**FLIGHT-AND-PURSUIT**

**Heron McConnell.**

**KENT, ENGLAND.**

CHAPTER 1

**Jock back again**

The rebel was crushing the soft back of her hand as he slammed it down hard onto the café’s round table to stop her from having a sip of her coffee. Jock**,** who had grown his hair straggly and long, whispered sickly sweet anythings as he wrenched Claiborne's pallid poloneck in a somewhat gruesome embrace. Not to mention the fun he had watching her submit to his indiscreet, offensively feigned affability as he frogmarched her down the terrace.

No one thought twice about the contrast between his grooming and his somewhat sickening sweet disposition as he offered her a Lucky Strike cigarette which she (politely) refused but, recalling a phrase overheard in numerous bars across the country, Claiborne heard him say:

“Mind, do you, if I have a toke?” Jock was talking in a low reserved voice: Claiborne’s was high pitched and squeaky but not on the same trajectory and had been ignored by the other ordinary folk at the café’s round tables. The waitress had politely checked to see if he wanted to order anything and he had casually waved the waitress away without looking at her, after he’d ordered the full English breakfast from the menu.

What he said about meeting here by chance was somehow rational, but more importantly what he went on to say to immature and gullible Claiborne about how she must follow him to his home, how he needed to hang out with her again, how he had turned over a new leaf was frankly completely irrational.

When the peg tile slipped out of its allotted place on the sloping roof of the café building, and then slid fast down the roof’s incline, it came to rest dangling from the drainpipe perpendicularly above Jock’s round table in front. Falling through space Claiborne and Jock tried to avoid its trajectory but it hit earth as quickly as it was inevitable, and had badly hurt Jock’s leg.

Jock turned out to be an impatient wreck as it cut a great gash in his trouser leg. He was non-plussed about it hitting his body and suddenly as a consequence became more loquacious and indomitable in his own inadmissible and obnoxious way:

“Couldn’t fight me off, could you?” He said, I believe.

“You’re right, Jock, couldn’t.” She said.

“Couldn’t have, and shouldn’t have, eh?” He asked.

“Yes, Jock,” She said.

“Now it’s time to let you in on a little secret. I’ve been wondering where the heck you’d got to. Ain’t that funny?”

“Umm, I’m not sure Jock.” She said.

“Ha ha ha. Priceless….priceless. You’re just the same, God, I’m glad I found you – not half! The lads’ll be dippy too, mark my words.” He said.

“What? The cult? They’re not still together really, are they Jock?” she asked.

He looked at his trousers that had a piece torn out missing from them. He swiped away the debris and the dust from the cascaded tile. He laughed raucously at this. For Jock’s part oaths and curses sprang to mind but also he needed to give an honest answer to Claiborne:

“The gang Claiborne. What were you going to say about them?” he asked. Claiborne’s eyes lit up akin to a stray cat trapped in the headlights of an approaching heavy goods vehicle:

“Oho, I get it Claiborne, me old mate. You’re not so pleased to see us as we are to see you, eh?” and by slamming her hand down onto the café table as she tried to sip her drink he momentarily exposed under his old, green satin bomber jacket (as he raised his pockmarked arm in gesticulation) a glint of stainless steel from out of a sort of home-made holster that shone out creepily.

That gave Claiborne the nervy motivation for her next rash action when she was in the restroom. The foolhardy attempt to run far away, flee the whole scene and disappear worked wonders; it was almost as if a miracle was going to occur. For one moment he was there, and the next instant that mere memory of his excruciating words remained, that shadow of a warmed up seat in a station café, and a chaotically upset cup and saucer testified to his presence. And something else too: her Filofax in effect stolen, and left for the waitress to find at their table as the leftover wondered where she was going.

Claiborne

It had been a few months and neither Lauren nor daughter Claiborne liked the newer enigma as much as when it blended in incognito and the unsprung idea of burning the whole Sanctuary to ash led to greater and more twisted, until now unappreciated satisfaction. So when Jock, fresh from a barber’s buzzcut went tomorrow during the daytime to buy a bucketful of paraffin and industrial scale blow-torches our little posse would be seriously into it.

The next night he packed a rucksack specifically set up for glorious “black ops” like this one.

Jock was in his room noiseless, svelte and alert as a pair of pumas while the rest were deep in sleep much like little babes amongst other little babes. Some undefined but far from random operation was going to happen. Whilst they slept their sleep and dreamed their dreams he slithered out commando-crawling very much in the style of a guerrilla soldier and a rogue ensign to carry out his vicarious function for Volley.

His brain rejected it, but he couldn’t think of anything else to do so he poured all the filthy molasses onto the herbaceous-bordered path that circumnavigated Block B. Meanwhile he was humming rhymes and chanting tunes towering over the oil-slick stains. The nefarious but sincere curse that the fiery inmost recess of the Sanctuary, this New Religious Movement, would not be annulled, divined or slaked by anything like the water cannons from the fire department’s powerful hoses blocked his pathway to success.

The experienced Inspector de la Reyes had been watching most of the tenants’ scruples for some time now from afar.

Their honesty, intentions and their distractions and their play acts of indifference entertained him. He wondered doggedly, with gritted teeth, how to reeve himself though from the frustration that had trapped him for two whole years now. He rushed to note down his latest theory about what happened to Morris Dean and his money, and to the Dean clan, before the theory seeped out of his short term memory and got replaced by another farfetched hypothesis.

Claiborne’s pastel pink Filofax held offshoots from a scrawl-laden smaller notebook that had once belonged to Herr Pirsig, vermoegensverwalterin a.k.a. asset manager. It was proved to be De la Reyes’s lifeline when it turned up in the lost property office at headquarters on the Friday of that week.

Jock had flicked carelessly through it at the Gare du Nord train station. He blamed one tremendous fault: the destruction of amnesia and its twin, falsely embellished memories. The notes had depicted the horror of a disaster in motion in words. On film, with the dog-eared sepia photographs. He peered nearer at the old photographs moving his head closer looking for something definite and he saw exactly what he might have expected. Jock saw Rudy, who had been preserved on film victoriously propping Morris’s arm aloft, was right there on the spot in the front right-hand corner as a horde of anonymous heads swept over them. So Rudy was the reason!

"If this is Pirsig’s," said Jock, "and it is, I think I can hazard a guess that it is…then I wonder how he’ll get himself out of this little situation."

"It's lucky no one else can find the rest of the dossier without the keys, or the one set of copies in existence, or I'd be in deep, deep trouble!" He added.

De la Reyes encountered Rudy, the CULT leader, only once shortly before he died and three years after the high-speed train pulled into Zurichsee platform two that ill-fated weekend. It was little more than two years before the New Religious Movement was abandoned, and after Rudy had finally moved away to retire. He saw inside the train station’s lobby a vaguely recognizable, plump and swarthy man was shaking hands vigorously and bear-hugging someone with strange attire. Someone with a freshly shaved skinhead haircut was talking up close to him. He suddenly noticed who the inscrutable but familiar face belonged to, and approached a bit towards it and heard Rudy saying: “Business is good…” He also thought he heard him start to talk to the inappropriately clothed punk who said with a regional accent really quite similar in cadence to Jock's: "Crime is good, you mean..." then their collusion was rent asunder momentously by a sudden noise exploding from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously, not of a sharp flick knife opening, but of a bullet driving straight into his heart from a Walther 2 mm. Jock pocketed the revolver and hobbled quickly away into the cold night outside, away from dying leader, away from the guilt, and away from the Swiss policemen's remit. The pensioner’s sweet pursuit complete…?

CHAPTER 2

Pirsig waved the new client a certain modestly cheerful goodbye from the doorstep and, instead of watching the client outside the window as he disappeared from view, as usual he went inside in order to concoct more fiendish plans. Then just after he had done so he picked up the receiver on the internal telephone and answered a call that had slipped through and interrupted him, from his new staff member in reception.

The insignificant switchboard operators at reception told almost every client who telephoned them that afternoon asking for the independent asset manager Pirsig, who they said was busy at a conference, to leave a message or a contact number.

They would not allow any rife exposure of his business procedures to random, general inquiry. Everyone that day supposed swarthy Pirsig in his office occupied with looking through his old files was in a high profile meeting of the directors, but they were totally wrong.

As per usual not much was happening here at 47 Rue de la Dorsaterie the luxury headquarters of Pirsig and Cie. All the legitimate business activity in august 2007 that impinged on this asset manager's domain, if in fact legitimate activity did at all, happened not just locally to the main Geneva office, but on a truly global scale. Pirsig and Cie's buoyancy ratio was unsurpassed even by Banque Clares Fides – the oldest and most established of Swiss banks.

“No, no he cannot speak to me. Tell him to get lost...” the plump businessman Pirsig said to his elegant young female receptionist.

Pirsig had had a long, long list of wealthy clients, but try as he might there was one client in particular who just kept invading his thoughts.

Even though Pirsig and Cie had had plenty of new, wealthy clients who arrived in droves each year to keep the balance sheet buoyant; even after he had selected enough illustrious clients from his many trade connections through legal firms and private banks he often nowadays found himself dreaming nostalgically of a long since disappeared past with negligible tax, the Swiss banker’s secrecy code of 1936, and with one client whose appearance, sheer financial wealth, and life's secret history he could not erase from his fecund memory: specifically Bertram Nivat.

The plan he and Adler, his chief compliance officer, dreamed up outwitted the pleasant Nivat couple who after entrusting their life savings were terrorized by him and his devoted junior and his other cronies by any means necessary until such a time arrived as they struck a golden handshake that meant Pirsig could use his dormant account as a pension pot without fear of legal ramifications; a nest egg for himself having made some unwise investments and expensive decisions to expand the ailing head office into other branch offices in more recent times.

He stomped around the head office literally fuming that his master plan had been so neatly foiled by measly Bertram: he slammed a palm down on the desk so hard that it shook its sockets. Bertram of all the idiots in the world, he thought. He had needed to indeed think like a monster, to work out how to rip Bertram and Lauren Nivat off properly that time. Maybe I should not have got Adler in on that one, he thought. Because there was no way, I repeat no way whatsoever I could do it myself that was the only reason, he thought, and anyway Adler at least looked like he would make a very good spy for me. Pirsig wondered if Adler craved some more action.

He knew that his lunch break lasted an ample two hours, therefore he could easily afford to get up from his seat, traipse across the room, quietly lock the double doors from the inside, and do what he had been prevented, hindered from doing for multifarious reasons for a long time.

He opened the modern cabinet in the corner of the room and extracted the documents, files and photograph albums, two of them, which after nearly thirteen years were no longer kept in the high security vault in the basement and cried out to be ripped open.

Taken in combination they told the story pictorially of what happened to Bertram, a reliable client, who entrusted to him his valuables including the photograph albums for safe-keeping in a "krankschaft" when events in 1994 started turning out a bit sour for him and very differently to the predictable, seemingly inevitable outcome.

“No, no this cannot wait,” thought Pirsig to himself, “It’ll be safe to look now that Bertram and Lauren have left me for good, there is no risk, nobody will know, or even care,” he said.

He suddenly felt depressed and thought whimsically about cancelling the afternoon's appointments entirely, and so buzzed his secretary on the intercom to that exact effect. His appointment diary looked somewhat pointless to him anyway for the next few weeks at the least. Stefan Pirsig was in charge, the establishment belonged to him – personally liable, it had thrived under his command and he could sometimes afford to luxuriate if the list had seemed as though a dead end lay in the unrealized future.

“No, I want to speak to nobody, not even the damn Ombudsman himself, okay?” he said curtly to his secretary.

Surprisingly after thirteen years had passed, he gathered from the makeshift evidence and even from looking just at the pictures in the photograph albums how the decline to failure had set in, but the fall progressed through winding ways and a large amount that was inherently left to his own conjuring made it yet more unfocussed. Perusing them he knew would clearly use up too much valuable time. He decided to slow down anyway and embellish the scant but true facts by a languid immersion in memory-lane.

Surely he should neither deny nor avoid the pedestrian facts of life with mock meetings that never took place, exciting upshots that were never true, or suspicious events that were never fertilized. What he was doing was he was actually putting together a logical puzzle, to explain to anyone who cared to listen piece by piece the factors that nearly led to him permanently road-blocking the material business of wispy Bertram, and his not-so-devoted wife Lauren forever. “No, but still, I’m surprised, they were nice people after all, I bet their friends say it shouldn’t have happened to them, but it was just so obvious,” he said.

As customers went he counted only a very few from Ramsgate, but as far as first impressions went, he had thought them polite enough, they aroused his sympathies by dint of their father's business background and they clad themselves fairly well. The usual tedious rigmarole but in their defence Lauren possessed an affable, courteous manner and his slightly embellished nostalgia surprised his conscience: of vivacity, of their sociable natures, but also of their pleasing naïveté.

So when in perusing the documents he felt their weight, texture, size yet the whole shameful saga bothered him. That he still took care of the files, although unusual to keep under lock and key in an unpaid safe deposit box possessions and papers without any intrinsic financial value and especially because they provided to some extent hard evidence, made him wonder aghast at what he thought his lack of shrewd planning.

At least he could afford to take a risk and hide them up here in his bureau for a while, on Rue de la Dorsaterie before disposing of them forever. Carefully wondering why after such a protracted period of time of mail being returned, correspondence being lost and contact broken, Bertram's family members especially Lauren who he foresaw definitely not likely to request to access his accounts ever again, had annoyed him still so much.

“No, no it’s safe to look now. I don’t think anyone’s going to care.” He said. “I want what I want and Nivat isn’t going to stop me, and that’s final. He nearly got away with it, but I won’t be beaten, not this time.”

He did not want anyone to start meddling with the past now but anyway, he intended going to unseal the metal containers which like most safe-deposit boxes made in the 1950s had several locks to open in order to inspect the contents. In his excited haste as he opened the black ostrich skin folio-bound volume number one he carelessly lifted a single photograph which fluttered down to the immaculately tended carpeting on the floor. Leaning over and picking it up from the smart carpet he wondered how it loosened itself so luckily from the rest of the disordered bulk. It worried him that perhaps someone else had been here before in secret, checking the contents of the “krankschaft”.

He saw what the image captured on film: a picture taken by a Pentax out of a train window but feeling it would for some illogical reason disorder the rest of his trip down memory lane he put it back, face down in the middle of the bound photograph album. Again concerned that his fingerprints could be discovered at a later date he took especial care to dust them. Only just then did he notice himself holding volume two, not volume number one so he quickly slipped the photo back into the volume numbered two.

Not wanting to deviate even slightly from the, although sensible possibly risky, path curiosity had mapped out for him he tried to find an easy escape route away from angry loathing and into the endearing and prepossessing thoughts dependent on the dropped photograph of the scene from volume one.

That his exaggeratedly romantic notions could indeed be firmly abnormal considering what he had made happen after Bertram opened these accounts figured for no more than a passing moment, as he chose a blinkered view and ignored what the other photograph implied.

The first photograph gave him proof of the two as a couple embracing oblivious to a secret camera's presence in an orchard or somewhere with long grass and overhanging boughs, and Pirsig realized that he could easily double-check the location written in his customer’s identifiable handwriting on the reverse of the photograph with less ingenuity than bother.

The second photograph, inexplicably picked out from the rest but not the one he had replaced in volume one of an empty seat on a train, everything on the table in front disgustingly messy, and a single lapel jacket hung over the worn armrest brought a rush of guilty feeling flooding back to him.

These placed alongside each other seemed to express fondly the first and second legs of a spring journey, a break, a vacation somewhere many years before their perfect romance collapsed proving that sometimes a malevolent influence from some hidden quarter, if kept covert did in fact work its magic miraculously well.

\* \* \*

Denny

Until that day, Claiborne did not pay much attention, if any, to what her mother Lauren told her. Lauren the ex-part-time social recluse and kindergarten teacher didn’t know why this was the case, but they both knew what they both knew, and she had always left the matter at stalemate.

Whatever the reasons behind her chiding of her daughter, her trying to stop her dressing like some punk, they were far beyond her poor, wayward daughter. At the age of fifteen, Claiborne should have trusted her mother particularly about the Almanack, because her whole life would later come to depend on Lauren’s a bit charmed, but also sometimes ineffectual words of baleful warning.

Lauren. a striking, long–haired brunette was wearing a pair of ragged, old striped dungarees to work in. Unfortunately desolate at fifty-five years of age Lauren’s petite physical frame certainly stunned people, especially Rudy, leader of the secret New Religious Movement.

If her stature was small as she reversed to and fro the damp cavern, the cellar at the Sanctuary late that night her tiny body had tremendous resilience and hidden muscle: sinewy strengths nobody else knew about either.

I had seen straight through her disguised revulsion at how hard she had to work for scarcely any reward, the night before. I told her falsehoods: that she impressed me she was so good at cleaning messes up, that she had almost perfected these horrible jobs she plied with both melancholia and disguised effortlessness, for the sake of the secret cult.

Lauren’s mental state was in fact not very agile, and not very nimble. Because a past indiscretion had already caught up with her, and those upheavals that this self-same past indiscretion had caused to her privacy had affected her permanently. She was up against it, certainly; obedient to the New Religious Movement, certainly; for the main part right and correct, not so certainly.

What was even less pleasant was she often exhaustively contemplated the ridiculous ex-husband she left four years before. Bertram was his name; Bertram, and I who had suddenly and surreptitiously morphed into millionaires just because of the Raffle, without accomplishing more than scribbling a few lucky dips in biro on a scrap of paper.

What was dubious or open to interpretation in her past was who had helped, who had been unkind, and who was brainless. Who survived life more ingeniously: Bertram her ex-partner, or her current lover Rudy? Who was not just wealthy, but particularly rich? And who was still in charge here at the New Religious Movement’s main hub, the Sanctuary?

Until last night,,,,, hands planted on hips taking a deep breath and taking stock of this abysmal state Lauren had almost never felt so much like an empty bottle drifting alone and rudderless, almost like all her enjoyment of life had been curtailed by a foolhardy, broken, and erratic air traffic control tower.

A faint light paused her lonely, cumbersome vessel’s onward route. She felt with all her strength her spilling over the edge hatred of these menial errands to find Claiborne’s drugs and their paraphernalia she was forced to do made her seem ungrateful, rude, and weak-willed. Unwilling to repent.

“Don't we all need a friend from time to time, though,” she thought. The seemingly somewhat more than just taxing tasks of cleaning and sifting, of returning the cellars to a fairly good condition, hunting and scouring for any of Rudy’s old ornaments to save from permanent incineration fell to her hunched figure now. She was loath to continue so tired was her diminutive body of it and so in need of dipping into a hot bath and an early night like she often used to do after a difficult day a few years ago.

An aviation light signal that flickered in warning, as it later changed to a flashing strobe, enforced the notion of how difficult it was to sort, arrange, and rearrange the cellar's contents. Lauren felt a sudden chill down her bent back at the difficulty, and also the unimportance of her work. She was bored witless by always doing the tidying for Bertram or the leader Rudy without any reward. A few years ago every few minutes a surprise discovery was sure to come her way.

"...is much worse than he told me it would be." She reluctantly grumbled aloud into the fug-filled room’s empty space, and nobody lifted a finger to stop, or to help her out as she continued trying to scrub away hard at the dirty floor, and to clean and sift through everything whilst her sturdy boots soaked warmth made her feel incredibly fatigued.

She polished the mess off the furniture, arduously cleaning the overall grub and dirt from the fetid environment, removing the cobwebs and dust that shimmered in the alcoves. She was pleased when she had shifted the cardboard boxes piled high with unknown printed magazines, and old recorded content no longer required, and in moving them from their dark tombs without any assistance she was this time almost like a lonely, lost prospector panning for nuggets of gold using a sieve, but getting nothing more than some bad arthritis. No friends came to help.

There was no option, but to hurriedly calculate that upon this visit, instead of any other attitude, it'd be simpler and more straightforward to transfix her vision on the terrible, erratic aviation light signals, to create order out of disorder, and a pattern of semi-perfection from total confusion.

She aimed to compensate the ex-husband by proceeding with a posture of due diligence, not boredom; and working without laissez-faire or daydreaming as the protocols of accepted standards for household tidying demanded, until this evening’s close.

"It'll take me forever to finish..." She might have been wise to be thinking, as she so often did, about her chances of winning some extra money with the local Raffle, as she mopped the beads of sweat from her brow with the back of a pair of dirty hands, and glanced exhausted but faunlike, around at the damp and depressing trail left by that dirty, forbidding room's junk.

In the longest, narrowest and at that stage most ransacked passage she had ever been witness to, whilst partly divided, and which led into another box-room at its reach, she cast her astonished gaze at what had been lit by two or three naked, dust-coated light-bulbs that dangled helpfully, but inertly above the brick inglenook fireplace: a simple and basic, rough and wooden, upturned crate with contents that just waited for her to give them a raison d'être. A small but long awaited trophy that patiently waited to be given a new lease on life by someone with problems that needed good answers…. someone such as Lauren.

"All right, I'll get busy and this place will be freshened up, in no time at all." She said quietly, almost nonchalantly to herself. Immediately afterwards, her tiny figure along with the big eyes revved into gear. Action Stations!

Her squatting posture, and hurting muscles never thwarted her purpose, not even in those times when she scrambled about on her scuffed knees, her striped dungarees getting muddied, and her old arthritis returning to her calloused fingers. However, the mess took its toll and it tested her not-to-be-underestimated wits, and her mental faculties to the maximum. Like a test with a bit of litmus paper, this inelegant chaos irked her, and she channelled her efforts away from the mess into some kind of logic, towards some kind of reorganized exactitude so she wouldn’t look too bedraggled when she got home to the leader and her responsibilities later on.

The pre-eminent aim of her endeavour for the cult was the narrow and precise target of cleanliness and decontamination, so that, they claimed, the entire locked cellar would eventually pass an examination for purity and wholesomeness.

As she waged a half-hearted warfare against the wasting, putrefying material, scattered like the contents of a jack-in-the-box gone berserk, dust rags, cloths, vacuum cleaners, and bleach were of little use.

In amongst this mishmash of detritus, vague bumf, and specifically uninteresting rotten misery, she hardly entertained any but the dimmest of hopes that she’d leave it tidy here before dawn. Things like cardboard boxes half full, and half empty, just paraphernalia tested her: defunct gadgets, odd gizmos, trinkets, toys, and equipment, bits of exterior cabling, light filaments, parceled objects, and wrapped modules, or unwrapped belongings, at the end of their shelf-life bereft of any use or point, taunted Lauren constantly with their sheer arrogance, the pride of the victor.

"Doesn't seem so much of a mess, the place is almost alright, I suppose I can get out of here, right now." She sighed, taking a swig of refreshment from her hipflask rather than her water-bottle, hitching up her old dungarees into place again, “A few hours of extremely hard work…” she thought and let her mind wander.

The clouds were indeed darkening the skyline rapidly outdoors, as conscientiously yet still with uncertainty, Lauren turned around and fumbled suddenly with a horrible sense of disaster and needless urgent impetus in the patch pocket on her stained, soiled blue tunic, to find the keys to help close, safely lock again and soon leave behind forever the door to the rotten cellar.

Then, without warning her short daydream was interrupted, like a shorn off piece of meteorite hurtling towards earth before satellites were created, she caught sight of a small, weird and immobile cylindrical device of some sort, fall and rest in a corner which she had idiotically scarcely even looked at before now.

"Oh, I can see something over there. What on earth is that thing? Where's my phone gone to now?" She thought, as her eyes stirred into life at the pleasant thought of letting someone know about the discovery of this unexpected find. Then she decided in favor of phoning her partner, Rudy, right at that moment. "I've never seen anything like it before. How peculiar, how weird is that?" Lauren said, in an alarmed voice, like a laboratory mouse or a rabbit which has stumbled across their master’s secret formulaes and has been almost poisoned, on the telephone to Rudy himself that night in December 2006.

As she rushed to finish work and to hook up with the leader, the leader of the cult, for the evening's cool celebrations ahead, she sensed both optimism, and desperation, in equal measure: a laboratory rat relieved that it’s not too late to use the symbolic potion’s formula, but afraid of its unknown potency, and its secret origin.

"Sort it out, babe. Bring it over later, I'll have to have a gander at it..." He said to her, leaping into his Renault, helpless to erase a certain tired, sad strain in his voice, and unable to convey an artificial, carefree attitude on this occasion.

The strange and beguiling item that she had stumbled upon purely by accident in the middle of contemplating her task, was not really weird in size nor odd in shape, but it was bizarre by dint of another property.

Although considerately and thoughtfully inclined and unwilling to keep secrets, Lauren nevertheless found it nearly heart-wrenching to include in her rendition afterwards to the leader any more exact details about the somewhat dubious provenance, and the unknown (but wished for) purpose of the blessed boon, the cryptogram, the superlative treasure-trove lying there.

Here, where it was nearly ashamed to have been pointed out, like a popstar’s shy fan singled out on the front row at a gig, incognito on top of a dishevelled stack or crate, in a disused cellar directly underneath a dilapidated block of flats the cult was planning to rent out.

And two years earlier, miles farther beyond the leader’s expensive former residence, Claiborne found there lay behind the counter in some ordinary corner shop tended with care, tended with love, that matter of a somehow remarkable, and yet also slightly covert accomplice to, or rather partner to the cryptogram's etched markers, both objective and held to be true: namely, the transposition key, in other words the Almanack.

Not far away, on the summit of a steeply inclined slope, beside the main means of entry to, and exit away from this mundane town in Kent was where Lauren had her pathetically mundane residence.

And where her blameworthy, sweet and simple interpretation of the unanswered humdinger, whose menaces nobody had the apparatus to conquer, also laid its roots; namely, the cipher's true, higher purpose - the use for the mysterious cryptogram that rested on the residence's inconveniently dank linoleum-filled floorboards, underneath Lauren's dubbin waxed boots' heavy tread, in a place no-one was supposed to have explored, like a deep jungle, and where it had survived unmolested, maybe for decades.

The words impossible and pointless, hopeless, sprang into her mind, but the main problem was her mistrust, her defiance of her associated forlorn hopes that she pinned on it, which was leading the cult, not herself, to the longed for buried treasure, not the thing's striking and strange, perhaps even psychic quality.

"You've never heard of anything like it, you say? Well, well, well. I want to see it, baby, don’t let me down..." He said, less cheerfully than was normal for him, except on special occasions like Christmas where the centre of attention was always all Rudy’s.

The cryptogram provided her with an excellent excuse to pour a bit more of her hard-earned time into the task before Saturdays ecstasy-powered underground Club-land provided her with an excellent excuse to dream of untold riches. Because she wouldn't be too early for the leader if she idled, she knew she'd seem much less foolish and over eager if she was to satisfy her curious nature by placing the thing, the tubular cryptogram, or transposition device under, to some extent, some careful and, as far as she can, scrupulous inspection, as though she had unearthed some forged work of art or a fake specimen of reliquary.

And, even though she couldn't really face it, and didn't have a clue what she was doing when it came down to it, she tried to forget that she was hopelessly exhausted. I'm going to take a closer look at it and see what it is for, she announced, to the gradually more and more interested Rudy.

“Yeah you wade over to pick it up from off the carpet and then tell me a bit about what it looks like.” He said wryly.

Lauren's sensitive, innocent, unsullied forehead wrinkled temporarily at the prospect of any vicarious, unpredestined and immaterial, but necessary reward. For one of her mind-set, megalomania and the attractions of power were incomprehensible, and she complained she felt lost and adrift.

Whenever she met, heard of, or saw one of those bossy types like Daniel from the higher rungs of the movement she became like some happy amnesiac whose guardian angel had cast a spell whereby she forgot everything harmful, or of less than stainless purity. For, in the main the efforts she made to attain high calibre droplets of wisdom normally shunted her into displaying unfortunate and dislocated frustration so she was fearful of trying to seem nicer than she was, or anything like that.

On this one occasion, however, the sluice gates were opened wide to high calibre sentience, and ideas and information flowed into her ken freely. Like a miniature miracle then from an inherently unreliable and untested source, she was the leader was the suggestion.

She had also seen a part of a programme about decoding devices on television once, and this subconscious knowledge served to account for her surprised bliss...something so basic could drag her fascination so much if its inner manifestation is proven to be intrinsically necessary, if it’s like a series of doors in a tunnel or links in a chain, in which Lauren decided correctly she deserved to be an essential component.

She remembered the television programme on cryptography explaining, exploring and examining various code-breaking equipment, and various objects used to transmit essential information from one place to another, without any fear of interception well.

By decrypting a message, a reward, or a treasure lay in store did it not? She smiled at her new trophy, fingering it and turning it this way and that with her hands, beginning to realize its full potential under the ardent light of a lamp.

She’d thought cryptograms encrypting devices, but had no idea what they really looked like, and rightly thought one needed something like a password, or possibly a key, to explain them. At this point in time it was locked fast, like a vestal virgin barricading herself against undesirable suitors.

A device that deciphered codes, the documentary said, and depending on the actual dimensions of the cylindrical object, its width and length, the corresponding scroll had to be wound around the cryptogram to reveal to the selected observer a translated, secret message of essential importance.

Like a map showing a person how to get to some secret hiding place. You needed both the cryptogram and the scroll with the coda from an Almanack to reach enlightenment, to solve the cryptic, hidden meaning. Or she’d be blocked, and like a vestal virgin’s guardian full of reproachful comments, get a false answer from the cryptogram. Each part, if she could recall, rendered the hunt for significance useless without the other in the shrewd investigator’s grasp.

.Therefore, if she could successfully locate the matching “scytale”, the scroll later, or tomorrow, or even next week, she'd be onto something very precious, not just onto an elaborate red herring. She checked the time. Ten to midnight.

Holding the mobile phone too close to her moist, red lips, she said to Rudy who was a bit flustered at this stage: "It's not going to lead to where some buried treasure is, surely I can't have been so lucky. Mustn't let my imagination get out of control..." She trailed off as she bent down to lift it up manually from where she had placed it, and tried to wrap the delicate cryptogram in newspaper for protection against accidental damage, or anything else that might have pulled a heavy curtain down in front of the achievement of her personal desires.

Assuming therefore nobody would want to intercept her with the code-breaker, she stalked outside towards the bus stop with the intention to ask the leader at the CULT hall, the Sanctuary, what to do with her cryptic device. She never arrived there, however her mission had been triggered. The quest for the lucky penny.

It was the Christmas holidays, and the whole of the town's inhabitants adored and venerated, but admittedly in tandem envied him, the leader, the local New Religious Movement’s leader, Rudy. His extraordinary intellectual abilities, the townsfolk claimed, and his effectually undisputed sovereignty, characterized his supernatural inheritance. So too his wonderfully gifted maintenance of a watchful eye over his rebellious, yet occasionally likeable entourage of followers in the local vicinity who were cleaved to by him, not just on occasions of cult “worship”, but the whole year long, even while Claiborne was stuck languishing hopelessly in a foreign country writing her never-to-be published memoirs. Raise-me!

This was to be the watchword, the lyrical motto for the New Religious Movement. Raise me!

Out of all those tarnished, blemished pathways of shadow in the town only Claiborne’s hideout was inaccessible, inhospitable or shut to him. There his influence could not reach her, there he was regarded as not quite alright.

By her he was seen as a rich, arrogant man who took advantage of many others and took them all for fools. Yet in every rodent-infested nook and cranny, every public space and civilian place, from playground to sports ground, there the leader could recite almost all of the dark, deathly goings-on therein; even in terrain used to crime, violence and malevolence these things of terror were nonetheless erased, obliterated by this our movement’s leader, or new age vicar, from Manchester. Raise me!

His arms drawn up to the sky, his index finger wagging in supplication: "I'm used to the ordinary stuff, I'm not blind to muggings, robbery, molestation, prostitutes, or brawls. No, none of it is beneath my attention, nor my compassion." He pronounced to the chain of followers devotedly listening to his effective new age sermonizing.

“Praise be! I hear you say the word but words are just empty without true faith. Don’t think I’m not aware of those who ply their trade here in our town, they go about rendering themselves purposeless and mistaken.” He said to rouse his rabble.

“Directionless, like electronic toy robots going haywire and bouncing, rebounding off the skirting boards, they are seen everywhere but we must forgive them. Show them mercy or join them in their pursuits, for we are equals.” Bizarrely, the leader recommended showing kindness by joining up with the “depraved” sinners amongst them who were not conforming to the new age rules.

The followers were encouraged to help one another through hard times, and to shop each other in if any one of them had returned to their old ways, the rehabilitation of the CULT not having worked properly.

“We are to pity them their sins, and to pray that the roll of the superlative being’s dice never swerves from the one true way. Let me advise you on this, do as I say and you won’t go far wrong, mark my words.” They let him aggressively advise them on this, but their good deeds of handing out flyers, free books, and charity boxes never amounted to much in the greater order of things, although the rife antisocial behaviour often became a thing of the past as they had always conscientiously prayed.

On impact an alien spaceship filled with hopeful martians would plummet and crash upon landing in some pastoral Cheshire scene, unless made of an indestructible alloy. He tried to draw parallels between this image and our so far ineffectual efforts to make the population sit up and notice our movement, and to implant trust in the new religion where there was none.

The leader wisely decided to try and listen to his followers, and to try and get them a human target of their own to reform, to save from themselves, to offer some hope to, and Claiborne and Lauren seemed the right ones to choose.

When Rudy eventually left the cult, after seven years precisely, the ties to the forces of darkness, the currents of evil, had been indefinitely suspended and loosened from Kent.

After the leader resigned, chequered crimes of drugs and of frauds, and infractions of a bygone criminal era in the picture-perfect municipality's hotspots were not blighting the air with an acrid stench anymore. Apparently sacrilegious villains, Lauren’s daughter Claiborne had no qualms whatsoever about upending virtuous deportment, and so called firm decorum. It was good advice the leader handed out and they all saw that, but his entourage, particularly one member, Daniel, told him to pare it down a little for certain tender minds as it amounted to no more than religiosity, a trap often set for the infirm and the weaklings.

This was one of the things which Daniel felt could not be tolerated and which was only too easily glazed over by the cult leader himself.

"Let me advise you on this. It's horrible, we can only pray the criminals around us see the light, and choose the paths of righteousness." He said at one home visit where he was consuming light alcoholic refreshments with a few members of the “sacred” family who had been victims of a terribly drunken scourge by some gangster villains not long before.

Upon rising with a puff and heading stridently on to the doorway:

"Let me advise you on this. We must ensure their ignorance is policed by the parish, have no doubt, they will never really be happy with their life's lots until the community has come to us." The leader said to everyone there before he left in his new fast silver Cayman sports car.

“Promises, promises. Can’t you give us a guarantee that they won’t come back for more?”

“No. They won’t do more. I know. Let me advise you on that, they won’t even walk past your house again, have no fear at night of them getting inside. Please. I shall “wish” for you” Rudy said.

The whole of the law-abiding population of the CULT to a radius of about fifty-five miles from the head office, gossiped about their lives lots before, and then after the leader’s tenure eventually faded. “Oh yes, The leader! Yes, I remember him well. Great chap, did his best always for us. His “works” were not in error, no.”

A fine compliment he was aware of, but yet it never affected his paternalistic manner, nor did it taint or sway his acts of supremely firm kindness to the worn needy widows or the helpless innocent victim of marital abuse who looked up to him with envy. So too the owners of the stolen bicycles, the high end Cannondale, smashed windows and damaged goods even, or the ones who handed in lost property, who were okay anyway, were obliged to be grateful in spite of everything that might make them jealous.

