and rolled into deeper local water, the freighter roiling noisily along the perimeter track and turning left, his hands following the taxi lines, his eyes bemused by the black-fringed yellow line '29R' as it disappeared under the nose of the ageing Boeing, one flattened edge of a tyre in the gear on the Port side protesting a little as they swung onto the taxiway: clunk, clunk, clunk.

Now three hundred metres ahead of them, the numbers '29R' under a little light exposing an arrow, and then the final twelve musical bars of the runway sliding into distant view in the headlights way ahead of them. Beyond that, the mad zigzag slashes of tyre rubber, as if a lunatic giant had been let loose on the apron of the runway with a huge black crayon. And finally the number '29' in black and white, drawn huge, but dwarfed by the vastness of the runway.

Further, beyond the arc of their headlights a scattered confetti of colours, blue, red, white; lights and orange navigation beacons reflecting unevenly from the white scarred flashes of the holding point.

“Bulgarian 241. Holding at runway 29.” The bird was still moving but had almost rolled to holding point, the taxiway being empty up to there. And empty sky ahead, maybe nothing over that horizon. Now the old jet paused quivering slightly, on the very edge of balance at the sharp edges of the markers, quivering in suspense, almost a thoroughbred, as if expectant. The runway perimeter track lights nearly two miles away blinked, as if daring him to leap into their blue depths and disappear.

Sam:

“Fifteen flap. Slats. All normal.” Silence, then the radio:

“Clear to take off, Bulgarian 241.”

“Bulgarian 241, Roger, Coventry Tower. Departing. Thank you, Good Morning to you.” The suddenly harsh rush of the engines drowned out any further thought as the heavy bird drove forward against the brakes and then, released at last, accelerated brutally away into the gathering violence of an unknown dawn.

And now it was later, much, much later, another day in the endless parade of days. The clamour of the airscrews was the first thing he registered as he came out of his doze, Sam flying at the time. Endless khaki-drill coloured sand to the horizon, the blue line itself blurred by drifting brown sand.

To the un-expecting eye, from eight thousand feet the desert resembles a frozen brown ocean, the serried waves reaching great heights but never falling, while in the interstices between them lie the forgotten remains of broken rocky structures, sometimes the odd palm tree, though most are buried up to their green tops in the sand and resemble spidery outcrops. Time frozen, but in fifty centigrade of heat. Below them, as the aircraft gently rolled a few degrees from wing up to wing down in the upcoming thermals, the sand displayed flurries and runs as surface wind currents stirred the continuous fine dust which lay on the surface of the harder compounded surface. Sometimes he could see the traces of *wadis*, frozen under the surface and solely visible from here on high where only he or an Eagle could see them.

Perhaps once in a thousand years the *wadis* would carry water to wherever the rock strata would lead it, but for this eternity they were dead, for this was the arid surface of a lost planet, Mars perhaps, with the heat baking the sand and often thus changing its colour to strange shades of chemical grey, opaque pale yellow, dead burnt dry dark red ochre. At night the desert is its most mysterious, almost velvet darkness broken at huge distances by the orange highlights of distant caravanse-
rai, isolated nameless towns and forgotten encampments way, way, into the stillness. And in the sealed climate of the pilot's cabin at forty-thousand feet only the unbroken humming of the engines, nothing else to tell

you about what dramas of heaven and hell, life and death were playing-out in the vast area beneath you.

Then as the freighter progressed he could see the land changing and the sand beginning to ebb away like a quenched tide, the wind driven fragments of dust now exposing striations of rock, only visible from a great height though barely beneath the surface.

Then a flat blank, as the glare of Sun rose piercingly in the windscreen, white, then grey - and suddenly the two of them were really out there in the stones and the hostile rising heat - dangled by the skein of fate, a frisson of fear down his back with the sweat on the light white shirt against the worn material of the seat, flying at eight thousand feet, out of range of hand held rockets and yet below most radars. Oh, and beyond where any sensible person would venture, as the freighter plugged endlessly onward, finally over dark red wastes, flat land looking like the baize on a snooker table but red-brown, where they now encountered towering, mysterious volcanic plugs out in the true wasteland, accessible only after a thousand, no, more miles of trek into the forever. He'd never seen them before but he'd heard tell, remembering more as the Antonov clattered noisily across the dead silence and the sealed acoustics of four hundred or more miles of savage, broken rocky floor.

Here the volcanic plugs stood razor sharp, shattered but straight up, on the layered flat floor of a billion

year old sea, denuded of their coats of extinct volcanoes and forgotten by almost everyone. Weird. He felt a sudden dart of fear.

They had now entered the air over the unexplored vastness of that tortured space called the 'Empty Quarter' - feared by the brown and black eyed Berbers, countrymen of the people here but yet a people totally strange to them - the green eyed Bedou of this place - a vast, empty tract of land the size of France and Germany combined.

Someone had once said to him, 'in the desert - never turn your back on a Bedou in the Empty Quarter, he'll kill you for the water you have in your container, for the food you're carrying, for your shoes, your shirt'

Your watch? What use is a Swiss timepiece in a land which time has forgotten, can you eat gold?

Time passed and now they had left the ancient fastness of the extinct volcanoes far behind them. Then the track they were on became suddenly alternately bumpy and then smooth. Dangerous for the unwary; it would be possible to fall a couple of thousand feet at the end of one of those rising thermals and hit something hard - and then no one would ever get to know what had become of you.

The freighter was a high-wing four turboprop engine job, an elderly Antonov, big, slow and sturdy, close

to the end of its official life. It nodded on and on as if it knew well where they must navigate to, having been there before sometime in logged airframe history.

The monotonous thrum of the two inner turbo-props had left him half asleep after more than four hours, flying automatically, deep in his thoughts. Sam leaned across and pointed at the gauges.

“Fuel contents down”

Sure enough, the tanks were showing a quarter.

“Better pump some.”

“You’re flying.”

“I’m flying.”

“Right.”

Sam first began to pump-out the fuel in the fuselage tanks into the wing tanks using the switches on the flight engineer’s panel, before he slid out of the seat and disappeared into the freight section of the fuselage, behind the cabin. Just then the nose of the aeroplane hit the unseen spike of an unexpected ridge of cool air behind a massive hill-like sand-dune way below, the aircraft fell several hundred feet and bucked like a stallion.

“Steady!”

“I’ll take her up a level.”

That took five more minutes in the thin air. And then any yawing suddenly vanished. It must have been the rising waves of heat alternating with cooler denser air, which had made their track feel increasingly as if they were driving over corrugated carpets of toffee and gravel.

Sam could now open the door separating the main fuselage and the cockpit and clip it securely open to the worn edge of the old galley working surface. Then he advanced through the freight bulkhead into the cargo space where there were a dozen or more huge drums of fuel; unclipped the stopper on one and inserted a flexible hose, sealing the join with a clip. Then he joined the hose to a hand pump, which in its turn led out to a valve in the fuselage floor, sealed that, and began to laboriously pump the fuel out of the drum and thus down into the tank. After a few minutes the fuel began to syphon, and ten minutes later the tank sputtered to a halt, with just a trace of fuel left in it. He then withdrew the hose, clipped the plastic stopper top back on, manhandled the drum by rolling it near to the rear cargo doors, and repeated the operation a dozen times more, leaving the last of the full tanks forward of the space, and a row of empty tanks half way down the fuselage waiting by the cargo door. He clipped the valve securely too.

Sam was exhausted now, mired in sweat and with a sweep of black oil across his face. He slid into the empty

flight engineer's position at the right rear behind the co-pilots seat, again, breathing hard.

"How's that?" Sam.

He checked, the contents gauge for the centre tanks showed half full.

"Almost enough. We should be okay. I'll do the rest later; make some tea."

Sam took a while to regenerate, after a few minutes he made the brew and they quenched their parched throats. Then he took over. The freighter droned on, neatly.

Suddenly the ground beneath them had changed: savannah, light brown arid sand and clumps of bushes, a few people shading their eyes from the Sun to focus as the ghost shadow of the Antonov skated over them like some sort of avenging angel. Then one hundred and fifty nautical miles later came small groves of stunted trees, the soil now a sandy, rich red-brown.