"Try at least. I think you must. You must turn away from evil, and greed." He said unemotionally to the geriatric Sarah who was accused of stealing some money to support her family. He was unlikely to give her any money but his words inspired her not to get into any similar trouble again. He helped all bar none, which was stupid and recklessly benign, if you considered what was going to happen much later as an indirect result of the Almanack, to the CULT.

He soon caught up with them and then flagrantly abjured, any rebel in the movement’s midst who held in contempt the inherent worth of the religious-legal system's wrangling, its punishments, and its meaty weight. So called decorum, ordered decorum, endowed his life with a direction and a purpose and when Claiborne and Claiborne started accusing him of having stolen the Almanack he took steps.

He was, and still is, a sort of towering colossus of cerebral intellect and an overwhelmingly rich fellow with his coveted “gospels”. Assumed to be always there in the background being judgemental, some were scared, some were made proud, and some dwelt in blissful ignorance.

His shadowy flitting aspect it seemed to some and especially to Claiborne, would follow and could mimic any dangerous step a gangster made off the beaten track into vice, without ever allowing evil to seep into its own presence, nor to filter down to these followers of his like a rank odour of something filched from the junk heap. Squalid perhaps, but he’d be congratulated on the flipside: heads I win, tails you lose was the catchphrase.

"Claiborne, dear, you are not listening, you are being very naughty, very bad, you must read the “scripts” from the Almanack more often.”

“Thanks Rudy, but no thanks. No, I’m sure you mean well, your heart’s in the right place, dear, but I don’t want you to stop me, I’m not going to go out and start with the rigmarole again, you know what happened last time…”

“Listen to me just this once, listen to me, I implore you. You will regret this, if you would stop to think before you do this. This drug dealing which you go about doing is right, I mean wrong, he is more of a philistine than I believed – you must not follow his example and waste your money on drugs.”

“Jock’s no philistine!”

“Yes, you are correct, we all have her best interests at heart here in the camp and we only want to see you both making something of your life. Rather than landing up in prison, or worse, ending up murdered you must follow me and not make unwise investments, or steal, or whatever.”

He taught Claiborne how she could switch from being the potential jailbird who swore and took advantage, to a bitterly regretful and repentant and richer person whose sole drug was greater knowledge. Quickly she learnt how to free herself from the habits of a sinner and took up the reins she had left off, those of a total fairy some might call them who was not to be trusted and part of a New Religious Movement.

Were it not for the leader, as not one of us, wise books and the Almanack and skills of learning couldn’t have become both Jock and Claiborne’s future mainstay, and a foreign land Claiborne’s eventual anchorage. Rudy led by example.

The resolutely learned New Religious Movement followers failed to appreciate this, so the CULT failed to rescue Claiborne from her insincere slang phrases, her deceptive turns of phrase. And so the New Religious Movement followers failed to help Claiborne recover from her torpid, nightmarish existence in a distant land's prison without any very good books or mental skill; until the time came that Bertram disappeared as well, and things got much heavier.

CHAPTER 3

In keeping with Bertram's annals depicted there in the asset manager’s locked diaries, volumes and albums and as shown in the folio numbered one the couple right now prepared themselves for departure, to disappear and leave home. The alien magic worked again and the pictorial representation of a scene turned into real life again. It was 1994. The couple had made themselves nearly ready with packing, and in a short space of time they appeared just about organized enough to go and set off on a big, serious journey to Paris, Gare du Nord.

They both of them felt they must have earned and deserved this short break from the arduous procedures associated with day-to-day living in Kent, the eponymous garden of England. All doors were hydraulically closed so they made a beeline away from the train terminal and as the train accelerated and their home receded from view, and as the ill-matched couple looked out of the windows and gossiped about their next door neighbors, and asked whether or not they were feeling hungry they never once wanted to contemplate any part of Pirsig’s incomprehensibly fiendish scheme.

“…As long as our house is safe under their watchful eye, they’re old but I hope it will be alright ... Shall I go and quickly fetch something from the bar up front, darling? A sandwich perhaps?” He asked.

“I don’t see why not, yes just a latte for me though please, Bertram.” she replied “Oh, and a glass of water as usual.”

While within on the face of it a loveless marriage, Lauren had conducted an affair with a certain swarthy businessman, Pirsig, for almost a few years now. It had been only a few days since last Lauren lay with her head on her lover’s chest, listening to his heartbeat, and feeling his ribcage slowly rising and falling.

“They’re getting worse,” she said.

“What’s that?” His voice was blurry and indistinct. It sounded like he was close to drifting off. He considered whether this was a good enough moment to give her the silver fob, another of the expensive presents sourced by loyal Adler, whose role was also to be his personal shopper sometimes.

“Our money problems,” said Lauren. She pouted: a pointless gesture. “He was always buying me little gifts. He never buys me anything anymore.”

He chuckled lazily. “Poor you.”

Lauren with her cascading sleek hair, with her smart managerial outfits and her much-beloved nine to five clerk’s vocation felt she easily justified him treating both of them to the short holiday they had patiently anticipated these last four dismal and cold winter months, it was march.

Indeed, she has but recently begun to resent that she never got the momentous attention, the spontaneous gifts or the impermanent yet lasting toys that other women in her type of situation received from their spouses ideally. And she really did not feel like giving way, yet again, to the customary polite, straitlaced and restrained manner needed, and so started to bicker about the situation. Greedy like those other girls who invariably existed in certain places she had no doubt that she did deserve and would have appreciated a better than normal treat or two every so often.

If her husband blithely ignored her or did not always cave in to her wishes she punished him with, like other career women, any and all of the heinous devices she could muster up. He on the other hand sensibly went to almost any lengths to prevent word getting out about her tasteless tantrums.

Although involved in an unfortunate marriage Bertram still couldn’t help himself but give in to her demands, and he stayed besotted.

As he allowed himself to proceed having realized the full weight of her selfish wishes, as he did not permit himself to feel chagrin at these desires in a personal way, and even though other people’s amusing anecdotes about her counted at times, perhaps his own sentiments he believed unimportant and spurious, if not irrelevant, as long as word never got out about her indiscretions and somehow reached his benighted ear.

For instance, he recalled his closest friends' warnings at the start of their relationship. The main gist, not to rely over heavily on her and categorically not to trust Lauren who they cynically claimed had been having clandestine liaisons with various men, on and off, since long before she was eighteen years of age.

“Don’t be a fool, Bertram, quite frankly she’s bad news. You should be jealous.” They said.

“You? You and Lauren? Ha, that’s a joke,” They said, “don’t you think that you should go out with someone more, well, a little more appropriate?”

Bertram's total ignorance of her bitchy codicils, her resultant bland admonishments not to mope over inessential trifles, and that which can be seen by friends and acquaintances, her disregard whenever the boiler needed to be repaired, the washing taken out of the tumble dryer or when the bedroom’s untidy disarray went ignored mostly led to a patchwork of curses and expletives voluble but meaningless. His suspended disbelief. His blind optimism for the future. His wishes continually prayed for went unnoticed, and blindly ignored by the skeptical friends, and perhaps by the seraphim themselves.

Once every month or so typically she and Bertram aimed to kneel down to say their cult’s prayers in front of the chest of drawers which rested at the foot of their bed, together in essence. Both knelt and crouched with hypocritically faux-serious expressions on their faces – the vague and tenuous seraphim eventually lending an ear to their requests because it owned some deeply entrenched foreboding of doom that their love would prove to be not real, their children a set of disgraces, and their joint destiny merely a grey and cloudy one of uncertainty, misfortune and bleak regret.

“Are you looking forward to Paris, darling?” He said.

“Yes, yes, what about the pensioners next door? Do you think they will remember to get the post for me? I’m expecting a parcel delivery while we are away.” She said.

They didn’t worry anymore that one might always find fault with another’s habits in private surroundings or with the other’s general mood swings in doubtful times, on the other hand. They had settled into a comfortable, yet incompatible routine after all; with the many colorful weekends spent together agreeably locked into argument and an honest, caring relationship devoid of affectation that would not have withered, like a rose locked in a walled garden, over the course of the past five years otherwise.

However, they seemed to most of their friends to enhance, in other myriad ways, one another’s quality of life without too much ennui, aggravation or hassle wrecking the kid-glove care of the good partnership; the loud curses purely referred to by close friends as a display, or a routine.

One or two of them hazarded a guess that be quiet or leave me alone meant exactly that. But most of the time the telling signs of the unequal footing and the relationship’s deterioration passed them by, effectively seen as amateur dramatics and nothing important.

Still, no matter how impassioned or irate their temperaments, the heating up conversation quite soon ground to a stop with the sudden eruption of the fracas that deafened the eardrums of the defenceless and harmless fellow victims on the Eurostar.

Indeed, Bertram travelling haplessly on what abruptly became known as the train of terror soon learnt one or two lessons in life: danger, submission, good conduct; and thereby once he had experienced these he increased his self-knowledge from deserving of the words a dark primal miasma of sludge to, later on, a better and much improved epithet. Through sheer helplessness he progressed, herein on the train’s madcap journey, from wrong perceptions to a better, friendlier outlook on life – not just because he had to, not only because he was compelled to by the assassin, but rather mainly out of a higher, nobler instinct of some sort that fell hard on his mind during the plight of that terror train.

Not for long will he be an utter heathen in a heathen's paradigm, nor will he flatter himself unduly simply for proving Lauren a liar and a fraud, but he will see to the essence of things, and by some miracle twist of fate become the hero not the victim.

With no crash, no blackout, no rescue; with no safety and no peace, the train did not come to a standstill but slowed down to a leisurely pace as if grievously wounded like a lame animal might after being caught in a trap.

Not only true that they didn’t even bother to think about the petty details like the trivial baggage, or those unimportant material objects of tablets and iPhones, also more importantly they thought about the serious things like those passengers huddled beside them cowering, and those behind them disintegrating into tears, and at mortal risk. Not only to have thought about their worried wives undisguised dismay or their own punctured pride, their own surprised crestfallenness or ruptured reason, but rather to have considered at length their actual life and breath on the train: the uniform constrained size of their immovable seating, the coolness of the air waves, or the shuddering and flickering of the lighting in the full compartment, and also what effect those would have had on everything; these put together seemed a complete waste of time compared to the survival of the innocent victims, compared to their personal struggle to alert the guards in some remote and distant place, and to save the train from the scheme of a determinedly angry assassin who loomed at large and dangerous scarpering from any have-a-go heroes.

When Bertram turned once to see Lauren looking ahead blankly at him, or at least in his general direction he did not know who she was anymore, just looked right through her line of vision impervious to her woes; a rush of adrenalin, a surge forwards as well as the train jolted once, twice, and she had been ignored completely; a dogged furrow should have but didn’t cross his set features until, one suspected on the face of it it was an ordeal for him, he eventually raised his narrow frame up and walked away cautiously blending harmoniously into the throng of passengers. His departure from the security of his retirement completed, the journey into dangerous terrain begun once and for all.

When he set out from his sanctuary of old crumpled jacket and table with laptop on it, scarf and sexy wife at the back somewhere she believed it was motivated by concern for others and self-sacrifice; now he had to agree without argument to the suggestion that his reason for setting out might have been none of these. Instead it was because he intuitively and unconsciously knew it would impress her. At last Lauren would gloat over it, and appreciate wrongly and improperly his propulsion into dangerous intrigues.

Before he stalked triumphantly out of the carriage chaos the agitated fugitive appeared near to him for a short space in a monged-out state of confused disarray and dishevelment: “Stop! I might tell him, tell them everything……... go, get back,” he said to Bertram in a hushed tone, the undercurrent of which was as inaudible as the words themselves to Bertram who felt like grabbing him by the sleeve and saying in a gravelly, confident sheriff’s way: “Tell him what, exactly?” He said.

In the next moments, the energized assassin jabbed him with some type of medical syringe, and grinned nastily at the end of his dark accomplishment. The thrusting motions were furious and callous, but it made no difference if he felt guilt in the end, neither he nor Bertram had any power to stop it happening, it was much too late for anybody to stop the wicked work of the syringe’s needle in his fast, angry fist.

There was nothing, no liquid left in the syringe, the assassin flung it onto the floor hard, emptied in seconds of the contents, the drug heroin, and Bertram could only stand stock-still there watching him running away knocking things over, pushing everything out of his way, and feeling the throbbing, pulsing sensation growing fast in the side of his soft abdomen. Then he swore louder in painful anagnoriasis than he had ever shouted before.

Afterwards all hailed him as a hero, with an ovation they applauded his puny gesture of defiance to the interloper from justice who had just fired the gunshot over the heads of all of them; with a great sense of shame Bertram later remembered smiling a broad self-satisfied smile from which it can have been assumed he had learnt not to treat courage or heroism with such levity next time, when it might have been that he was required to work harder than he had ever worked before to get the goods.

In the middle background there was riotous applause from the everyday onlookers that didn’t fade or diminish quite quickly enough. But the continuance of the volley of congratulations inculcated something in him, refreshed him after several more long minutes of cheering.

If the passengers’ praising and chanting taught him a bit, in and of itself, if it served to develop a reflex against self-aggrandizement, then it admonished him also again by criticizing his natural cowardice, his fears of bodily harm and as these teachings became evident both now and later in his heroic activities, this produced benevolent results for the future.

However, the hullabaloo did distract from the realizing of every failure yet on his part against the foe. This was only the first step along the path to inner peace, and at that time, in those moments he understandably, if anyone could sympathize, still reeled from the shock of the moment of no return when he went right up next to Pirsig’s hired hit-man and confronted him alone.

It was only much later, and a lot further down the path to inner knowledge that he remembered what a bad joke it was the way he used to treat valour so lightly, and those smiles of the hero he used to loath as such a mistake. Inspired somehow he perceived some flaws in Lauren too, and hated himself for the perception just because he used to love her more than anyone else, just because he was powerless to admit they had no real future together in a difficult place and time.

Then again as he blundered over the armrest and sank into his seat another idea which he did listen to more straightforwardly then and there was somehow connected to the dose of drugs he swallowed. In a heinous moment of revelation, an instant which could not have been predicted nor avoided, he saw with clarity how stupid, and ignorant a life he had always lived with his friends from the cult movement, but also how perceptive he wanted to make himself in addition, and it is this knowledge that he had not been able to put to one side, the knowledge that he immersed himself in for the next twenty minutes.

The reason for this was in the main because he found the pleasant compliments coming from the vocal passengers on his left across the aisle and in the seats fore and aft not difficult to comprehend, but awkward to cope with:

“Oh! Why did you do that? You took such a risk!” they said.

The lull in the catastrophe was pleasant but difficult to comprehend when maybe never before what he cared about most, Lauren’s love and trust, because of a few strangers had been plonked at his feet like so much tinsel from a christmas tree:

“But…….” he hesitated and shuffled in his seat playing with an empty drink cup, and he muttered just distinctly thank you by way of reply.

And so he discussed, in whispered tones upon sitting back down again in the velour and fidgeting with the retractable table on the seat in front of him with Lauren not his only listener while clutching his stomach, his prior glazing over of the positive qualities of their relationship whilst waiting until the security guards arrived to help to explain everything.

“I’m all-right, aren’t I? Lauren?” he questioned her, both reluctant to reveal his recent deep-seated fears, and eager to put on the act of the hero of the hour, and not the mask of a loser.

“What? Not now, aren’t you supposed to be enjoying your new-found glory?” She asked him, still bemused at why he had picked up the empty cup so timidly but then again also had the utter gall to exhibit the bravery he had just displayed to every camera and every mobile phone there.

“Ha ha, not a bit of it. I reckon I was a bit foolish there. I could really have got into trouble, y’know! What if something had somehow happened to you purely because I went and risked my life?” he said.

“I ask because I’m hardly trained in hand to hand combat,” More than bemused, Lauren was gob-smacked at his alteration to streetfighter from wimp.

“Oh, I don’t know, the chap must have jumped off the train by now, I suppose you’re lucky, anyway you can see the security guards are on their way, stop being a coward and worrying all the time like this – it’s not right for your reputation.” She said.

“I hope this doesn’t mean you think I am being an idiot, Lauren?” he asked her, a great deal of doubt in his tone, almost too much, as if he was thinking of some other alternative form of description.

“You’ll have to be careful from now on, though,” she said and gave him a friendly, gentle poke that spoke reams about his chances of surviving another similar contest.

“Don’t give anyone our names and deny any part in it, we should be alright if we are careful,” he made no mention of the pulsating throbs in his side which subsided, and then rose back up again a few seconds afterwards, as his arm jerked down to the spot to feel the stinging wound, he fumbled clumsily with a sleeve to try to hide his hurt side from the other travellers.

The problem was not he faced straight ahead at the back of a seat but asides from the painful injury and the psychological insecurity he felt about his character flaws, the main problem was the dubious revelation that he’d actually forsake the conniving Lauren for a handful of sensual excitement which he ought to have rejected outright. He needed more wisdom, before he got back to Kent a week later when events at the cult took on a different aspect.

When the train had begun moving, and with the onset of natural light from outside beyond the pitch black tunnel this newly gained wisdom, nearly as if Bertram and Lauren had similarities to those ones who had membership of a cult of rebels, to those ones who might have published, possibly, a pamphlet called the Revue which had a resemblance to a critique of an establishment distributed free of charge they began talking about the idea of the senior citizens next door and of valid reasons for trusting them in a relaxed optimistic way. In denial of the confounded bomber’s wicked doings.

“I was meaning to ask about our neighbour’s husband, dear. He was saying to me that he was so badly wounded at the Somme, he gets a fairly decent pension; he made some money, so he has enough to live on and to pay the rent at the Sanctuary yet he isn’t flagrantly immodest – there isn’t a sign of insincere bashfulness nor falsity of manner reserved for many who were as successful as he was.” she says.

“He learned the hard way. And then he did divorce late in life, didn’t he say he had an axe to grind about the youth of today?”

“Yeah, he certainly did, when he flew into that tirade against arrogance and self-esteem, brooking no opposition from that contingent which allows praise and congratulation when it isn’t appropriately meted out.” he said.

“He may have been fibbing, trying to impress you.” she replied.

“I don’t think so. He vented his pent-up spleen over what he terms the heroes and hero-worship, in recent times, of petty tyrants’ morbid crimes, the deification of violence, which I think lends support to the notion he is against what is known in layman’s terms as the deification of the sinner, the vilification of the saint.” At the end of the mini-sermon he lunged forward and grasped his side: the frightful pain in his abdomen wasn’t going away.

“He still might have been fibbing, baby.” She thought Bertram such an imbecile to be so wholesome.

“He wasn’t, and as far as we can presume, had no reason to, Lauren. He is a modest, unselfish old guy and he dislikes war-mongerers, to the same extent and with the same fairness he dislikes over-arching pride.” He said, and questioned whether she thought their neighbour, not just a run of the mill veteran, but an ingrained soldier of fortune, not really a hero but a victim of random crime locally in the vicinity had to be the more respected for his humility, or for his divorce.

“They weren’t meant for each other, such an age gap!” she said.

\* \* \*

The old woman Agatha, who seemed a sprightly pensioner, a nimble pensioner and the husband Morris, who seemed a bit of a vigilante, a bit of a do-gooder citizen, liked the Nivats a whole lot. In the sad, sad case of the neighborhood watch in the vicinity of the Sanctuary their efforts had recently witnessed an immodest, untoward rise in the number of incidents and call-outs during the previous months, especially after the arson debacle had happened at the Sanctuary. He did a bit of sailing, wayfarers mainly, on the side as well, but the new wife was the only one who has told anybody about this little hobby.

However monochrome and sleepy their lives in this backwater locale the futures panned out as more of a lurid nightmare than they had anticipated. People repeatedly lost their phones and once or twice their wallets up at the little village shop.

The tired old village shop sadly reported that there was a conspiracy involving more than the supply and distribution of stale loaves of bread. What was more some suspicious characters who for a few months loitered in or around the well-tended village green had begun calling themselves an organization of some sort.

“Hope it will be all-right. Got bad feelings about things this time.” Bertram had said once they were back inside their chocolate box cottage in the grounds after an excursion to pack the miniature car with baggage for the journey ahead. A few suspicious shouts from far off near the village green let him know the mystery organization hovered nearby.

“Don’t be anal retentive, let’s get going.” She kissed him then, a peck on the left cheek. He tried to avoid a fully-fledged argument by not rising to Lauren’s bait, on this occasion he missed the lure very narrowly.

“But, why, um, oh I see…” he trailed off and gave up, and hooked by a sense of failure the resignation left unsaid, he set about carrying more baggage out to the waiting black Renault in the driveway with the open boot.

Nothing weird or wonderful there then. Anyone can almost hear the unknown voices of the organization out there in the ether whisper that this innocent scene of comedy will have to end in a tragic coup very, very soon indeed.

“Oh yes of course they will. We’ll look after them. Have a good time… No don’t you worry, everything will be fine here, you have my word,” The wheelchair-bound neighbour Morris had said, and he assured Lauren with a nod of his head, he would look after their lodgings. He fully intended to do what she asked and sign for the parcels from the delivery man whilst she was away even if it meant cancelling something else.

They left them standing outside returning into their house as they were getting into the fast little Renault sedan, the house keys in their safe, secure hands.

Handing them over the garden wall they talked a while, but the elderly neighbour Morris with Agatha his chronically ill wife could not afford to natter about the hopes of the neighborhood watch. Not now that he needed to put their minds at rest about the noise pollution, at any rate.

In the brand new Eurostar terminal pleasantly teeming with a hum of holiday makers all heading to France, the couple expressed their discontent at the tourism trade with serious, mature faces and without stalling to waste time amongst the crowds of families, while the children giggled together as they bounced onto the high-speed train.

With all the jostling, the heavier than heavy bags, the irreverent noise and some offish glances at multiple strangers they took their places in the full-to-the-brim carriages where it was really a situation everyone looked forward to but never actually enjoyed because small scale stuff always went wrong especially at a fiasco like this was about to become.

“They will be in the tunnel, by now.” As he idly dropped the remark to Agatha to try to initiate a morsel of gossip so he slowly did the washing up standing at the kitchen sink, but he saw nothing untoward out of the windows of their cottage in the grounds of the Sanctuary except he heard the traffic as it passed along out of doors, the grumbling sound of engines personified by his imagination.

“Yes,” she said in token agreement, “Where have you hidden their keys, darling?”

“In a safe place…” he said back to her in a deliberately ambiguous way, because without telling her where he had hidden them he supposed he had won himself a perfect chance to gossip about the younger couple’s specific lot instead.

Wondering why they were happy, how they always had money and what the reasons were for their holidaying did not increase their knowledge of the sweet little couple it only obscured it more, and neither she nor he had even the foggiest idea of the atrocious manner in which the couple’s joint destiny was certain to unfold later that morning in April of 1994.

Then he said he had decided to make sure to check up on their well-kept home on a daily basis in case of burglars and meaninglessly but earnestly commenced asking inward questions like whether anyone would consider this an important character trait of his, this careful diligence, and like were the sounds from the village green merely a bad sign or were they an omen that needed to be reported to someone.

“Tell me. What do you think of them? I heard they were splitting up, and do you know how Lauren can actually afford all those packages that keep getting delivered?” He asked.

“I heard, now don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying it’s true but I heard from Virginia at the cult that Bertram has been keeping the small matter of some share certificates in Switzerland confidential.” She said.

“Who told her that? Morris?” He said, indignant with surprise and disappointment boiling over, as he inadvertently peered down at the dropped cutlery clattering to the floor at her feet.

“Oh, it’s just a rumor…I suppose Morris must have because didn’t he meet us at the Sanctuary that time last summer?” she said.

Several brief moments after the old couple stopped at first class carriage G having merrily embarked on the train when the comforting country surrounding scenery at Ashford International which Lauren had been photographing out of inane habit on her Pentax - the outside seen through the wide triple glazed windows giving way to the silent, pitch darkness of the channel tunnel itself for the next few minutes - a loud series of bangs abruptly shattered all the eardrums of the couple, originating from a few rows in front of where they were. After the ensuing, short pauses in time to take stock absolutely everyone began to scream in shock and Bertram, remaining a virtuoso of placidity there, wondered what caused the harsh noises, and what he had to do that might subdue it and bring back normality again.

“It’s not the brats three rows behind throwing all their toys on the floor, nor someone spontaneously combusting through sheer tedium,” This he decided after he had also decided it could not have been the train compartments dividing as if they were on an old fashioned rural train, nor some corpulent bloke who threw his weight around as he clambered over everyone to get out of his seat to use the lavatory, as it could not be any of the newcomers from the village green set either, playing tricks on each other he decided. It was a sound like that of a pistol shot that started this mission, and he was not sure but it would probably be another one that ended it.

Meanwhile a multiplicity of serious thoughts on their precarious condition fell upon the passengers, some welcome some not so, as these rushed thick and fast that morning into the shocked passengers’ dotting-about minds, as they fidgeted and revived themselves because of it they continued to howl and groan:

“Has some gangster shot his rival as the final insult, has there been a murder, maybe, or has some schizophrenic just fired shots into the thin air, for absolutely no good reason whatsoever.” They hurriedly asked each other this kind of thing but found they could get no closure while the shreds of newspaper lingo framed their paradigms, and they helped not one jot.

And finally a seemingly long time later, while they noticed the emergence from his seat near the back of this compartment a hitherto unnoticed passenger significantly braver in inverted commas and more courageous than the rest of the cowards on board today, De La Reyes materialized as an angel of mercy out of the dark recesses of the train. A passenger who showed no fear or anger in the shadow of both as he helped the other witnesses to control their doubt, the shuffling and kerfuffling having given way to unadulterated seismic terror. Although he rashly and maybe even stupidly some might say advanced then towards the objective epicentre and tangoed amateurishly, graciously with the handles of the seats on either side of the passageway alert as a viper could become if caught in a trap deep in a dark forest.

For about the last three years the still rather attractive, if greying, Lauren had experienced a bewildering and recurrent sensation of deja vu, the description of which far from boring her witless compelled her to research its causes and its attributes, how it made her move magically from one locale in space and time to another, its effect upon her known reality no less. Since we know it was funny she had also cuckolded Bertram for an equal period of time with a plump Swiss businessman this roving, quizzical state, justified by her notorious greed and also by the financial misfortune her beloved Bertram had suffered from through no tangibly discernible fault of his own, came as no surprise to a random observer.

Her smug satisfied and obnoxious rich lover would not have controverted Bertram who was completely hapless, or challenged when it came to earning the big money from the city, or spoiling her with little deluxe trinkets which she knows don’t actually suit, nor she deserve if he had been on the terrorist’s train; but she certainly felt she wanted all the designer handbags, the diamond watches, the plush hotel rooms that stingy Bertram would never even consider trying to get for her.

Even if this nasty lover-boy, both corpulent and vile to look at of course with a grotesque big nose, was of a different sub-genre to Bertram, yet he had access to the means, the actual dough and had influence.

Even though it transpired that beautiful looks affected not the issue at stake: the compounded issue in all of this, Bertram’s soon made pathetic bank statements and overdrafts and Lombard loans did so. So that easily over-influenced by other celebrity figures in the media, their conquests, their flaws, how should this couple ever make their thing work as a union for life Lauren may wonder incessantly, when placed in regard to women who read at length and in depth the trashy magazines and typified most of legitimate mainstream society?

This sense of deja vu, deja sais, had driven her on to marvel in wonder and gaze lovingly at the umbrageous terrain of time travel, and the zigzagging potential highlights which obviously appeared on the horizon therein, like whether it’s possible to predict or make warnings about the future on this the chess-board of life. None of the warnings of past life regression scared her out of her bad habits, but they fired her up to more outrageous and reckless acts of deceit or dreams of it.

Only about ten minutes earlier in the lulled train, before the fear set in and after they had stowed their luggage in the cabin they could be overheard having a silly sounding but important tiff about why the sour Bertram who would have rushed obediently to fetch saccharine Lauren her bag with her holiday novel from the luggage compartment annoyed her to such an extent: just to see and to experience how far it could go, he said:

“You’re so impatient,” he said, at a loss. “It can wait, wait until we’re out of the tunnel,”

“No, I’m not impatient. Get the damn book.” She retorted.

“You are so, so impatient,” he replied glancing away, hoping not to start a scene.

“My hopes, and my wishes, have left me; don’t ever say I’m impatient again, baby. I know you mean well for me, but here I am utterly alone, in the depths of despair about money, without recourse to desires, or aspirations, and you, you tell me this is because of my impatience, I take it?” She said, with a bite of venom.

“You don’t realize the obvious, you don’t see the good in what I have done, only the blackened aspects, but sometimes you get what you’re after – if I let you, even if it’s wrong.” He said, again in fact to help her, but ostensibly to a casual onlooker, to rile her yet more.

“It seems you don’t care how it shattered my dreams when, three years ago, I first had the revolting revelation I was clock-stopping, quantum-leaping.” She said, and nonetheless she never dreamt to admit to him of all people about her affair so tied up with the déjà vu.

\* \* \*

Pirsig, prone to assess this and such like fantasies from amongst the looks on the various faces in the next few emotive pictures in the album, embellished everything with his own anxiety. However, every one of them was accurately enough represented there, surely his anxious memory was irrelevant?

Undercover vigilantes of some secret cabal or some ninja clique might have been the best way to see whom? and he thought for at least an instant to himself that the feelings of panic, not the photographs themselves, threw up a much improved likeness. Pirsig actually felt as if he did not observe but had been able to direct these their existences, the camera obscura gone weird and dictatorial.

In the future to understand his worries Pirsig may have had to cogitate some more on Bertram, once so spaced out, so spun out, but not so short-sighted and his particular feelings: those extenuating circumstances resident far outside of his narrow legal realm of consciousness. That inability Bertram had to stem the tide of boasting then and there to Lauren as soon as she gained the much needed insights into his tottering immodesty which he was so drawn to before, so attracted to now as if by an umbilical link and which led to other mistakes later. The knot of vipers, in other words, which he presumed she was leaving him to untie and that poisoned his existence and had kept him fastened before to a form of safety that of self-confidence; but at least he was aware that she had strayed now.

Why was she trying to do so much damage to his self-esteem by committing adultery, whilst shifting him towards a state of utter paranoid fantasies about himself like a converse gnostic? However, probably only the substance’s toxins caused this newfound insight, the chemicals that were all over his veins made him think of getting rid of those thick blindfolds which we usually allowed to be associated with sanity in the sane. It was a long time since she had flattered him. It had been some time since he had deserved the term of "baby" or "darling" and compliments were becoming more scattered and rarer as the days went by for the couple. However, in Bertram’s effort to stop the railway tunnel horror he did feel he was deserving of a snippet more praise, and when Lauren refused to congratulate him that signed her fate; she was a prime bitch, at least as far as he was concerned.

Not least because he actively showed himself more and more concerned about the dodgy aspects of life and that encompassed where the hitman from the CULT’s palace had actually gone to after he missed his target but also, partly because he was a desperate braggart in a meaningful sense of the word, it both started and ended his attempts to improve upon his character flaws and no less his obscene pursuit of true love, and it didn't stop there.

This was futility though some might say a highly spiritual mission to base the entire foundations of one’s life's hopes upon, even when the aims could never be fulfilled by Lauren’s partnership in the near future, he still wanted to turn dust into gold. His lust to be loved was secondary only to his fondness for standing ovations for petty trifles from anyone else he could have respected or have wanted to impress.

Later it happened again. In an immensely disgruntled but relieved way, he thought of how he could better adjust himself and win Lauren over which he so badly wanted to do but only after the very last person of the dozen or so admirers from his immediate environment had shaken his hand, brusquely, or lightly it made no difference; and even though they had all possessed one thing in common: they all towered above him as if they ministrated to his form squashed into the seat, “at least there are no more palms to grasp, thank God”, he thought to himself. “He’s bothered that he boasted too often, but shouldn’t I be kind for once and flatter his huge ego, just a little bit?” Lauren asked herself surprised at this insight, then balefully gazed into space as she tried her best to appear to uphold some outward semblance of turn of the century decorum and decency.

“I suspect it is what is expected of me, but really I couldn’t care less.” She thought.

She heard the station master’s whistle beginning to blare out a strange, ethereal music that sounded like everyone was listening to it, and started rummaging around in her bag’s detritus to find the mobile before it came to a halt, and went to answer machine which she knew would only serve up another nuisance to her fat male friend who was phoning her from far down the cabin on a whim to discuss their love for life and living.

She remembered clearly the last time her composure had broken down and had left her needing to remain in her bedroom incommunicado for a whole day, the risks associated with being left on a limb, came rushing in as she recalled how she fared so well on her own when he arrived late for yet another luncheon after numerous messages by telephone that he would be there.

“Can’t find my bag.” she remarked to Bertram who, while revelling in his newly found spiritual attainments and not noticing anything so humdrum or monochrome as a major tangible detail and not alerted to danger has had no recourse to defend himself from the future’s plans for him. Since her sensation of déjà vu, Lauren had understood a new theory: that this deft management of apparently pointless chains of events, and this skilful handling of seemingly unimportant decisions will mysteriously determine for them their combined future’s entire direction by reverse-engineering. Now not only does she realize that but she sees how her rudeness has been exposed in spite of her best efforts.

She reflected on her emotional needs. She wished him to repay her fine compliments with like comments, but he displayed no acumen in respect of her déjà vu, it simply didn't seem to properly bother Bertram if she was regressing into a phantasmagoria in a parallel reality, or even if she jumped off the edge of a cliff. You could see he was lazy with his helping hand, but Lauren knew it was more than that, it was almost a kind of middling metro-sexuality.

Perhaps because of his apathy the ennui, the infidelity and disrespect he deserved seemed as nothing if seen in comparison to the hell which was waiting to dim finally the gateway to her personal harsh future, and the harmful private trajectories of nearly everybody she was linked with, or connected to, in the present day and age when discretion and decorum was the universal skeleton key?

Whether the salient point was déjà vu or déjà-sais mattered less and less, because it mattered that the unpleasantness springing up seemed to present itself over and over infinitely repeating in her and everyone else’s mind.

She resented her bubble being burst nor was it merely because of the hardship that lay in store for Bertram that she resented getting caught, Bertram whose belief system ebbed away from him evenly, as a direct consequence of the discovery of her indiscretion like the continuing counting down of the timer on a bomb in a war story after it had detonated, if that was possible.

“I’m getting bored, I hope we arrive soon – excuse me while I go to the dining car,” he said, a few seconds after these her thoughts about deja vu had somehow escaped and eluded her, and meanwhile she nodded over towards the obese businessman’s back and, intending to expound the thrills of the fracas on the express train to his ears in superficial terms and to the detriment of any other subject if it seemed apposite, cool, and a bit funny, to respond to the telephone call which she could not answer earlier.

Bertram indicated to her that he was planning to leave her in the lurch for a while anyway and went to proceed alone to saunter up by himself to the dining car in order to see if he can discover much-needed details about what has just happened, and he intended to surreptitiously, also, partake of a little visit to the area outside the gentleman’s lavatory during his personal promenade in order to check in private that the sharp copper or that the brass needle's bruising on his body was not threateningly severe, for he would have to make mention of that too to the doctors, if it had happened.

Mostly the fat businessman commiserated, demystified, and then showed his surprise or shock about what had happened. Instead of which Lauren only glamorized, celebrated, and then nothing much else. With his attentiveness and perspicacity, the perfect fair-weather friend, the Swiss businessman Adler and she have a perfectly balanced polarity during their conversation.

“It’s just that it’s not like him to show bravery…it was a massive shock and old Bertram just kept on at it, he’s really quite altered in my opinion, can’t you see.” She said.

Towards the conversation's finish when Lauren, in repose in her seat, brought up the shocking issue of Bertram’s crowning, by both the off-duty policeman and incidentally by the rest of the train, as the lord and master of this train of terror in such a way it seemed to Pirsig as little more than a tacked on abbreviation, a petite flourish, or the equivalent of a teaser: a free ashtray or a wafer of chocolate you might have got from the staff, and that you fell for, in a decent restaurant with the express aim of tempting you to return again, he got uncharacteristically stressed out. He grew unstable, psychologically irate.

“You’ve really done it this time, Lauren. What am I supposed to do with this useless information?” He asked. Lauren ceremoniously, and in the long term it turned out very shallowly, went ahead in a blatantly thoughtless manner to copy him and to sham, pretend she found fault with Bertram’s lucky escapade too. She irritated him.

“But exactly, darling. It’s gone right to his head, the old devil.” She said to the businessman he had done nothing to deserve such applause.

The conversation ended on an amusing note, as follows, transcribed by Adler and written on a dirty little scrap of paper extracted from one of the original, tattered old journals also held in the safe deposit box:

“And now he by dint of the psychopath’s foray into frail territory, and rendered singularly brainless by his bravery and his inflated ego, is at one and the same time seen as a showcase of the hero whose fluffy need it is to glean honours where none could ever have been, and the coward who’d do the same if he could – no Lauren the message is clear you must leave him, surely it is obvious." The scrawled letter was anonymously written throwing up a multiplicity of questions about whose insight this really was with no outside listeners in mind. The annoyance was palpable.

Aware as Bertram still was of being applauded, he hatched a decidedly spontaneous plan to wield his inner sabre of mental light once again, although neither Lauren nor Adler had any chance to warn or admonish him for this self-destructive plan of action. Having to blow myriad invisible kisses and to shake plenty of warm, clammy hands Bertram saw the furtive photo in the notebook being taken by Lauren of him and the suspicions began once more: that she was perhaps incubating some dark alternative feat to be played out by him, her pawn, as a magnificent encore.

Whether that would take the shape of a massive impetuous crime remained at this point far from certain, but he knew, although unaware of the future and Pirsig's role in it, that she wanted to keep a record of him in her mind for posterity and for the heartfelt gratitude of his newly acquired disciples too who would sense it to be fit and proper.

“Oh, so you want to take a picture? You do, do you? Well, I’ll have to let you, then.” He said to himself as he gradually approached her seat.

“What? You don’t mean to say…?” Lauren had just deferred again to her buddy there while he was locked in the washroom checking his abdomen. He meant to say that she must spend more time with him but it sounded like he was suggesting she get a divorce.

“We’ll have to wait, but I’m convinced that if I was pregnant with his child I would call her Alice; wait, a certain someone is almost within range. Speak to YOU later, darling…” Then she was rushing madly to terminate the chat before a soft, approaching tread, and made sure she had placed all the gossip behind her and was set up to display, to the observers casually seated around, that her covert agendas were concealed and ostensibly encapsulated their agendas to wit their hopelessly baffled bliss at this fortunate capacity on Bertram’s part to act as a quasi-hero when he scared the cult’s assassin and drove the hitman with the Luger away from them.

“Welcome back, dear. Are you alright? Oh, thanks.” She said whilst he was handing her the coffee and a beaker of water.

At this stage of the mission's course the Swiss banker Pirsig in Geneva whose way was usually flawlessly illegal will have been rather annoyed that the plan had turned out so. The real Monsieur Stefan Pirsig looked at a single black and white photograph from album number one of the incompetent Bertram smirking or grinning broadly with the people he walked past on the way back to his seat, and he saw every one of them as dotards but he saw they were jinxed and proceeded to wish everything went back to the way he wanted it to be and that he had paid the Adler and the foreign assassin beforehand for a real reason, a reason that might ruin the cult.

The truth wasn’t and probably never would be shown to any newcomer, like he longed it could be if only Bertram was dead and buried; Pirsig searched for more historical evidence, rifling through the chaotic contents of the box, consisting of reams of printouts and ledgers, and a few petty objects included.

The prisoner, eyes wide in a kind of trance, languished at the farthest reaches of the train with his hands cuffed together, reciting key verses from the cult’s manifesto in macabre tones. With his voice hushed to a low exhortation, he took his hardened stare from the novice on-board duty officer, and turned abruptly to face towards the entrance where another more senior detective was at last now visible, approaching very frostily.

He’d endured a lot of surly, unhinged interlopers before this: quack doctors, dealers, pimps, fraudsters, kidnappers, casual hoodlums. They, a gallery of rogues without exception, hated him whilst they remembered him, the man who sent them inside, to jail. Except for this one who, whilst baulking at the prospect of his terrible jail time, this one particular hitman had never learnt to bow down and to obey the law. He greeted him with a beaming smile seldom he had seldom seen used by his victims.

The new policeman had the aura of a real knower and a street wise tough guy. His face with its deep set eyes and his rough and ready tattoo neatly peeking out from under the cuff of his sleeve and his eerily quiet advance seemed to point it out succinctly as he walked forwards.

Giving no clues to his professional function other than that hard-man exterior he got from the civilian traveller little impudence, and fewer smiles. Though when younger, he was almost always the receptacle of masked feelings also like Bertram, from his bored and lascivious wife. Now immediately he relished the task of inspecting the potential murderer's mood, a wrongdoer who did not cloak his innermost impulses, like his wife had done before the divorce, and who looked ahead to prison with much too much pleasure.

The cult’s hitman did not reckon he was going to walk to freedom, the officer knew he probably knew aright. As a secret agent his main priority was public safety, his private concerns for past health matters of his family, and the future well-being of his children had remained insignificant, in the background. At headquarters they called him De La Reyes, he was referred to by his nickname Chimera, on account of a more than energetic ruse five years before when unravelling a case of such convoluted twists involving such gung-ho criminals he was the only one who could recognize the signs and ciphers.

As for the man's prepossessing characteristics they were stoked by his opium addiction. The fierce frown, the apathy and the engineered strategy had the drug of choice, opium as its fuel. For him opium was an attack and a defence, a mechanism to uphold religious honour to the enemy but also to uphold violence as a means to destroy a culture and an end in itself. Liberation and recreational usage were bywords used by a gullible pratt.

“Hello, name and address please.” He said.

“Hello, you gullible pratt.” He whispered.

“Are you refusing to co-operate?” He asked.

By now the terseness, the pallor of the hitman had been replaced by serenity but as a result of the explicit and implicit reliance upon an afterlife in heaven; not as described in a newspaper article, as a captured assassin being escorted off the platform later hands cuffed and police guards all around. His mind was trained and also focused, in death he imagined the glorious and spotless life they’d never let be discovered in this dimension of the real world because he had already received the massive bribe for Bertram’s destruction from his contact person in England. He already looked forward to a glorious destiny, as displayed by his still calm, emasculated appearance. The sleuth weighed him up for a few more minutes serenely, trying urgently not to get sucked in to the terse situation by the disgust on the malevolent convert’s wrinkled brow. Like all fantasists he wholly disdained the modern man, he hoped he’d trampled upon the churlish infidel.

“I said, are you willing to co-operate or will you just sit there singing your confounded nonsense?” De La Reyes asked.

In antithesis, a few minutes nearer to Paris, De la Reyes permitted a faint smile to be traced on his forehead, but it was soon cannily replaced with nothing but a cunningly engineered stupefaction which was made to appear as if it had resided therein previously when it had not. Against all expectations he was satisfied with the outcome of his interview and so satisfied in fact that he hid his jubilation behind a guise of stupidity and took himself off to the guard huddling in a corner.

Composed, he had asked the guard was the captured secure? If he’d fought, and if so whether he’d been restrained? Was he in a serene or agitated state ten minutes earlier? Asking such normative questions was the building blocks of getting to know one’s prisoner, and it led on to another brisk but useless and inconsequential interview with the incriminated party.

Was there a threat still posed to the other, presumably, harmless passengers on the express train? Could he have somehow ditched some concealed harmful object in the coach – an incendiary device perhaps – that, he said, might be the sole reason (other than money) for this disconcerting chanting he was continually making.

He coolly interrupted that sound and with a loud belch drew nearer, as undeterred he allowed his odorous breath, as he stared at him to seep onto the hired hitman's hooded face. The blank face and the amorphous lack of identity was closing in on the assassin's own serenity whose persona could only just be delineated, only just remembered, with an analogy to a fierce predator; neither tamed nor repentant his two handcuffed fists slowly clenched and just that little bit less slowly he relaxed them in a series of successive angry movements. Only for a few short moments could he remember enough to recount these insolent mannerisms to anyone, Bertram and Lauren soon became the sole receptacles of his observations.

The interview seemed to go nowhere as the gunman refused to meet the police detective's eyes levelled at him, in just the same way as he was told by his contacts in the CULT they would be if he was captured.

Retreating into the partially lit doorway of the last cabin on the train, De la Reyes gave an ironic smile to the guard and moved along to find Bertram, the poor victim.

Twelve or so years afterwards, in 2006, when Pirsig started piecing together the knock on effects, the final upshot, of Bertram’s misadventure on board the train those documents he extracted contained many informative photos and diary entries ushering in private history, instinctual knowledge, saddening facts. Those images were redolent of the onset of the decline in Bertram’s health.

He felt sickened, and nearly choked, at the recalled memory of the last occasion he had met Bertram a decade ago: The outrageous supposedly humorous claims he claimed about how he spent his time collecting rare butterfly, the lies he propounded about how he thought his marriage was fine, plain sailing, and the claim he made to Pirsig about a new source of income, above and beyond the millions from his oil baron grandfather, it all turned out to be in the end a false or a benign hoax so Pirsig muttered something aloud in his consternation and searched for more clues that he so urgently needed.

Pirsig felt let down again as he viewed with interest more of the resonant documents, because here he saw a sprightly Bertram retreating down the platform executing a very foolish manoeuvre known as a dainty jig to raise a proper laugh from Lauren.

On another occasion on the reel of old sepia tinted film he saw him bowing in a fake obloquy that he felt lit up his eyes in a sinister way, however. He had often said to colleagues and friends that he wondered what the exact details were after he'd heard the bribe was paid for the failed murder; of what change of personality Bertram underwent after that holiday to Paris ten or more years before. For that had to appear ostensibly to most of his partners at the bank to be the catalyst for losing contact with his esteemed client, not the truth.

He was wondering now whether their mutually beneficial silence was known about by anyone, or if as he dreaded somebody discovered the pair had severed all their personal connections with Switzerland when, upon their return from France, the large sum of money went missing, but somebody could still suspect and implicate him anyway. His imagination ran loosely, fired up by the stock of material that had been stowed away in the vaults.

As gut instincts go he was not far off the very edge of guilt and fear. The photographs he picked up out of obscurity helped him see into the core of his guilt over helping Bertram get into trouble later. Yet depressingly the photos were not furnishing him with any useful data, facts, or inroads into the experience Bertram suffered on the train journey, and on many more occasions since then; he laughed at the question marks still unsolved, and asked Adler to come in.

CHAPTER 4

It flashed in upon Bertram that when he got back to Kent he had to buy a few light bulbs to replace the nightlights deterring intruders in their apartments, because they were supposed to be changed to green, eco-friendly versions.

“Various lazy and scruffy persons in the upper apartments have somehow expelled their old director from his post, obligated the unsteady Sanctuary to dissolve early for a kind of summer holiday, and subsequently they have caused great uproar and no lesser upheavals,” Rudy said in the musty staff room on one of the first mornings he attained power. The director, Rudy, whose sharp tongue and blunt ideas went on cataloguing every boring point, at their morning coffee, of the reform to be implemented by his subordinates such as ground-breaking swearing and heavy drinking rules cited them, rattling them off:

“It is vital, or you will be fired”; he told them, “you must halt the madness,” and bring the Sanctuary chain of New Religious Movements back within the new confines, the modern boundaries “of mutual regard and decent gentility,” he said. While the remaining junior staff tried to enforce a reunification with due protocol, the Sanctuary had tumbled down the essential “league” tables, as anyone may know they used to be near the top; the new director stood no chance of halting the decline towards what was perceived as foul play and libertinism, because the rumours were not false. In amongst the ridiculous establishment a gang of senior delinquents had garnered an ominous reputation for avenging, by means both unfair and foul, any small but significant cruelty to themselves or to their underhand flouting of the duress of rules.

Meanwhile Lauren humoured her decrepit husband on the cruising Eurostar and feigned her fascination chronically, as she heard the story of the cult read to her she could only look forward to the destination. Some members of the movement, but not Lauren, had heard of the CULT’s ascent and descent and had also heard of Agatha being in the same gang as Naomi, Morris, Max and the rest of them.

Bertram preferred to regard the director as beside the point when the crew exacted revenge; the gang thought they should hand out punishments in their own style without Rudy ’s posturing or his attitude to etiquette. Despite both the faulty method and the erratic strategy, Rudy had proven a gang of scruffy and steadfast pensioners had turned the Sanctuary into a hotbed of degeneracy, and determined its famed conformity a weird kind of useless infamy.

“The vaguely magnificent attempt to emboss its trademark decency was allegedly to magnanimously re-instate the bicentennial anniversary concerto which two months prior had been quietly slated,” Bertram went quiet, more concerned about a safe journey through the storm shaking the train than about either updating Lauren on their estranged gang’s slide downhill into ruin, or their concomitant, eventual return to mutual regard and decent gentility. She never would admit it but Lauren had longed, Bertram believed, to share the joy with newly acquired associates at the concerto that autumn a few years prior.

Rudy realized in the nick of time how things had turned nastier than nasty overnight at the CULT hall. In the months leading up to his first arrival, capers were underway at the CULT secret lodgings that he found morbid: the entrance hall had been incinerated by a group of pyromaniacs; the corridors were bleached having been graffitteed by vandals; and one of the rooms was locked constantly until police had finished their forensic investigations. A gardener had been heckled, then accosted regularly, by a group of cult members for the last two years – finally he’d been committed to the sanatorium. The pretext was hearing human voices coming from behind a rhododendron bush.

Everything had been swept under the proverbial carpet before the new year. A replacement gardener was recruited, the burnt-out entrance hall where concerts were held had its skeletal structure hastily renewed in time for the onset of cold weather.

Rudy didn’t talk to anyone in the Swiss bank (that wasn’t the way forward) but Pirsig had already infiltrated the Sanctuary, because daring Adler showed up there for the concerto. These events were often interesting, murky secrets that any spies, members of the public, or innocent juniors were withheld from discovering.

“Remember the time when you told me Naomi asked for a copy of that magazine, The Revue, to read and she only met a glower and a sneer from the director?” Bertram asked his doted-upon Lauren, seeking to assess her reaction. “The only reason was because they’d all been confiscated the week before, and to even look at the magazine would be an admission of guilt,” she replied.

The argument which welled up between them about his cowardice seemed to abate, Bertram felt happy enough to get on with his reading, and corrected his copy with an entry in the margin.

Anybody broad minded enough could live at The Sanctuary. The fact was anybody who was offended, whose temperament was a bit wishy-washy, or who was reporting to the local authorities was required to remain unexposed to a startling truth, or would be removed.

The gang’s plotting was not in the nature of serious fraud at this stage; justifiable caution and xenophobia inspired the en-masse conspiracy.

The moment he arrived, Rudy could not prevent the manager-followers getting their way. Everybody saw that discretion and decorum were the only viable alternatives to wholesale, naked rebellion. Especially when disloyal outside factions became involved, such as De la Reyes. When folk vanished from the premises it became clear that a bizarre retribution was afoot. They weren’t escaping to Valhalla, and they weren’t transferring to other institutions, they were leaving no traces, and they weren’t returning a few weeks later. Nobody missed them, or worried much at first because the place's outstanding reputation fogged the truth under a cloud of frauds.

It was expected that the lazier contingent, including Bertram, Lauren and Naomi wanted to do as they pleased without telling anyone or warning anyone else, and without returning their keys, or signing the visitor’s book. What happened as a result of their rebellion was anyone's guess, until De La Reyes.

"We're free citizens, we can more or less do as we please." Outside the refectory the two chatted freely; at the same time as the mole Adler was skulking not far away.

"Yeah, they can't stop us. If they try to, our children and their friends will go absolutely ape-shit on them." The other said scuffing tweed slippers on concrete as she stubbed out a cigarette.

"Too right. The manager-followers have to just shut up and know their place...which is at the bottom." The former replied.

"Yeah, it's tough luck but I mean what do we give them money for? To be treated like losers? I do not think so." And more to this effect. It never occurred to them to apologize to the staff for absconding either, being such total rebels with or without spies from Geneva around. Though they had seen him loitering nearby on their way to the smoking area behind the refectory just before the concerto. They were far from concerned that Adler, out of sync in his dented porkpie hat, was probably listening in and was gathering evidence. It turned out much later that the two people least expected to come under suspicion became fixated upon as prime candidates in a murder inquiry: Naomi Dean and the mole, Adler.

There was already such bitter animosity people doubted or denied, they could not believe the role Adler played in the saga. Naomi knew the director had not much objective past and no real history, no experience of directing prior to his arrival on the grounds. However, in his favour he was a magician when talking to other staff, he had verbal skills above and beyond the necessary for a layman, his amazing memory for medical facts and adept talent for snuffing vice out. Naomi told herself she must not forget about that.

Without clues as to the eloped tenants' whereabouts, the detective De La Reyes was strained to find a lead in the initial stages of the kidnappings; but once five or six old people had left, were swallowed up by the void, he had no option but to examine the Sanctuary's darkening reputation for avenging exploits that flouted the rules, but that meant the squeaky clean director could get into trouble for keeping illicit happenings secret and also, eventually, for lacking qualifications.

This was based partially on the severity with which his followers were driven away from or rather suspended from the property whenever they plotted a daring coup that they expected to nonchalantly get away with like that of The Revue, the magazine they cobbled together in the heat of the moment. Lauren had not even handed round copies of the Revue before their intentions were exposed to further inquiry and furthermore they were not allowed to quietly fade away but instead were driven away by the plant Adler’s greatest acquisition, Rudy the director, regretting their latest actions.

As a generalized rule blackout and secrecy were the cult's paramount motives, they permeated every layer, atom, and cell perpetually. The leader hid the truth in the cult’s annual statements so well that Detective De la Reyes felt a fool looking for evidence, checking for signs and leftovers of the pensioners' play.

“Thus the police were to have no idea of the real skulduggery happening at the Sanctuary,” Bertram explained to Lauren. The police were missing the point. Lauren complied with his commentaries though she stood up astonished at some of them, and told him he was way off base. She was off for a walk and wouldn't be back for a minute or two.

“Quite apart from a logical thesis, theory or a tenable dogma the detective in charge only had a minuscule hope of ever making the right sort of claim about who were the irresponsible few, inside or outside of the private lodgings.” He said, and smiled in a subdued manner to himself.

From the viewpoint of an omnipresent eye at the headquarter the detective’s suspicions were untenable if not ludicrous, his colleagues remarked, cast upon the gypsy troupe from out of town.

De la Reyes’s plight was exacerbated by the fact it seemed an incredible crime for one, two or even three seventy-year old people to end their lives at the same time; impossible, no matter how hard-core a rebel crew they had somehow become.

He vowed that if they tried to escape the law and tried to combine their feigned suicide with contempt of authority in all its forms, he would make it “a very, very terrible scene to deal with,” So he supposed, and so he was willing to put forward to the utter disbelief of sceptical colleagues, astounded at his unfounded theory about the gypsy troupe.

“Five senile delinquents have gone missing, five personalities we thought were wiped out never to return;” Bertram read, paraphrasing the document.

At headquarters, De la Reyes pronounced his task was to bring back these personages from the brink, to assert everyone’s paranoiac delusions were a load of rubbish, to save the day from total collapse of form and etiquette, and to bring crime to a close with summary justice by shifting the blame onto a gypsy troupe.

His flaw was in placing his trust with his chief superintendent who coldly and callously subverted his ideas and made him feel his heart-felt supposition about the guiltless candour and innocence of the followers of The Sanctuary was also loads of rubbish:

“Look,” said the detective, “I’m just doing my job. There’s a lot of crazy nonsense being spouted at the moment, and in my opinion it’s nothing more than paranoia. I’m going to find out what the devil’s been going on over at The Sanctuary, and you can rest assured that I’ll bring the perpetrators to justice.” He said, balefully wanting to go and blame the gypsy troupe on the outskirts of town.

The superintendent wielded mettle, and this time he denied De la Reyes by always ignoring him, chuckling at his “amateurish” leads and undermining his tactics with ramped up criticisms.

Lauren had returned from her walk and started to read, taking over the copy of the analysis of the Revue:

“and then, without a second thought persuaded, or rather forced, the humbled and diligent detective De la Reyes to pursue less harmful, much more innocuous “alternative avenues,” He was officially “off the case”.

She stated wrongly that the route to fame as the prima-donna or hero of the station - as this could not possibly be an inside job within the closed ranks of the Ramsgate gypsy troupe – was at an end.

"Yes, De la Reyes, you heard me, there's no way I mean, no way, you're on this case anymore, so go get some alternative avenues to explore." The superintendent said in front of the rest as De la Reyes came back from the concerto welcoming the new leader. He was assigned to guard the Eurostar.

The superintendent took nothing the detective said seriously and someone had to step in. He was worried the gypsy troupe would gather momentum in the public imagination. He feared the analysis would have an impact upon the locals around who were soon going to find De la Reyes a tasty morsel. Also he foresaw a backlash because the hacks at the gazette had heard already about the case of the arson, and the so-called suicides.

“In this case, it seems to me that the staff have no choice but to at least revenge the victims with a popular scapegoat if a real perpetrator cannot be caught.” He said privately. Hoping he didn’t already sound like he’d concocted a farce, he wrote another memo to bring in a tone of expertise to his full length analysis when he got home, rather than the one of anti-climax he had got used to.

Everyone wondered inanimately along the lines of “How could this balmy, sweet memory of that top tier establishment ever be completely refreshed now that these murders have been committed?” After such sallow and callous a series of crimes was allowed to pass a cold sequence of murders had been stymied, hushed up for some time.

Efficiently, detective De la Reyes was invited to inspect the Sanctuary as a token of gratitude and his colleagues felt he accepted as best as he could.

In reality he wanted to sop up the tense atmosphere of the place, and maybe pick up some leads as well while there; this he kept away from anyone.

Off the record, the detective De la Reyes’ lead was reduced to looking merely at cause-and-effect, he was already remonstrating with his inconsiderate superintendent about the lack of pointed evidence to work on for the anti-terrorism unit of the Eurostar.

Everything nigh on perfect, everybody seeming virtually squeaky clean, De la Reyes remembered his past experience that this belied an ongoing undercurrent of angst and pent up aggression that he urgently needed to target and zoom in on. With his precise intuition two members of staff acted tipsy and there seemed a few too many vain smiles, not enough frowns given the facts of the case, on the leader’s and member’s visages at the event.

“Something peculiar or untoward on the pensioners’ faces but…?" he commented to himself and he felt he could safely ignore them altogether to concentrate on the drunk leader's mannerisms and behaviourisms which were revealingly, and demotically ordinary.

Whilst back on the train Lauren said something about this and tried to persuade Bertram to close his notebook, and focus on their lunch which was soon going to be produced on board the hurtling train.

Officially speaking he could not tear in or reveal it to her, but there was a deep malaise, an uncertain undercurrent just lately-blooming. So he could not assess favourably thus far anything in the brusque, brash new boss and his subservient, devoted entourage:

“I wonder why”, De la Reyes asked himself, “I feel such a serious urge to incriminate and implicate the gypsies in the case? There is definitely something dodgy going on, no doubt about it. But if my instincts are worth listening to, I’d say there is more than a few culprits to be found here; many more.” He said.

Hearing himself mumbling these sobering thoughts to himself he gulped briefly with regret, concerned that someone might have, in eavesdropping, overheard him weakly murmuring, and he walked stridently over to the duck pond a little distance off to earn a moment’s release from the frustrating carnival and not to be caught out by sundry itinerant pensioners with sombre faces.

Scores of glinting fish circuitously swam about submerged beneath the surface of the darkened water of the pond and as he tried to bend over slightly to peer down at his reflection in the shimmering water below something sparkled a foot beneath the murky brine.

He thought nothing of it, it could have been some object of value like jewellery or the blade of a knife shimmering, but he cleverly ignored this impression, and decided to send forensics in to have a proper look, just in case. He was still absolutely sure of his initial instincts that the crime had been committed by somebody he suspected was interested whether or not he got caught, and somebody he guessed was only very distantly connected to the Abbey:

“No doubt about it”, he pronounced as he, discomposed and dulled strolled away again: “I still think this is probably an outside job.” He said.

He let his irascible boss off the hook for thinking this didn’t seem to mean that the Chimera would solve the infuriating case of the absentee senile delinquents for a long time.

“Unless he has some kind of a paranormal dream or he is right about the gypsies, unless he gets some more clues which throw up some great answers he really is going to have another difficult time on his hands,” The superintendent said when “discussing” the issue.

He hadn’t been capable of a clear interpretation. Because partly it took place weeks ago, not long after the distractions of the previous case with the corrupt gypsies, and partly because it was before the force had even summoned him onto this one on the Eurostar, but as a matter of fact the detective did have an emotive dream of magnitude. A singular dream, the omen of which left him feeling almost uneasy and unsure of himself.

Thinking he had parked his leased and really undistinctive unmarked car right outside the terrace of a new café somewhere on the Brampton road he entered the shadowy establishment having already helplessly noticed an old woman he liked the look of, but upon further inspection she had buried her nose in an e-book and he chose to ignore her vaguely familiar lineaments. But at the same time he realised he’d forgetfully left his card and wallet behind in his very ramshackle car, and could only afford a newspaper with the loose change he had. So he had to leave by flinging the waiter a brief crumb of an apology, without sitting down at one of the many empty tables and without even getting the cup of coffee or a croissant. After that annoyance he saw a smart sports car where his leased, off duty second-hand car had been only moments earlier and then, loving the search, he found himself walking or roaming the grey pavements for the whole dream as he tried to find his lost transport that in fact he had envisaged somewhere across the other side of the city, without success, and without help from anyone; strangers were saying nice things to each other but every avenue seemed strange and new and unfamiliar until he woke up. He woke up with the uncomfortable sense that his whole left forearm was missing, in the manner of Koro and with a poignant cramp in his shoulder blade where it had been loped off. He understood that most of his dreams were horrendous corruptions of what he was hated doing during the day, and strangely enough he decided that’s what it was but the aspect he hadn’t forgotten was and the facet he couldn’t write off cynically was that the car in the space wasn’t really his, it was the car he’d dreamt of getting if only he could afford it. At this point he was surprised he hadn’t seen one of these sports cars for many weeks, which was quite an unusually long period to go for without sighting at least one.

What did De la Reyes suppose was the point of all this recollection going to be when he knew about car theft and most of the time enjoyed his work? He thought he knew he liked fast cars and had a weak memory for petty details, but what connection was there to anonymous pensioners escaping from hard homes every year in absolute droves when there was not normally anything particularly unusual about it? The sinister was often nonetheless involved, if only fleetingly. A valid objection especially as no grimly errant bits of bodies had even been stumbled upon by the detective yet. They may have asked why De la Reyes was wasting his time with red herring dreams and with bright items left unidentified and sparkling under the stagnant water in a pond's depths and not moving on with the real aim of the case. It struck him that this type of plot was a touch too trite a cliché, the woman too arbitrary a character and him too ineffectual a hero, the ideas dealt with slightly feebly and with a fragmented undertone. He never guessed what he had forgotten nor where his car had gone and he never finished the dream.

In that case it would help if someone unleashed the plain and no nonsense fact to the detective that a very powerful personage’s mother was at The Sanctuary at the same time? If that someone released data to him about the enormously important tertiary characters Naomi and Morris Dean? Who, though it impede the momentum of this plot, could add sufficient reason and transparency to the blackmails that were rife at The Sanctuary?

Because De la Reyes cast a glance over a particular criminal, and a specific victim, someone was above the law and to blame and it was not the other innocent one's fault many misdeeds happened unappeased at the Sanctuary between 1990 and 1999.

“A terribly shameful action,” the director speaking to the detective called it, "one which shall not go unpunished." He said. The colossal events, and words, and intentions leading up to this nexus of which the public were still unaware, presumably (unless Pirsig had some photo-static images) of which they were blameless needs to be elucidated coherently, and in as great detail as the public's circumstances permit. Then the excuses for the rigmarole shall run out of steam.

Morris could not wait his turn needlessly, surely. Description of his role in this cannot be delayed without cause for concern. Tertiary characters who figure more dominantly later must not be told to bide their time for no reason. Despite or because they are from backgrounds of vast wealth or even of middle of the range incomes, because their parents are somewhat on the up is not a reason; whilst we analyze the reasons for the ill-fated progression to and the longed for rescue from calumny, of Ramsgate in Kent.

\* \* \*

Sense, cautious sense ceded to power-purchasing three months before Bertram foolhardily walked like a gypsy or a vagrant’s sidekick into the forbidden place, the inner sanctum of capitalism, a thousand metaphoric miles from his obscure, dingy flat in Manchester. Sure he could be in theory someone very important. Sure he knew that he wasn’t shopping from cheap-end mail order catalogues anymore: he wasn’t doing anything gainful, he wasn’t working but was down on his luck, and he wasn’t even stressed out anymore. That important person who he wanted to be in the future set out to smite his indulgent aspirations, and he worried and grew really annoyed. However, his basic shopping needs of victuals, of food, of everyday items could only be appeased now by a stern diet of and appetite for, luxury goods.

Luxury was hard to come by, and the more remote or rarefied it became the more the marketplace vaunted its power, flexed its muscles, rebuffing the few it did not need, and inviting the few it did require, or had a use for.

Bertram swung the glass doors open with a greedy hand’s malevolent shove. His financial success bubbled to the surface and erupted like cosmic and wild lava from a volcano, or like untreated acne bursting on a spoilt greasy teenager’s face. He shook the rain water from a cumbersome, big bright golf umbrella, crazily with goofy mannerisms. He looked to them and felt to himself uncoordinated like a twerp, or a clammy sea trout writhing on dry land, the fishermen having lured and baited him and about to gut his insides.

The window pane either side of the logo-festooned enticements of the entrance were covered with smears of smudging rainwater:

"Why am I going in here? I can afford anything with what Denny and I’ve got from the Raffle, but anything I do buy: it'll get stolen." He grumbled unhappily, prying into the smart store and, in spite of his newly acquired refined instincts, just as a vagrant’s henchman might hesitantly venture into smarter districts of town entered: oblivious to any social decorum.

A great overarching desire took over, an irresistible longing to spend any shred of money he got on luxury tattle when it meant inevitable exposure to deep probing from his vicious uncle Denny, and probable if not certain bankruptcy one distant day. Like an overblown electromagnet wasting its huge energy picking up miniature shards of steel file from the laboratory table top they could not help but think him much like a die-hard, try-hard drawing attention onto himself. In a flicker he saw he wasn’t just using his unprofessional imagination the nice, extremely new gold-plated record-player for a brief, exalted moment: the reverberating bass, the poignant tones involved in it, its allure fathomed by the shop owner of "Lo-Fi", and his colleague actually not artificially or amateurishly.

A normal, everyday household victual in the greengrocers, or as a vicarious item seen in the corner shop in the vicinity while he might have been running an errand for essential provisions he floundered out of his depth, his comfort zone of taste and style. He crossed to the expensive corner of Lo-Fi nearly on tip-toe and said, extirpating the bewildering hush of the array of music stacks before his tender eyes:

"What a beauty! I'd warrant it's really professionally made, Uncle Denny would probably get extremely cross with me, though he's a git. Yes, I can see it now: in my living room pumping out fine tunes..." A trophy purchase, his loving gaze looked only at its flashing lights and sparkling diodes and cross-hatched knobs, and then onto the metallic turntable’s drive train of no real importance or value to the untrained eye of an amateur enthusiast who thought he needed this stereo system to celebrate some massive festival in style. Since he had visited more than ten hi-fi stores, in London and around, in the same way as a vagrant and his sidekick would not, each occasion had lasted only a few honorific moments before he lost interest and moseyed on off. His dim outline staring wistfully in counter-opposition to the rest of their clientele's faux-posturizing expressions, they had seen his poor, oppressed face with its nightly insomnia-darkened rings under the eye sockets captivated by the magic and beauty of the heavenly, anodized golden rectangular boxes, piled up high, in a heap of technical wizardry before them.

“Perhaps I ought to have looked at those rubbish catalogues again…” his ongoing delusion about important people from when in Lo-Fi stalking him.

“Why do I sense he’s watching me all the time,” put Bertram in a quandary. How to splash that cash, so he and everyone else knew he had enough to splash. He picked up a price tag, and tittered smugly as those with the unseen eyes weighed this up.

Shop assistants milled about taking stock of Bertram as he sloped in and accidentally let the door bang shut. If it was by accident they did not know it was, he was sure. They could only presume him innocent because from his age it would seem he was about forty-five, and therefore either too old not to have a clue about polite door closure or he hailed from some immensely impoverished, unsophisticated corner somewhere. With piquant disgust they erroneously grasped he had not got much slippery and greasy, two finger-rubbing money in much the same vein as a vagrant’s henchman could not have. The assistant had not assented to one unkind opinion about a customer since he was a junior volunteer working at Sonic Bass outside of town in a backwater place Bertram might have gone to fit in not that long ago. The assistant appealed to his colleague. They exchanged a furtive glance while standing shoulder to shoulder as mores demanded and then went to assist or at least to patronize this visitor. His gawkish gait meant nothing to Bertram but if it fell uneasily with someone else they would never show any consternation. The assistant scanned for innocuous words to express himself with but every choice had sinister undertones.

The two did not face each other but surreptitiously held the last in a list of a thousand hushed secret conversations: "This one is top-of-the-range...", the junior muttered into the ether's demesne as he rubbed his slightly clammy palms avariciously thinking about his treasure, about the subwoofer and the speakers. The shop assistant waited, biding his time, before creeping over to the nonchalant customer's personal locus in space and time and sound. He split asunder Bertram's stabilized and elemental harmony with thunderous and blunt words, like a wake-up call amplified:

“Just looking, Bertram?” He said. He trembled but did not respond, look around or even appear to have heard his old friend. I wished Bertram had said more to him, his old school friend, to have greeted him politely would have been sufficient but Bertram did not recognize him, and anyway he hadn’t cared about off the cuff school reunions. A sudden exposure of pearly white, cleanly-flossed front teeth and glancing right through Bertram’s appalled expression:

"Can I be of assistance to you, my old friend?" Interrupting the quiet ebb and flow of this background harshly, Bertram as if carefully poised on a vertiginous tightrope with the atmospheric background music instantaneously electrified, saw there was no rewinding back to when he had not won the local Raffle.

"Yes, I mean no, umm, looking around for now, I hope you don't mind." he replied, and: “God, it’s not? It’s you!”

Nearly off balance he swiveled his slender hunched torso away from a spotless, idly humming amplifier. He looked at the glass doors with a yearning that suggested he wished to flee, dissolve or melt away, to escape the horrific scene without revealing any embarrassed shame. To dissolve into many invisible micro-particles, to melt into the background more anonymously, forever away from his old friend.