They should dump the tanks, time was now.

"Oh. Not that they'd give a fuck."

"Where are we?"

"On track okay. Think its Congo."

"We should dump the tanks."

“Yah, your turn.”

“You’re flying.”

“I’m flying”

“Right.”

He took his turn now, first emptying the remaining full metal tanks into the on-board fuel tanks, going through the motions, then rolling the empty tanks close to the freight door. Then he fastened a line around his chest for fear of being sucked out into the void, pushed the door back, and rolled each empty tank into the yawning, shrieking airflow gap, only imagining where they would land in the savannah.

Now he was exhausted, it must be the rising heat in the cabin. He dozed in his seat for more than an hour and finally awoke feeling just a bit refreshed, sweat on his face.

Sam was good with the Antonov. An ex-military pilot with too few hours on his log book to get a decent civil job, he took any flight job which would add time to his total; thus he was here, doing crazy things for hours and money. Mostly hours. Once he’d breached the three thousand hours that he needed for regular flight work, maybe he’d be off and work as a second pilot for EasyJet or someone, flying what they called a ‘Desk’ and screwing the hostess of the moment to maintain his concentration without going absolutely mad. Or maybe not. More likely

not. Adventure is a dangerous addiction, it becomes a habit. He couldn't imagine Sam in a nice tidy jet, no way.

“I'm flying.”

“You're flying.”

He took the controls now, and Sam dozed off. Flying two handed was not his idea of pleasure, a bird like this was quite a handful and the cockpit was wide, which meant that really, according to the manual, there should be three of them. The pilot's handbook talked about a flight engineer, more even, a fourth hand, but the two of them took turns running about and it worked out. Busy though, trimming all those tanks and trueing-up the Centre of Gravity. Yes, they could use another pair of hands, but on a flight like this one carrying twenty tons - hundreds of invisible explosive goods shrouded in waxed paper and reeking of the waxen stuff which covered them – in innocent plain coded green painted wooden boxes like this, well there was no margin for risk at all.

The hold was stacked up with those twenty tons, boxes which had never officially left the manifests in the north of Europe and for that matter had never not existed on the military quartermaster's manifests down south. Enough that they could not take the risk of carrying crew who did not understand what a secret cargo was, and what the risks could be. The insanity gene? Perhaps; but think about the money!

Simply. If they were unfortunate or dumb enough to land for any reason along the line between their take-off point and their target point, the plane would be impounded and they would end up serving time, years, in a stinking bug-infested hole somewhere. And that would be if it went well for them. Thus the cash payments, the high charges, the high risk; why they were there with a cargo of explosives that were barely legal.

He checked the flight details on the clipboard, then checked his watch against the clock on the panel. Good, they were on track and a couple of hours short of their goal.

*T*he wondrous variations of colour amongst the dark mottled sweep of the dense vegetable tops of the trees stirring in the heat of rising air seemed to bloom afresh amidst the rainforest, as it itself fumed and boiled in all its treacherous transient beauty below them, wisps of steam or moisture or something rising from their tight green tops over the rich red sandy soil, then blowing over the distant trees accompanied by the scattered colourful ragtag of large slow birds, as if it were composed of little lost wisps of cloud.

The dynamic of the air had changed as quickly as the light itself had changed; the Sun was almost at three-

o'clock in the sky and they were well fuelled and almost out of there, almost legal, climbing out of reach of the dangerous deserts. They would soon be checking-in to area control, picking up the Morse transmission for the nav. co-ordinates, and flying straight to a distant transponder. Simple.

Now they could climb to thirty thousand and soon the waiting local control in SA or Windhoek would clock on to them, give them a squelch, an I-D number and a heading, and they would be proceeding at a lick across the steaming forests and glistening deadly bands of mercuric river far below them, flashing like vanished planets in the deadly Sun, while over the sun streaked wastes and the first tropical tundra of Namibia the sun held them tight in its grasp. He pulled the enroute chart across his knees, looking for the next waypoint. Goodbye danger, for today anyhow.

Ten minutes as the freighter made height, wearily levelling off at thirty thousand feet, the port outer suddenly vibrating and then trailing a dark stain of oil smoke against the rising dense steel blue of the air. He pushed the throttle forward a click and the vibration stopped. He felt suddenly exhausted after ten hours in the air.

"Hullo unidentified aircraft, identify yourself." The radio had woken up.

He gave the call numbers and the Controller at Windhoek suddenly knew him, without comment. They were expected, after all.

“... Nav. 8273. Your SQUELCH is Delta Delta 3429 note this is military; local control on one two nine decimal five, QH one zero zero five; turn on to vector one seven five at flight level three three zero immediately, and wait for further instructions.”

Home at last. Time for tea, cucumber sandwiches cut in triangles, and a seat by the pool in the summer calm.

2

One of Ours.

A moment of contrived sadness.

This was an awkward time for him. He affected a halting stride: tall, too tall to do anything other than stoop when he was avoiding other's eyes, too big to be easily camouflaged in a crowd, and too aggressive to allow anyone to irritate him. He was a psychologist's bad dream, not a team player but yet the leader of every team, too fast and far reaching in his thoughts to be controlled and yet covetous about his secrets, for secrets, he had aplenty. As for sadness... well, he had known too much of that already, his dreams told him so. He used painkillers to slow his mind sufficiently to allow him to

sleep, and an alarm clock to bring him to wakefulness in readiness for those lonely mornings in the cockpit. And now this play acting. He hated it.

Unexpectedly, a couple of nondescript cars had driven into the rear of the parade of the few cars parked by the graveyard, and some figures disengaged themselves from them and mixed with the various mourners at the graveside without anyone noticing, or comment being made. He noticed that there was something about those unknown almost transparent visitors that momentarily made his hackles rise, but he was too busy being a mourner himself to have the time to think it over.

While a bearded saxophonist played a jazz standard over the grave, he watched the widow, then he, then others, sprinkle dense, dark sticky earth onto the top of the coffin, while a couple of cows poked their heads over the picket fence, perhaps scenting the rich earth which, despite the chill of Autumn, was anyway almost palpably alive with the deep sensation of continuing forever.

Then one of the strangers surrounding the grave stepped forward almost unnoticed, except that he alone had realized that he was one of the car-crew, and doffed his hat, while the others from the cars remained motionless in their neat black row amidst the small gathering. It looked as if in some way they were paying their dues, duty.

As the mourners witnessed the priest scatter Holy Water onto the coffin, the cow's beautiful kindly eyes gave a genuflection all of their own as the gravediggers stepped forward to begin returning the richness of the soil back to the earth herself. An especially deep grave because one day the widow would return in a coffin of her own to continue eternity with her loved one

He asked himself, was she one of those strangers by the grave, or was that just a sideshow? She must belong here somewhere in the jigsaw puzzle, after all.

Was she one of the family, one of ours that he hadn't known about, met, before? The thing was that anyhow he'd seen her somewhere before - but where could that be? His eyes saw it all in a startling clarity made possible by the alcoholic lies told by the brandy.

He saw a tall, svelte athletic blondish figure, eyes moving this way and that, business-like yet clothed in mourning, a tight black dress with swooped collar showing the gather of her small breasts and the shape of her strong shoulders as she turned, with the cutaway underwear emphasizing the twin ripe shapes and subtle sexual swells of her arse under the thin voile of the dress as she moved. How can death be sexy?

He realized that he must have seen her that first time by the grave, strong and yes, desirable. With those other strangers from the cars perhaps, a heavy black overcoat, and then a detail: untidy hair over her face and

that sharp, demanding nose, that was all - but that was the work of the wind - mere wind could never affect his newly kindled desire.

Later. An hour or two. Time had passed and the stranger's cars had gone and yet she was still present now at the tail end of the Wake, an unknown woman affecting a sort of slightly watchful politesse and managing thus to navigate her way through the last minutes of a sort of celebration which now had now become more a chorus of the overstressed, the lost and inebriated than simply a funeral party. Still, that is what Wakes are about, a celebration of all the lifetimes we are yet to celebrate, for one day we will surely lose them, too.

He had caught the way she moved, subliminally almost, was watching her out of the corner of his eye as she engaged someone in conversation, a tall woman who must have been very beautiful in her youth, another who he knew could speak very many languages, when unexpectedly as she moved round politely their eyes coincided, shared thoughts flitting through them taking fire in his imagination, as they both shared a twinned glance directly at one other; she risked a slightly toothy smile, just a brief smile, as if it were the wrong thing to do there.

***'Not seeing window covering?'*(5)**

He was almost sober, and besides, he had to look after his charges, which he did, forgetting that fleeting contact. The party, the Wake, dwindled, took its place in

history, the people returned to where they had come from, he did his duty... and two weeks later he was once again in the big City, almost solitary, meeting some casual friends later, this time at his sports club, right there in the centre of town. He'd forgotten her now. And then the passing of time moved their small shared realities onwards.

She had apparently unknowingly approached his seat from behind, pushing her way through the crowd of sporty people who had percolated between the club and the pub; scattered people in tracksuit trousers, sports tops, talking animatedly or using their eyes to smooch with someone they had found might satisfy them, relaxing after sport or whatever, such that he did not sense her presence, or she even suspect his.

At least that is what he thought, as suddenly he found that he was locked into that magnetic moment: she was perched at the end of his table almost side-on, with her back half turned away from him, being talked at by a drunken Art Director from an agency off Margaret Street, which was the gist of much he had heard from the stuff the man was spouting, and now half turning away from the Art Director and towards him, as if she vaguely recognized him and wanted to talk to him for some reason. A thought in those eyes, the mouth beginning to move, then close, then the thought intruding again.

As yet he hadn't suspected a thing, concerned with something across the room, his friend Richard mouthing and pointing at what he had obviously taken to be his suddenly new pick-up. Evidently, Richard had seen the signs that he had missed. He re-focussed his eyes and suddenly they picked up on what was apparently virtually happening in front of him.

Now she was giving the Art Director the dead eye.

A moment later she looked across and slightly down at him again seeing his tan skin in an English winter, which gave the lie to so many things. The ghost of a smile, then with some sort of increasing surprise. Could that be who she'd thought it was?

She leaned towards him a tad.

"I've seen you somewhere. Was that in the club?"

Her body was toned, he could see the T-shirt draw-in against her slim waist, the hint of the impossible, a six-pack, as she breathed. She was desirable, *fuck it all*. He felt suddenly very unfit, with that constant slipper of fat on his belly.

"Maybe. I do recognize you from somewhere."

"It must be. I use the Y a lot."

"I come here when I'm not working somewhere."

“Oh, I just do stuff to stay quite fit. What d’you do?”

“Well, I travel all over the place.” The word ‘pilot’ brings hosts of camp followers, baggage, and he just didn’t need that. Just, ‘I travel all over the place’ was more than enough.

She didn’t continue that line of enquiry. Instead:

“Live close?”

“Kind of. Crouch End. Six miles or so.”

“Oh.”

“Twenty minutes in the car.”

“Ahah.”

“You?”

“I’m here a few days a week; live close to here, just down the road.” There was alcohol on her breath, he could smell it.

“Yes.”

“No.” She’d had a thought. One hand rose to her brow. What was that? She shrivelled those pretty, wanton, eyes in order to focus, to reach the thought. His eyes surveyed her body. All in place, neat. Yup.

“No? Oh.”

“I got it! The funeral - I saw you at that funeral last week, out of town - or when was it? That was it.”

He saw her as if she were there, all over again, of course.

“Funeral? Ah yes! Now I remember.” It *was* that woman, the neat arse, the strong shoulders.

“Oh yes; actually, I hate funerals.”

“So do I.” She said that as if she’d seen a few. Weary perhaps, sharing the thought, even a bit of the sadness.

“Well, that’s something! Who did you know?”

There could only have been one. She read his mouth and just didn’t answer, unmoving for a moment with her brain maybe out of gear.

And now he remembered her better, perhaps it was the drink. No. Yes, that face, those off-pink, rather questioning lips, tugged-at by her thoughts. Those strong shoulders, the slight hint of trained arms, that tight shapely arse. The black dress, the hint of the neat breasts. The walk with a certain proud sway to it, shimmying into his thoughts. Yes. Like a ballet dancer, but stronger, very strong.

“How did you get to be there – at the Wake?” Again. She had to answer, now.

“Oh, I knew him slightly.” That was all. Slightly inconsequential. “It was politeness, but I knew him, charming man. He was part of my circle.” Part of which circle, the whores or the executives? Before he could sort that he had a question:

“You knew him... from the City?”

“Yes. We worked together - on projects sometimes. He was one of ours.” She looked at him as if she was re-focussing, for a moment, seeking something.

So, more an executive than anyone else. He had no idea what she was saying, but they are a bit of a sneaky brotherhood in The City. They have a series of codes they use, just like QFE, VFR, FTR or SQUELCH in his language. Impossible to understand unless you were in the brotherhood. That was it.

“Oh. Tell me more.”

She ignored that. She looked at him a trifle blank then, her mouth slightly open, perhaps in sudden doubt of some sort. Then she smiled, a question in her eyes, but at the same time not curious. And then she smiled again, a hint of the schoolgirl, a tempting, slightly toothy smile. Interest was what it was, probably. Then:

“We’ll be going to the Boozy in St. Pauls, with his other mates next week - to see him off – are you going to be there? Friday around two.”

“It could be; I’ve got a meeting earlier with my agent, he’s here for a couple of days and I normally only speak to him on the phone - and then maybe I’ll come along.”

“It would be nice to meet again.” She had decided him, not that much of a problem. For all he knew she could be the whore of Babylon, or a banker. Not much difference, then. He’d find out in time.

“Actually, I will be there.”

“Really?”

“Really? Honest!” Was that a promise?

‘Blind’

A chilly Friday afternoon in late autumn. Amid the continuous din of drunken bankers and stockbroker’s whoops and shouted conversations, the pop of champagne corks and the blank look of the opportunist whores circulating here, with the weather drawing-in outside, he remembered that he had been fascinated by the way her mouth moved. He had no idea just why. But when he saw her again he must watch the rhythm, it could just be the right thing to do, watch the rhythm, taste the music.

This was after a moment after he'd discussed something or other at the bar with an account executive whom he distantly recognized from his old business and then rotated to face the room and drank a rather tasteless red wine. For a while he was subsumed by the crowd of tired and slightly drunken distant friends of the recently deceased. They ebbed, and then they flowed. After a couple of hours the extended Wake was burning itself out.

And then that strange woman was in his sightline again. She must have been there for some time already, but in the bustle and the crowd he hadn't seen her. Pleasurably, suddenly, she was there right close, extending a hand to him and then withdrawing it before he'd touched her. There must be a subtext there, somewhere. Control, perhaps.

They spoke, nothings. But her eyes held a certain contained interest and so he kept his curiosity back, covered, afraid of what passion could lead him to. Life was too dangerous that way and he had run out of space. Actually, what with flying and adventuring, frankly, he had lost his way, his immediate agenda. He must search for a new one. But a new one would mean that perhaps he would cease to fly, and for him flying was the drug, the obsession. Those hours above the clouds where he could commune with himself, seek all the secrets and explain them to himself, with death and life and forever a few inches away outside the skin of the fuselage. Gorgeous.

After a while he found that they had fallen into a sort of listless dialogue, killing time and yet wanting to communicate strangely urgently. They had been speaking for some time, the Wake dwindling around them, looks being cast at him as a near relative of the dead man, some watchful, some conciliatory, others simply curious. Then the Wake was bye, the staff clearing the space and re-setting the chairs for the evening.

So, they found their coats and left the place, dwarfed suddenly on the street by the steel and glass columns of a new emergent cityscape, the wind snapping at them amid the concrete stacks and the massive bullet-proof safety glass walls and the darkness sweeping over the newly awakening city. She was amused by him and what she had realized was his permanent air crewman's Pacific tan, even though he had begun to shiver in the cold winds that he'd almost forgotten: flying was not like this, you spent your life looking down, not up, the Sun so blinding that the windscreen was self-shading, and of course you used Aviator's sunglasses to shield your eyes.