Bertram acted as though he had not just given away a big nasty secret.

If he was more careful to conceal his financial might in a dark corner, surely he can never know anything Bertram thought, now abashed, now ashamed not of his acne, nor of the sagging wrinkles under his eyes but of a fattened or ripe glint in his demeanor, which illuminated him conspicuously yards in front of his clueless old friend in the dead-zone of the music shop.

It was as if when he got home later that day he might be capable of blotting out this friend and beating a retreat, surrendering his white flag to melodious sounds emitted by another, recently purchased and already installed, electronic contraption that revolved in its own private sphere on its proud pedestal, represented by the insignia of rock ‘n roll, and that permanently erased any or all violence, envy, hatred and unexpected enemies.

Which was pretty much the way Bertram perceived him, in point of fact.

Most people in their right mind wouldn’t posit a wish for such luxury, and in Bertram’s case actual poverty or virtual insanity had less chance of justifying those possessions of inordinate wealth.

He had listened to melodies every day before and rhapsodically exclaimed he was not stopping because old friends knew it gave his life substance. Life, not enough with monotonous unbroken silence or without rock ‘n roll songs, was an infraction to his senses he thought.

Music should always feature prime-time. He often came up with nonsensical phrases, especially when he made up pitiful excuses for frittering away the Raffle windfall.

"I'll hear the dulcet tones of my compact disc collection in a whole new way with this little number! Uncle Denny can get lost for all I care, I'll soon be listening on my headphones, and I just won't stop." He said. Muffling his whispered words partly for the assistant’s benefit and partly for judicious, personal reasons.

As he walked jauntily away from the tiresome, irksome doorway of Lo-Fi, taking his damp brolly back outside, he was jubilant and also relieved.

Because he had had no savings to content him before the Raffle; because he'd paid up-front, in cash and the expensive and over-blown, top-of-the-range system was arriving any moment, delivered by courier at fantastic cost, and because he told nobody, especially not Uncle Denny, about his "out of his price bracket" purchase, his piteous financial state did not pose nagging problems anymore:

"It's so beautiful, I really, really like it. Aw." He might almost have been heard saying to himself in the lounge whilst sorting out his compact discs from the various other deluxe acquisitions and their packaging, everything thrown higgledy-piggledy around.

Ideas themselves wanted to be purchased, ideas, notions, ideologies themselves indicated to him they were within his price range.

Shelves for books, for records, for scattered objects he removed, making room for the compact discs in pole position in his sympathies for another senseless foray into aural utopia. He had everything he could desire, even his pet gerbil had everything it could desire and anything he liked even the things in magazines made eager overtures to him to buy them.

This wasn't the best that money could buy from Lo-Fi granted, yet it was the best one could get permission to buy without a professional reason.

If it was a car its equivalent would be a sporty three litre hatchback. He turned down the knob on the volume and the graphic equalizer and hoped not to have to host impromptu serenades for the New Religious Movement for a thousand Friday nights which they assumed was what he was angling for, since the last one at his home. Envious ones from his past turning up everywhere, enemies were to be kept under lo-fi: “under close scrutiny.”

This was what would happen to anyone if they went around spending profligately as he did after winning Raffle.

He never exerted much effort when he was at home and completely alone even on the occasions when much was predicted to lie in store, later that night at the CULT. And even with his pulse racing, like an over-accelerating metronome in a cartoon on TV he didn’t expend much effort on weighty things.

Peering in, hapless Bertram paced about, and wandered senselessly from room to room, seen through the gloomy window.

The afternoon wore on and as this top of the range shipment hadn’t arrived he phoned the courier and then the shop; in a fit of spleen claiming this and that about how it wasn’t nice to have been so rude to him: his old friend unable to offer any reassurances.

Next, he decreased the frequency of his bored manouverings almost to inertia. There was atheism in his sloth that was a direct result of winning the Raffle.

On a graph or a chart, it was a decline to lazy pig-headedness from which no New Religious Movement observer who measured its rise and fall predicted any revival in the future because he had never been energetic before.

After he cut open the parcel, slipshod and chaotically with a paper knife, he tidied the boxes and the wrappers and, while most avid music fans would not, he brewed himself a hot drink, he switched the television on and off again, he sat there reminiscing indolently about the phone call to his friend at Lo-Fi in a new faux-leather armchair in silence.

A silent prelude glared at his unmoving form to the same extent as his audio device, containing himself no longer and hesitating and trembling he turned the complex dials right up so the entire neighborhood listened to his musical preferences.

The contraption proved a less durable one than he had thought and started vibrating wildly until it crackled to a standstill, and moments later he brewed himself a hot drink which led to him switching the television on instead of listening to the music, contemplating the fact he must eventually tell Denny he had bought a faulty hi-fi with a vast portion of the remaining money they won gambling on the local Raffle with a stolen cryptogram.

The soon-to-arrive Uncle Denny raced across the suburbs speeding to get to Bertram’s flat before he concocted a valid explanation for the blaring noise that was coming from his living room. Listening to the noises crackle and fade to zero as he walked down the path for a few seconds he knew what lay ahead, and he knew he was too late to intervene. Another massive embarrassment.

He assumed the apologetic air, the insincerity, and the sub-standard behavior was about to feature again. This is what a friend would have warned Bertram about. About exposure, and about spending the entire Raffle win on frivolous pastimes and inane pursuits. Denny arrived shouting at his nephew malevolently and screaming in the front garden, on the porch and round the side of the house:

“Where are you? Where are you hiding my lad?”

“Don’t say anything Denny, please. I promised you I’d let you look after it and now you can. I’d been meaning to tell you for such a long time. It’s yours now. The hi-fi, it only costs a little to get it repaired. I’ve got loads of dosh left, and it’s yours, you can keep it.”

“About time I got here. You’ve finally seen sense, my lad.” He laughed: “No you haven’t. You’re a cretin, you’ve only gone and got us busted, now the whole world and his wife will want to know how come we’ve won the Raffle. The game is up, pal!”

“Yes! And Denny, I’ll never do anything like this again, I won’t be able to. There’s really no reason to get annoyed with me, you can be my banker and my uncle, both, how does that sound? We’ll make this work eventually, we can figure out anything now we’ve got the cash off the Raffle, Denny.” He proclaimed from inside the flat. Denny dissimulated both agitation and despair at what he predicted lay ahead, but meanwhile he thought he knew what he was getting in to. Unlike his companions at the CULT who didn’t.

CHAPTER 5

Not contemplating what De la Reyes could do, the terrorist had bombarded him with virulent expletives. Disregarding this abuse De la Reyes slid the doors open wide. The idea of what might happen to the terrorist later he was reluctant to admit into his mental pantheon.

He could not even when urged make sense of whether the bomber’s story should be properly pitied or merely shrugged off; he did however feel disgusted at the traces left by a large amount of opiates found on the terrorist’s person. He did not forgive or forget it though. Left alone he’s not sympathetic to that nebulous point of no return so left alone he hobbled away down the central aisle.

De la Reyes has nearly lost his composure. When he has wended his way, swaying left to right and propping himself up on the backs of seats, to coach G to locate Bertram in seat forty-nine and to process his witness statement, a sudden afterthought struck him: the churlish terrorist may have had presence of mind to have concealed an object or an explosive somewhere nearby on the high speed train.

He badly wanted to get some more vital information, but a secondary weapon of some description was not the thing he needed to locate in the first instance. He began to wish that he was still in the Abbey, that it was not his duty to attend to the Eurostar today.

“He’ll never tell me where an explosive is, no, I’d be better off, far better going and talking to the people in carriage G row forty-nine…” he said inwardly.

More than that he felt his emotions gaining sway. It was like his acknowledged feelings were not greater than at any other time, but better or more important than his own selfish sense of worth in a bigger and more violent universe out there, where all differences were in fact the same in the final analysis.

Bertram’s coach was stuck towards the tail end of the carriages. The detective had to choose between three courses of action. He chose the second option. He regretted it. Being fairly equivocal about the first and sure that the third was no use he went down an avenue blindingly worthless. It was nearly a tragedy of epic proportion.

He thought his actions wouldn’t matter after all. The first choice consisted of scouring about the modern train’s interior décor – its angles, its corners and its compartments. Scanning manfully for the explosives before they all reached Paris but to have to opt for this he knew was the heavy-handed option. The third option, the other one that he shut out, would have to have been to produce some reassurances for the witnesses.

By lecturing them on self-control, emergency evacuation and other home truths they didn’t seem to know anything about he would save them.

It was always going to be like this with detective De la Reyes. He’d plump for the easy way even if it hadn’t anything remarkable to it. So, alighting on Bertram and Lauren’s seat numbers he was at once kneeling and huddling beside them, talking softly to them and perhaps trying to get some evidential facts connected to the psychopath from the homely couple.

De la Reyes hadn’t an inkling that Bertram had been struck by a sharp needle contaminating his blood. Until that point in time he never encountered another similar spiking job. There had been other cases. When the National Health Service had been called in with the stretcher, the paramedics, the sirens, and the accident and emergency department or the stomach pumps for the unlucky victims. Bertram had no idea of the opiate.

He needed to check Bertram’s pulse in next to no time. He’d also need to calculate his odds of survival on his abacus. Bertram’s bleary eyes and fragile condition weren’t that obvious to the observer.

Only as he was getting up and leaving this became a noticeable feature. His pulse was raised to about double, maybe even triple the normal. If this had not been par for the course De la Reyes would have been more shocked.

It manifested itself in such a difficult manner that it took all De la Reyes’s powers of perception to conjoin the outward reaction to the inward action.

For such a surreptitious trick, he mused long afterwards, he had to rely on his previous experience: of no use, on his shrewd intelligence: of no use, and on his emergency field training: of no use to him.

Luckily what was of use was gut instinct. Bertram who was obviously not inured to the kick you’d get from a hit of the white stuff didn’t yet understand. It was a lack of knowledge which fired the detective up, set this moment apart from his easy everyday experiences where nothing was fluid, nothing was in a state of flux. De la Reyes’s training didn’t help at all, he had to learn through intuition what to do next in this scene.

Something told the wise copper, some indicator of Bertram’s mental state set the alarms off: when Bertram seemed unable to register who he was or what his function was supposed to be. When signs emerged from some scarred skin tissue De la Reyes knew immediately almost without thinking that he was intoxicated by the substance in the spotlight. Proof had been given.

Unable to piece together the simplest fact of who the bomber worked for, who he was, or what he was doing there, De la Reyes also failed to notice the beverages on his breath.

He proceeded to search for the tell-tale signs of substance abuse and noticed only one trace. Because Bertram used his right hand to pick at and scratch off the skin of his left fingernail De la Reyes’s sense of alarm was acutely heightened.

Oblivious to many signs including the panic setting in for Bertram and his pernickety, involuntary twitching too subtle for anyone, De la Reyes was running out of worthwhile ideas, but there was one clue.

“I need to ask you a few questions. Can you remember what happened? Can you remember if you might have seen the man deposit anything in the carriage, maybe he stowed something away and you saw where?” He inquired.

Beside him and in tandem Lauren thought something was wrong but also a worse turn of events she could not have pictured. Her line of vision focused on a tenebrous spot hovering between the seat ahead and the end of the carriage. Her gaze suggested she had been locked in her seat far longer than she’d wanted – and that she’d also have had one clue that day for the detective.

The head-rush from the opiates blended with the jolting train. It was not doing him any favors but he remained in a steady state of equilibrium. He neither fell asleep nor experienced hallucinations, but suffered a minor setback from the drugs and unwittingly Bertram’s acuity was swept away from him once more at the dawning realization that an explosive device might have been ticking away somewhere nearby.

“No officer, I can’t remember a single thing about it, truly.” Lauren said.

The visible clouds outside before his eyes had dispersed and he realized clues, hitherto left static and stationary, were around for him to grapple with. Once removed, the precepts blocking his mind as the effects of the injection set in, seemed to become replaced with an insight unknown to him.

At once both unsettled and seeing mirages Bertram shifted about uneasily in his seat. He fidgeted with his hands while the effect became more serious as he ripped the skin from his thumbs, and almost heard the chaffing sounds. A precarious situation. Intuition told the detective what he had to do next.

De la Reyes knew the signs and could not bring himself to tell the hero of the almost unaverted disaster what those signs meant. De la Reyes got no surprises when he heard him say how thirsty he was, because Bertram started to gulp water from a plastic bottle of spring water scarcely heeding the conversation as it passed between the detective and Lauren which had gone on for more than the few moments he had estimated.

If the prospective bomber wrested his way from the sanctuary of chains in time and he reached the carriage with the explosive the banker Pirsig’s great plan might still evolve into something massively worthwhile.

Lauren recounted from a folio bound diary the build-up of events: from the moment they handed their keys to the sprightly neighbors to look after, past the disrupted quietness of the train journey, finally to Bertram’ return as an anthropoid of titanic proportions with what might be described as a metaphysical fanfare playing, cobbled uneasily together with a surreal amendment and an exaggeration in parenthesis, here and there.

Presented with problems on the basis of Bertram’s inclination to carelessness she was completely prone to dismiss these dilemmas offhand. He was valuable to her in retirement, and she’d have regretted it if something untoward happened by such an inclination, yet his problems were sartorially shallow, and easily covered up. Never a trace was left after a day at most, luckily.

On some occasions Lauren’s tendency to dispose of his problems offhand was enhanced, possibly according to the gravitas in the situation.

It was terrible to decide it was right to acknowledge, not just make fun of his phobias outright and risk agitating him. The Eurostar would have brought his confidence and daring to the forefront as a total fallacy. She was not at all expecting him to face up to such dangers when she took into account the times he complained bitterly and irritably of minor ailments, and of clearly petty issues.

By that stage of the journey the other travellers had drawn closed the curtains on the windows to do something about the glaring sunlight filtering in. Lauren leant forwards diagonally to do so too, but as she stretched, Bertram shuddered and made a disturbing and audible gasping noise like some berzerk clown figure in a large amount of pain over some triviality.

De la Reyes had stood on his feet and wandered up the carpet a few feet away. He had to try to ask the fanatic to confess to hiding a bomb in the other passengers’ luggage at the top of carriage G. Bertram and De la Reyes made not very good friends. Their lives were set up to be poles apart, one of peril and the other of safety.

Bertram, you could intuitively tell from his air of largesse was a docile exemplar of a holidaying pensioner. De la Reyes, by contrast, never refrained from unfettered smirks when he used his moniker, nor exited a room if others used crude, or bad language. Potentially fantastic qualities: chivalry for example, and courage in De la Reyes existed nevertheless at the peaceful end of the spectrum of things even if things got exciting.

When De la Reyes told Bertram about the risk he was saddened. The sorrow undid him because of the gulf to bridge between them. Mainly because Bertram could easily take what was said as an insult or a slight affront.

His lack of worth was precipitated by a love of sheen and lustre and a hatred of unknown menaces, in short anything heinous that shocked him to lift himself out of his emotional and sensual complacent poise.

De la Reyes meant no harm, but did injure Bertram’s strict sense of propriety.

He did not want to let the commentaries pass. His blithe concern for matters not of any pressing importance had got the better of him. He’d prefer to take charge, so would De la Reyes. The detective wanted to be noticed for his tenacity by almost anyone. It mattered hugely to Bertram to point his minor problems out after an unbearably fatuous remark about terrorism had nearly been allowed to go by without his direct retribution. This complicated the subject, with both intense egotists in a deadlock.

Why did De la Reyes chuck himself into the fray. Why was he happy to have talked to Bertram – such points finally began to add up. When he accidentally allowed just the faintest of touches to occur between his hand and Lauren’s shirt sleeve the issue became unbearably restrictive for any such dignified person.

Lauren changed immutably in the same instant.

The detective practically licked his lips at a hint Lauren had glowered briefly in his direction. Bertram never entertained the conception she liked his foe more than decent, but de la Reyes idiot manner was inordinately weighted towards a suspicious tendency that led him to suspect Bertram’s heroin fix was an omen of evil to impossibly queer at the next instant. His cynicism spurred Bertram on to prevent him unravelling the conduits of the case.

The effect on the senses offered by a cataclysmic fix of opiate was strangled in its infancy, the detective grew afraid of consequences transpiring at any moment, unless he warned Bertram, the victimized party.

The heroin’s punch mixed with a merger of words, thoughts and coincidences. Absorbed into the blood stream these opiates would bear dramatic results if he wasn’t trained, still he warned him as one living human being to another. A need for another fix was foremost in his mind in these seconds. It could exit the pensioner’s blood stream soon and leave him afraid for his actions, and de la Reyes responsible for the poor fellow’s premature demise.

The detective though he had no responsibility for the alchemy of the drug, saw Bertram sitting his eyelids drooping and wondered what he had seen during the fracas. The only thing keeping them open sheer embarrassment. In a few short minutes he’d become a laughing stock; either that or he’d probably be pitied like a hurt animal by his neighbors in the community, as panic set in.

Gradually suspicion and fear mounted and spread like lightning through the train’s short compartment and was transferred further afield to the guards at the front.

The dismayed neighbors in carriage G overheard De la Reyes who had embraced and shaken hands with Bertram so joyously earlier in the nearby tranche of seats, but not being deaf they realized from the conversation, by momentarily catching De la Reyes’s words, that there was something greatly amiss. They shuddered at the thought that soon turned into belief they were on track for yet more disasters.

“Without more than two police officers on board our train, I'm afraid we’re in some deep trouble,” he thought.

So he reverted back to Lauren. Considering only the children, he hurriedly informed her of what he decided just happened to Bertram, the innocent prey. Swiftly he sidestepped the scary parts of the tragic tale and he disclosed what he averred might have befallen to Bertram half an hour before.

“On Opium,” he told her, afraid to the hilt he revealed too much, “stabbed with a syringe.” Her horrific stare into the back of the seat in front spoke reams and reams. Simultaneously to this, Bertram was coming up to a higher level of consciousness than his wife, so unsure of what to do about it he attempted to get a grasping hold of De la Reyes’s attention.

“Oh-ho, that must be it, yes that’s right, now you’re telling me! Who are you calling a coward anyway? What? Do you want to frighten everyone, or just show how clever you are, detective?” He called out. Nervous and quite afraid, but compos mentis at the very least, one of the passengers soon spotted his agitation and so tapped another passenger on the shoulder-blade, signaling to the place where the brave detective De la Reyes was crouched over conversing in cahoots with the fallen hero. Beside him, Lauren was by now showing she was deeply disturbed.

Something was certainly amiss and the commotion began all over again. Harder, mush harder this time. With effort the tourists tried shamelessly to decode why they were not yet in as nice or safe a position as they had liked to assume.

Even those amongst them of the stronger constitutions would find the disturbance unsettling at best. So the atmospheric cacophony in the carriage began to be wired up and electrified, with some coping and some in contrast, driven mad with fatal doubt.

Though the policeman was fearing some potential but unclear entity he had urged her not to try to stand up in her nest of jacket, bags and shoes. Formerly silent, Lauren got herself daintily up onto her two feet and raucously shouted her announcement. Basically that was every last bit of the information the tourists needed to break out into lethal mass panic. “All of you, shut up, you need to do a drugs test when you get home. Even if you can’t feel any symptoms now…!” She cried out at the end, but this didn’t help.

A riot of commiserating noises in the close, confined compartment became a whirl, a hubbub of activity as they heard the group mentality that rose and fell as they excitedly strove to check if any of them had also been secretly poisoned by pure-grade, powdered heroin.

What followed soon after, once word had spread to the rest of the undelicately unbalanced train would’ve made the detective lose a grasp of his superior orientation. Whereas, the detective probably would have managed to stay calm and well-orientated before the rest of carriage G was experiencing frantic pandemonium. The randomly shocking behavior: with people rushing off to the toilets, women being appallingly sick, men pulling their trousers up and facing the facts, and hysteria running amok. It was a shame that Pirsig wasn’t anywhere on the Eurostar because it was impossible to defuse this tension, this pressure. For the only other one capable would have been him. As far as Pirsig could tell after he had heard his plot had been foiled, he needed to hatch yet another more monstrous plan that wouldn’t go and spiral off ludicrously, as his only, his only option.

CHAPTER 6

Soon it would be after midnight and Bertram was going to become afraid. It was colder outside – freezing in fact. He said he was not stupid – he had acquired a Phd many years ago, in Greek mythology no less.

His kind, aspirational parents brought him cautiously into this world long ago to inherit their knowledge, to resent evil, to embrace good even in enemies and to trust that work never, never went unrewarded. Bertram had enough money – it was not that much he loved to tell people but enough to get by with because his tastes were not particularly fruity.

No cause for immediate complaint except for one: he was mentally and he'd have warranted also physiologically addicted to online gambling. As each dark night progressed Bertram became more frightened of this hobby and tried to send himself off to sleep again. Someone must have found out, he worried, about his private pursuits and his Swiss account at Pirsig and Co.

Nobody knew whose fault this fatal flaw was, apart from his. If his stomach for online gambling got hungry he needed to nourish it or it would not leave him alone. And in case you are wondering it’s been this way for a long few years. He was certainly skeptical about what could be done about it. Once gone a vital part of his nights would be removed; it was an apex of shame.

With, on the one hand, the whimsical pretext for playing slot machines and casinos which he felt guilty of and regarded as a vice; and with, on the other hand, the fact that the games intrigued his wife Lauren, he wanted so much to denounce this sin of his, exclaim, proclaim it even. About the private pursuits and Swiss account he wisely kept quiet.

When still just young and corruptible Bertram used to pursue strange things simply because he was out of his mind on adrenalin. All those pent up nerves and excitability waited to be unleashed. And then when eventually he reached his old age he started feeling more than a bit lumbered by the vast expanse of his past. Until he could not rid himself of those fun times that constantly peopled his memories, and the way to stop memories of larking about whilst younger from hijacking his entire life was by playing more of the online games. They helped him put his enjoyably misspent youth behind him. And more and more as the time went by until he reached exhaustion, surfeit or oblivion this happened.

How could he know he’d find himself there staring and staring at that computer screen so many years earlier? There were no indications in his secure upbringing that was to be his fate: that he’d been effectively destined to be lured in by the hedonistic pleasure, transitory and weak as the pull was at first, of viewing the stimuli from motion graphics. Raffles, lotteries, blackjack almost anything virtual.

He was staying at The Sanctuary along with the rest of them. He was a pensioner, one who had worked hard, but if he was bored or unable to sleep he’d stay up late into the night watching gambling programmes, like some sort of an alien clone. Winning had invaded part of his dotage as he pored his attention addicted onto and into the slot reels. It was possessing him. He acted differently to any of the other less celebrated, less illustrious pensioners who did not bet. With no trivial interest in the The Sanctuary case because Naomi and Morris Dean had also been tenants there a long time ago, he played the online Raffle.

“You had so much more interest, even more than me, in The Sanctuary’s predestined end and its concomitant demise.” Lauren said, sweetly reminiscing with Bertram one evening before making up her mind whether to tell him to go to sleep and switch the lights off. “You weren’t that thrilled to see the awful newspapers either, were you?" he asked. “I would be surprised if you weren’t a little bit afraid, that Mr. Woburn arriving there.” He went on.

“The repercussions of the incidents were enough to unsettle the most astute of observers, don’t you think?” She asked.

“You must have been surreptitiously contemplating one of two things: the first, will I be safe there without my nurses to guard me; the second, what if the rumors are true, will it finish off our good, solid air and manner?" He continued playing the bonuses.

"By rumours, I presume you meant the hostel's renown for its awful strictness?” She asked. “Sounds emanating, or rather blasting out from the director Mr. Woburn’s rooms and of tenants getting clackened and of being almost manhandled, and not quite tortured for some minor misdemeanours must have really upset most people, but they could never really have bothered you because they had as little influence over the events leading up to the final denouement, the dark twists which you’re so obsessed by and that sealed The Sanctuary forever, as they had influence over Naomi Dean and the murders.” She sighed lengthily.

“I recall that you had not at that stage yet met Naomi, the beautiful princess.” She said. "Little bitch, I suppose you’d prefer to call her, yet in retrospect I’d never resort to such a rash complimentary judgement for such an unhinged individual." This did not dilute Bertram' nightly consuming fear of various crimes happening to them. “Long before she reached even the age of sixty, this bitch prized her childhood and demanded in a symbolic way that others properly appreciated that fact. She asked incessantly for help in grooming her pet puppy, and if anybody was negligent of her puppy’s requirements she ran away into seclusion in her bedroom as if it was the school holidays,” she said.

“And refused to speak to anybody for days, presumably.” He replied.

“The horrible little thing had been given names and a mock independent life, but she did not believe anyone was able to properly empathize with these ideas;” Lauren replied.

"You should have seen the frown on her face when contradicted by her children. Strangely enough she also had a sparkling gold and silver USB stick at age about sixty shortly before The Sanctuary, but really badly looked after it was. At the moment it was probably grubby from lying outdoors for some reason overnight; perpetually losing track of it she was never quite sure where she put the thing, or what purpose it served, as a child’s collection of marionettes can serve tellingly beyond their use or function." She would have continued if it wasn’t approaching midnight.

“So, what was she, this princess, like?” Bertram asked.

“Why did she change so much, you mean?" She asked.

“No. Why did she have that silly puppy at a ripe old age, for instance?" He asked.

“Why is somebody rash and unreliable, same reason.” She said.

“What did she look like when you met her?” He asked.

“Whether you would believe me or not, I don’t remember. She had blonde hair, and a cheesily toothy grin.”

“Did she seem like a villain to you?” He asked.

“She was messy, wicked, vain, stupid, spiteful and seemed every inch the culprit not the victim.” Lauren said. She knew that Naomi Dean was an altered specimen, one of those who had seen the eternal light, or who once repenting had been forgiven.

She thought it was right given her track record; but it was impossible to accredit the highly unlikely transformation from a goddess to a convicted criminal. So quickly she was running out of chances, she theorized, so dramatically did time come to a stop after Naomi left The Sanctuary for the grave, that she could explain her descent in only one viable way.

Trouble was coming in the shape of the pensioners, but she didn’t want any trouble, and she wanted to avoid any trouble. Lauren suspected Naomi's gold and silver USB stick and matching fob was a farcical attempt to save their hostel from incineration. A thread-thin mask to cover over a serious problem.

From what Lauren heard about her from Bertram, Naomi showed herself a complete wild child, the real deal, the genuine article; shaken up by a seven-year stint in jail (where all the bad girls go if they can’t go to hell because they’re too rich, or well-connected) that led on to what was going to transpire.

She allowed herself to smile vainly whilst she reminisced on an episode from The Sanctuary. Always on the fringes of the action but in her good graces nonetheless, Lauren had gone back to Naomi’s family home - Marlowe place - once one boring summer a very long time ago.

\* \* \* \*

Under the flimsiest of scrutiny, galloping towards them, the detective might have been mistaken as unheroic and less than admirable, but at the same time his persona and attire contained a formal, but vague aura that morphed into an assurance.

The director said he was “terribly sorry” for him to leave his party, but was unabashed to admit this particular fact to his colleagues.

“A waste of time, I call it,” he said, “might as well go howling at the moon; just as I feared, we can give up hope of finding the killer, once and for all.” Woburn had said. In hearing the noises issuing from the office when he returned the other policemen did not like the way in which De la Reyes argued with the superintendent.

The superintendent would have understood his failures if he had shared any personal traits with him. Everyone wearies at times and his future path lay in overcoming his habit of hatred of doubt, or hatred of exposing his lazy side, or unusual dislike of never arguing: not even in the case’s grand finale. If he investigated De la Reyes biography after this they would gain more than one mere insight into the self-destructive personality traits he truly had kept hidden within himself.

Lauren supposed he wanted to know about their lifestyles as well.

"But this mad thirst for information unsettles me, I only know this from what I can assume from Virginia who was in the movement for a while too in 1999, from the diaries I’ve seen, and from a few morsels of information from Naomi, from her perspective." She said. Everything seemed hardly innocuous, in fact it seemed rather strange or surreal.

One of De la Reyes’s favorite remarks was reserved for anyone at the station who got in the way – he didn’t smile as he said it, but in fact normally turned away and did not trouble to look around at their reaction. Often he cheapened people in this way especially if they were expressing notions of doubt with respect to his hard won, elevated pride. He hated being called a Chimera.

\* \* \* \*

A year ago Denny owned his own semi-detached home but was highly unqualified. “Work” for him was a path destined for futile researches and less-than-useful pastimes but once his intense love of lucre flared up and when he began to negatively regard his “work” as a waste – both happened about the same time – the “work” began to flounder. He drove a Volkswagen truck with bull bars around, he did listen to rock ‘n roll, and he rejected the whole class system. He'd also milled about suburbia most of his life, and to cap it all he had acquired a paunch which he asserted was a six-pack although in everyone else's mirror it was more of a bib.

His dark haired, fashionable partner was a bit embarrassed but kept any revulsion to herself and maintained a cosy life with the man she loved many months ago. Though she could not afford to unless he won big at the greyhound track they went regularly to far-flung locations: Bournemouth, Scarborough, Skegness etc. They were secretively co-authoring a semi-fictional biography of Bertram, once a week on Saturdays.

Originally a docker he ended up granting himself a mundane internship at a city studio yet finding this not exactly what it was cracked up to be, and that it would not lead anywhere, he reverted back to writing a decidedly ordinary sports column for a local newspaper which role he was soon demoted from on a pretext of a personal issue.

Presumably partly because he’d been off the circuit with the gambling on the Raffle, and partly because his habitual gloominess had escaped the confine of the studio and spread like wildfire around the office of the local newspaper – he got sacked. His demented expression every morning at nine o’clock was no longer acceptable, his hours wagering on the internet deemed unacceptable, and his flatly unconvincing denial of an unsavory habit banned. A shadow of misdeeds was cast upon his childhood.

A similarly difficult scenario lay in line for detective De la Reyes. He plied his trade for a while longer, until he retired from the police at a not very tender age. They said he got the sack too and went into management without any reference to the Eurostar affair.

There he found that his skills of analysis and contempt of others, and his dubious modesty led to new fields. So with a reputation for clarity acquired since success with the insider debacle he was able to get quite far.

CHAPTER 7

Whenever the CULT boss felt like it and he got the chance to, he spoke to his followers of the second time he ever met unemployed Denny at a private club in the spring of 1990 after Bertram had scored on Raffle. He always used to like to go into his customary relaxed version of storyteller mode:

He was pontificating by holding the cuff of a left sleeve with his right hand: "Well. Let me start off by telling you a tale or two...!" he'd say.

He told “The Sanctuary” that he had abandoned the delights of the club inside to greet his fellow smokers holding out not an olive branch, but the whole tree to them that became like in some gentrified cat and mouse escapade. While Denny with his legs splayed any which way, stood fast by a steel ashtray on the wall and was feeling mildly at a loss and a tad bereft with his extrinsic features which seemed on first inspection a bit unusually hardened to the boss’s outdated eye; after that they struck up an interesting conversation apparently in lieu of outstaring each other.

“”Hi-ya,” he said to us, no he did...! He was prehistoric, challenged psychologically and vertically, and at five-foot tall stood squatter than most of us.” The chief said.

“”I'm taller than most, most of my rivals are shorter than me too, complete runts; you may think I'm a dunce,” he paraphrased: “but I've never lost a battle yet; except for that once, when I was about sixteen and I went and picked this fight with some moron who I didn't like the look of much.”

Meanwhile the followers imagined him grinning a series of that sort of gappy and fecund smile that most professional orthodontists think ought to have been pushed back forcibly into hiding with pliers, if necessary, hidden forever from their scrupulous ministrations.” The chief said at their meeting house called “The Sanctuary”.

"And then he suddenly felt a desire to beat some idiot up; him and his whole sleepy clique, and send him back to the rock which he crawled out from under." The chief recalled him saying.

"They thought: oh yeah he's a dunce alright, grumbling like he was a caveman or something from the dark ages, but we thought no more about it. He proceeded to garble something about the olden days, and olden ways, where you presume there is no Bible, no code of principle, and no right or wrong to get in the way of membership of a confraternity, or a clique.”

“They started to wonder how an idiot such as Denny circumvented his way past the central issue at stake: class distinctions, and had opened up. Yet it seemed Denny’s rhapsody slowly illuminated those who cared to listen on that front. The head of the CULT went on with his story:

“"Before I leave please allow me to explain. I like being called Denny. Anyway, it suits me, I'm proud of being the only one in my set,” he proclaimed “who can truthfully be called Denny. I've been watching, waiting, listening for the day some wise guy calls me Matt the Pratt;” and the head of the CULT said he gulped.

Ostentatiously, a forlorn filament of fine tobacco spluttered to the end. The leader stared at him for a few seconds in disbelief as he squashed and manhandled it with his boot’s heavy sole.

"By which he probably means he thinks I was born yesterday. Get my drift?" Denny added. Where is this leading to the father figure said he thought, while watching his fist clenching and loosening sporadically.

"Anyway, I'll come back in a while and tell you what's been going through my head since my posse of dossers and I hit the wheel of fortune bigtime the other goddamn day! Bye for now." He said. As he left to go back to his friends inside the club he looked over his shoulder, and caught a brief glimpse of us before we started laughing malevolently at his lie.

The father figure was soon aroused. What was Denny doing here? Through his old historic connection to Lauren it would have to be bang out of order and the leader’s right hand now looked as if it was clenched into a fist too. Apparently: "I couldn’t help but observe, in my stern constricted way, as he wended his loping path back inside a thronged-to-the-rafters bar, the run of the mill roars that reached us sounded as though they were emanating from within a witch’s coven.” The leader pronounced.

“While we were left alone together, our entourage a strict lodestone out-of-doors in the shape of a semi-circle in the dank drizzle, we wondered to ourselves why we so often failed, and this specious, but garrulous, specimen had defeated us: why we were out of pocket and to all intents and purposes he had become one of those rip-roaring success stories bent on arousing everyone’s envy, everyone’s spite, like a cheating but not yet caught spouse might." The leader added tactlessly since he was richer than most of the townsfolk.

"Did they believe you?" One of the clique drawled just about audibly in Denny's direction but out of the leader’s earshot, inside the private rooms of the club.

“For one of his black and white manner, and his mediocre, lack-lustre abilities, to produce a fantastic Raffle jackpot needed more excellence of talents than he has got I am sure, but it was many rotations of the moon ago and he could, some might suppose or suspect, be a liar.” The reigning leader muttered this to his gang of faithful followers. He unfairly rationalized that someone so idiotic usually reached the pinnacle of pecuniary renown by routes altogether suspicious if not evil. Thereby and therefore, by dint of fixed tenets the reigning leader was permitted his envy, his spite, his grief which they said was a justified gripe, and a completely righteous issue; not to be allayed by nor diminished by any sort of crude rubric or paltry code known to man, “well not by any kind of man I know,” he then affirmed, ruthless as ever, to the rest of the CULT.

“Soon he returned to us outside in the smoking zone,” the leader of the CULT said, “presumably for the inevitable next stage.”

"My friends and I predicted that the next stop on our journey of enquiry would be to establish, on firm and upright principles, whether Denny's luck was our misfortune, or, on the other hand, his triumph was also a cause of ours - somehow." The leader said in debate, later that night. “That's the question your storyteller has set you to try to unravel.” He added.

“No more than a few minutes before the next fag beckoned him back outside he turned out to be more of a rabble-rouser than anyone had believed.”