Undecided in their strangeness to each other, they enquired of each other and decided to prolong their conversation such as it was, and then all of a sudden swapped locations, a ten minute ride in a taxi; they went to a wine bar she seemed to know well near Covent Garden and were alone, well, almost alone - while a couple of her friends who happened to be there said jolly things

to her and pushed off, for Friday plans they'd already made. They registered his tanned skin and said nothing.

A couple of hours more had elapsed and they were in another bar now, drunk. She unwontedly telling him about her earlier life:

“Once upon a time, when I first left University I wanted to do something less brain orientated - learn to be a masseuse - you know, break away from the academic usual and do something more linked with... well, your body. I'm female, we live in our bodies... Know what I mean?” She peered at him. “Which is why I joined the Y last year.”

“Body. Yes.”

“Anyway, next I did a course in Massage, became a ‘Bachelor of Massage’,” she laughed and mimed a funny something which he didn't understand, but he laughed anyway as if he was into it. “Lasted ages actually - in America, Salt Lake City University. Stupid romantic idea, actually. Couldn't work. Didn't.”

Money? These things cost, don't they?

“Uh huh.” In the States?

“Later, I joined.”

“Oh yeah.” Neither of them were sober, now. What did all that data add up to?

“You know one thing?” He said, in an unguarded, alcoholic moment.

“Eh?”

“I hate funerals!”

“We said that.”

“Did we? So why were you there?”

“He was one of ours. You know, don’t you?”

He jumped logic, went on without thinking:

“I can massage, but I never get massaged.”

“Poor you!”

“Yeah. It’s awful.” He drained the glass and looked over at the barman for another. Just a minute. He’d done a course in massage only a couple of years ago in the summer when he was at a loose end between contracts and not gainfully employed, in Rome, actually. He fancied he was pretty good at it. In the dark they’d had to massage anyone else in the group who came under their hands. Naked sometimes (that was how you’re supposed to do it after all.) Well.

“I can, actually.” A moment of madness.

“Really?” Would she believe him or reject him as a spoof?

“I did a course, in Rome, took months, twice a week in the evenings. We did it in the dark, mostly, it’s a good way to learn the body.” He explained it to her, his eyes now slightly out of focus with tension. “Well, you know it’s better with your eyes closed anyway.”

“Oh, yes.” Maybe she believed him after all, her eyes held something, perhaps a smile, or perhaps she’d been through this before and was reading him.

“And like, you’re supposed to do it with, like you, naked.”

“Sure, that’s the way I always do it.” Her eyes showed a hidden spark for a moment.

“It’s tough on the hands.”

“Should last at least ninety minutes.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, you have to be strong. And use a little oil, not too much.” She was, and she enjoyed it, he could see that; her body was firm, no fat, quite long limbed, firm breasts and shaped arse. Perfect really. He could imagine her massaging him in front of a log fire, both of them naked, the flames rippling away, a smidgeon of female steam wafting from her, his nose full of it. Heaven - or Hell?

“I could massage you if you like – I mean I really could.” He was quite getting into this now, just as the alcohol seemed to be getting to him as well. He drained his glass and they sat drunkenly together touching at the shoulders, he slumped a little, she upright, their eyes only a little out of line. She moved:

“What’s the time?”

“Oh,” he squinted at his watch, “five to ten.”

“Too late for tonight, then.”

“Well, later, tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday - just right. Yes, I’m free, and anyway I haven’t had a decent massage for just ages.”

“Well, tomorrow suit you?”

“I’d like that.”

Where had he heard that before?

“You know, I don’t know your name.”

“You don’t have to know my name to massage me – but anyway – I’m Morgan. You know, like in Welsh.” There was a slight rising lilt in her voice. “Forget the rest, you know, like my boring first name.” Morgan the body? No, Morgan the Masseuse.

“What is it?”

“Eloise.”

“Beethoven wrote a sonata just for you.”

“Oh yes?”

“It’s called ‘Für Elise’.”

“Well, there’s a thing!”

“And I’m...”

“I already know, you told me.”

“Oh, yes?”

“And you have gentle, strong hands, I’ve seen that.” She looked down at his hands as if memorising them, said that and then made as if to forget the statement, and wanted to correct back. But it was too late.

“Well, I can massage you if you like.”

“You already said that and I agreed.”

“Did I? It’s the booze.” Laughter. She was looking at his mouth, quite drunk herself.

“Well, - promise?”

“Ha! Ha!”

“Yes really.”

“Promise!”

They both found that very amusing, for a private reason that rippled between them, very, very amusing. They both laughed and the people in the seats next to them seemed to want to join in; laughter was infectious that night. It was the alcohol. She found a piece of paper somewhere and scribbled down her number and address, with instructions (*'follow the building line around the corner to the main door it's not obvious'*).

"Okay." They kissed farewell awkwardly, almost formally, cold noses and cheeks, bending forward so as not to touch too much too soon. She laughed; a cloud of frozen breath. Then she was gone.

Saturday.

He awoke with a hangover, had a coffee at the 'Boozy Rouge' walked around the shops, said hello to a few friends, checked the newspapers in the library, went to Morrison's and filled a basket, watched television in the afternoon, played with his friend Ubu le Roi the cat, generated a new puzzle in his head;

***'Fusilier confused about Beethoven's opus.'*(8)**

And left around five.

He'd phoned her on her landline at midday while he was walking between shops half way down Hornsey

High Street. They arranged to meet at her place. She texted the address to him on his phone as if to reinforce yesterday's scribble on the paper, with a reminder of the time *'Don't be late, I'll get cold!'* What does she mean?

The evening threatened rain and then cancelled the thought. Traffic was heavy going in, but it's always light late in the evening, nevertheless it took him a few extra minutes to find a secure carpark, and then trace the apartment in a tall but anonymous hotel-like block near Tottenham Court Road, ringing the entry bell, pushing the door anonymously and finding the lift a trifle claustrophobic, which he put down to sitting at the sharp end of aeroplanes and seeing nothing but fate in front of him for much too long. After all, when you're in the air at forty thousand feet you are somewhere near to God, though if you fall down, things reverse, don't they?

She'd given him the apartment number on the intercom, which was marked only by the name 'Morgan'. Almost anonymous, not quite. He banged on her door in the narrow hallway, smelling something like a waft of embrocation somehow seeping out of the door jamb and caught in the air. There were a few moments of tension in his mind, and then the door swung open.

There she was, the same slightly tawny helmet cut blond hair, green eyes, tall, no makeup, wearing a sort of thin shift dress of sorts fastened at the collar, a welcoming smile on her face.

“How nice, you’re on time!” They greeted and he leant forward as their cheeks touched again in the symbolism of the ages. No promises, then.

She led him through into a small overheated sitting room, the curtains drawn, with a massage table ready at its centre.

She had made coffee, timing it for that moment apparently; he sat down, she brought two cups and as they drained their cups five minutes later, she said:

“Are you fit?” He put his coat to one side, kicked off his shoes. She released the button on the shift, and was naked in front of him, supple, beautiful.

He worked hard for an hour; finding the contused muscles around the back of her neck, in her strong shoulders, on her back, then around her body, using a little oil on her fine skin, shaking-out her legs and her arms, talking non-consequentially as they went. After that his arms and back were wrecked, he had to rest for a while. She was strong alright, strong, core muscles finely tuned.

Made him feel like a wreck.

“You were good, for a non-professional,” she spoke gently and sensitively, perhaps going easy on him.

“Well, it was good” he lied. “I enjoyed it.” Wringing out his arms as he had been taught to.

“Hard work.”

“Well, yes.” She knew, then. Of course she would.

He sat down to rest his arms, lay back to relax. She smiled at him and without a word left the room. And now he could hear the shower operating. Then she was back, disappointingly fully clothed.

“Hardly recognize you with your clothes on!”

“I need a walk or something.” Humourless.

“Why not.”

They walked down through the old precinct of Fitzrovia to the new Euston Road and finally through to the darkening acres of Regent’s Park, then down the stunted new avenue that was all that remained of the original Broadwalk after it was felled by disease.

Somehow later in the cold dark, they had reached Primrose Hill and she’d caught his fingers in hers; they ate steaming Borscht, one of his favourite dishes. She’d never eaten Borscht before and enjoyed it with the rich rye bread they supplied. Two hours ago she was naked and he was luxuriantly pulling her limbs out, then massaging around her breasts when she flipped over, smoothing down her thigh muscles and only imagining what was between her legs, inches from him, and now she was light and playful, listening to him talk about adventures, flying, danger, wearing clothes which hid her beauty.

He suddenly wanted her desperately, his skin hurt in the cold air. They had a drink at the Belsize Tavern and at eleven something arrived back in a taxi at her apartment in the block the worse for alcohol, laughing for no reason. Nothing seemed to have changed, not that you would expect it; the entry hall, the stairs, the lift, the other apartment doors. This was a place of... anonymity.

The doorway; she fumbling in her bag and dragging stuff out, he held some of it in his hands to help her.

Finally she'd found what she wanted. Then the door. On some kind of impulse he pushed her roughly against the wood as the door opened, and she almost reacted as if he were half an invader – and then as if he were a desired friend. Her eyes closed either in panic or delight or starvation, her hands first pushing him away and then in reflex clutching him violently in to her, as if to tear his shirt away from his body, all out of balance.

It was famine in his mind at that moment; then that instant when they had their first kiss, his lonely hands suddenly finding her body in the camouflet of dark, her arse flexing against the counterpoise of his body, surviving, flexing against their twin weights. Gorgeous.

So then at that next moment they staggered in, as if four legs had ever been some sort of impediment to movement. He threw his jacket on the sofa with a hunched gesture, she kicked her shoes off, dropped her

things on the massage bed which was still standing there waiting, peeled her tights and top off so that now she was almost defenceless - his, in just her cut-away pants and brassiere - and gave him that cross-eyed lost look, as if that were a signal, which it was.

d miles on the M3 and then left.

Sam not around, on a flying job for a friend of his in Scotland somewhere, so they would be alone on a short two day thing. Nice, to get intimate; right, when she's your lover, possibly even your... well he'd leave that to fate. Dawn coming up, rush hour, time to forget all the other dawns and just remember your simple physics. His fingers still a little numb with the cold, her nose a little red at its tip. He chewed his sandwich and forced it down with a cup of tea. Done.

The King Air, a spanking new model this time, stood out by the dispersal waiting for its crew, its new, fine, curled-up carbon fibre wingtips challenging the air itself.

They walked out onto the apron as the dawn began to fill the westerly sky, and watched the ground mechanics finishing the servicing; he signed the release and

clipped the copy to the clipboard of documents as they boarded through the forward door. This was a very new model, straight out of Hawker's factory near Southampton; the paint smelt new, the surfaces and the instruments were new and the motors sounded sharp and untried. Not that any of that mattered, it would be theirs only for a couple of hours.

The motors started smooth, as you would expect, and they taxied along the perimeter track busily, waiting for clearance. Slight misting on the interior windows, he put that down to the materials warming up as the cabin heater took charge of the air-con.

The King Air cleared the perimeter and he spoke to control to wish them well and to set his course: one hundred at flight level two zero zero. Morgan was pretty good in the right-hand seat.

"Gear up."

They settled down to enjoy the flight, brief as it would be.

Morgan took the control.

"I love you."

"Shut up."

"I'm flying."

"Roger."

She looked quizzically at him.

“Why are you being like that?” She knew. Women’s intuition is hard-wired in. They were talking over the intercom, checking each other out with headsets and microphones, looking straight ahead out of the windscreen. Almost comical, really.

“*David.*”

“Oh, *him.*”

“Yes, *him.*”

“Well?”

“You fucked *him.*”

“No – *yes.*”

“Well, tell me –”

“Hey, that was a long time ago. *Years.*” The words sounded tinny suddenly. Must be distortion in the R/T.

“Sure. And you met him by *accident* on the Termini station!”

“Well, he told me that he worked in Rome sometimes. Who wouldn’t if they had half a chance! After all the Mid-West is well, two thousand miles of the Mid-West, is all.” There was a flat drawl in there somewhere, he could swear it. Just like he couldn’t kick the clipped

German vowels he used when he'd been working over there for years and visited the UK.

"You had his number?"

"Uh, huh."

"He gave it to you?"

"Uh, huh."

"Are you being faithful to me?"

"We haven't done it for years."

"Promise?"

"I promise." What did *years* mean? One year? Two years... more?

"And what does he do, then?"

"He freelances for an agency, a sort of RAC for Americans out of the boondocks; it rescues you out of a fix. It's called UIF."

He settled back in his seat to let all that sink in.

She seemed to be telling the truth, was the problem. How would he get past that one? He let it go for that day. Maybe she'd say something unguarded when she was between the sheets. That's if he was listening that time, of course.

The King Air landed on the small strip they had been directed to, a short well attended runway, clear markings white stark out on black, which sat between the tussured, pubic, serried ranks of young trees, on a rocky promontory itself surrounded at a distance by the typically narrow signature of the stripes of vineyards, with their characteristic untidy assortments of green foliage and slightly uneven lumpen chalky soil.

They climbed out, rather stiff after three hours in the air, to be met by a beaming Controller, who sat them down, and in German, chatted to them about the way things were there. Being polyglot as he was, he had no problems, translating for Morgan. At length it was time to leave the strip and be taken by the local taxi driver to a local *gasthaus* hotel in the nearby village, very old and rugged in the South German style beloved of pastiche in Hollywood. The day was dying, the beginnings of evening in the sky.

There was a pile of palings and old wood structure which was obviously being renewed, heaped outside in a shallow skip by one side of the hotel, and builder's tools as well as bags of cement and plaster under plastic covers waiting for someone to come and use them. Builders were obviously working somewhere at the back. He paid for a couple of days in advance, that way they could leave without notice if they got a sudden call, it made things

easier. The stairs creaked as the manager showed them the room.

Morgan looked at the pretty antique bed, massive wood and all, like a ship upon the ocean of dreams. The ancient floor creaked and the management were no longer young, and he saw her mentally calculating just how wildly they could make love without causing a stir.

But they had another couple of days there before they would start making their way to the nearest airport to crew the next 'plane out. Justas had had one lined up for them, but it had been delayed.

“Let’s walk through the woods!” Said Morgan. “Quickly, it’s romantic in the moonlight!”

Morgan seemed to have an inbuilt sense of direction; they walked for a half hour before they came through the woods onto a slightly raised wide stony area and then chanced upon a large cleared space. At first, with his urban eyes, he took it for a forest clearing of some sort, but then saw that this was a purpose prepared space. On a high bluff overlooking the flat area in front of them was a small, somehow imagination-perfect, gloomy castle which seemed 17th Century, with deep set windows squeezed between grey stone uprights which gave a wide and deep view of the surrounding countryside for many miles. Below the castle on its eastern side and looking east almost to the visible limit of the land, he realised that this here was a border edged by woods.

Morgan:

“Wow! This is so Dracula!” He was not going to tell her now that he knew a very similar castle at Frankenstein, four hundred miles northwest of here that she would be sure to love too. She clicked away with her ‘phone, ever the tourist. They had been there for a few minutes when he saw a movement on the far edge of the field. An olive green staff-car of some sort, obscure type, obscure army markings, obstinately bobbing about on the gravel and clay and rock floor as it made slow progress and proceeded, bouncing, left to right across the space. He had an intuition that they should pull back into the cover of the darkness of the trees. Morgan acceded. A couple of minutes later, as the two of them became subsumed in the green brown and black camouflage of the forest, the staff-car came slowly round by the forest’s edge and stopped as if patrolling, then continued after a minute. At that moment he was standing by a huge fir tree, Morgan soundless beside him. They looked at one another.

“One more dodgy photo for your album,” he said.
“What the hell was all that about?”

Now curiosity impelled them back to the edge of the forest, where, still in the tree’s deep shadows, they could look out at the clearing. Way over, at the back of the field was a low shed-like structure, difficult to see, under an overhang of the huge rock the castle was on.