The leader’s argument continued along as follows: “When we chose to peek into our souls and found nothing amiss or to shame us, except a tendency to fault and to mock or to critique the astonishing detrimental qualities, or the transparent shortcomings of a malapropism like Denny. It was often wiser to root out the annoyance that led us to want to cover our faces in shame with the palms of our hands shaking our heads. To dismiss the dunce, and relax in safety in private was for the benefit of everyone,”

“It must have been better to realize destiny had told us not to struggle but to just accept it; not to neutralize but to offer resignation to other's occasional times of indolence? The premise of the late-night gatherings at the sanctuary was a supposition that Denny was a heathen. With this vague insight we later ceased to mind when we were made to see he was a refined liar in every pore, through and through. At this stage the leader, and the rest of the CULT also had no option but to favor him with their trust and to believe he had really won on the Raffle many times.”

Before this debate ensued spinning on his heels spinning around, one of his friends asked Denny who we were when he had returned from the smoking zone. He gave him a big pat on the back, and sidled off, as if to shove off over to the smoking zone to check things out. But not before replying:

"I dunno do I, nobody special, even those girls weren't much to worry about." He replied. Then turning back to Denny his mate put a hand in his pocket, wearing a hole through the inner lining to get loose change he raised his eyebrows ordered a lager from the bar and whispered: "Did they suss us, do you reckon?" Quietly he let off a laugh in a deep, sonorous, bellowing way:

"No. They don't have a clue ‘bout the Almanack and he’s Lauren’s new bit of stuff, ‘n all." Denny replied to his mate: "That's 'ol Bertram's business anyway, isn't it?" he snorted, and finished his pint off in a swig slamming it onto the bar before him as if to signal definitely an end, then and there.

Outside the leader was rambling in his educated and privileged manner. A feeling arose that “as soon as it came into to my cognitive field I felt sublimely happy for the sake of this winner, the likes of whom I never saw or encountered before. His deceptive excuse for being brash demystified the torpid junk, the tedious misconceived technical arguments I was in thrall to, and I loved his ways more than I might have been grief-ridden or sorrowful at a dear friend’s funeral” he explained.

The leader's third Marlboro was a partner to intoxication. It was whittled to a stub, and he put it out, pushing it embers and all into the steel cylinder beside him. The rest of them went on marveling at the stark differences between his cushion of indolence and Denny’s brutality.

Inverted modesty in Denny was previously overlooked by his mates because underneath there existed amongst everyone an extreme repulsion from outrages such as insolence in the street, such as cat calling and other slights to his perceived honor.

Unlike the leader, they used to swagger, with the bravura statement, with the arrogant putdown, and the powerful words of advice. These served to persuade strangers like the leader of their justified arrogance.

Not enough of his private opinions were impenetrable, with the carefully defended views and with the correct opinions, because internally he would be gored with notions of misfortune, and with disentitlement. The leader observed to the astonished CULT members.

Denny was shedding clouded light on his foul with a stolen Almanack at the bar inside the club, and howling with hysteria at the elected leader’s gullibility, but the leader remained wrapped up warm under the eaves in the cold sensing his inappropriateness for the not so infantile, not quite so cheerful setting here, so like the last piece in a chess set waiting to be knocked over by the victorious player who brought the opposition’s king tumbling down by a set final move he did not know.

Denny, Bertram and their fibs rapidly caught up with them as a result as well as wishful thinking about the Raffle, and their illusions about beating the odds.

Someone was closing in on them like the workshop vice closing under responsible mastery to repair some whist, some pipe dream gone awry. When this unidentified someone realized what he had been dealing with, and what he could not help but dislike, he needed to find something to do about it, to repair a wrong done to the Raffle and its innocent players.

On the night of the 8th of April a year previously Bertram had been in the semi-detached house in a trance-like state, poised mid-way between life and death, like the CULT elected leader when he was skulking in the empty basement of the new quarters of the Sanctuary “meditating”.

A bit like an everyday household arachnid quietly and imperceptibly spinning out its seemingly exact geometrical satiny shapes he dangled precariously mid-way between comfortable life and economic disaster.

He magnanimously and like a megalomaniac above the heads of everyone including his uncle Denny, who wended his way underneath, sat plotting until the instant moment unraveled that was equivalent to a second chance for the arachnid.

When he was hovering or hanging so suspiciously if someone saw him there he had no alternative options except to dissimulate petrification, to turn into a stone-like mass or to rapidly scuttle back up the meagre thread he had woven out of the clutches of economic disaster.

The unidentified someone must have looked up into the rafters at him sleeping where he was because the police and the authorities were already closing in and swarming around both of them.

An arachnid because he was insignificant, a total nobody: not for being a creepy example of a pestilential species making his debut. But an ordinary spider who in posing no bother could be ignored or made to be an inconnu as the case may or may not have been in Cheshire amongst those with any more than an inkling of critical awareness.

By the February of the following year however his boon completely brazenly reversed that tragic fragile situation, fortunate Bertram got those winning numbers that appeared out of the lucky spinning Raffle wheel.

A bright light broke through the cloudy vision and a second spider’s web wasn’t out of the question nor a third, nor a fourth. The majority of the parishioners were impressed by him as Bertram underplayed his faked winnings a hundred times to a friend it made hardly any difference in his incredulous listener’s fresh eyes.

His despaired of and lack-lustre existence skyrocketed onto luxury and top of the range, onto that which any other person's appetite could possibly handle, even conjecture.

Or, so it seemed to a particular member of the CULT with their vacuum of true love and their mass suicide versus his spree of wildly unjust takings. His particularly sought after collection of motorcars, one of which he had finally got to run smoothly on new sets of tyres, that same afternoon in April.

With his own myriad problems and with his bad luck at being tracked by the authorities, plus with his recurring ailments he watched in wanton abandon as Bertram with his phobia of going bust was trying but failing, to renew his old relationship with Lauren.

CHAPTER 8

Claiborne was rolling solo, and she never knew her two firm and solid legs could be this knackered, like a runner practising for a marathon. This spring she was telling herself that she hoped to opt for unspoiled, unsullied terrains where she could be as innocent and as naïve as she wanted and excommunicate herself from, to break off the entente cordiale with her mischievous and harmful pursuits in town. Claiborne was not sure she really meant it one hundred percent though. She suggested to all of us at the meeting she was just plain bored of breaking the laws of the land, and she’d come running back to Manchester in next to no time, but we just agreed with each other that it had been a temporary phase that would surely wear itself out. She was like a renegade, the phase had nearly run its course, and now her collar was turned up, in a lonely and defensive mood, she was taking stock of her life – its errors and volte-faces. She was keeping a low profile, in some dark crevice of an alley somewhere where no-one should easily catch up with her, tired and hunched over. At the age of sixteen she had already become in the space of just five years Claiborne, a junky philistine.

“I’m thinking of giving up this dealing malarkey.”

“Think again Claiborne, what will you live on if you do give up?” her brother asked.

“I need a mission for the big money, none of this petty stuff bothers me.”

“What? You want to be a Raffle winner or something like that?” he asked.

“I don’t want to win the Raffle I want the Raffle to win me…I’ve got a plan. Listen up, I’ve got a story…” Perhaps once a month Claiborne wouldn't say no to the scent of a measly bit of dope on a Friday night, but she’d expect to get caught again and then the leader would go bezerk. But he had vowed he would never help her out of a fix again; and she still couldn't help but reminisce about the details of the last time she got skanked in a deal which had gone pear-shaped over there at Silverlands.

She said to her brother: "A true, bona fide renegade never grasses her friends up, but even so this pal of Volley's was definitely an exception to prove the rule." After an evening of the usual weekly lectures he said:

“Where is this going to? I wonder if you are not being just a tad paranoid? Go on with your story; I’m all ears.”

Claiborne described how very late at night she was on her way back to the hideout. It was darkness visible. She began by telling him there was some unidentified male voice chortling or bellowing mockingly in the shadow. He had just seen petite Claiborne anyway, in the gloom, her and her narrow and bony fingers tussling in agitation with the dark brown leather pouch strapped around a belt loop, hidden by the shadow cast by some large trees beside the pavement, and she said he had probably thought she must be shaking that weakly for some unstated reason. She knew Volley’s low life pal Jock did not usually keep negative sentiments under his hat. However, this time he left off the idea of verbally disabusing her soon afterwards, when after he crept up to her she produced a quarter of an ounce of resin. Explanation enough for her weak quivering she said she adroitly selected a cellophane wrapped oblong blim, sized to fit into the palm of the hand from her ethnic pouch. Thinking he meant “Well done, Claiborne” Jock smiled again, like he had not since a long time before the beginning of this dusky tryst.

"Here we go, mate, just what you need, and if you don't need it, you want it, and if you don't want it then you haven't tried it." Claiborne cited her scripted lines quietly so nobody else could hear, gave him the gold sealed doobie and Jock said, as youthful Claiborne adjusted her bag querulously and with difficulty, not having a torch or spotlight to inform her vision, as he prepared to dissolve into the late night air:

"Excellente! Ta very much, Claiborne." She told Claiborne she was grateful that she had delivered with such speed and with such directness on the spur of the moment and steadfastly hoped she could hightail it out of there.

“No need, mate. It’s a done deal.”

“Alright, ta. But tell me how strong is this stuff? It’s not going to do my head any harm, is it now Claiborne? I’m not sure I want it if it is.” He was a hard dude to talk to, this friend of Volley’s, she said. She had felt secure despite what she had heard about him and his mean ways of beating people up, and what can you expect, yes, nothing but crumbs all over the floor, when you munch on too many disco biscuits said Claiborne, the hash cookie monster, to Claiborne as she frowned at Jock under the light of a moon’s brightness, now the heavy clouds had dispersed.

"Yeah, be careful, stuff like this has got to be handled with kid glove care, now don't go telling the whole world either because they'd all want to know where you came by this, it's quality stuff. It makes even me nervous, stuff like that, it's really potent, I hope you enjoy it." she had said, precociously, at his ironically jaunty way of whipping out a zippo and then lighting up a cigarette.

“But…but…where did you get this merchandise from? I mean, who is your supplier?” he asked obviously trying to neither set alarm bells ringing at the CULT nor to sound too suspicious of his pal’s acquaintance.

"Anyway, I can't talk now; cheers mate." She turned away and, so she wouldn't catch a deathly cold on the spring night standing there looking out of her league, she had lifted her hood and bade him a slang epithet for goodbye. There was a hushed silence. There under the trees although nobody was listening, and though nobody could see their outlined forms she said they both sensed some extreme tenseness, and heightened tautness to their environment.

No concert violinist herself, she said to Claiborne she had struggled to subdue and contain that impromptu nervous twitching, partly the result of a cold, brisk wind which had started blowing, that was serving Jock as a prolonged reminder of the style that a violinist on television used to create the musical effect of emphasis known as vibrato. Sorted? Well, Jock did not say anything, but he didn’t like to hold his tongue, and for the next few minutes he could easily tell from her body language she felt very strongly Jock was up to something not very kool. Perhaps she thought he could affect her place in the hierarchy, or perhaps he’d report her to Daniel or somebody else.

After paying Claiborne, Jock who jovially disappeared on springy steps around a corner, for the purposes of the story an odious little chap only seeming to respect hardened Claiborne in her role as a dealer, her “good customer services”. As she stood transfixed with cold wily Claiborne felt Jock was jailbait, and as he left her valuable and valued company she was in a bit of a dodgy state. How right she soon proved herself about her client Jock’s worth.

He just left without the trip to a late night café, not even a shared toke, no pleasantries normally exchanged on a meeting such as this one, none. When guiltless Claiborne checked her money-bag many times under an angle-poise lamp an hour or more later, back at Headquarters, well, drugs den, she assumed she had not noticed when she had accidentally dropped the stash of plunder somewhere in the bushes on the way homewards. She said to her brother, moaning, as her aching head began to boil and effervesce over the edge like an over-filled kettle, she had no choice except to rifle through her belongings scanning, scouring, hunting for the missing cash payment.

Not until a few whole hours later did trusting Claiborne really have to begin to suspect Jock could have, and had, flown off without paying. Claiborne said he wondered why demure Claiborne had hardly contemplated the notion that Jock might have ripped her off, nor foreseen the cringe-worthy idea. She guarded her nest well enough on most occasions, so he asked her why in the obscurity of the shadowy and dark, tenebrous night there was no viable reason to expect another thief.

“I had the fear from other things anyway, I was para, but not about getting ripped off by a mate of Volleys, I mean I ask you! This goes to show that you can’t always tell if they’re gonna try something funny or whatever. Bloody hell, what is the world coming to….?”

Claiborne was left alone yet again. Actually in this cage out on the edge of town the huge efforts of being a dealer far outweighed any trivial effort Claiborne had made at keeping her own company and minding her own business. It wasn't that Jock was a tricky to handle person, nor was a silly person, it was the easiness and slyness with which he pretended to have swallowed her put on showman's talk, her robust banter. For the still naïve Claiborne this was the most difficult part of it, everyone would have thought, to accept, to admit to being the case with his sister. Always failing to turn up or running off too soon usually, Jock was so sarcastic and so rude, and this time he had only been smiling and bright to her lone wolf persona and so very uncharacteristically polite towards Claiborne. Had he just left without worrying to pay her for the squidgy black wordlessly and mischievously? Claiborne wanted to know. And Claiborne said he wondered about him to himself for another hour or thereabouts. He felt, his sister was making a heinous, irrevocable mistake and allowing paranoiac fantasies to take charge and shine full beam at her in shame again and again because it was as unusual as a global flood in the middle of post-lapsarian summertime. Crudely vowing never to let such a rip off happen to her on his turf, he thumped his left fist on her tatty, matt black coffee table and then: "The stupid prat!" Again and again, Claiborne made ready to go into his big time wheeler dealer mode in order to recoup her missing profits before pursuing his vengeance on him. It was a mode he loathed and abjured when he saw it had been generated, but also a mode he both needed and relied on while travelling as lonely as an orphan anywhere. He wanted to tell someone else about this as well, but Claiborne neither whistled that tune in earshot of anyone except trusted allies, nor ever admitted his flaws to anyone else.

Her dank, windowless hideout, and the dank, shadowy streets that were poles apart from the other mainstream thoroughfares worried her enough, but also they were tranquil dens for her. Set fifty metres from the pavement the hideout was a much-needed place of solitude and security separated from her trading place, the mean tarmac street that was a fitting domain for hoodlums, loudmouths, and any manner of bloodthirsty criminal to ply their business at leisure.

Her new divan, ensconced in a zigzag tapestry of ageing colourful bedspreads, throws, sheets lying at an odd angle on the freezing floor of a Zharkov’s laboratory. On the peeling-off paint on the walls, now they had gone down the drain, the forsaken Claiborne and Claiborne viewed posters that they were not fussed about anymore, and then asides from that they were forced now to wake up and take notice that their official residence had become depressingly achromatic, nothing but boring and outdated.

There were a few peevish tributes to some bygone haze. It had still got some weird artwork in each of its corners, and: mobiles and lanterns hanging down from the ceiling, breeze blocks, boxes of stuff, and her favourite memento mori: the triple-level centrepiece – the blackened, smooth low coffee table.

Claiborne thought she was keeping her ears peeled for police sirens sitting in front of the window sill and to while away the time, but at the same time Claiborne was wondering if and when she'd be able to intercept Jock again. He owed her at least fifty pounds, she claimed. It was not the amount that hurt, that was so irksome, so black and white, it was that he might never pay her back. So she made up her mind to venture onwards, to seek out the prat Volley's lurid lair, where, like the reverse of some jack-in-the-box he was hiding for the sole purpose of recouping her lost cash and lost honour. Her brother volunteered to help if he didn’t pick up the telephone.

Anybody who tried to convince her that she herself dropped the fifty pounds on that wet, tenebrous night was sorely mistaken. Surprised at her anger; gone was the prospect of getting his inebriating, pleasurable wares from her in future, were he to argue with her economics when she located him, she added balefully to Claiborne.

Usually the official residence, the den, was a place of safety and refuge, but it had just acquired a vaguely outdoorsy, muddy smell and Claiborne wondered why he didn't notice it before. He didn’t think anyone had been in except his sister. It was as if somebody dressed in bovver boots might have walked in from somewhere and snuck back out before anyone returned home, she suspected anyone and everyone now. However, the only person she liked, with the keys to the heavy padlocks on the door, her estranged father – Bertram, was unable to lift a finger and was miles away in Birmingham. The reek lingered long after her thoughts had moved onto other subjects in contradiction to those old fumes from the tin foil or the customary smell of incense.

In the outside world with its “no turning back” mentality, life bore no resemblance to this dark den of forgotten chances and regrets. You could tell from the few soft miniature lamps shedding a dim light it would never be envisioned here by these blind citizens who led other blind citizens from strife to pain to anguish in this site slap-bang in the middle of this town whose architecture is constantly praised and digested, by conformity itself, with or without the cult’s aid they were mere doomed automatons.

So Claiborne lifted up the rotary dial telephone and placed it on her knees, and she goofily reached for and grabbed at her bulging, trusty Filofax from one of the dark corners of the hideout almost yanking the short replacement cord out of its socket. Then, waiting and anticipating defiantly Volley’s lies and his subterfuge as she called it, prodding as she touched each number, slowly one by one in turn, she dialled Volley’s mobile number.

"Volley, man. You able to talk?"

"Uh-uh. Yeah mate."

"It's 'bout the dosh of mine you've got man."

"No I ain't. We're quits. Jock paid you. Too right he did."

"Now. Volley. Listen up. I ain't got my cool fifty bucks, and it better be in my back pocket by tomorrow or all hell's gonna break loose." Click. The line went suddenly pointedly dead quiet, utter doubt entered Claiborne’s mind at this juncture, but yes, there was a dial tone and Volley was still there.

“That’s why, Volley.”

“But it’s not like it’s that bad, it doesn’t happen every week, Claiborne.”

“But it’s embarrassing to ask Jock for the cash, and it’s not much money either.”

“You need to try the lottery. I’ve been hatching a little scheme up here.” And he tapped at the side of his head with the tip of his finger a few times, “I’ve got a little plan. You ever heard the news lately? Heard about Bertram? The one what won on the lottery, apparently he’s gone and won 50 mill, so a little bird told me. Go and tell that little bit of news to our pal the good old leader from “The Sanctuary”, maybe that’ll be the way to get your money back. I mean he’s your father ‘n all isn’t he?”

CHAPTER 9

The real reasons behind Bertram’s total decline were manifold and faded across one another leading to the eventual destruction of the whole. Behind all the individual reasons lay hid one amazing hallmark, one totem which just happened to be the ministrations of his control-freak “relationship-manager” Pirsig. He took it upon himself not just to be in charge of his everyday ramblings, but also to remain in such an elevated post he doffed the mantle of general maitre d’ of Bertram’s life. One of his many key quotes was the one where he proudly proclaimed that he was “close to God”. He grew so enamoured of this phrase and its permutations that he used it to scare his listeners.

“And being close to God” he’d ramble on to his famous clients “doesn’t mean you can forget what I just told you in this appointment.” His quip sounded on his eardrums and reverberated around Bertram brain. He spoke not of any board meetings with the almighty, nor did anyone recall any true to fact instance of him wielding any influence except on a very pathetically circumscribed stage. He was a specious proponent nobody was allowed to know what he was up to in his den hyphen lab hyphen office. Some hazarded the guess that he had mastered the dark secrets of science which had in their turn exerted a mastery over him. You see, before Volley(?) got rid of him, Pirsig was the epitome of proficiency with his many ties to the diamond trade, and he had even heard of the Dean connection in London.

Hankering for a past long overdue and banging on the portcullis of the future his malevolence was incarnate. The whirling Genevan society’s barrage was not nearly robust enough to deflate him. Pirsig you must understand was not a healthy specimen anymore.

\* \* \*

{That things were not progressing particularly smoothly in the lengthy court case was his assumption but I was intrigued to know how it fared so I asked them to tell me, in between firing of plaintive letters, about its latest developments.}

{Much of the case was spent with lawyer’s rants about the money aspects as if it was to blame or by the defence, as if it had nothing whatsoever to do with his alleged crime. Rationally and legitimately they interviewed an escort and everyone cheered when she had stopped speaking.}

\* \* \*

The following dislocated environment was uncovered as the vibrant backdrop for the unlucky beneficiary of the nineteen-and-a-half-year old banking account that mysteriously and by illusion was manually, some considered vengefully, closed by the Independent Asset Manager, Pirsig.

“Is it done?“ he asked many years previously. A serpent’s smile and a slow nod.

“Is form B completed as we discussed, Mr. Adler?“ he asks.

“Form B has the unlimited PoA, and this is registered to yourself Mr. Pirsig,” was the reply.

“What about the Ombudsman Association? Nothing to worry about, I presume, Mr. Adler?”

“How should I know? I’ve taken every precaution I promise, and it seems that they have, as you said, decided in our favour so I think we can be certain…” he said subserviently.

“Congratulations, you fool, we must be sure that nothing can possibly go wrong. The name of the “oil painting” is all set up, the moles have no idea where we are, and as long as there aren’t any “fishermen” on their little trips we’ll be high and dry but we must, we must have the association….“ Pirsig said.

“If you knew what is at stake Mr. Adler.“ he said.

“Yes Herr Pirsig.“ he replied.

“Don’t call me that. You never think, do you? We have twenty years to report to the Authorities when the client confidentiality agreement will be annulled,“ he said.

“Oh, I see, of course. Your schemes will work, sir,“ he said.

“Yes you fool. Just as long as there’s no interference from the banking commission over there in America,“ he said.

"Bertram Nivat will never know, that is for sure." Pirsig said.

“Did Mohammed, the lone wolf, agree?” he asked.

“He had no choice, they said he did.” Mr. Adler said.

“Very well then, so you may leave.” Pirsig said.

The essential moral issues for those who were pecuniary failures added to their plight. The successful and wealthy lived in sublime bliss without a single moment’s consideration for superficial ethical problems such as weapons and drugs. The personal interactions between the top and the bottom layers were getting less and less frequent by the measured hour until the only contact with the other side of things was precisely when you happened to get stuck in a rare traffic jam and looked out of the metallic-silver car’s window by pure chance at a wanly meagre face or a violent sign of life. Likewise, supposedly because postal messages between the Independent Asset Manager and his customers were without their post being stolen without fail poste-restante, many lost contact with their bank.

On the one hand, Adler, elaborately dented porkpie hat in hand as always, felt he must tell his dear Naomi Dean about his boss's unfortunate secret deceptions with the confidential account to eternally save his own tarnished reputation. On the other hand, he was scared of his boss. To have made sure he avoided prison time for fraud and hassle from Pirsig on a massive scale he actually needed to wait in silence until the last conceivable moment before he went and revealed any slight fact or detail to any other personage, such as Naomi or even the money laundering office.

The reason being that after twenty years any existing account must, legally speaking, be reported to the Financial Ombudsman Authority which is the regulating body for dormant and closed assets, deposits, or accounts in the country.

“Wait in silence, yes that’s what. I’m no schmuck, I’ll wait – the hero that I am. Oh, for xxxx’s sake why can’t I tell somebody? The goddamn Dumbkopf…who does he think he is, anyway? He’s interfering, he is. This account was closed properly, it’s none of his business now…,“ Adler said.

“What are you talking about like this – why darling, who is it?” she said.

“I’m going to be an client advisor now in my own right, yes?“ he said.

“Yes, of course you are. You know it’s true babe.” She said.

“No-one can take all this – everything we’ve achieved – away. Get me?” I’ve got to tell her he thought in silence, that was the only way she’d hang around if he got busted. I’m cool, sophisticated, a proper celebrity but the Ombudsman could trash this happy dream in an instant, damn it!

“If anyone tries to thieve off me I’ll kill him, you hear me? I mean it!“ he said.

“Hun. You’re getting a bit frightening…let’s change the subject.“ Naomi Dean said to Adler.

Not this, he said to himself wryly, if only it hadn’t amounted to this flaw in my greater scheme so soon. He wished he had foreseen this at the start of this his meteorically fast scramble to the top. Only with newspapers reporting the visible antics on a daily basis did he repent, and now pondered only too late about the clever strategies, like maybe faking his own demise, that were required to avoid public disgrace, shame, annihilation. For if the Nivats were ever ruined who else but Pirsig or Adler would have easy access to their swathes of cash? Adler put his ornate porkpie hat on and stomped out.

\* \* \*

Back at The Sanctuary, Morris Dean said to his friend the psychiatrist that the voices he heard in the winter months were merely a backdrop to the theatre of his life. It sounded innocuous at first to Doctor Bertram Nivat but soon he realised one thing which was a secret he should have taken to his grave of which even the closest confidante could not be informed because lunacy and despair was a normal sort of future for the hearer of these voices.

Morris Dean's friend the fussy Doctor wanted to keep revolutions in check, and criminals imprisoned, and any voices needed to be snuffed out at their very inception.

“You fear them?” Doctor Nivat asked.

“You’re the only one who knows how terrible it is.” He said.

“Will you ask me to leave you alone if I cannot cure you?” He asked.

“We’ll think of something. You’re helping me to ignore the voices I hear.” He said.

His vile loathing of this doctor's innate power and his dread Agatha might reveal the actual content of what the voices said so others might fear it appalled him. As Agatha and Morris left the consulting rooms he patted her on the back like some kind of fool. Bertram thought that the helpful words he was privileged to have heard from Agatha made no sense when strung together, they were insalubrious lies and insidious slanders.

\* \* \*

If Lauren could have foreseen how Bertram left their daughter Lauren to grow up alone and follow a career as a cleaning woman after the money had been stolen, and foretold how he showed extreme apathy in letting her future go to error by never phoning her and dying right after the court case was finalised, Lauren would then know another side of the argument about him.

Being cackled at, issuing commands, complaining about their daughter, Lauren presumed was just a fact of life and was what Lauren accepted as the truth.

Across town and Lauren was on her way round to her parents’ house by way of celebrating her engagement to Bertram. Her parents weren’t there. She was already a grown woman, of about twenty-five and had a petite but wiry frame and dyed hair usually swept back into a bun from her face. Lauren liked that, and the way she never seemed to have to take up too much time in front of the mirror in her new, shared bathroom.

“I’m not sure if this is a very good idea,“ her fiancee Bertram had said.

“You promised not to say anything until we got home, it’ll be alright,“ his future wife said.

“Yeah, party time,“ He said.

“You know sarcasm’s the lowest form of wit. We can go out afterwards,“ She said.

“Did I mention how sexy you looked tonight,“ he asked.

“Ooh. Compliments will get you everywhere, but lay off the sarcasm for a couple of hours, okay.” She said.

Lauren liked the fact that for whatever reason her parents didn't expect him to perform overly well. They actually appreciated it when he said they weren’t going to take a honeymoon because they were a bit cash-strapped. He admitted his father was a hopeless carcass but back in the sixties his pleasant mother was a looker and his father had what’s known as the right manner both of which had now evaporated into nothing, since the same time as the terror on the train.

“It’ll be fun,“ She said.

“For them,“ He replied.

“Don’t be like that,“ She said.

“I hope you are on form,“ He said.

They’d been there for half an hour already, idly chatting about the latest on the election front not complaining about the status quo but the government wasn’t apologising either. The man Bertram called father had cropped grey hair, strong sinewy fingers and a very poor imitation of a designer suit for the occasion.

“So. Yes. I see you understand behavioural mass psychology,“ He said to Bertram.

“I’m really just an amateur enthusiast.“ He replied.

As he poured a second glass of the oh so expensive Prosecco for Lauren he wondered adoringly how much longer it would really be before she got sick of her witless father and dumped him off somewhere he belonged. Bertram also worried enormously about the cold looks Lauren was giving Lauren, her worried and unintellectual mother, on this Bertram’s first family meeting and had to put it down to a form of embarrassment.

“There’s no way…I’m not saying. I’m not going to tell her, some things have to remain secret." Bertram said.

“Why not, you’re being ridiculous, Bertram,” his wife-to-be said.

“Let’s go through, I’ll tell her later,” He smiled and looked at her affectionately.

From where Bertram was standing in these new pleasant surroundings it seemed they were critically looking him up and down. Instead of friendly and sociable they sized him up and though he wasn’t distressed yet he was strangely uncomfortable with all the preamble to the night’s entertainment which seemed to be going to continue incessantly revolve around him. The inedible snacks just made Bertram want to puke. Were he to say this in front of Lauren he knew he would have no chance of seeing their family ever again, and they fell for the guilty pretension that everything was plain sailing.

“So, Bertram, where do you want to go on honeymoon…?” asked the problem: his father-in-law of his uncertain twenty-seven-year old son-in-law to be who was soon plunged onto the capacious colourful beanbag because of course he didn’t have a clue what he needed to improve upon, act on and desire more before everyone round him became a bit non-plussed.

At that point Bertram was ready to do just about anything to ensure Lauren and Bertram split up.

“Now, now, don’t be so nasty to Bertram.” Said Lauren, very worried and also turning to Lauren for support and to impress upon her that she was not a matriarch, nor a problem:

“I’d prefer it if you’d be a bit civil to our guest. Ha ha!” She said flinging a surreptitious look at Bertram but as always timidly and fearfully, terrified of offending his lights, or of alienating him and giving him cause for concern.

“I just want to be happy, in love, and to help. Helping others, it’s one of the highest ideals you can have.” Said Bertram the sweetest act they’d ever met and by heck he was right about helping others. Eleven years later and there he was again, fettered, in that same lounge with its clean aroma and its unused corners. Being probed and grilled by strangers was nothing new to him by that stage.

CHAPTER 9

Eleven years later and over the next few hours Claiborne, Lauren's daughter, attempted to illustrate how Naomi prised herself out from mid-way between the loss of her miniature fob on a ribbon in the duck pond at the Sanctuary and getting caught snooping around the Sanctuary late at night. These two miniature silver and gold items were a gift proffered to her by her uncle because he was a diamond dealer in London with connections to Geneva’s Pirsig and Cie. The item was given to her on the faithful promise to carry out two tasks for him without being detected. The first of these jobs was to snoop around the hallowed territories at The Sanctuary and tape-record specific conversations when the unsuspecting pensioners were at rest; the second of these jobs was because he doted on her every move he could find an excuse to act as the lord of the games, and to be a benefactor and give Naomi an expensive gift for being the pride and joy of all the troopers in his extended family. For he did not really want her to go snooping there, the whole affair was an elaborate scheme to act as a prelude to the listening in on and the recording of his friend Pirsig's private concerns.

However, he had decided, now that both Bertram and Lauren had entered into the fray, to use his niece as a pawn. Firstly with the presumed enemy of his and Adler’s unrefined desires the famous Bertram Nivat himself, then afterwards and only briefly with the two neighbours house sitting who were largely irrelevant.

“This is funny, really funny. If things like this keep happening I’ll be out of house and home soon.” Naomi was tearing her long hair out, unsure what to do, or where to look for her prized trinket, her signifying piece of jewellery.

“That stupid thing should be in the glove compartment of my car which is where I decided I would always keep it.” She was highly charged, firing on several cylinders at once. The only safe hiding place for it was compromised and, she thought of her uncle's temper, their terrible relationship, her own security, and the empty Marlboro lights carton she had thrown out the window of the car instead of letting it get intermingled with her wallet, and pinched herself to ascertain what was real and what had happened to the fob.

In regret of her potential implication in this debacle she sidled into the study, mid-morning, the same one where she had met Morris but she left it to return to what she presumed was the original source of her loss as soon as a possible conclusion came to mind. The solution appeared to be an unravelling glaringly obvious to her previously incoherent ideas. Undisputedly, the jewellery could have fallen to its resting place when she was in the gardens eavesdropping on the pensioners at The Sanctuary the night before. She was so wrecked from booze that she remembered merely a tiny snippet of what had happened in the garden or in Morris's lodgings and forgetting the rest of the staged melodrama, she assumed albeit rashly the origin of her great loss must certainly have occurred there and nowhere else.

“I’m not wasting no more of my valuable time here,” A-feared The Sanctuary was highly forbidden; however, Naomi said to herself, she must check it anyway, but she knew that she had to wait till nightfall to go back; there was no actual hurry to leave but her frantic mind was pulsating with a type of stage fright and she could not look anyone directly in the eyes for the great pure fear that was upon her mind until then.

“What’s the point now that I’m probably getting busted?” and she bid a metaphorical adieu to her long-standing partner in crime, her uncle. So afraid of her uncle's brazen awful anger that it struck dark doubts into her own lack of bravery she didn’t even have an inkling of the cost to her eternal soul involved, and to the overall scheme concerning the neighbour’s lives now also put in jeopardy, also caput.

Of course, Naomi had as yet had no idea, not even the faintest of suspicions, Lauren and Bertram were to be Pirsig the banker’s next target, but she was headstrong enough to decide that nobody, not even someone as harmless, peaceable and categorically “not dodgy” as the detective De la Reyes must succeed instead of her in the search for the precious fob.

Her nerves were flaming up again, her fever rising as she rushed to her white Peugeot estate to drive to a place of safety and quiet in a nature reserve away from others where she might collect her thoughts into a more organized formula, because otherwise her plans would come to naught.

Of necessity, she lit a Marlboro light as she sat in her car pressing buttons on her mobile phone. Several cars drove past the lay-by where she was calmly sitting, and even at one point a police car flew past, sirens blazing. She didn’t even blink so consumed was she with her grave error, she’d rather liked the idea of being a shadowy spy and she fancied herself as a type of commando going undercover for the SAS who were never foiled in their aims or intentions.

Calling her mother Agatha, and deleting texts from her ex-boyfriend, Naomi started not only worrying about everything, but also soon began to look frantically around the car for her heirloom.

“I’d better bend down when I have this dram...” she thought, taking a nip from her hip flask to regiment her nerves.

"...as I know police are everywhere patrolling for tearaways like myself who are on the lookout for an easy buck, vast hordes of us.”

She back-tracked, and repeatedly reversed the car to the edge of the parking space stupidly trampling down the stalks of grass and heather on the mound behind her in the process and ended up by swooning into a light slumber right there a few feet from the side of a said to be busy, not too noisy at this time of morning, dual carriageway. Conveniently her white Peugeot distracted few of the day's motorists as they sped past on their way to and from work, and fortuitously for she often found very original ideas in her sleep, she inadvertently began to dream.

Naomi then shifted to another zone of reality where she was furiously typing away on her computer, trawling the Internet for rubbish to use as material in her university exams.

“There must be some practical use for this” she assured herself. “For a wastrel like me there must be something on the internet that will help me to find out about these treasured fobs.” She hesitated she had not thought of that before, till now. She thought, maybe if I can find out their origins I can find out something with a practical purpose which will lead me to them, or even buy new ones in case my uncle asks me what happened to them.

But, sooner or later she was going to have to wake up, and someone’s voice started pleading with her not to move and urging her not to desecrate Kent by leaving – that voice was Morris’s, her mind came back to the real world and she opened her bleary eyes. She knew she had now got the ultimatum, the call; the call to move beyond her paltry pathetic existence and predictable routine to pursue a new horizon.

Catching sight of the next police car, Naomi put the car into gear, waited until the policemen swooped past, and drove slowly onto the dual-carriage way. Enough has been said of the tangential digression, Claiborne missed the point as she often seemed to do; which was that she has already seen what could become the net consequences of her crimes carried out for her uncle and Pirsig, his ally, although she did not understand the prompt of it.

Naomi wasn’t very concerned about the way she was being moulded into a pawn, made into a wooden puppet for her uncle and his secret best friend Pirsig; if she had known about their friendship, perhaps she’d have taken the time to weigh things up and reached a differing decision. It didn't matter now, it was too late to turn back.

However she would then have felt disturbingly maligned as Pirsig was a laughing stock, a creature of disrepute amongst the Deans and their friends; Agatha especially was not immune to the jokes levied on his head. Even Bertram Nivat had been unimpressed. A failed womaniser, a money-grabbing thief, a gambler, a tax evader and eventually Naomi's father's bank manager.

Zooming in on Naomi, we knew he had, in the past, been quite accepting of and resigned to the fact of her role as a latter day pickpocket, a thief, a malicious criminal, an unrecanting sinner. As for the uncle the diamond dealer this was not the only time he’d required a favour of someone, and she had grown to depend on his gifts and rewards for her pocket money, and then latterly her allowance, and then she hoped maybe her wages one day.

On the one hand, the villains, Pirsig and Compagnie seemed to be complicit in their intentions to outdo the taciturn residents of Kent, on the other hand however they, should the circumstances ever arise, wanted to stab each other callously in the back.

They weren’t exactly a lovely lot, they gelled together simply for self-preservation, and though people did not know them, if they had heard the phrase “never talk to strangers” and all the rest of the warnings issued to us as children then, with these characters, those phrases of advice would more than likely be the best policies to adopt with Pirsig and Compagnie.

“My only excuse is that I needed the dosh to buy a new fob, if I get busted I think I’ll just tell him that…” Naomi went on, unaware that she was talking to Morris, utterly oblivious to her own deep down cowardice, she was thinking this without realising it, and the only speech she was conscious of was:

“Who dares wins, school for scandal, that’s what this fit babes all about and they’d better look out because I’m coming through!”

You can witness here absolute untarnished arrogance is what she was really all about, what made her tick so evenly, and what her actions almost always consisted of at their root.

\* \* \*

Leaving Pirsig's temporary setback aside for a while; others in the world were soon hoping to do good deeds, to fix the world’s problems, and to eliminate diseases such as Morris Dean was soon to discover.

They said the voices in his head had plentifully increased of late, cosmic coincidences, flowing through his maxillofacial system, enlarging his isolated ennui and they warned trapping him in a great spiral of discontented illusory nightmares.

Any attempt of his to blot his relatives out and to create an Arcadia in his head was doomed to backfire because paradise was exactly not what the enemy – predestined fate – had seen appropriate to deliver him up to. Anything which stood in the way of his introspection, and was not connected like an arterial vessel to his inmost wishes he called balderdash. He was soon checked in to the retreat in the countryside, in Surrey, for a spell of treatment where the relatives learned that although he was not the only one to be in suffrage, he was also greatly in need of medical attention in a time of acute stress.

His life was passive, at standstill, it seemed as though this was fair to him but the doctors said it was worthy of medical and scientific probing.

“Why do you think I hear them each day, Doctor?” he claimed he had begun hearing the muffled words a week into his stay in the unit. He had been forced to admit his voices were unreal and hardly an excuse for his wild behaviour.

“Possibly because you are stressed, where did you start hearing them?” he fell short of asking him to tell him about his mother, yet he said that the voices were a manifestation of an imbalance in his brain’s chemistry and as such were going to take him further into the twilight realms if he did not perform certain perfunctory actions such as the taking of selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors and going to cognitive behavioural tutorials where he was able to see others in similarly upset states.

“I need to get more energy, so that my sister will be proud of me” he remarked pointlessly. However, the doctor, an ageing man with a goatee beard, a monocle and a vast overcoat was impartial to his wishes. He said he must take physical exercise, and leave his past behind i.e. act like a grown up.

He gave a lot of advice but unfortunately his advice, though well reasoned, was rather too interesting as he took rather too personal and affectionate a view of his patients, or some of them. He had been through a lot of them, and in particular, the young beautiful girls were comforted by his large, handsome hands and handling their problems they quickly fell in love with his selflessness and lack of egotism. He wasn’t sexual but he would really have much preferred to spend time with some exotic private patient for whom there might be a kindling of mutual tenderness, or a real drug addict with some chequered past of shenanigans, who was at the forefront of modern trends and was perhaps nightclub mafioso.

Morris Dean wasn’t ready to be shunted irretractably into the mental health system as yet. He wasn’t sure if he was actually ill, said the respected doctor to his family, he said he coped with the auditory hallucinations in a normal way, and they had to accept it with grace. And he suggested they tried to think of another way to bring their greatly doted upon and work-shy Morris back to a long lost legitimate reality.

CHAPTER 10

She lay there in the bed next to her husband. She twitched, and moved her legs about trying to find some comfort, yet at the very same time she sighed. A vain struggle, it was impossible to relax on her side of their bed without waking Bertram up from his well-deserved slumber. Lauren thought she must be half-mad to lie there awake unable to get traction on the duvet, or the situation with the swarthy businessman.

Without many problems to address, given that in her opinion her husband Bertram was well-employed, quite successful still and downright handsome, she had no reason to despair; or so most of Lauren’s friends boasted of her. Exciting a feeling of insecurity in her, these well-meant remarks, while they made her arrogant also, served only to widen a gap, increasing the loneliness and the morbid nature of her nightly worried guilt. Nearly every morning before six o’clock she fretted over herself and her liaisons. It was saddening that some mysterious force poisoned Lauren and plagued her mind, the long forgotten past indiscretions with a string of swarthy businessmen caused a disharmony in the relationship, a discontent of which Bertram did not know the logical cause. Wary of the fact, she had dreamed of her university days recently, when these were long ago and really she thought best forgotten about now that she had grown older. With these regrets in mind Lauren could gain no tenure on the pleasurable side of life, the claustrophobia of town life pulling her apart at the seams, over and over, day after day.

Hearing of her predicament, Bertram tried hard to find some redress for the very real problems their relationship seemed to engender, or at the least for the bliss they had missed by a fraction. In the earlier stages, when his infatuation and her admiration coexisted their mutual commitments were made to buttress them against poison and this sort of eventuality. She waited for him to make that particular sound of his breathing becoming less regular which was emblematic that he was now awake, and ready for some early morning nattering—a habit they had formed thirty-five years previously, when they had exchanged vows after only six months but had a child to care for and were powerless to find another time when they were not tired or annoyed, or both. The habit reasserted itself especially these days when Bertram’s work was taking up more and more of his time, meaning he had to spend longer hours poring over professional text books, even in the evenings when she couldn’t handle her household duties unless he remained with her figuratively, and psychologically. She used to crave his help with Claiborne, with emergencies such as changing nappies but needed also to know he would neither shun her to do this alone, nor mentally have any will to exhibit such a disloyalty were she to become a burden.

To enliven the tedium of his day ahead Lauren made her mind up to talk to him at the next available opportunity of her visions on the previous night.

This was particularly apt, if you consider that Bertram just so happened to be a hypnotherapist. For some years ago, insomnia became his special field, maybe he was not of the highest calibre, but if you had disturbing visions you would turn to his peculiar breed of therapy. Although he was not acclaimed, he was popular. Bertram’s clients relied upon him for a sense of understanding which was hard to find in the business, and which he was positioned to supply by dint of his rare assiduity.

Lauren was the one who knew he seldom tired of explaining the nature of every dream that could possibly be experienced and so she was not afraid to ask for his attention on this matter. Besides, she herself would have no more qualms about recommending him on account of his wisdom in interpreting nightmares and dreams than selling her soul to the highest bidder. Often he would supersede those with more qualifications, and the word had spread that he could cure you when his contemporaries could not cope with treating you. Prodding him gently she encouraged him to wake from his rest and listen to the latest of her intuitions. He seemed quite complacent, often perhaps rightly explained by his trying to wean himself off depression years earlier, but this belied his true interest in his chosen field more than suggested some fallibility. His mood swings usually posed a risk to her personal security, but for the moment he was passive and not a threat.

Attempting to describe desires and emotions was always preceded by a guilty sensation, as if what she was trying to express, to mediate, would burden him yet further beyond the call of duty; as if by doing so no more would be achieved than to remind him of his work as an insomnia expert and to allow him to start to think of her as an invalid placed there not to assist but purely to be assisted. Accustomed as they were to sharing everything, Lauren repeated to herself that he would run a mile if for whatever reason she took liberties in their union and began to talk about his failings or purely about her emotional or spiritual lacks. She could envisage nothing worse than unexpectedly losing his interest, and she needed to reflect that she might incur an undesirable turn of events were she to ever stop probing him for answers to her selfish problems, so to reinforce their mutually beneficial union, she said:

“I was wondering, dearest, if you can just be a teeny-weeny bit helpful and try to make something intelligible from another vision I saw late last night when you were still sleeping and it was the middle of the night? I wouldn’t have disturbed you,” She added, “I know you need your beauty sleep, honey, but I think that my dream had something to do with our daughter’s wedding to Rudy in a few weeks–you know? I’ve given up trying to understand it on my own, but you may see it as an opportunity for your brain. Well, are you listening?” She said. This was said in as sibilant a tone as she could muster up, yet not come across needy or too forthright. Bertram rolled over as he blinked his eyes on his good-looking face momentarily before seeing poor dishonest Lauren smiling wanly at him.

He was, to all intents and purposes, still very proud of his loved one at the time. For egotistical reasons, but also because over many years their mutual affection had grown plenteously. A dual reason there was for this mutual trust: because they both liked the feeling that duty and responsibility were efficiently dealt with, and furthermore for the manifold reason that he had always been devoted to Lauren and that his aim to fulfil his calling without her was doomed to sinuous gracelessness. His main reasoning, his primary motivations all stemmed from the irrevocable knowledge that she was the one who would flounder without his bulwark of support. If he could manage to surreptitiously impart some good advice here and there that would be sufficient for Bertram. Then he positioned his hands behind his head and looked quite straight ahead, up at the ceiling of the large bedroom, and went into doctor mode which involved utter concentration, as if the whole world depended for its existence on the dexterous and clandestine handling of the crisis.

“You may not think it, Lauren,” he said, “but I am always ready to listen to your ramblings. Tell me all about it and I’ll try to see if any of it is important. About our Lauren’s wedding to Rudy , eh? It’s so soon that you are bound to be getting the jitters. I hope that you get over your embarrassment at talking to me about private things too one of these days.” He added.

All this was said somewhat obsequiously like an untrained impersonal observer, some ghoulish spy from his past who might have been well outside of the lover’s nest but who wasn’t involved in the discussion and unlike Lauren herself was capable of interpreting the dialogue in a more realistic and less fanciful mode. Lauren composed herself ready to recapture as many of the motifs of the dream as was possible in order to show him more clearly her fear and the terrified journey she claimed she had experienced the night before. She was going to have to inform him as adequately as was possible of her sighting of herself in a bedraggled costume in some non-descript location: a bus shelter, a crossroads, waiting desolate and solitary for someone to finally turn up. For what seemed like hours she thought she was going to have to stand in anguish under a tree for shelter from the rain as people stared. Or passed by plainly disgusted as they averted their eyes and quickened their walking pace to a jog.

Having been upright on the pavement furtively struggling not to display her shambolic self for this extent she was released from her troubles by the abrupt approach of a bus, unluckily one with many passengers, making the vexation more humiliating and so much more intense. As if it had all been acceptably ordinary she boarded the people-carrier daubing her face with a colourful smile. It was as if she was invisible to the other passengers seated on both sides of her as she laughed and made her way to the only seat at which she could sit alone and not harm anyone else’s moral decency. The perfection of a moral order raged in her soul that this was not the worst eventuality or the most trying situation, but her disordered garments were merely an unnecessary wasted expense. Far worse might lie in store if you squatted in some filthy, rat-infested basement filled with used needles. Or worse consequences there might be if you were perhaps blind and then falsely imprisoned in an asylum. Anyway as she reassured herself she realised with a gulp that the woman in the row behind had been tactfully making some efforts to begin a conversation with her, despite her messed up state of self. She seemed to be taking no pains to conceal the fact of her profession, which was no less than that she was a cross between a gypsy fortune-teller and a startlingly well-informed and talented cleaning lady. Because her nature was at risk, she exaggerated the gypsy's importance exuberantly and with delight, not like earlier from a careless and therefore blurred viewpoint, but one that sprung from a more direct and personal source within her.

The supposed cleaning woman called herself an old biddy; even when Lauren her chosen victim had not heard nor even been fractionally conscious of her, the stranger carried on with her onslaught; in other words, she made sure she was heard. Emboldened she said it happened that she also had a few important concerns about her sordid trade which she felt that Lauren in the badly attired state she was in, this being fairly unusual, may have been capable of watering down or diluting via her approval, or confidences. She told Lauren how she had a refined and clear memory for old folkloric practises; once Lauren had at long last absorbed the obvious fact of the similarly unkempt woman making unexpected overtures or advances towards her. In the process the gypsy swung round to face Lauren who at the very last instant backed down and lowered her forlorn eyes, both for her own sense of shame, and also from consideration for the old mess of a woman who seemed to be so enthusiastic to provide friendship. Perhaps somewhat vulnerable on a bus full of strangers she inquired, now becoming deferential, of her what her destination was. She did not dwell upon the odd way in which every other passenger was alarmed by such a caricature dishevelled figure, but instead her mind seemed to go straight to the bull’s-eye as some feminine minds can do. When she did not receive a response she tried to retrace the preoccupying matter, saying:

“I may be able to be of some help to you.” Lauren's misgivings had been allayed for shaky reasons she herself would have qualms about and subsequently she had little choice but to cave in. She’d welcome a more secure position than this, where a large coat might turn out to be a rather useful addition, or where a friend might be of help in defending herself from the criticisms of the spectators. One passenger had the nerve in a quite agile way to spin around every few seconds raising his nose and sniffing as if to decry the fact that something odd disturbed his sense of smell, and it didn’t refresh the air wholly to his liking, but that made the woman's hoped-for friendship blossom still more.

Lauren could no longer ignore this useless meeting and she accepted the kind cleaning woman’s spare blanket which she had conveniently stowed away in her baggage on the seat near the window beside her. Next up the woman proceeded in as militant a vein as she could muster to launch into a mighty tirade in justification of their right to be left in peace.

“Have no shame, my dear woman for we are all alike underneath. Our outer skins do not try to lie and hide. It is our own pride and vanity.” So that she could continue the pleasurable invasion of Lauren’s personal space she quick as lightning was now seated beside Lauren muttering some vague and idle threats that what would happen to the next fellow who tried to steal or mess up her bags, and it wouldn’t be half as terrible as how she would hurt anyone who reprimanded this innocent Lauren for her unavoidable pale and forlorn condition. This hid another ulterior agenda, more pressing, hurting the washerwoman’s conscience that was making her breathing more laboured than usual and less rhythmic. Surely she did not have those special lines on her hands in the space between thumb and forefinger, on the soft skin located there near her wrist? From the markings on Lauren’s hands she could surmise, well versed as she was in folklore and clandestine practices, that Lauren would not be averse to hearing the real gist of her words. She had deduced correctly that Lauren absorbed her words with some approval, although in the meantime Bertram was wondering why she had not rejected them outright. As the washerwoman explained to her, she had worked for many years in a bank’s back office and during her time there she had seen and heard much that was apposite to the truth. One of the stories went that such and such a person had left a quantity of monies to lie dormant gaining no interest. And while it was rare, something was said, something that linked the aforesaid phenomenon to the distinctive markings on the jewelled fob hanging from a loop. As far as she could recall them from folklore the USB stick and its matching fob, similar to Lauren’s cipher acquired in a tattoo parlour, signified the numbered account. Nobody claimed it was anything other than a rumour but the badly educated cleaning woman was alert to superstitions and on the lookout for these signs. Her last wish before returning to her seat was to repay Lauren for the potential favours she had not yet done for her, and be as much of a Samaritan as she could given the strangeness of the encounter.

Refraining from the obvious resentment at having her privacy invaded, Lauren did her utmost to lend an ear to the reductio ad absurdum.

“So if I do not trace this cash that as you say is dormant I will be a major loser. But if I trust you that it’s there then you may have given me false hopes and misplaced hopes can be worse, far more damaging.” She said.

“I have some old contacts at the bank—I could trace this cash for you for a small fee,” she suggested.

She went on to explain that having a slight influence at the bank, she would have a sly word with a security guard there, a good old boy who she felt sure would prioritize Lauren's claim for the missing assets which belonged to her, presumably. She further assured her she required only a percentage finder’s fee for doing this work out of the goodness of her heart, on her behalf. It was not enough to rest at ease, her agitated mind wanted a portion of that money after it had been found. When she wracked her brain she said she felt duty bound to tell her some last tidbit of gossip about the undisclosed sum lying in the bank's coffers: namely that Pirsig and Cie was the custodian bank's name. To signal to her that this business must be kept within her bosom, with emphasis on secrecy at all costs she placed one finger, the index, over her lips in that manner that is held to traditionally mean silence when commanding rebellious children, and as a wisp left her mouth the next moment the bus drew to a halt.

It was still raining. A day such as this was a contradiction now. Lauren felt a sudden surge of sorrow as she saw her interlocutor departing the bus. Shambling away down the road and overwhelmed by the weight of her array of bags of odds and ends she looked over her shoulder at her and was gone.

Naturally the origins of the vision seemed obscure the reverie having been entirely falsified, and Bertram was left with a feeling of oppression and a sense of something akin to strife. What was the innuendo here he wondered? Some concealed relationship between what he had just heard and the marriage of Lauren to Rudy . I didn’t know we were that hard up, he thought to himself, didn't know he was quite so young and they're both just out of school, her and her equally inexperienced fiance? That their money problems were not what you might call pressing; that Lauren had once been sectioned under the mental health act and as always without a penny; that they held no other serious premonitions on behalf of their daughter in respect of her marriage gift; these were considerations called upon yet indeed here was no link to the wedding itself, no apparent concern other than perhaps the cost of the event itself.

“Why do you say we need to be so majorly worried that our daughter’s marriage is going to abysmally fail? There does not seem to be the least, not even the most tenuous link between what you dreamed and our real life, except on one score which is that her fiancee has never been in a quasi-real relationship before!” He stoutly affirmed their child's future was not in doubt; he sought to prove this by calling up the track record of their mildly affluent situation.

“No cause for your bombastic concern on behalf of his fortunes either, I assure you.” He continued, “He will never want to become a tramp and so long as he always avoids addiction or ailment, I’m sure that we will be rightly placed here to stop him if he gets out of order.” At this point Bertram humphed, and rolled over again onto his side and again for the thousandth time strove to come to equally justified terms with the brief but horribly significant lapses of certitude and discipline his daughter forcibly underwent in her thirtieth year.

Not long after the day her grandfather died and they opened an account with Pirsig and Cie both Bertram and his daughter Lauren had turned into simply another power of attorney and they could barely walk in public unrecognised, even on their own. They submitted to their fate with complacent resignation. Though his movements and habits were unimpressive after inheriting the windfall, his old friends sort of ignored that too. Still it was how Pirsig planned to use Bertram that was so rude. At first he could claim he lost most of it on the stock market, and when that failed he might claim Bertram had transferred it out, closing his accounts at Pirsig and Cie in the process. Bertram’s memory didn’t serve him that well, and it was going to be an easy step to tell Bertram these lies and for Bertram to believe the windfall practically never even existed in the first place, especially if you added that the drugs he ingested after the Eurostar debacle made his memory even less reliable.

Pretty soon after Rudy met Lauren’s family the word had crept out onto the local scene that a millionaire was astride the town’s pavements, and then it was an almost foregone conclusion that his biography should become a piece of public property for perusal by every and any nosey parker, creep, and unimportant personage. Self-evidently present, and they made no secret of it, was a contingency on the outer fringes of Lauren’s circle who couldn’t care at all about her unimpressive persona when amongst them. Nor could certain people see a whit worthwhile in her parading up and down the street in brand new designer clothes or being always first to the bars every evening just because of a rumour of some grandfather's fortune.

For Bertram’s supporters however she certainly possessed savoir-faire, but vitally and essentially his clearly malign mien exemplified by his arrogant phrases and the faux-ignorance of his name The Instant Millionaire, ousted him from the outer fringes of his diminishing group. And thanks to Rudy ’s gossiping more criticisms grew up to surround him. Then he recalled they cheated him of his money, until having poked mockery at him, having made a voodoo pincushion of the winner, in effect; the outer perimeter of innuendoes and slander closed in on him, surprise recipient of a Swiss account, and then on anyone with money in general also. Vilified in the National Press even lottery winnings were soon seen, to be sure, less attainment than instant gratification. By the autumn after his inheritance jackpot loathing had spread from the few hardcore entities who never played or won anything to a sizeable chunk of the public opinion. Everybody knew, you still read of the ostracisation of his “type” in the press and true to “type” the spring came when they had garnered enough support to retaliate against poverty.

Imbalanced and unreasonable it was but fair and loyal betimes it was not. He looked around him for loyal, devoted allies and you could smell the cowardice and envy burgeoning where there used to be civility amongst these compatriots. So naturally Bertram, Lauren and Lauren levitated towards the upper crust you could say, what with the formidable Deans as their neighbours at The Sanctuary, their new lodgings.

At every step around the gardens and across the lawns the coppers were right to have got involved, there were so many threats and such dangers dangling in the unfresh air. Yet even the police weren’t able to diffuse common opinion from a hardcore entity on the fringe of the sunken back garden behind where they used to repose. As more pensioned off people were wallowing in the grounds that spring more important and urgent matters than the unjustified wealth of the lucky minority led the way for them. Severe debt engendered criminal tendencies, in the same way as poverty often produced demonstrations of anger. Whispers went around of plots being hatched. Even if the passion to rob, steal, or set aflame, deface was frustrated it gave birth to the darker side of human antipathies. So while he could practically take the drugs, hooked on since the trip to France on the Eurostar, as or whenever he chose; aimlessly wandering about the paths and across the fallen foliage the underclasses at The Sanctuary were lamenting their misfortune with nothing to do. And, in their straitened circumstances it seemed a chasm, a rift had taken over from everything else of natural enjoyment and of pastimes. So noticing this and because of the lies he was being spun by people at The Sanctuary, not to mention his newly-acquired Alzheimer’s, Bertram intended and vociferously promised to cut all ties with the bankers in Geneva once and for all.

The next few moments in the bedroom had scarcely passed before Lauren noisily and fussily saddled with a repellent stowing away of her own rising tide of secret perceptual clarity...

\* \* \*

Already Pirsig pandered to the mood of his colleague in the office while secretly loathing Adler in his hat for being seen, being intertwined with these people the Deans. Especially after his failures. His attitude seemed on the surface both relaxed and haughty, far from friendly or effusive. It was designed to cover up a hidden vehemence he refused to admit he possessed. His patient exterior concealed the terrible aggravation he carried. He was sure the man always in the slightly tilted porkpie hat would observe that it was all so obvious that everyone was inclined towards overly enthusiastic expressions of fondness to impart a travesty, and an impression of honesty. In the meantime, Adler, seeking for the best route forward through the transluscent, glass-panelled door of the old banking establishment out into the dark afternoon where he can make concrete the abstract, what is as yet theoretical can become real: the entries on the boards the winning numbers and Naomi Dean's keyring found, and Pirsig's problematic mission accomplished. His was the path that led not to visible clarity but to a long period of confusion and waiting.

Then a while later, an hour after I the porkpie-wearing man receded from view, Pirsig tried to kill time until seven p.m. when the appointment must and could take place. Without much to play with he walked around central Geneva, but nobody paid attention to his unprepossessing yet stern form. He began to show boredom, but it was nearly six thirty and he would have liked to head back to his allotted place soon. Arriving early he checked up and down and across the busy road on which the house was situated next door to the station, surprising him not nearly as much as it ought. He rang the intercom. Only because they knew his face and strong german accent did they let him in. Because he was early by some ten minutes the madam showed her annoyance in uncertain terms, in a moderate terminology which wouldn’t cut him down to the size of a pygmy with the sexual prowess of some destitute, alcoholic male.

What she was wearing was a conglomerate of satin and net, the usual stock in trade out of her wardrobe for such an affair which comprised the multifarious outfits the girls at brothels used to titillate their guests. The main colour of her sexy outfit was black, black suspenders, black tights, with some purple. Dutiful, and somewhere along the way to piteous she stopped at the doorway to the boudoir. There was first a smile then a brief attempt to engage eye contact with her. Theirs was a mutual liaison but the money had always to be exchanged beforehand and punctiliously. There were many other things to notice however. Many things happened fast and in succession. Lots of worthless talk maybe, but also a sizeable quantity of special tells which connoted everything and which to admit to would be like stamping your feet very loud in the quiet moments of a solemn funeral.

\* \* \*

Once the big changeover had happened and once Pirsig had got his sex in return they just kissed quickly and she went off to try to make sense of these tells, and he remained to tangle with another sort of issue. Both knew their futures looked pretty dark. Sally had shared some of the facts of her existence: her reasons for being there, to get a deposit on a house; her vocational pleasures and displeasures; and her assumptions about the others who were always well mannered enough and polite enough and full of goodwill or endlessly charming. She said it seemed to her mind that she had no reason to ever stop.

Although gulfs separated the two of them an unlikely union sprang up and he knew, as he put his feet into his socks once more, that there were people – not the same as his fellow businessmen who were uptight and easily brought to shame – with whom an hour snatched here, there, anywhere was given out of their bounty and not to be despised as prostitution or a crime.

He gave her a peck on the cheek goodbye when the time came. It was more her choice than his, more her liberty which enabled the camaraderie here. He, by rights, could easily afford to take her home with him and yet he was the underling in every aspect of their unification. Surely she would do as she was told but the walls dividing them had crumbled long before; and his desires and her needs meant he was her master, she his servant. He had paid for the luxury of the idea she was besotted by his wily enthusiasm in the bedroom. Pirsig was nonplussed when it transpired to not be wholly valid as an opinion however.

He left safely and silently; again checked for the police or curious neighbours and left the ill-reputed place, a satisfied smile staining his braggadaccio. The upturning to his own advantage of the laws of cause and effect was one of the worst, figuratively speaking, foibles Pirsig possessed, and he did not expect to get caught out at it either. Which is what would happen if Sally spilled the beans on his whole charade.

\* \* \*

And now the court case. As such it left everyone wondering why there was a court case. In contrast the judge couldn’t help but draw attention to the plain corollary between his behaviour and their responses which he denounced as so much madness. It was ultimately a waged war between the moral vacuum of his primitive excuses, the bomber was held responsible, and a heady code of values propped up by the lawyers. The starkness of their mistake eventually led to Pirsig's demise and downfall.

The judge, however, rejected anybody’s except the bomber's responsibility for his crimes.

\* \* \*

For almost seven years it looked as though he could have no satisfactory result, no appeals permitted. Naturally, Lauren knew of the restraints hovering over her husband. Put bluntly there were several misnomers in his universe which denied Bertram’s memory free access to liberty. One of these was his reliance upon luck and fortune, and imagination and ideas. It would almost be putting this whole sorry saga in too harsh a light were we to investigate the laws of causality in more depth. It reached a point of no return when he almost had to have chance explained to him, along with its rather flimsy links to luck and gambling and the judge decided it was divorce accelerated by opiate addiction.

\* \* \*

Even the component that blamed the bomber for his errors was soon going to have to be dismantled by the case. During the arduous court case he was attended to by a pale-faced and worn out coterie of family friends. Usually they would imagine Pirsig sweaty palms clenched in any manifold posture of compliance: compliance to a domineering spirit which seldom did not aim to annul the arteries of their spirited defence: that the law of cause and effect could be reversed or reduced by something like a stomping great lotto windfall. Alone, it never occurred to this haggard figure he had been transformed into that he was drifting to unknown shores. As those lonely hours passed in the dock he stayed on. When, then, his entourage of well-wishers returned from lunch they weren’t ready to find him descending yet further into the chasms of depression.

“I feel sure,” he informed his employees from Pirsig and Cie in Geneva, “that they will see through our artifices. We don’t stand a chance.” He summarized.

“No, no, no. Everything’s running smoothly,” they lied, “all is going according to our plans.”

“So you’re trying to fool me are you?” He inquired ruthlessly “So, you’re trying to say they will agree that I am not responsible, I am not the cause of the problems; they are and the dormant account was,” he shouted.

Harking back to the distant past in order to pinpoint what deed of woe unhinged Pirsig. He was drawn to a series of episodes in the local brothel Gals twenty years earlier when he was fifty-nine and without a whit of common sense, to his family’s degradation. To all intents and purposes everything had been steaming along fine with a flourish here and there of success; he managed however to insinuate himself into his encounters with the ladies. Indeed Pirsig had run the gauntlet across town so often to his these quarters in the poor sector that their boss could do nothing but mention his endearing yet easily-caricatured ways to their other customers: “Oh such fun”, “Such a dude!”. His looks were not of the trendiest calibre, and he depended instead on a certain quality soon to be described. He also meanwhile relied heavily for his favourable receptions upon his innocent badinage and the prostitute Sally's assumption that he was utterly harmless.

It was to be old Pirsig's de facto agreement to accept his unfortunate destiny. At first the owner of Gals who was fast rising to a place of esteem in his eyes took him under his wing. Without a thought in his mind he graciously accepted the lavish attentions he accrued, because of, or so he thought, his innate good humour and whimsical charms. Very soon afterwards, word got out of Pirsig's successes with the prostitutes, someone said they had given someone a reduction, and the pimp made a tidy little name for himself amongst the down-at-heel and the scum. He could hardly be expected to know what a hindrance this type of parochial intrigue might later become to the foundations of his as yet unspent savings, not to mention his role as key witness in the case against Naomi and Adler.

The competition in this case was a group of about six swarthy younger men. They were raised to indignation by his banter and unearned recognition. When they clapped eyes on him they could tell he was unfairly set apart by the lottery win he sometimes claimed to have acquired. They could not allow this immaturity to pass under their noses without some hindrance, and action was imminent. Affection was hard to come by and even harder to get away with. Apart from the odd customer who turned up unannounced, whose credentials were unknown, the prostitutes had been talking and then some. Pirsig’s inept fumblings in the bedroom were relayed to the six men and so enraged did the girls’ laughter make them they gathered to decide what was to be done about this impudent rascal who was turning the girls’ minds soft and giving them the wrong ideas about the value of money.

They shrewdly debated the pros and cons and came out with loud pleasure at the notion of bumping him off. They decided that better than that would be to tell him to get lost and stop giving their girlfriends a taste of what they couldn’t have: pretensious airs and graces. So they hatched a plan to scare him away forever. A task which they did not expect to fail in as he was not a worthy foe. Their honour was at stake and though they spared a thought for their whore’s happiness it never amounted to anything more than a thought.

The men’s plotting was put to the test when as Pirsig was leaving another entered and, meeting in the doorway the man whispered “get lost” to his back. He definitely knew it was directed at him but he didn’t know why. Everything had seemed to be such plain sailing. He had felt nothing could ever break up his extreme joy and now it had or so he thought.

The second and third time this happened sirens started in his happy mind. Upset with humanity and its cruelty while there he heard hysterical laughs coming from the massage parlour, and, apart from rage he felt vaccinated to them and went away.

\* \* \*

CHAPTER 11

Lauren had kept Claiborne out of the loop in terms of the slander against Bertram, and in the main the CULT members largely felt sorry for Lauren because Bertram’s detractors often convened in droves to their chosen location, from any quarters that might be mentioned by us lot stuck at the CULT. Those who armed themselves with an arsenal of blanched faces and blackened phrases made her resort to any form of charity as ours; to protect at any cost her family with our help; to find ways and means that contained the harmful, accusatory words to fend the enemies off with. Maybe to sign a treaty, maybe to avoid surrendering to the victimizations; surely to give wayward Claiborne, and her sister Claiborne, a fair deal in life, with or without Bertram’s good reputation.

As she squinted at her darling Claiborne, Lauren amused herself with the thought that this slander would have no impact. Those people or persons unknown who she was repudiated by could be evaded by her strong instinct for survival and in the next moment then and there Claiborne rushed crazily out of the kitchenette. Lauren assumed the gossips of the detractors would one day be rebuffed, albeit perhaps erroneously and Lauren muttered something inaudibly as she felt the old passing impulse of affection for her beloved daughter’s fast pitter-patter on the hallway floor. She went back to supposing that somehow those old enmities and misalliances would one day be obliterated as she fervently wished, and her children rescued for all time from the disaster stemming from her destructive link to Bertram.

Claiborne said she felt Bertram’s unwanted attentions harmed her mother, out of them came no useful or beneficial purpose; always insalubrious, they had no substance but the most vague, tenuous, and causal link to her true, inner self. It was largely him anyway, a subsidiary and tertiary figure as the children saw him, out of sorts with Lauren and whose fondness for gambling and games of chance only managed to compound an already distilled source of enmity, who had denigrated her by his advances. The useless leader said to us at the meeting house that Bertram had lost sight of what were to be perceived as Lauren’s feminine rights and he must know that in his heart of hearts he was just stupidly and overly fond of her.

He saw her somehow, he heard how she’d speak sometimes, and he talked to her in many ways. Yet the silly leader’s words voiced an opinion that in public only ever devolved to one part of her, one aspect, that of Bertram’s savvy, dismissive, ebullient, but effective way of jilting her from his personal life. Since ejection from his life Lauren had known no kindness from anywhere except the leader and she’d resorted to the CULT doing the utmost they could to save her.

Lauren lingered sadly for a time alone and, picking up the roadmap near at hand, noted in a rough offhand manner a list of points, on her impending planned journey with Claiborne and Claiborne up to Birmingham the following Sunday, at which to rest and recuperate.

The journey that loomed to Bertram’s new residence, or abode, was really quite long, and scarcely was it event enough to suggest the possibility of any nasty occurrences from which to run and hide.

Although it was many years since she last had met Bertram, he was still the erstwhile father of her desperately addicted progeny, and in this hereditary quality he actually had become a bad omen – long lost, now much forgotten, eventually fairly well ignored.

It wasn’t easy to explain nor to justify her jaunt to her newly-met romantic interest the dicatatorial leader so in an effort to do so she politely invited him along with them. He with his jealous and quibbling mind-set would be better employed on other more enjoyable subjects such as a weekend away than be left to fester and wonder alone.

Tracing a route up and down, under and over, the roadmap provided an excellent excuse to complain to him and show she needed him. Complaints which he savoured, because he brought to bear his skills, his ploys and his many abilities with which he attempted to make Lauren feel alright again with. These were the moments he appreciated his own prowess.

Lauren reflected that she understood from the outset, because it was a necessity, where and how she was going where she was going. Losing track however she thought: “But, I know where I’m going – to exactly the place the fascist leader won’t be going for very long because he and Bertram won’t exactly gel well.” She often digressed in this manner if the opportune moments lasted long enough; however, they seldom did last as she changed her mind often on important issues, like a bowling skittle is often replaced and knocked down.