Morgan, pummelled a lump in her bag and pulled out the binoculars that they had found in the truck in the Empty Quarter and squinted through them. What a girl! The darkness was beginning to descend, but the glasses were equal to that.

“Night glasses!” she said brightly. “What’s all that, then?”

He looked through them now. To his surprise he saw the sharp points of the heads of what looked like missiles protruding from the darkness of the hangar, and behind them a parked jet Fighter plane, some other stuff. The area was bigger than he would at first have thought. Over the curve of the field it must have been twice the size he’d imagined. Morgan counted, pointing.

“One, two, three, four...”

“Well?”

“How could they fly things like that out of a field like this one?”

“They’d think of something.”

“VTOL?”

“Short runway, maybe.”

“Never seen the type.” He had the feeling that they could just be in the wrong place again. This was getting to be a habit.

“Well, we’d best keep our heads down and disappear.”

“Sure.”

They sneaked away across the darkening forest, slowing as they crossed a road to avoid curious eyes, zig-zagging until they were a good way away and covering their rear until they were finally close to the town. He was nervous.

“Look, get rid of those photos on your phone.”

“I already did - sent them to my cloud.” One less thing to worry about.

They slowed as they neared the hotel, and spontaneously kissed, in a shadow. A dog yowled at the moon.

They were close to the entrance of the inn on the darkened high street lit only by the lights from the windows and a waning moon, when he noticed a lumpen military car of unfamiliar build sitting close to the front door.

“Is that the same car we saw before?”

He was now confronted by two men in uniform who walked out of the dark. Without warning one lashed out and caught him on the side of the head. He fell into the road. He saw Morgan running somewhere.

The other soldier approached him and kicked his ribs. The pain was so intense that he gave hardly a sign, feeling just the internal agony.

He managed to straighten up as the first soldier spoke in bad, accented German:

“Was haben sie mit diesem fotos getan?” *What have you done with those photos.*

“Welche fotos minden Sie?” *Which photos.* He had the immediate impulse not to agree to the proposition; that could make things a lot worse.

“Ach, du Weiss sehr wohl was ich mind.” *You know exactly what I’m talking about,* said the second soldier, preparing to give him another kick as he levered himself back up to vertical just in time to be hit around the back of the head by soldier one. He tried to react but his head was all fuddled.

At that moment there was a banshee’s wail and a long ragged heavy piece of wood hit soldier number two, very hard on the shoulder. There was a dry cracking sound as either the wood or number two’s shoulder broke. For a split second he saw Morgan, holding a piece of dry old hard wood structure from the skip or somewhere, with her feet clear off the ground as she brought the long crooked piece of ancient tree down.

“Yahh!”

Soldier number one had started to wheel to face back to her and that gave him just enough time to half straighten, and then throw himself at the man, catching him around the knees where, pinioned thus for a moment, he fell forward. Morgan was there again as soldier two writhed in agony clutching his broken shoulder, and soldier one suddenly stopped moving as Morgan, that slender delicate ballerina, elbow punched him on the side of the head, nearly breaking his neck. But not quite.

A pistol had freed itself from the soldier's pocket, and bounced, then skewed itself around on the road. He saw the outline. A Makarov. A Makarov? Surely that should be a clunky plastic Glock?

The kerfuffle had awoken the normally somnolent street. The hotel concierge was out on the tarmac, gawping:

“Ach Gott in Himmel, was jetzt! Polizei! Polizei!”

At that moment a police car came cruising round the bend of the road, like they do in movies, and drew up by the scene. One angry woman with her clothes torn and a cut in her palm from a piece of wood she'd found in the skip and used as a club, one man with a black eye and contusions to his head: two injured soldiers, obviously off the base nearby. What was this all about then?

The concierge had seen it all from the side window of the hotel and explained everything to the policemen. Thank God that Germans were so nosy!

Two hours later they left the *Polizei Revier* where, using the police telephone they had hired a car. It would arrive at seven.

“Are you okay to drive?”

What a question! Despite the present polite company, this was somewhere they had to be out of, yesterday!

Twenty four hours later they were sitting queueing in a twin with an empty cargo bay on the perimeter track at Munich, waiting for the Tower to give them the off. Then it would be home at last. A slight problem with his black eye as they transited the crew lounge and showed their papers, but it was soon bluffed away. (*She gets mad sometimes!*) Actually, for the moment he was troubled just a bit, his eye swollen, one lip split, his ribs hurting distantly, but anyway looking forward to lying close to her, scenting her scent, like a wolf, once they were back. Something to look forward to. Thinking for a moment, something troubled him:

“One of them had a Makarov in his pocket. He dropped it when you clobbered him.”

“What?”

“A Makarov 9mm Long – that’s standard Russian issue, isn’t it?”

“Oh, a Makarov, not a Glock, like usual.”

“Just what I was trying to tell you.”

“Russian Army issue.” No answer. How did she know, come to think of it?

At that moment the Radio woke up and demanded attention. Morgan rummaged in her bag for something while they waited, and then put it away safe in the locker by her seat. *‘Her feminine item.’*(3-5-5) some secret feminine thingamabob that women will always contrive to have about them even if they’re air-crew.

“Clear takeoff.”

Now the runway’s piano bars streaked beneath their feet, and they were climbing into a clear dark sky, a thirty degree turn, the lights of an elegant city beneath them reflected in the bright mercurial waters of the Isar, a great river shrouding a troubled, forgotten, past.

The strains of a Strauss waltz all at once filtered through his mind. How nice it would be now to just... *dance.*

‘The Woman Thing.’

Romance.

10

Out of Nowhere.

Early afternoon, raining heavily and water and thermos' of tea and coffee stowed in the battered galley area of the freighter together with packed food for a couple of days. Where were they off to - the far ends of the Sahara again, perhaps? The lights were already beginning to shimmer on the perimeter track, perhaps it was the dying of the winter days.

The engines were muted as the freighter skewed on the turning circle at Antoduplo and the airframe squeaked a metallic sigh. Now onto runway 25; and all at

once he fancied that he faced the ends of days again. That was how it was, then. They had sat there waiting for clearance for five minutes already, and traffic was anyway low. The rain suddenly cleared, and a cool wind began to rise. He locked the window on his side of the cabin.

Sam pulled open one of the Jeppesen charts and began to check something he had maybe forgotten. Flight plan: flight level one two zero, turning on to a bearing almost due South and then a dogleg and a final track into the field after two thousand and something nautical miles, no sandstorms or turbulence expected.

This time, North Africa. Mali, actually; he'd overflowed that huge mad country several times before, going South and West. Not a problem, then. The cargo? Shoes in the hold, ten tons of them, and assorted boxes of this and that, a few tons of that, fastened securely onto their pallets and shrouded in netting. They would be landing around dusk, and the strip itself was apparently just dust; with a laugh, the enroute office at Malpensa had told him that the control Tower there looked like someone's holiday caravan. Truth is often more bizarre than fiction could ever imagine. We live in tiny discreet boxes, each one apparently a world perfect and detailed in itself. The problem here is that there are billions of them, each one different, each one imagining its perfect centrality in its perfect imaginary Universe, and sadly, each one entirely wrong.

And coming back from Mali? Something heavy; the ground crewmen had hefted a ratcheted set of heavy webbing bands into the rear of the fuselage and fastened them down with a metal lever and its gear on top of them. What the hell, it was money he was here for, not romance.

The runway markers fell away and the Controller sent them the expected QFE, their height allocation and their vector.

“Three Greens.” Gear up. Almost due southwest and then to starboard, a dog-leg into the field near Taoudenni. Sam found it on the Jeppesen approach chart. No ILS; he’d have to use VFR, his eyes. Good, it kept you in practice, and the field was absurdly small, but the place looked flat.

He was wrong about flat. They approached over craggy rocks and desert which quickly became rolling savannah, with the promise, from thirty thousand feet of green pastureland some way over to their left. Taoudenni is still locked in desert: but they wouldn’t be there long either.

They taxied to the main dispersal.

“It’ll take some hours to load and its dark now. I’ll schedule your ETD for six thirty in the morning, okay?”