As she hollered down the receiver, her breaths left behind on its stem some sweaty fingerprints, and revealed microscopic droplets of vapour on its perforated microphone. Lauren had once got red callouses on her hands from gripping the surface too tightly, likewise she was jilted once before for the same reason by Bertram, the father of her child Claiborne: once before she was obliged to learn from her mistake: that of holding on too tightly to the wrong sort, she instilled too much faith in their trust in a world where nobody cared about anyone else. Inevitably Lauren became detached, quasi-jilted, permanently distanced by and from her previous social set. Inevitably the CULT would appear, as always, at the opportune moment like a row of bonuses on a slots machine, them all pulsating crazily in flashes of brightness; but a wise totem, a good investment anyway maybe to the weak. En-route to collecting the ex-husband, again anyone could have seen her muscles standing out when she was holding the steering wheel in the car too firmly. It was also easy for anyone to foretell that the weekend might not go quite as she had assumed it would go. Bertram, however, seemed to have perceived this and dismissed the observation as nothing to worry about, which was exactly what he should not have done given the leader’s unrequited love. She divested to him that the leader’s presence might not be exactly what he wanted, considering that Bertram had been slightly underhand of late: in view of the fact that he hasn’t even paid child maintenance for the last three months and in terms of being open and honest, but his foresight was limited to say the least. Trees flashed by, cars and lorry’s too, everyone pointed themselves towards the city of entitlement to culture, and as a countryside stays in place, with forbearance turning a blind eye to the motorway at its feet, only a very tiny minority not inclusive of Bertram saw their future, in the perennial manner, contain what they hoped it did.

The Bertram’s wrong assumption about Rudy had planted itself irrevocably, like the central reservation in the middle of the road dividing the cars and lorries, but with one essential discrepancy: that the barrier protected, while his silly expectation simply attacked: established wisdom, boring or exciting planned-for results, overinflated and hyper-intense balloons of desire are numbed by his method of assuming things were fine.

Total autocratic conformity featured in the CULT followers mundane rites of passage, and there at the Sanctuary, without the plutocratic leaders say so there were no mirages, nor any miracles. Here there were not any daredevil and beautiful, reckless but materialistic false hopes just the everyday banalities. A narrow set of likenesses flew up between the uniform identities of the schoolchildren like Claiborne with their mandatory undone laces, and loosened ties, and the exactly identical problems of the followers, of which paths to take in life: the one that brought freedom, or the one that has for the reaping the greater reward, the CULT before subversive human liberty, one of mind over matter, perhaps.

Bertram and Denny ensconced themselves in Birmingham that day, plumes of some type of smoke creating a dense fog in their home which they lacked the vigour to clean out and aerate before their visitors’ imminent arrival. Lauren’s personal history, fabricated by Bertram, in an amalgam of lies and slanders composed in the main of excuses that the oligarchic leader when put together with Lauren, made “a right pair”. Although he had nothing against snobbery and posh-frock per se, they made a “pair of ponces” as Bertram declaimed, when you looked at it. As the CULT was known as funded for no reason other than the leader’s parents’ fairly successful businesses, Rudy said by way of preparation for their imminent arrival to Denny that he was not expecting it – the weekend ahead, to be “exactly a barrel of laughs”, and that Denny might have to find some amusement some other way. Denny chuckled at his nephew’s gross insinuations, and with hardly a whiff of apprehensiveness awaited his first meeting with the all-mighty leader.

Bertram’s excuse for disgruntlement could only be that since Lauren had left female charms had evaded him, since Lauren had left him the sexual side of things was casual, not serious, short-lived, not diurnal, inconsequential not geared towards possession, or to kindred minds meeting in unison. He grew irate with waiting. Expecting all the while some horrible demands for money as donations from the leader.

That the potential truth or falsity of their two, opposed standpoints on the universe counted to no more than pieces of eight for a pirate captain, deriving from their sociological stance, was never flung out of the ballpark as an idea by febrile Lauren’s perceptions. It probably provided an excuse for more of the same banter, and derision for them that weekend in spring. For the pirate captain for whom pieces of eight were his only chance for non-mutinous cabin crew, likewise for Bertram it was patently unfair that this offspring of his had become such an obstacle to any hint of romance in his life when he was so rich and handsome to boot.

On the way to picking up Rudy the taxi van drove past one after another petrol station, through the parts of town that have disused churches and lottery terminals dotted about everywhere at every few hundred yards. From the kiosks to the pumps, from shop-fronts to foyers, everything was motionless, immobile, marvellously silent, as the taxi van, with its rubberized, electronic whirr, its alkaline and non-metallic piston sounds, drove across the two suburban neighbourhoods, greedily hunting, avariciously seeking the his escarpment in the nodes of Manchester. A part of the town that silently cried out that happiness did exist but the lottery dream did not lead to it.

When they arrived, the driver stated twenty pounds, the meter in the taxi hitting the driver’s estimate with precision, as the taxi reached a halt and time disappeared altogether thereafter, Lauren slid her notes from her walnut dyed, suede purse given her as a present by the all-seeing leader. Turning around to face Claiborne, she sensed without showing it the driver gawping at her daughter, unmindful of his payment: “Does he reckon I’ll be “none the wiser”?” she speculated inadvertently, but it seemed now that he was peering out the side window at Rudy attacking with shears the garden hedge now that he was advancing shambolically down the path to the thick double yellow line that stretched uniformly, and as expected, from where he is to the roundabout on Bolton Avenue.

Lauren’s thoughts are only of her squandered, rapidly dwindling twenty thousand pounds worth of ISA, so much so that any amount reached into her innermost recesses and tug at her equilibrium making her struggle to see anything clearly anymore even the twenty pounds, excluding tip. At the shop, she’d been enthused by Claiborne’s sweet nature that never demanded more than a sachet of sweets, but here the taxi driver appeared to have turned into a rasping lizard ready to poison her, his skin tone grimy and his eyes slits, simply for not seeming to care about her shrinking savings account, in the least? Of subsidiary relevance was that she was continually deluding herself that money was not a struggle of the roughest sort for everybody at the CULT, as well. Except Rudy .

She pushed open the whining passenger door of the taxi for herself. She mumbled her thanks to the driver because something else was preying upon her mind like a plumb line tracking her moves drawing her mood to the depths. She was hard pressed to try to recognise their leader for who and what he was. A useless, expendable component to an CULT, or more preferably, the formal prerequisite to a successful and valid love life.

The leader’s perpetual presence already seemed like a small time crook’s pension – gone before it arrived. She brought Claiborne over to him, and remarked fondly to him what a great father in law he would be, if only he did not fritter his inheritance, and his admirable qualities, away on the petty and the trivial new religious movement which he firmly believed consistent with hailing from “advantaged stock.” As it would not be long before her ISA’s were all dissolved and Claiborne had no prospects of staying buoyant, Lauren noticed Rudy was more and more tied into Claiborne’s welfare; floating now like a line cast on the surface of the water by a patient fisherman, her small daughter might soon be, she feared, gradually tending to submerge beneath out of view. How near or how far from the inevitable poverty line they were just depended on the all-knowing leader who she wished to keep ignorant of her and Claiborne’s sorry state. That time lay ahead. Having glanced over her shoulder, the taxi had gone to another fare or some lizard’s hole where she herself could not exercise influence.

Deciding as she walked in it would be a bit of a nightmare and it would bear the hallmarks of virtual infidelity to leave the leader “out of the loop” and “in the dark” about the Almanack proffered to Claiborne, she decided to show it to him at the next viable moment under a pretext of simple fun.

She said she thought that what was otherwise a very boring afternoon sitting around in the conservatory could be revived and resuscitated with news of the chanced upon Almanack’s very real, very groundbreaking capabilities, and she hoped it could pique his interest somehow, stir him up to even dizzier activities than she had done, a few weeks earlier. Because when she had returned from her cleaning up tasks that specific evening his excitement at the Almanack and its prospects were pale and wilted in comparison to hers. He appeared at the doorway to the lounge sounding a lot less pleased than when she talked to him when he had been at the other end of the phone a few weeks ago. So this made her feel resentful and highly suspicious, almost more concerned than she would possibly ever admit to being, at any point in time since their relationship was conceived two years before.

However, this time there was a discordant note within his manner which always used to be the signal for her to open up, to explain things he didn’t understand. The minute as far as they were concerned the obligatory formalities were over, and they conducted Claiborne out of the room to have her fun alone upstairs, she told him the Almanack could probably still hold some material value if treated and handled respectfully and carefully. This somewhat discordant note came over him, and he began to ask for a succession of clear answers to pertinent questions, such as: to whom did it belong, where on earth did the Almanack come from, why could it have such magnificent and incomparable value in her opinion? What if she was proven wrong and it was indeed a red herring, for example?

For a long time, he thought himself sorely pressed to resuscitate offers of independent financial help, but appreciating the perils of such blunt gifts made it difficult, and he literally steamrolled his way over to the Almanack that he had never seen before to find out more about it. He resisted admission of the fact that he did not only know full well about them, but felt guilty continually, conscious of Lauren’s embarrassments and the perils of her decreasing savings and ISAs. He must have, couldn’t fail to have noticed the urgency of her need of his help. He must have known to revive her lustre really did need a boon of some sort or another, and the Almanack was exactly that.

Taking the magical booklet up and fairly roughly manhandling it he shook it open as though some sort of unimportant piece of kitsch art he, the collector, was loath to be associated with, but one that held a promise he was highly reluctant to have to point out to others as a leader of an CULT.

Lauren thought now, fair or unfair, this Almanack supposed for Claiborne and for Claiborne alone. Yet here was the leader reading it through, and without any interest. He was doomed to drastically underestimate its providence without any even slight curiosity about its strange codes, its abstract and cryptic designs, and the ordered templates it had the power to actuate. Miserably he attempted to weigh up its qualities in terms of its inherent value as an antiquated eschatological item – its age, and its authorship, were more important measures to working out whether to flog it at auction before Claiborne grew fond of it, or on the other hand to keep it as a museum relic and lose out financially, and allow Claiborne’s amusing but almost pathetic attachment to flourish still further.

The cryptic and hidden messages, adding up to too many in number, often looked indecipherable; the pictures and diagrams, amounting to complex charts and fulfilling no ostensible purpose, looked alien and slightly frightening. Yet the leader, sometimes issuing a ho-hum or a brief ah-ha, kept scouring the coded messages, flicking his thick thumb onwards through the two hundred leaf manual. Lauren thought it right erroneously to provide a sort of polite canopy for his total lack of faith in it. Especially because neither Lauren nor the leader had yet approached anywhere near to the point or metanoiac space where they must bear in mind they could muster the insight to pierce the veil, and see a link between the Raffle, and this Almanack here it was tough.

He leaned towards it, and then jerking his head up, looked steadily over and said to Lauren:

“Might as well just let Claiborne use the book of codes – we don’t need it.” The reasoning went that they did not stand to gain nearly as much from it as an eleven year old girl might. The reasoning went that he foresaw he couldn’t persuade even an auctioneer to put it on the open market, owing to the rough and ready quality with which it defended itself as some perverse trinket or collectable.

Lauren felt awfully guilty she had created a certain amount of needless worry for her beau. He wanted her to dispose of the Almanack as soon as possible, and she regretted drawing him into this whole pointless palaver. But more than that, his tactic of sounding nonplussed gradually seemed to have less sincerity and to have backfired. Lauren presumed that his sudden quavering nonsense signalled more that the booklet should be discarded as a cheapened and tattered fraud, as a specific danger or thing that they might have needed to steer Claiborne and her puerile curiosity away from, rather than perceive more as a mysterious and divinely inspired coda, or riddle-solver.

For the foreseeable future, the leader and Lauren rested upon a level of maturity and expertise so that the scripts and tables, these diagrams and representations, led them nowhere important. As a backdrop the Almanack : like a disqualification, or a rejection, or like a failed exam: a slice of misfortune which was inspired by despair or depravity that cannot lead anywhere of note other than by acting as a means to a greater despair or depravity, like the forces of darkness can often do, the Almanack Claiborne deemed exceptionally dangerous.

Sometime soon, Rudy ’s permission notwithstanding the Almanack would, on another level, lead Claiborne to unheralded and unforeseen treasure by virtue of the fact that she was on a different level to that older and less juvenile one that rested by twisting paths latent and dormant between its covers that meant the adults failed abysmally to take heed of the obvious secrets. With her comparative youth still unspent, with her innocence as an acquisition untainted, and with guileless observations intact, the supernatural booklet was to become for her some time later a ventricle of especially good fortune. To describe it in detail: the bookmarks, built in, silk or satin, red or russet, smooth in texture and a centimetre and a half in breadth, were not the only signs that its creator had long ago in 1950 inserted or integrated a plasma, a membrane of good quality into its production. However, from a mature adult point of view, the book existed indeed merely as a quirky version of a treasure map, from even another perspective, Claiborne’s, a roughly-hewn mishmash of haphazard clues and pointers that probably led its owner, even if they endowed it with purpose and gravitas, to a dead end, to such an amount of wasted time for its owner, that you would have to realise that it felt far less tiresome guessing your way to the end of a rainbow.

From the latter point of view, one set aside afterwards for those in the CULT and the super-troopers and the smirch-less, the manual gave the secret answer to a question, the reply to a challenge that could really hide so clandestinely and so covertly that only a person of inner goodness, un-besmirched, could see or translate, its hidden message and its prophetic codes. Because whereas Lauren possessed especially good fortune to acquire the Scytale only a few months prior to this, she was also inclined to vast and enormous dissatisfaction or querulousness as her past was not clean, nor her brain’s pickings unsullied nor immature enough, to fully combine the two halves of the equation: Scytale from the attic, and the Almanack’s twenty-two pages of scrolls.

The whole community, not just the CULT, in other words, would have been very interested to hear of the Almanack, and its twin the Scytale, to use them to fully understand the local Raffle, at the earliest possible moment. After translating those ostensibly atypical and even idiotic scribbles, scrawls and doodles in Indian ink, laid out for the perspective of a less wise viewpoint to lay claim to, into their higher and more irrational purpose. But Claiborne and Claiborne had had the perfect set up, and they knew the combination full well constituted a scowling barrier to any such happy and mellifluous outcome that might be prefigured by the community.

CHAPTER 12

I jump forwards a few months. Although one end was untied, loosely unfinished, Naomi was now lounging at home in her new maisonette, immersed in the business of passing the hours until she could speed over to The Sanctuary, to the crime scene, to relocate her missing fob. The dilemma was what to choose to tackle first: the fact that she hadn’t found her silver and gold trinket, or that she had to decide what could be done about Adler.

At times like these when she needed to watch a bout of afternoon television, she’d usually have a little smoke, a bowl of leek and potato soup or something, and settle back to vegetate there in her parents’ living room, but today the procedure was a bit different. She was slightly phased and stressed out even, this was no surprise considering what she was planning to do later which was blatantly trespass all over the formal lawns at The Sanctuary. Initially she appeared not to care a whit for her own protection (which was in rude health) but slowly and progressively she became more and more alarmed:

“I have to prepare her for me going out later,” she thought, and went through to the barely furnished kitchen leaving the television to pipe its sad old refrains, to speak to her mother visiting on a whim.

Agatha featuring at her home for the first time in the present story, was a strange, little, proud lady with high moral values, thick spectacles and absolutely no idea what nasty games the rest of her diabolical family liked to spend their time playing. In the past there was a generally assented to decision to keep her out of the limelight as she was “not good with that sort of thing”.

“Mother of mine, can we leave supper tonight as I want to go out – fairly late though so I’m telling you in advance.” Naomi was carelessly ransacking the drawers and cupboards in the kitchenette, feigning an interest in the sparse contents of the apparently empty fridge all the while.

“Well, thanks for telling me. That’s not like you, what on earth has brought about this change?” She was acting as cool, savvy, and wise as she could that night, given few raw materials to work with being seventy-nine and very aware of it.

“Oh, just some guy I met.” Naomi, to contrast her parents Morris and Agatha, had always evaded the rules and regulations of her household when staying there to a far greater extent than her appalled, traditional mother was able to put up with. Despite this grievance, Agatha found it hilarious to mock her child's wayward idiosyncrasies, as they were long-standing oddities. By this and by setting no disciplinary example whatsoever Agatha had incurred the satirical smiles and cold glances of everyone in the community of Ramsgate who knew of her ways since moving there long ago in 1987.

“Oh just some guy eh? Well good luck then.” She thought “Oh no, not another crazy guy,” but said nothing more.

“I can look after myself.” Naomi adeptly wasted no time in bragging of her talents. She knew she must stop Agatha's frowning, and make her think she was not just a rebellious but senile delinquent, or else she would find some effective way to clamp down on her illicit activities at once.

Her daughter pounced on favoured people like Morris as examples of the type of person who made her feel safe. Morris, who she’d met only twice, as a black star in the firmament was not to be followed, but avoided, ignored or derided as a scurrilous hoodlum. Naomi maybe hadn’t a clue about Herr Pirsig who had wrecked Bertram life, but also she might too easily have guessed who he was not: those guys that Morris hung out with so often from The Sanctuary.

The spliced age gap was often being slurred, contorted, and only too frequently both extreme ends of the age spectrum collided as one.

Yet, the seriously ageist slant of their kids, without exception, created one inevitable barrier to freedom for the older generation. Morris and Agatha in Ramsgate were daily witnesses to an undermining and a condescension which knew no bounds, and Agatha could rightfully blame her misguided child for this the harshest of prejudicial treatment. The leader was the only one who thought that both Lauren and Naomi's mother Agatha were such sophisticated retired ladies that they deserved nothing other than to be well-treated because of, not in spite of, their adventures.

Naomi would, I am certain, have matured into a great matriarch herself were it not for those nameless, profane and ineffable lies told by her friends to her bigoted family when she first arrived, sick and browbeaten, at The Sanctuary.

It had been only a few weeks and already Morris and the rest had joined forces to falsify and edit all there was to find out about her and her mother's backgrounds, ambitions, illnesses, and the whole ethos of their family life. All was treated ironically, if not sardonically, with such convinced surefootedness that anyone from the police force expressing an interest in their interrogations was left floundering, and mired in deception.

“Naomi, do I seem to you like a go-getting kind of girl?” She’d ask, having her doubts over whether she had been left behind or not during the prolonged crises: of mismanagement, of not enough money, of arguments, and of strange hostilities.

“I don’t know yet what sort of woman you are, mum, I'll wait and see.” She thought to herself “one more idiotic question like that and I’ll put her up for the loony bin or something.” She never got the chance to carry out her vocalised threats, she was more mellow, Naomi, than she was generally considered in the village, town, home or wherever.

At that moment in time, in case any member of the public have got preconceived ideas about them, the aged hipsters Morris and Agatha weren’t really as far removed from these rebellious urchins on the premises as the younger ageists made out they were when they finally opened everyone’s whole life up to the newspapers.

Without wanting to make a comment generally about something that specific, the next generation might say that both of the parents were rebellious in their own right, but in the ordinary ways like cursing, vomiting after parties or having casual sex. For far more than a two- or three-year period maybe they could have partaken in that in the 1970s, but Morris said they had to have relinquished those enslaving addictions before they reached an age when it started to look a bit stupid.

If immaturity can and probably will exist right through your life unless you wake up one day and question, as Naomi was often doing by now, where did it all go so matter-of-factly wrong? If at the age of thirty she sought to capture and tame her wild side, and to reform in a manner of speaking then to mellow out somewhere nobody could track her down to cast her another line; if this happened she would have planned to have sought refuge in a maisonette in Brampton near The Sanctuary there to weather time gracefully.

To admit she was promiscuous, youthful, juvenilely emotional was defeat but was at the same time a byword for self-realization in many cases, especially in that of Naomi. It took her a few years and a lot of guts to know herself properly but truly, insightfully but without outside aid. It was no easy task for her, as she had always had these various mistaken conceptions about her somewhat tacky, careless, childishly shambling image, and her arrogated power to:

a) attract men whether they were superficial made no difference, she had easy access to them it was just a matter of charming them carefully and not running into dangerous situations.

b) fend off false ideas if anyone tried to cast her a line, take her for a ride or rip her off because although naïve and immature she possessed insight that was not taught by the education system and that often went unnoticed.

c) be charming for others and always maintain the outward semblance of politeness to others that her parents fervently hoped to inculcate in her and to always try to evade gross impoliteness even when pushed too far.

d) have style whether bought or acquired from shops or boutiques or assimilated in some other way, and to not brag or show off but to be supplely underhand or secretive so none of the wrong sort would know.

e) perceive errors and see assiduously to the inner core of things like government illusion, criminal bribery, drug shame, guilty pleasures once tasted never forgotten.

f) own a wealth of spirit derived from an urge to magnify and exult the spiritual over her own carnal lust, but also to often devolve to her own maxims and aphorisms.

g) master an ability to apologise whether she believed it or not was beside the point if it was expected and was considered right by those important around her she mastered it.

Brutally put Naomi was not a genius, but you’d readily forgive her for she had, it was not to be doubted, attained a first class university degree in physics, through showing a singular conceit and ability to conjure new ideas of one sort. The singular conceit was a quickness to outwardly fault her tutors and her somewhat annoying ex-chorister mentor, but where this would lead nobody told her because she never turned their words inward on herself, and moreover as a dabbler in the dark arts of witchcraft her muse was of the sordid variety, so it was usually over-ridden as innocuous. To be brutally clear, she possessed a rare amount of defective reasoning. Yet despite this the tutors at the university had been given permission to portray her as so kind, divinely led and self-effacingly charming. Naomi had not been depicted as some messed up, agitated and silly, yet also blandly superficial girl.

For the simple fact it would have to be that her conceits never harmed anyone other than by words, and she never meant to wound others, though she was certainly hurting herself when she grew doleful and baleful; to be pointed, she tried to help with many things like the mentor's concerts, like the boring chores connected to attaining a degree from a top flight university and her useless mother’s victim status but invariably landed up criticising or voicing dissent against anybody she met.

Elemental, and dark magical forces seemed, at times, to aim at her for outright satisfaction. To aim at her for some kind of personal vendetta on the part of the owners of this microscopic system she hated but that we are all tiny cogs in the machinery of. The same forces tried to stop execution of righteousness in the intricately constructed social and moral texture of this random town she returned to after university.

Certainly Naomi by no stretch of the imagination continued to enjoy the luxury of a “good life” after Pirsig's interruptions, and sadly, tumescent sickness waylaid her body soon after she left home, and after Adler tried to invade the family enclave. Her voices of dissent got her nowhere.

As their lives took a turn for the worse, she resorted to flopping in front of the television for solace, and other pursuits of the depressed and lonely. In her zealous attempts to locate a metaphorical painkiller, a placebo was picked up but the effects of the fever never assuaged. Notwithstanding the hyperbolically facetious singular conceit she was always right, or at least correct, in matters connected to her family. Yet is that statement true when it was generally accepted that she changed things after the fact to fit her envisioned dogma, or that ideas fell into place once she had pronounced her statements, as if every atom under the sun except her mentor would have longed to comply with her dictatorial sayings, her common-place commands?

As with things and her ideas so the composite parts in the natural world seemed to have a tendency to align themselves with her dictates: such as, telling her mother not to see a new boyfriend who was a bad influence and then the worst nightmare she had ever taken for granted and the boyfriend flicked her off for her faithfulness; and such as issuing directives that meant her brother might never be granted permission to become a Wiccan, could this output of hers have encouraged the atoms, the rocks, the hills and the mountains to despise the entire Dean family? “You mustn’t mess him around anymore” She told her daughter. “I won't listen to that. Please just leave me alone” She argued trying to find refuge from these incessant, garbled, and to her nonsensical, but to her mother strategic manoeuvres.

\* \* \*

For the Nivat family circle, Marlowe place was an enormous sprawling pile, made up of numerous additions added over the centuries, the original house mainly comprised of a galleried hall house, though it was far more than that today. To be fair, it was massive to everyone else too, for that was an objective and scientific appraisal of the outer facts of its construction, but there was more to this house than met the eye and it struck the Nivat family fully head on. I must have noticed Bertram completely gob smacked when taking in the sight of this vast edifice with Lauren's smiling, appreciatively special references to the size of the wallet necessary to afford the upkeep. As he stood shakily gawping at its design charms and developed a mounting taste for this exotic creation that was "elephantine," and a mounting distaste for his own relative impecunity my feelings of wrath presumably had found their source.

The other factor, that Bertram was criminally engaged with his affliction: a drug habit whilst the previous residents of The Sanctuary were ostensibly at any rate uprightly honest and making their multi-million fortunes from firmer foundations such as the hectares of arable land in the environs, he was outstripped and over shadowed in both our opinions by that. Standing their ground firmly, Lauren straining to see the roof in the warm September sunshine, holding the massive house’s architectural beauty in the palms of her outstretched hands and not for one moment contemplating the notion that the gigantic house might be tarnished, possibly the only ever dreamt of product of ill-gotten gains, she said: “You can see it for miles around” She commented: “Are you annoyed?” and then: “Well if you aren’t I think you’re an idiot” She added.

“I’m no fool except if I actually listened to you.” Bertram said.

“Make some more money, then” she said.

“Why? We’ve got enough to be going on with” he said.

“Maybe you don’t know how.” She thought his indelible, habitual crimes were wrong, but her main priority in putting up with him was that the people of her class and stature didn’t usually make any sort of decent living at all, so she fell under his charms rapidly and easily for the sake of a nicely secure life, but now the moment had come that she wanted more. She needed to provide vital bulk and hefty importance to her diminutive frame's unprepossessing shape with an independent home of size and stature whether he could economically afford to give it or not. “I don’t want you breaking the law ever again, Bertram Nivat.” She said. “Where did that non sequitur come from?” He asked her.

“From heaven, where else?” She could see it now in front of her in a vision of her husband embarking on a great rise to the top of the social scale with treats galore, ovations from admirers, shoals of children, and a full not empty conscience so unspotted she could turn her nose up at anyone with the rife insults and the encouragements to take the swarthy businessman on, even at those already living in the best, most winsome rooms in The Sanctuary. This vision was not that imaginative or inventive and she squarely refused to see the implications of it, for instance, infidelity not fidelity to her husband and much more than a milligram of social climbing went undiscovered by her for as long as he did not know. Though her husband sounded ostensibly as if he had a good vantage point on this matter with which he tried to expel her dissatisfaction, he had none really and her dreamt for successes fell shy of their mark yet once again.

“Those guys who live there, they’re awful, you wouldn’t like them, they’re too posh for the likes of us, their children and their snobby friends with their suits and ties. They need binoculars to see us worker ants slaving away just to make a crust of bread" he was trying to express this, but was too proud of and pleased with his wife that he ran from the concomitant risk of splitting with her there and then as a result of spiking her visions with a fair dosage of rationality. They were indeed dwarfed, yet Bertram’s antagonism and envy and malice gave Lauren a really big but highly unjust lift in the town’s popularity contest.

The old, wizened Abbey on the two-hundred acre plot of land at The Sanctuary, which nestled neatly on a mound between two ancient river-ways, one more of a rivulet, was years later after purchase incredibly well maintained, until the Dean entourage began renting it out lucratively for pop concerts and naff weddings.

The Abbey itself was a microcosm of society in that it ran on a strictly ordered system, based upon the Dean entourage’s intent not to alienate their surroundings but to shape and mould the Abbey and thereby imbue it with fresh pathos, almost some might say shut themselves off from the world and in from metaphysical storms and rain and at one point Morris was so afraid of the solely hypothetical reality of a stalker with a gun he had been accused of madness, yet Lauren’s notions of romantic glories persisted.

According to the internal ramifications of such a cosmos the Deans led an enviable and extremely interesting, luxuriating and safe yet hardly outgoing existence there, countering this the internal reality of their degraded, lonely abode was a heavy box with a strong lid closed.

Rich and poor. Excitement and boredom. Friends or enemies. It was never doubted that a cross purpose between polarities, a combination of the two which could never really be separate existed. But, exactly what measurement of crossfade was the key, was of the utmost importance and veracity and depended on the way you combined them together, Lauren pointed out. The extent of cross purposes was realized by combining opposite theses, Bertram agreed. Either degrading poverty or intrinsic luxury and whether you wanted it enough, this plagued Lauren and Bertram enormously since they nearly became the great downtrodden after Herr Pirsig had employed the Muslim lone wolf on the terror train to work his magic with indestructible force, and to hopefully he thought create what was known as “the Nivat dormant account”.

“Perhaps I could learn a lesson about how to diddle a banker type for future reference.” Said the aged Agatha to Naomi Dean, as she cogitated on the universal associated problems, as she strove to achieve global closure from any quarter about the miscarriage of justice in connection to the Nivat’s grandfather’s leftover inheritance, fourteen years of illness later.

This her quest for information was definitely her passion and her cue to greater higher ideals which continued well into the night each and every night that she soberly perhaps a little proudly stayed awake without moving a muscle and without disturbing anyone else, keeping it all bottled up, and people seeing the occasional light in the bathroom window flicked on for a minute and off again in the depths of the night. She vainly hankered after something like the sublime solution and gravitas to the exclusion of everything else, including: Morris’s memory, his emotional fulfilment, her activity, and her imagination. Lost, she languished privately until she eventually passed away in her early nineties.

CHAPTER 13

Pirsig whispered to no-one in particular that in the box-files, amongst the notes a journal entry said there was likely to be a kind of posse of rogues following Bertram’s every ordinary step. His dormant account in Switzerland attracted applause, it brought on parties, it rejected apathy, it served to impress the pimps and the dealers in their manipulative attempts to remove this newly found money from somebody they considered a hopeless loser.

Bertram told his family that he was going to go to some high powered business meetings but he had never described these foolhardy and frequent and also expensive journeys to distant towns in any great amount of close focus nor detail when he returned afterwards empty-handed. And it was left to his wife Lauren’s candour to imagine what information she wanted to entertain herself with: idyllic fictions about how Bertram was comparatively addicted to work, and how he set about earning the meagre supply of money that kept the family afloat until his father died, and it dawned his trips were more exuberantly clichéd and formulaically intense, and less blandly proverbial.

“Doubt old Bertram senior would be keeping a low profile after this one” she said.

“It’ll be the same: everything classified” he said mockingly.

“Making money, tons of it for other people presumably and never talking about it” she said.

“You’ll get a share one day” he said.

“Geneva is an amazing place” he said.

“Yes, it is an amazing place but you went there all those years ago and I don’t think the bosses down there want you around ever again” His wife Lauren said.

Bertram Nivat had sometimes bought certain political reviews and he encouraged Lauren and his daughter Lauren to watch only the right wing news channels. Skim reading the reviews he could be observed not really absorbing the stories. He would flick through the channels impiously on the television news updates while he reflected humorously often and at great length that the stories were some sort of running joke:

“He reacted to any news stories he disliked in a mad, bad way when moments earlier peace would have reigned supreme,” said Lauren to Lauren.

The point gleaned here was he would never willingly proffer or release any real or potential clues about his work for the company and diverted attention away from his business jaunts. Except for the extreme minimum, which Lauren and Lauren dearly needed him to furnish them with, a few words here and there was the nearest they got to basic facts, and they had to surmise the remainder, the sheer discreetness of Switzerland feeling morbidly depressing.

Before the sad death of Bertram senior came about, Lauren had later learned the only knowledge he’d willingly divulge was that old grandfather Nivat had made by his low standards vast sums (something to do with the markets) and Lauren had had to at least pretend to trust him; not because she was necessarily that naïve, but because largely he had a mock-dictator’s attitude: irascibly he’d go into that self-same mode that clarified the many right-wing principles in the Nivat family which suppressed opposition to the head of the household fourteen or more years ago when Bertram senior was alive, but not anymore.

“A tiny bit schizoid wasn’t he,“ she said.

“That was below the belt, Lauren,” Lauren said.

“Well, you hated him too ,” Lauren said.

“No that is not true, I'm looking out for your best interests you must be quiet“ she said.

“Everyone knew he was a Schizoid and it’s embarrassing. He never spoke properly to anyone.” Lauren continued.

“Listen dearest, you’ll have to leave me alone, if you can’t say anything nice.” Lauren said.

“Are you telling me to shut up?” Lauren shouted.

“She’s out of her mind you know, completely out of control.” Her father said turning away.

“Hmm.” Lauren only mumbled in reply.

You’d have needed to pay an army of spies to find out anything old Nivat didn’t want you to know back in those days, Bertram used to say about his father. Wrongly or rightly, it just didn’t matter anymore to Bertram senior though as long as he kept his fortune.

On the local scene old Nivat senior had been a misnomer. He had an attitude that people liked but his son thought they could tell he was desperately ashamed of something unidentified. His falsified ignorance of his own huge net worth was clearly not something anybody could have known about, except from knowing about the whispered about box-files in the cabinets in Geneva.

\* \* \*

We can relate it was a chilled, but also palpably raw Sunday afternoon in April that was literally and metaphorically bursting out at the seams with alternative avenues for sensuous amusement. However, Lauren, thinking or rather hoping Bertram both faulty and erratic was not in any grave trouble; that he had chosen to follow his head over his heart; he had opted not to disembark from reason right there in order to pass the horrifically grey lassitude and the invisible increments of time that afternoon in an idiosyncratic and drugged up fugue or its equivalent.

On one of the few occasions she was behaving according to her lights a few hours later, Lauren said: “Hey, dad, why are you standing by the phone? You look like you’re expecting someone to call,” she said, “You’ve made about a dozen calls in the last half an hour and nobody has rung back. What’s so important, you’re practically wearing a hole in the carpet from pacing up and down.”

“No. No-ones planning on calling me” He said flatly.

“Then why don’t you do something rather than just stand there beside the thing, waiting? Seems to the rest of us you’re just wasting time or something. It’d be better if you want to speak to people if you came and talked to me. I’ve got an idea, we can talk about your trip to Geneva,” said Lauren, without once revealing her misgivings.

Later that night, led by sensuous urges he couldn’t comprehend fully aright he both deviated from the normative values of family and society, at the same time, as he subtly crossed the empty and decrepit car-park towards the dank veranda which, in about fifteen minutes, is where we know he will supposedly be joining a friend of his in club Sinestra – yes yet another mere casual visit to a prostitute’s brothel.

CHAPTER 14

Sadly, two decades earlier, Naomi only managed to acquire very few close friends in the eighties asides from Morris and maybe Bertram. While she was cutting footloose either by writing poems, exercising at yoga or singing tunes, she was usually left alone. She was by her lonesome self now. She was looking at her fingernails with disgust, examining them, thinking how distasteful they looked, and how much less distasteful they would be if they were trimmed again. She retained an element of dismay, but she simultaneously realized that although cleanliness may have been next to Godliness, hatred, spite and consuming envy were far further away from God than mere specks of dirt under His fingernails. She was not volunteering today. Usually she went down, moribund, to the local council library at ten a.m. She did not enjoy her job there, but saw it as a personal sacrifice, a useful job, a valuable one and last but not least, altruistic. She avoided human contact in her actions, and although she would have preferred to have a lot more money, tried unsuccessfully not to be greedy, and to make sufficient what she was in a miniature way blessed to have received from on high.

As it was said she was letting herself go, this time by reading a novel which she did not do rapturously, voraciously, or winsomely… trying to decide what she could do out of doors which will be both enjoyable and, more essentially, not hurt anyone else. One of her worst fears was that she might one day accidentally harm, or even kill someone while carelessly enjoying the fun sports or recreational pursuits most people of her age got up to: dances, parties, presumably riotous group events.

About five years previously on the other hand she was one of those who took full part in events with their age group; now after all she has been put through, and now after she has survived according to herself relatively unharmed, Naomi wholeheartedly thought Morris and Bertram retarded, she actually despised her naughty, wicked past, and longed to prove herself worthy of a truer sort of heaven with the New Religious Movement. She came from a more than fairly privileged background as Morris's daughter, so she used to expect to almost be dealt with by anybody at all in a particular way, automatically. Now she has learnt the maxim that not to get murdered or assailed by gloomy misery she had to be on her “best behaviour”. This was not always automatic.