They would have to skulk around the freighter with the whiff of kerosene around them all night, this

way. Either that or some pieces would be missing in the morning.

They took turns to walk around the aircraft, flashing the torches that were in the cargo hold at imaginary shadows. By five in the morning he had fallen asleep in the driver's seat while Sam and Morgan were making coffee in the galley and having a long conversation about stuff in general, sitting with their legs dangling over the edge of the cargo floor.

There was a sudden noise. Burping engines and banging joints on the rear end of a tractor unit. A huge truck, a White, straight out of Ice Road Truckers hove into view, pulling-in to the airfield boundary. Good, they would soon be loaded and off, back on some sort of schedule.

"What is the freight?" Nobody volunteered a word, the labourers just wheezed and staggered as the two heavy grey containers were hefted into the hold and secured with the running gear he'd seen on the top of the containers of shoes before they were unloaded. They checked the fastenings and the stanchions on the cabin floor. All okay. She might handle a bit weird with the cargo so tall and the weight up in the air like that, but he could handle it.

He signed for the manifest.

"Fish?"

“Yup.”

“I always eat them out of cans. They’re kind of oblong, aren’t they, with square bodies and no heads?”

The cargo doors clanged too.

“Wow that was a nice romantic night, we all together drinkin’ beverages and sandwiches!”

“Let’s go, Mrs. Pilot.”

“Sho thing, Cap’n.” She was laughing now.

“How many NM’s?”

“Eighteen hundred in a straight line. Fuel okay Five hours, maybe.”

“Cool.”

“Battery on. All dials alight.”

“Good Morning Control, Bulgarian two five zero. Starting engines.” A minute, then: “Start starboard outer.” The starters seemed to whistle with relief that they wouldn’t have to be there any longer. Then in a broad French accent:

“Bulgarian two five zero, Permission to taxi. Runway three zero.”

A couple of minutes as he manoeuvred the lumbering weight on the uneven taxiway using bursts of

power from the engines: the sharp lines of the piano bars of the runway as normal, spoiled by drifting sand. From his perspective the runway numbers distorted by the drifting dust into almost gothic symbols.

“Bulgarian two five zero, moving. Runway three zero.”

“Clear for take-off”

“Thank you Tower. Good Morning to you.”

Leaving a desert this time was much more amusing than it ever had been to arrive, he conjectured. He let the freighter take a long line, flaps at fifteen degrees and slats out and then quickly retracted as the wheels came up, bumping, into the bays.

The freighter gained height slowly on that line, surprising some wild camels a few miles out as they stared blearily into the easterly rising Sun upon hearing the approach of the freighter. Then another twenty or so miles and now in full daylight, gaining height while looking down at a now miniature encampment at a small oasis in the desert which looked to be Bedouin, a huge spread of tents, the black tent fabric flapping lazily in the rising heat, their flocks of goats chewing at the vegetation on the edges of the enclosures.

They were over the Mediterranean coast in less than two hours, chased by a following wind at twenty

thousand feet, and joining the queue at Malpensa as the mid-morning rush hour started three and a bit hours later.

He was starving for something to sate his nerves, and so were the other two. They sat at their breakfast as if they hadn't eaten for a week.

Morgan tipped his elbow with her fingers, her eyes focussing over his shoulder.

"Look."

"What?"

"Someone wants to talk to you."

"Oh?" He pushed the chair back to half-turn.

It was one of the control staff, there with their manifest on a clipboard.

"Hullo." She looked at the paper as if she were short sighted.

"Are you this?" She was short sighted. "Um... twenty tons of fish?" said the controller. "Out of a desert?"

"Now you say it, that's kind of strange. Someone told me there's a Lake Chad somewhere, never been there. Not my business, anyway. Thing is, I never look at the manifest, just so long it's not dangerous."

“We’ll have to look.”

“Do it, of course, help yourself, it’s not mine any more. Anyway, I signed it over to the handling agent. The whole cargo was sealed-off. Didn’t see a single fish.”

“Live fish.”

“Oh, that was the reason for the weight! Okay.”

They sat in the canteen for some time, reading the papers, thinking what they should do next. The freight agent seemed to have disappeared.

Another controller returned.

“Something strange about those tanks.”

“No idea. I’m, just the driver.”

“No, I appreciate that: we think it’s some sort of scam - the *Dogana* are looking around, I’ll let you know more later.”

Sam wasn’t listening, scribbling again as he always did in his little book. When he asked him why he did that he said ‘It’s my diary. In two hundred years someone’ll find my stuff under a bundle of junk and they’ll read it and say. “*Did he really screw her too?*” My diary’s to horrify historians, just as the scribbles you write in your cryptic are intended to drive us all mad.’

They were free to travel, and that they did that day, going to Rome for another extended weekend. On the Monday he was about to buy tickets on a scheduled flight, but as they were in uniform decided to cadge them a lift on a scheduled flight instead, entering the crew lounge and asking around. As a matter of form he asked at the desk about the shipment they had landed at Malpensa, and the clerk gave him all the info he needed. Surprise, surprise:

“The tank supports were lined with cocaine. Nice job. Almost. About a ton of it. Lucky there wasn’t a leak, or the fish would be stoned! The agent was arrested, but they let him go - he was after all just an agent, and the expeditors and packers were yesterday, somewhere in the Sahara, gone. Well, according to the info from the Guardia di Finanza at Malpensa you can fly anyway, but your company had better just watch its sources in future.”

“Righto.”

“Fuck that. They’ll keep an eye on us. The receiving agent fucked us up, nearly got us into trouble, they’ll watch us now when our stuff is scheduled.”

“Yeah. Must talk to Justas, he screwed up on this.”

11

The Woman Thing.

“I’m just not a gambler”

The party went on around them. Shape-shifting women moving like vertical waves in their tight dresses, hypnotic, in the half-darkness. It was a party of sorts given he thought by a friend of Morgan’s from the Y, back of Tottenham Court Road.

As they entered there were people laughing, talking with friends on the street out of the windows, exchanging comments. The party was evidently going well.

Upstairs on the third floor in a modern apartment. It was a crowded space.

The alcohol was getting to his mind, music battering down, a woman in a tight red dress rubbing her side against him and then snaking away across the dance floor, her eyes inviting him to dance with her. Sam was somewhere else in the party, he'd seen him talking abstractedly to a few people. Sam was a great survivor. God! Didn't he owe him his own damn life! The two, no, the three of them, were more a crew now, a team.

He sat down for a minute, realized that he'd lost his drink, got up, exited to the kitchen, where he bumped into the woman again. Her eyes welcomed him, and her body did the rest.

"Who are you?" She was rubbing against him, rubbing her breasts against his chest, hungry. He could feel the warmth of her thighs, smell the alcohol on her breath. Not unpleasant.

"I'm... I just do stuff!" He cancelled the obvious answer. How could he explain anything like his mad existence to someone who probably spent her life in an office or something? No point opening a discussion just now, it being impossible to talk much, for obvious reasons.

The floorboards creaked under the light plasticized surface and started to develop a tidemark, it was

swimming with spilt booze. Yes it was one of those parties.

“You always meet the most interesting people in the kitchen at parties!” Where had he heard that before? Anyway, did he look that interesting? Oh, stupid, think about pheromones. Or were the other men all queer or boring, this was the centre of London, gay pride and that.

“Yes, yes you do.” She was so close to him that it was no sweat to look straight down her front, see those burgeoning small breasts, so firm and round, cupped in that delicate beribboned looped brassiere pushing against him. She must know that, she must want that too. And be a member of the club. Obviously. Never seen her before though; but there were thousands of members in the Y.

“Are you a member?”

“Everybody here’s a member” she said with a certain solemn certitude, as if it must be obvious to anyone. “Isn’t it obvious?” She was holding a drink.

“It’s just that I haven’t seen you before.”

“Oh, you will, I’m around the building, you know, most days.”

She squeezed against him again as someone, maybe the hostess, came through the throng, trying to get into the overcrowded kitchen. The floor creaked.

“Someone has crashed this party!” Laughter, the crowd were so busy talking that they barely heard, let alone were listening.

“Me!” Said the girl in the red dress, squeezing her breasts against him yet again as the hostess forced her way back out. His hands had found their way to her back, and then they dropped further, cupping her firm arse.

“Not you, Deborah” said the hostess. “Who’s he, anyway?” Looking at him a little out of balance.

“Oh, just a complete stranger. Friend of Sam and that girl Morgan.” Said Deborah, taking a quick swig of her drink.

“Oh, hullo. Welcome to the family. And watch her” said the hostess eyeballing him, wrinkling her nose and whispering a deadly secret into his ear in a shrill soprano, “She’s the fastest girl in the office.”

She fought her way out into the hallway and disappeared. Sniggering broke out between them. Soon he was laughing too, as Deborah put her hand on his crotch and sought what was there.

“Yeah, I’m in the mood for a fuck!” she pulled his head down to her height and said into his ear. “Look, let’s go upstairs, there’s a room there to which I have the fuckin’ key!”

By then, with the alcohol and all, he was in the mood for a fuck too; they began to make their way out of the kitchen into the hallway. Deborah took his hand and cupped it over her crotch.

“Don’t squeeze just yet, unless you want me to come.”

“Really?”

“No!”

Up the stairway into the clerestories of the house, until the noise of the throng had dwindled. She had the key, and found the door. They staggered in, her hand undoing the zipper on the back of her dress with two fine strong fingers in an impossibly dislocated female manoeuvre, he undoing his belt.

In a moment they were standing unsteadily by the tousled bed, his fingers parted so that he could speed the crotch of her pants as his palm sluiced down her belly and then zipped quickly down her closed legs. Deborah was naked from the brassiere down, her dress over her head. Now he was on top of her naked, her hand finding his cock and making it hard for her.

12

Little birds.

He was over at Sam's place, visiting. But Sam had something to show him anyway. He was sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of tea, when Sam brought out a large brown envelope and dropped it on the table.

"Something you'll be interested to see."

"What?"

"The contents of the other case you flew back in the King Air, the one without stones, I was told."

"Told? Someone got into them?"

“That was what they said.”

“I’m just amazed.”

“You’re easily amazed, then.”

Sam peered at him as if he’d become suddenly short sighted, and then extracted a couple of sheets of copied paper from the envelope with his fingertips as if it were some sort of magic trick. Pink.

“Well, what would you think all that was?” Figures all over the pink paper, squiggly writing, perhaps an Eastern language. Against the wood grain. Could be Sinhalese, perhaps.

“Fuck knows – I’m just a fucking ignoramus, a driver. Anyway, how did you get to know?”

“A little bird told me. I did the homework was all.”

“What is it there?”

“Copies of the stuff in the attaché case.”

“How...?”

“Hey Man, they do it, is all. They got experts.”

“Oh.” Hopeless to argue when the forces acting around you make a point of ignoring your lack of knowledge and take advantage of your weakness.

“Info. Data. I guess it’s pretty hush-hush. And I’ve been carrying stuff like this around in my flight locker on these flights?”

“Sure.”

“That stuff on the border?”

“Bit of a chance, eh?”

“No, I mean how did I get into that?” Morgan and the woods and the darkness and cold sweeping down from the Carpathians - and who knew what in that field, behind those walls. The army men in an army car with the wrong weapons on their belts. It just didn’t add up at all.

Now Sam was holding another couple of sheets of copied paper up for him to see. Blue, this time.

“Blue for a little boy.”

“Another set?”

“Yup.”

“What is it?”

“What’s it mean?”

“Come on!”

“Ten years in the nick.”

“Shit, no!”

“Well, they could get nasty, couldn’t they?”

“Really?”

“Really!”

“Tell me then? “

“Codes or something, not for me to presume on them what must be amused.” They weren’t amused, much, when they saw them. Sam’s idea of a funny accent, to amuse him.

“Well?”

“Who?” Pointless, he’d never get an answer to that, he must be really naïve after all, just to ask.

“That’s the way the cookie crumbles in this game.”

This game, what friggin’ game?

“The little bird let me in on this, too. It gets to you eventually.”

“Fuck!”

“Likewise.” He thought a moment.

“Just where have I motored to?”

“I’ll let you know soon.”

“Look, don’t tell Morgan, she’ll freak!” After all Morgan was just a virgin, wasn’t she? With her hammer

elbow punch and tough body and change of voice when things got tough.

“Morgan.”

“Yes, Morgan.” Suddenly he realized that he wasn’t on a secure footing with this – there were all those intractable items in his mind, things he had no bloody idea about, including his lover, Morgan. What about her?

“Morgan?”

“I reckon Morgan’s pants just ain’t that clean.”

“None of us is.”

“Ask her how clean this all really is... go on, she’s yours after all. And let me tell you she’s no ordinary chick; she’s tough for one thing.” Where did she learn to elbow punch like that?

“I will.” He knew, he’d seen her in action and felt challenged now by what he didn’t understand. “And...”

“More, you want to see more?”

“Not a word, you can trust me.”

Sam emptied the contents of the envelope out onto the table between the mugs and the sugar bowl and the toast and marmalade and stuff. He looked at the pink sheets. Stamped SECRET in fresh heavy, solid, red ink across the top - the content in Cyrillic with black pencilled translations into English sketched around the edges;

names and cyphers. Obvious that all this was high-grade data, info of some sort. What was this all about?

“Fucking codes? We’ve been carrying fuckin’ secret codes?” What kind of a sucker was he?

“Can you read Cyrillic?”

“Like fuck I can!” Oh boy! Where could all this lead?

“Actually I should say that I was told that they’re written partly in Amharic, which makes it even more complicated, but Amharic and another dead language, Dravidian, are ideal for numbers and code symbols, so they use them for that. You have to be a professor or something to figure out anything about it all.”

“How come you know that?”

“Oh, more little birds: you’ll get to meet one at some point soon. Now, I would think, you’re getting to know a lot, and that’s just the start.”

“Shit. Here I am towing half the world and a code book only readable by a University professor around in an invisible trailer in my bloody locker.”

“Think about it: that could be the reason why the chief and whoever else have been using your services.”

“Oh?” He thought. The fuel, a few thousand dollars, the plane a deteriorating variable asset, the strip...

don't know, but the actual cash required; well, a lot. Expensive, but the security is good if it's your flivver, and you could pack all sorts of shit into the airframe and the fuselage panels. God! How basic was that? He'd thought that he was carrying some smuggled stones, but actually...

Sam took the thought out of his mind and gave it shape:

"Sure, cowboy outfit ferrying planes, freighters with junk in them, fish, weapons, don't know, don't care what else. Shoes, unopened packages, RPG's - anything... nice target, isn't it?"

Nuclear secrets, satellite launch codes – the sky was the limit.

"You know more than I've figured, don't you? And there's me playing fucking patsy again?" He was getting damn angry, despite what he imagined was his outward calm.

"No, relax. We can back out of it."

"Can we?"

"I'll do it, you're all wound up with Morgan and in her pants and all. What about Deborah by the way?"

"You saw me?"

“I saw she fancied you. Deborah is usually available, she’s has been down everyone’s trousers. Or should I say that everyone’s been up her skirt. She’s okay though. Nice girl. They’re like that at the office, you could say, trained that way.”

He had to cover himself, quickly:

“Don’t say anything to Morgan, I was an idiot, I mean Deborah could turn out to be good in the long run... but I really have to stick with Morgan, I mean, I really think we could go places together. I mean, it would be good to be faithful for once, I mean that was nearly a very silly mistake.”

“Nice body. Very nice, I would have done the same.”

“Great, but I was just drunk, was all.”

“Don’t worry, they don’t even know one another.”

“Well that’s a thing.”

“We got to crack on with this stuff.” Sam waved a blue sheet. He saw the word ‘Confidential’ stamped across the top. “Well?”

“Thing is,” said Sam in his slight Geordie accent, “...you know something? Look, this looks like a good time for this, I always seen that you play hunches - gamblers

play hunches. So look, we can talk to someone I know and play a couple of hunches more. Well?"

Book 4

The Glass Ceiling.

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