Even now as she took care of her toilette and prepared to go and have a coffee for the sake of a harmless diversion she sensed something going awry in the stilted atmosphere. She disregarded that; she was not just mega-sensitive. Someone out there, from her loftily elevated past still hated her and her habits. All up to their old tricks, up to their necks in it, involved in drugs, weapons &c. and getting off scot-free. Just having a few moments of fun, it was harmless in those days, childish amusement and pranks, and par for the course at The Sanctuary. That meant it wasn’t fair the way she was made a scapegoat and had to take the punishment and get sent to another much worse maisonette in Brampton road by the head nurse only for the rest of Morris and Bertram’s friends to escape undamaged. So she had decided. She’d decided that the only honest course of action was to purify herself in thought and deed until there was not a trace left of her old, happy and cheerful, yet very wayward and highly selfish personality. She found herself hating that which peopled her memories, however she left the house planning to go to the café taking a route that was longer but more scenic and bypassed the drug den they all went to as a gang five or six years ago, or thereabouts.

These days, hatred of friendship welled up within her fairly frequently. And the more this happened to empoison her, the more she apologized to an omniscient being who must have formally existed out there, a numinous deity. As she exited the basement flat, she was really in a foul mood. Then after the frantic apologies made not without effort to the white blank wall suddenly a momentary good, benevolent mood replaced the stain of dissent, the angst, the wrath on the metaphorical barometer. Initially she stopped, leaning on the door jamb saying: "Oh God, I wish I'd shake off this temper, it's no good I'm not going anywhere." She decided not to go out and to put a brave face on.

Naomi’s exact age was still out of focus but not for much longer. How on earth she came to be living in this nice but tiny flat with only two rooms and one window in Ramsgate town was equally saddening as it was confusing to see the plight of the senile whom society had discarded.

Whether she was known as a victim of a delusive fantasist like Rudy from the cult, or a successful innocent party like Morris was another point left for the moment to mental aptitudes for suspense and specifically individual vivid imaginations. She was the one of the five or six stainless pensioners who disappeared in about 1987 from their difficult block of flats in Kent called The Sanctuary, to return only to their children and grandchildren in the hearths of their homes with much altered characters. She was found five years afterwards, in 1993, on her own and morose and with seemingly no real desire to explain to anyone in the public sphere how she had eluded danger and existed without creating any trails for the last five or six years of her life, her destroyed and guiltless life.

At seventy-three years old she looked totally and utterly bored earlier that morning, and was perched on the window ledge, while looking obliquely at the pavement above her basement flat, for some reason. She couldn’t see much more than the shoes and trouser legs of the pedestrians, but she surprised herself and found a fleeting amusement in them nonetheless. It was worrying her that somebody might pause and start to look down here and see her half naked in a dressing gown. "I'm pathetic really, this is me being a coward as usual." She thought. However, nobody poked their noses down yet so she waited and she sat cross-legged without a break for three hours seeing a lot of people walk by in that time. The time elapsed and the warmth of the café’s ambience beckoned but everything seemed the same as it was before to her. Agatha’s assorted possessions lay strewn beside her, growing more cheerful she looked over at her smart Filofax and handbag, and the various possessions she had held onto:

But not haphazardly.

“On the small, rectangular bedside table was the only item in the flat with which she could be identified: a wallet with about thirty-five pounds cash in it,” Bertram Nivat had read on board the Eurostar as it was trolleying for a smooth departure from Ashford international.

“She was never going to sort these objects out, rearrange them, tidy them up for she didn’t need to. The sitting room itself was hardly normal. A rubbish heap with entrails of living and sleeping diffused about the corners, and with what remained of cleanliness just a tiny rectangular patch in the centre of the room; but in contrast to this her home, her universe in its entirety was exceptionally clean, pure and pristine,” he read. As he heard himself say this and looked over, he heard Lauren ordering a drink from the stewardess. She had got slightly irate, expecting as she was a reply to her carefully composed remarks about money.

Importantly, she kept the bedroom in a wrecked state, not for anyone else’s displeasure but purely out of a sensation that the higher sense of duty and love of always doing the best for herself that she possibly could went against the grain of other folk she had to copy. "I hate people so very much," Naomi had said, uncurling her sitting position. “In the meantime, the police investigation found the lounge the epitome of disorganization too.” Lauren had let him grab the magazine out of her clutches just a few moments earlier.

The main transformation, it was apparent, was from both carefree and rebellious rogue to both submissive slave to benignity and paragon of good humour. Bertram continued to recite the words from this, a somewhat inaccurate, article by top hack Thomas. His wife was grinning at the author's choice of register, but ordered him a Gordon's gin and tonic, and closed her eyes halfway then opened them again but slowly in an attempt to listen to the sound of the voice of the thoughtful man she acutely couldn't help but endeavour to falsely show she adored.

The problem, and the question it seemed to Bertram was whether she had been hypnotised, pre-programmed by her father to always be nice, always be perfect and set a good example, he added, knowing it was an eccentric way of describing someone else’s daughter. Even if estranged for years the magazine had no ready answers because it reported there was allegedly a great distance in her glazed eyes and left it at that.

Now that the high speed train was in motion and the overhead lights had begun to beep, and while an announcement breached the sound-waves from the Tannoy he was totally absorbed in recounting to his wife Naomi's sad, convoluted tale from whimsical tearaway to little boffin which made it into the regional news. He quickly noticed however a slight, in a way compressed commotion coming from the aisle across from them. A security guard and the detective De la Reyes engaged in some type of a muted argument.

A morality, this codicil shown in her virtuous deportment not once she had vanished but before, emerged unexpectedly from out of a miasma of indolence. Only her unknown evil abductors, Pirsig and Adler presumably as yet free and footloose, held the cryptic, possibly nefarious answer to the riddle of her radical decline. What it was: her suicidal tendencies, and where it originated from: privilege.

The indolence of an expensive, private retirement home exchanged for the price of innocent blood and gore. The running headline (the neighbour read the same magazine and had once freelanced a bit for it, under a nom de plume) accelerated most of the readership into a mixed array of mainly negative emotions, startled astonishment and disgusted fear. In particular, the deputy editor had before it was published said it propounded overtly anti-privilege dissension, by and large, and it would simply get the acclaimed journalist Thomas into trouble: he had said that:”the news must never be treated as a stage for someone's petty quirks or hang ups, but instead for reportage”. The bossy deputy editor turned his spotlight intently on other issues, like the general election, and changes to first past the post; he astutely sifted out the nasty aspect of the hack’s attention-grabber of a headline. The editor took it upon himself to modify the running headline, not without a sharp rebuke but allowed him to keep the major part of the article intact as he had first-hand knowledge of the type of people involved. It ran on for quite a while, roughly as follows:

“At a retirement home which used to be known as a melting pot for the upper crust and posh element there has recently been a scandal beyond all previous proportions. We reported a few weeks ago how our investigators had uncovered evidence of a plot presumably by the tenants of The Sanctuary to bring down one of the country’s most revered old person’s homes. Now, we have substantiated the facts and we are able to report that this home has become a melting pot for vice on a par with the worst imaginable we furthermore….”

Proud, no-one in their right mind could defuse a certain smile at this ambivalent wit, at the rhythmic, lilting sound of these first few lines, and no-one could really handle not knowing whether the other regional publications would follow suit, and also blow the story out of all proportion. Wanting to continue in this vein for a few more minutes longer than should be allowed, while on television the cameras would graciously pan away from the picturesque scenery of parts of the immaculately kempt lawns, Thomas stirred up a considerable amount of trouble in the end for he never actually explained away nor justified the persons responsible for Naomi’s transformation into some sad and lonely woman.

The Sanctuary still today has similarity, in many regards, to any expensive private establishment. Without grey scaffolding, without breeze blocks, council aid or hindrance, and lacking inferior amenities they are towering structures which usually try to parade the experience and success of its tenants with fervent yet discreet aplomb, Bertram mentioned. Slowly closing the newspaper, he tried to ignore the ongoing argument between what seemed like a really tough steward and a very thin man, De La Reye with Balenciaga trainers on the other side of the train.

"That's the proverbial that. Agatha and Naomi were bound to be living under duress at the Abbey, it's all here!" He said.

He disliked afterwards the alignment of the newspaper on his knees, not precisely to his taste at that moment, he flipped it over. The back page on the other side at least depicted a less contentious article than private retirement home bloodshed: boy of twelve saved mother from burning car, and then sanctimoniously got his eleven-year old sister out of wreckage; alongside a graphic picture of a pinned down and stretched out unsavoury laboratory rat from another piece of scandal mongering about animal welfare.

Returning to the article a few minutes later, The Sanctuary hardly survived the scathing attack of the press in many people’s eyes after the debacle with which we are concerned. Yet it “clings” to this day to its sepulchre of “humdrum dignity”. A “reputation” which it lost in the scandal through some multifarious and rife “activities”, of which we will sooner or later uncover “the full nature”. Bertram attempted to read this over the din to his wife beside him who was putting on a brave face throughout.

\* \* \*

A distinctly middle-aged and officially corpulent man, Mr. Byrowe was already holding court there. The new “director”, the reportage described as balding, decidedly plump just like a Christmas goose, while also it left out that he was prone to the small spot of dribble on the odd occasion, which for the most part repelled his staff, and was mainly “fact”, not “rumour”.

Unfortunately for him he was also, unlike the rest of the “innocents of The Sanctuary” apart from Naomi in this regard, in possession of a pernicious, acidic and consciously assiduous sense of “decorum”, Bertram quoted to Lauren at this point, just for the effect it would have.

On one occasion, one of the female friends of the interviewer in charge at The Sanctuary who commented on his drooling when he was a director elsewhere was promptly reprimanded in an effortless sabotage, and then ridicule set in from even her own peer-group, as a result of the soon to be director's own ready defences: a disgusting, unneeded volley of sly expletives. This capability alone had, other applicants for the post mentioned, whispering their complaints given a really bad man that little extra notch at interview above his rivals for the place.

The common room, “oak tables” and stiff portraiture imbuing the asinine remarks of the alumni with acumen, with the taint of veracity.... “he’s a one act bloke”, they were heard to say, “he’s a lumbering mess” they said, “he’s not up to the job”, it seemed they had all argued jealously amongst themselves about the director, Bertram added.

It paved the way for him to be rashly appointed at the very last minute the surprise new director of The Sanctuary, the rather highbrow publication slightly gleefully announced.

"He’s gloating over it," said one of the bemused pensioners who they interviewed.

"He’ll wreck it," said another in emphatic accord.

"He’s a charlatan in disguise and I don’t think he’s going to survive," said another. One or two of them muttered their disapproval at his nondescript background, this brash and swearing director's risky appointment; although upon this ebullient character the hopes of the Abbey, it was murmured, were placed afresh.

As for the murderers, Naomi was the last of the line to see them, apparently. Naomi had been aiming, a bit hopefully, to find a seat at a small café in Brampton road where nobody “cool” with savoir faire from The Sanctuary or the prison, would be able to find her. She could hear them in her head as if talking, or shooting the breeze, continually.

The would-be murderers made their escape from the scene of the crime look easier than it really was. Naomi took herself daintily up the flight of stairs from the flat in the basement onto the bustling street above after nobody she recognised had visited her for five years. She carried her handbag with aplomb but in a sorry state, the new and comparatively expensive bag which she regretted because it stood out and likewise made her stand out without aplomb or panache. She disappeared immediately into the heaving, amorphous throng soon swept away by the crowds, enveloped by the swirl for the next ten minutes of jostled walking. Today though, her mind was increasingly hardened, inured, impervious. It was going to be fixated on the old The Sanctuary chap Morris who at that moment was celebrating a small but he thought certain success in his malicious way because he had finally located, found, caught up with his quarry Claiborne since that chance sighting a month or so ago. He cleverly hid himself behind a napkin that time and had the guile to follow her completely unnoticed back to her lair on the outskirts of town.

Who cares anyway, just another feather in your cap if you do murder, or heroin, or even wham bam thankyou ma’am both at the same time Morris remarked to the tired Naomi. They were the ones who never got themselves into any trouble, always staying ahead of the game; and she wished to avoid them altogether nowadays. He had been hunting for her since they’d all fled The Sanctuary together, trying ingenious methods to find her and maybe take a tumble in the bedroom with her again, if she had not become too much of a loser or spod these days.

Now that Morris saw that blonde hair, saw her half-open mouth, wanted every part of her and since she could tell he would not retreat unless something unexpectedly awful happened to him that made it impossible the liaison looked probable. He intended, of course to have some passionate fun with her, then have his wicked way with her, get smacked up, and hopefully do her freaking mother Agatha with the sad weird name too.

He’d been planning, waiting, expecting it all along. He went up to her, happy as Larry, with a big, silly smile on his face: there’d be no way she would make a scene in a public quarter like this one.

“The pigs aren’t going to interfere if they know what’s good for them,” he said under his breath in a low tone.

What he said about meeting her by chance was designed to seem rational; what he went on to say to her about how she must for no reason follow him home, how she needed to hang out with him again for no reason, how he has turned over a new leaf, was to be frank calculated to threaten, harass, intimidate.

A tile slipped out of its allotted place on the sloping roof of the café building and then slid fast down the roof’s incline. To a stop it came dangling from the grey drainpipe directly above Naomi’s round table in front of the plate glass windows. Making a rumble as it was falling through space, Naomi and he tried woefully to avoid its trajectory, but it plummeted to hit earth as suddenly as inevitably as ever.

Morris metamorphosed into an impatient wreck as it cut a great gash in his chino trousers. He was nonplussed about it hitting him unfortunately, and suddenly as a consequence, became much less friendly and far less helpful, his own obnoxious way of importing meaning becoming transparent, clear and difficult to shut out:

“Couldn’t fight me off, could you?” he said twice.

“You’re right, Morris, couldn’t.” Agatha said.

“Couldn’t have, and shouldn’t have, eh?” He asked.

“Yep Morris,” she said, twice in her nervousness.

“Now it’s time to let you in on a little secret. I’ve been wondering where the heck you’d got to. Ain’t that funny?” He said.

“Umm, I’m not sure Morris.” She said wondering at the morphed tone he was using.

“Ha Ha Ha. Priceless … priceless. You’re just the same, God, I’m glad I found you – not half! The lads’ll be dippy too, mark my words.” He said.

“What? The gang? They’re not still together really, are they Morris?” Naomi asked distraught.

Picking it up and pawing it irreverently he swiped away the cascaded debris and dust from the fallen tile. He laughed rudely at her. He was looking at his chino trousers that had a piece torn out, missing from them at around knee height. For Agatha’s part, at this juncture, oaths and curses sprung to mind, but she also needed to get an honest answer from the guy:

“The gang Morris. What were you going to say about them?” She asked with some unlikely, spasmodic, but amiable deference.

Morris’s eyes lit up with alarm on his furrowed brow, akin to a stray badger's manner and style when trapped in the headlights of an approaching vehicle, and so he began to talk…

CHAPTER 15

Just sitting there replete in the lounge, aged sixty-seven, extremely disinterested Morris had earlier on in the afternoon returned by train to The Sanctuary from their family home on the outskirts of London, Marlowe place, where he had spent a few days dealing with children and grandchildren. Minding his own business, quietly and on a fairly low-slung chair that didn’t plead with him to move anywhere in the foreseeable future – he immersed himself in a sense of ease, and repose captivated his totally relaxed mind. The low chair was almost too low, but he just propped up his ancient and boney self on a couple of nice dainty cushions, and with a library novel open on the table before him made every single thing just the way he’d have liked them to remain if possible.

Obviously if he had to get up for anyone else he would be irate it was so difficult to move without his gnarled cane, but he thought to himself that it was very unlikely anyone else would either tap on the door or buzz and startle him on the telephone. His wife Agatha had been quietly tucked up in bed with a minor ailment since lunchtime.

This languid vacuum of meaningful action was necessarily forbidden knowing how frequently and needily Naomi would feature soon in the stupor-filled Morris’s life; how dismissively he would fail her, incense her, be rejected by her and even forsake her assistance too. Good old Morris and his, as far as anyone could tell, un-loveable daughter Naomi lived for many years in comparative safety and security at Marlowe Place, where she was supposedly born and raised to defend the good life, to trot out Latin quotations at a pace of four hundred a minute, and where her appalling kids drove them both about the two-hundred-acre estate in two or three big Chelsea tractors.

Naomi saying “despite your lack of any proper employment at any point in the last twenty-five years,” used to suggest to her often dozing father that he should welcome the legacy he was born to inherit, but because most of it had been wasted on a vile drug habit he had acquired in London and then continued through middle age, and finally with a twirl flaunted in depression at the age of seventy in the school of hard knocks, she insisted he ought to pursue worthwhile objectives more often than hinted.

When people began to get slightly suspicious of him because his family weren’t myopic, they weren’t stupor-filled, when what went on at Marlowe Place soon seemed a joke to others and a painful burden to them, he and Agatha were sent to The Sanctuary on the pretext that they were taking their offspring for granted, a case of domestic abuse. The assumption was they could come back for a few days a month. So Naomi and their grandchildren bided their time till they could get him to shrug off the vapid fumes of his opium den, till at last the nurses opined that there were no “obstacles not even addiction which he cannot surmount, as we have always thought," another instance which showed the better resilience of the older generation over the younger, who can never give up a good time and invariably take more than their fair share for granted.

“I assume that your prosperity will last forever,” Naomi assured him at the homecoming. Pirsig and Cie in the safeguarding of their trust, their assets, knew intrinsically as did everyone else who visited Marlowe Place those past weekends, that Morris by acting like a slovenly fool, by going down the tubes, and by never maintaining himself with any sensitivity probably never fitted in to the modern future of social day to day living. Without the intervention of some mismatched, misshapen incidents entering the fray to improve his daughter’s life with, Pirsig and Cie wanted to close their “proactively” managed bank accounts with them.

The trumpets blared, the fanfare blasted for Morris Dean as soon as he quit his posting in the city, at the age of forty-two, overtly for personal reasons but it was actually rather because of his inertia and his failsafe uncouth composure that the supervisors had termed “personal reasons”. And that was why his relationship manager at Pirsig and Cie compelled him to take a year, then two, then three break from the proactive clients list and indeed also remove himself far from the ailing legal firm where, often erratic and often depressed from taking the cocaine, he had worked for a short period.

The first mismatched incident happened when his impatient extended family first began to diddle him, by teasing him and by treating him like an imbecile, or by deliberately letting him overhear their conversations for fun they could act as swindlers and introduce irrational and self-referential ideas into his frame of reference so that he, by now an old codger along with his stigma of addiction should have to just take for granted their animosity and basically he had to bow out in humiliation of any contretemps.

The widening gulf eventually reached a saturation point when he realized that it was all a carefully managed smoke and mirrors stage routine served up solely to inundate him with disadvantages, revenge for destroying Naomi. He gloated over how much new evidence for bleak fellow feeling and mistrust he had reaped from eavesdropping so adeptly, only he went to sow on the same soil again, but with a different seed this time.

Liking to think no obstacle could ever present itself which he could not flatten or conquer, he observed disdainfully with detachment the rest of the Dean entourage and his circle engineering shallow ditches and intrusive traps for him which he would not surmount. Morris not once had predicted the malevolence afoot in his prosperous and formerly easy-going home. Not once more did he fall into the trap they set.

\* \* \*

The Sanctuary was yet again showing how sensitivity to familial issues could, and should result in painless integration into a well-balanced social life, and illustrating once again how rose-tinted spectacles and incandescence actually resulted in nefarious, torpid errors. Morris Dean wrapped himself up in his own ideation and wondered if he was right or wrong to agree to go to The Sanctuary. He was charmed and blessed with a total perceptivity, a complete resistance to and immunity from any insensitive issues upon which the lives of his evil children might have revolved.

Setting that issue aside when Bertram went into town that last, darkest of days and caught sight of another example of his old friends, who seemed much altered since their last meeting the sight was welcomed yet filled with eery displeasure seeing the changes of allegiance had so obviously manifested themselves. Agatha had actually altered in an infinitesimally insignificant way but in this case to Bertram even the slightest of changes felt vitally important to the master plan.

A few moments before a person had stood on one of the side roads in Ramsgate poised close to the edge of the pavement with their body’s weight balanced on the foot of just one leg and, arrogantly, used their mobile phone as a shallow excuse to cock their head tilted to one side. Another person fixed their eye’s gaze on the first and held their sight to linger upon the person for a longer than appropriate, correct, fitting interval, and nevertheless deemed surely alarm won’t be given, nor offense taken.

The two people knew each other well but once one of them was deliberately ignored by the other; one was too wealthy, the other too shocked, disappointed and neither wanted to deceive the other with base cheerfulness since the common ground and shared history they remembered was too poignant, touching to be made grossly inadequate by basic cheerfulness. Bertram soon regretted his rudely turned back.

Nothing to be done decided Bertram but to cheerfully approach his old girlfriend Agatha, and to ignore his misgivings, and to avoid automatic pleasantries. Reserve those for another time, and to try to make apologetic amends for what he decided he could have termed a mistake and was surely a bad, inappropriate joke of the worst kind.

Immediately Agatha picked up the signs, she slowed down her momentum and luckily forgot to concentrate on lending an ear to those terrible thoughts everyone has upon seeing an old acquaintance after a long intermission, such as: how do I look, how should I talk, should I fake being happy but only mildly so to see them, or should I just be nonchalant?

Instead, along with blotting out and forgetting those traditional, and inevitable reflex thoughts about the other party as they approached one another Agatha assumed that abrasive, haughty mien that amongst other reasons would be potentially the result of the following disclosure. Everybody, including Bertram, knew that the unpalatable truth about the complete and final fraud, and also the disgrace of her family sinking into ruin was complete, and there was no longer any option open to salvage past deeds, and they were unable to see how to escape ruin. As the questions were bound to arise, the embarrassment an inevitability, the exposing of her worldly cynicism a possibility too, Agatha made a callous move to cross the street out of earshot, out of view, out of her old friend's path. Bertram’s true sentiments were slightly different to what everyone supposed but consisted of saving her from the disgrace of having to relay what had happened to her fabulous name, and the horror of having to assume a mien of jocularity when this was so obviously not really going to be the truth. That truth which, combined with the embargo against the whole Dean crew, he was supposed to believe in meant he ought to perhaps traipse slower and avert his gaze away in future.

“Oh no," thought Bertram. "That’s Agatha Dean.” She wasn’t looking in his direction any longer, and from the blank look on her face it seemed that she hadn’t seen him or that she was lost in her own private thoughts.

On the other hand, Bertram told himself wisely, she could be simulating her own chronically badly feigned lack of good vision, as an old deaf man can only hear what pleases him. He spent a moment or two deciding whether he should simply blank Agatha to even the score, brazen it out, or try to hide behind some lamp-post or pillar box. Agatha was only about five feet away when another choice occurred to him. He made the faulty decision to exert a desperate and obvious lunge for the far side of the road.

As Bertram had come to his senses quicker than Agatha, he ran full tilt across the road to the far side taking less than a fraction of a second to complete the whole highway code he looked over his shoulder once, and was right there in no time. Lauren was reduced to a bemused state that was neither hidden by fear, nor silenced by justice when there was no way to avoid or postpone the inevitable collision with what she found Bertram's irritating wariness, and she surmised this jokey yet gross indiscretion had upset the applecart, she considered it could have been like some affront that had caused a duel or a face-off between two errant knights in the dark ages, but in the meantime the only option which remained open for her was to assimilate this test, the unprovoked challenge, and to flourish her true flag. This breached respect encouraged her to a hope for a better treatment from somewhere and to take stock by remaining motionless awhile, by averting something progressing which she knew could be likened in importance to a harmful personal wound. Thinking about confronting him, she reckoned the old pensioner had enough chivalry left to have deliberately meant invisibly to insult her.

Misguided Bertram, for whom Lauren had been transformed into an adversarial problem, and for whom Lauren had hobbled away from down the street in quite a both unsubtle and indiscreet way, exploded into a savage and uncontainable rage. He, utterly unaware that she was merely doing her righteous duty as she judged it mete and fitting, right and correct, not to talk to the man the supernatural powers had noticeably double crossed and wielded their mighty scorn in front of, but Bertram couldn’t abide this because the offence was understood as too great a one. His high idea of dignity was unprotected, not able to withstand it. So when he saw Agatha try to creep away he made up his mind to pounce on her, to show her he didn’t care much at all about the supposed snub, to follow her in other words in order to remedy the bad feelings.

Most rational human beings would accept that this “offishness” went against reasonable behavior, and all received knowledge of behavior was powerless to assist and much dampened too in the light of this really crude situation, Bertram’s utter wrath notwithstanding. With a forceful jolt Agatha showed her marvelous surprise, and, sensing with shock that something nastier was about to transpire, a turn of events she could not predict and something she was forced to take pre-emptive steps to unravel, avoid or destroy the consequences of at all costs, before they grew out of proportion to their stature. She had to beat a fast retreat from Brampton, no matter how amusing her crap joke at his expense, with her snazzy mobile phone.

If they could have remembered properly, they both would have remembered the shared stance on religion at The Sanctuary. If so they would have brought back to mind the common bond of opposing overarching authority figures, they’d certainly not have forgotten the tastes in funny euphemisms they had cheerfully united over. When a stranger would walk into a bedroom that they were occupying he’d say: “ee-op. Eeh by gum you’re here”, or “Hey good lookin’… Wot-cha been cooking up for us?”, and she’d end up laughing at these randomly blurted out statements.

When someone wasn’t keeping up with their, often also coded, messages they had this shared expression: “My, my, clever clogs, you’re so tall!” These kinds of things hadn't happened for a long time, in fact they happened years ago at church fetes and jamborees organized by The Sanctuary, but Lauren had intended the unions’ attitudes to last forever, and if judged aright both promised they were adamant that they would neither just deny the other one a casual word of hello if it had been expected. It was surely wrong to dis one another in such a trashy fashion?

Perhaps they should have employed more restraint formerly, thought Bertram apparently, feeling sick after he had gone home to The Sanctuary later that evening, for the latter conversation was not what he held in mind as epitomizing a fun time. Agatha Dean had scarcely recognized, nor merely acknowledged him from the other side of a lamp post just a few short yards from him.

Against the un-enervating, almost boring, back-drop he paused, and the street and world seemed to stop flowing, progressing, moving for him momentarily. As the anticipated recognition slowly and carefully began to light up Lauren's bright face the external hubbub of the bustling traffic must have faded and the world which usually seemed so cruel, noisy, cacophonous once again took on a beautiful meaninglessness so that even the flow of congested traffic had to allow them this snatched moment. He wanted to blurt out “It as if we are together again,” but upon consideration and in the clear light of the day with strangers viewing the bereft figures standing there in front of them, this pithy, amicable phrase rang hollow for Bertram and he chose to make do with less unconventional greetings. Not without first feeling ashamed of himself for always having been such a retarded freak at rock bottom, Bertram, the rebel, whose uncle Denny was less domineering than now many long years before, wracked his brain for the appropriate witticism for the occasion, and delighted but uncertain of his ground this time, he found one. Times had aged him much more than they had ground Agatha down to dust. He was less affected by people now than he used to be, and less afraid of what horrible things others might say about him, especially when it came to questions of any importance like whether to guard his self-esteem and stay on the lookout. Not that this would have been any great concern in the present situation, but with his regional pronunciations you would be forgiven for saying Bertram was at best a tear-away figure, at worst perhaps a figure of plebiscite rudeness.

Nonetheless nobody controlled Bertram or Denny, and nobody lorded over their tastes in music nor could persuade either of them that they had done the wrong thing and pursued a wasted path in life and an unguarded route to this point which was a far cry from the rat race, the gravy train, the conveyor belt. A rat race which was sooner or later stridently trying to malevolently emboss its own standards on many of their dying friends’ remorse.

Whilst they both totally lacked ambition nonetheless Bertram had fulfilled an inverted aim, he was no lonely social failure and he tried to maintain his self-esteem. He was unconventional and had battled tooth and claw for several years to win the money and to get himself out of the comparatively choking poverty of the social scene in which he was raised and reared, when he was actually more proud personally of that background he shared with Denny than he would have been if presented with any other one on offer.

Since their last meeting, when he and his brother discussed their antipathies to becoming automated puppets in a power crazed world, his brother Mickey (apparently erroneously) tried to alert him to his misgivings or his fatal doubts he might have had over the worth, point and value of such companionship as Agatha’s. Bertram gave him no real chance in the matter so Mickey with his well-meant opinions and advice, in an attempt to compensate for his brother’s newly landed wealth, and the attached burdensome effects of winning at Raffle, encouraged him to mingle with other friends of a different social background to her and who might threaten his place less, maybe even Rudy from the New Religious Movement.

Mickey couldn’t help but recall to his mind the hours they had spent in each other’s company in childhood, and in taking holidays away from school. To take time off from his mediocre, but decidedly gloomy teaching post in London, Mickey had once concocted the inventive excuse of a delightful attack of schizoaffective disorder which led onto post treatment depression, which was followed by a course of antidepressants, and which as everyone knew needed time off work to cure yourself of with good weather and relaxation a must. Bertram reluctantly relented to his demands this time for a trip together to the coast of Dorset. Mickey and Bertram were not heard of for ages, and no one knew their whereabouts as they evacuated Kent that time about twelve years before the Raffle for at least the duration of a month on the beach and roaming in the rural countryside.

The countryside of Dorset was then theirs alone without interference from stray particles for a few weeks when they indulged in everything they could find that was on offer, such as indolent monotony, such as ripping off Mickey’s insurance claims for a spot of cash, and such as extremely heavy bouts of "wine tasting”.

Mickey, potted bio, couldn’t avoid the harsh truth that they had become incompatible on some fundamental level but for those few weeks, blissful pleasure was theirs to impart to one another if only in a trivial, petty and perhaps tragic way. Except when their avoidance of serious issues became blindingly obvious and Bertram and he fell out, both had to accept in the end that they were really meant as close mates, not soul mates, not brothers anymore.

Camping outside a little village just off the beaten track, their 1980s orange VW camper van had been gathering many sorts of different rubbish since they set out, they might have been portrayed like Huckleberry Finns aged only forty and mulling over the types of matter that was later to seem and sound incomprehensible.

Hearing the noises of the hippy tribe’s sound system’s amplifier waft over the hill into their part of the dale Mickey wished that Bertram might agree to accompany him towards those beguiling sounds of space age rave music. Although the first signs of discontentment were already increasing, burgeoning, developing for him and although anything that was to occur later before their time was spent was just fine and anything which went on was the result of an adult decision between two consenting sane minded persons, apparently Mickey didn’t bother, consider it important to argue with his younger brother. Bertram knew Mickey would feel let down if he didn’t go along to the tribalist gathering, even if it wasn’t going to do him any good as the teen drug scene held no romance for him. It only seemed to result in endlessly sweeping under the carpet the casualties of free gatherings who were no more heroic, brave than a plastic action-man figure, indeed no more paid attention to than a toy either.

It was bizarre that he soon found himself hankering so very much for solitude where he might reflect in depth. Bertram could not let himself go to the dotted about tents. He wanted Mickey to tell him, even if he had to pay a large ransom for the knowledge where and when Mickey acquired these mad desires to ensconce himself amongst what he thought was the street cat riff-raff, the drunk hoi polloi and the esoteric ravers. He did not think that going to a rave would be the biggest thrill of their holiday. Despite evidence to the contrary Mickey said to him it was not illegal to hold free parties in the woods nor to visit raves; he shouldn’t sneer, Mickey proclaimed it was meant only to be a good laugh, or so their dead older sister was wont to tell him when he had said: and anyway what harm can one do oneself in a backwoods little village like this one except get run over by a cow or step in a puddle, or experience the ecstasy of a deep house track, or three?

So, after many such expeditions, this was presumably where Mickey had acquired his bearings, his humble yet not totally obsequious manner of carrying himself, a bent over mode that he couldn’t stave off really for the life of him. Bertram was stunned to see that he wouldn’t even have recognized or understood or identified his brother in the road after the years had lapsed if it weren’t for that gaunt, arched, hunched frame loping towards him down the busy road. Mickey had got in way too deep with the fast living, but slow thinking set who knew him by the alias Po and who even went as far as plied him with class A drugs, that Bertram had always refused, so he could “chill out” with them. Once or twice since university days Mickey had tried and failed to phone him up out of the blue yonder to make him come to these tribal gatherings in rural places, miles from home and miles from anywhere to get high. Set up he had said by some green activists campaigning for a new motorway the government were planning to build to be stopped in its tracks, he assumed this was a good enough reason to rouse his reluctant brother Bertram, to willingly give up his decreased pace of life and get into the idle delights of underground culture.

Although Mickey could trounce him in any vaguely underground scenario later, but for the time being was mostly just employed as a teacher, yet Bertram too had made strides forward with his own private, secret, less illicit investigations which, when manhandled and tussled with would no longer land him a Raffle win far out of normal proportions sometime, somewhere, somehow.

Mickey and Bertram never actually went right up to the other party-goers, they just stayed there on one of the mounds doing nothing, looking up at the stars in the night sky, admiring nature and thanking heavens their lives were as peaceful as they were, with the booming bass providing a Revs Per Minute backdrop. When all of a sudden Mickey whipped out this massive chillum pipe and offered to light it up for Bertram. He knew what it was already but was completely hopeless when it came to using it. After Mickey had shown him what to do with the contraption he just felt a bit lightheaded. A few hours later they both recovered from a fit of giggles followed hot on its heels by an uncontrollable hunger which Mickey, hilariously to himself, called the munchies. It was impossible to understand it and Bertram had enough perspicacity to see it as so and to recover from it so soon enough the light of the morning jolted him back to a sober, albeit fuddled awareness which Mickey wanted to go away and leave him alone. They departed soon after sunrise, their rampage leaving a residue of enormous questions suspended in the air and the solidarity of the two, once so thin and thread-like, now so firm, now and until they met again.

The very sighting of Mickey brought these long gone memories flooding back. So after a moment Bertram checked to see his older brother was still there; he was, so he approached him. Bertram had the vaguest of notions this might happen one day, and as foreseen their first contact was awkward and messy despite any elegant leather trench coat which Mickey had draped on his back. Few cannot have known, although out of spite many claimed not to know, that Mickey had hurt himself in a drink-and-driving incident, badly enough for an ambulance to be called a few months after their aunt had died of an overdose. Ever since he had hankered after attention. Whenever he felt he was not getting enough he used to put on an affected air and blame his parents’ meanness for everything that went wrong for him since he started using drink and drugs. You saw latterly that when he spoke it was with a distance between him and his listener, and with an artificial discrepancy between the simple words he used, and their meaning. Mickey's face had a furtive aspect to it that poorly concealed his unstable condition and his wild child habits.

As the two greeted each other and stood face to face, cordial pleasantries were exchanged for a moment until Mickey noticed how pathetic it was to conceal true feelings under a mask of good wishes, so he quite tactlessly piped up:

“Come on Bertram, let’s not beat about the bush, I know you’re dying to tell me what you’ve been up to, and I’m literally dying to hear it!” With the emphasis on the word dying, the formal and staid pleasantries were over and Bertram, a different person then, breathed a sigh of relief because he was beginning to wonder how cautious and disguised their conversation was going to become, and whether their fate had been sealed, finished, closed down as translucent, ineluctable, and a pretense too.

\* \* \*

Similar in dimension to a small cigarette lighter, in size to a hessian pouch and with partly silver, partly gold-leaf filigree like the ornamental works made during the medieval dynasties the curious object of her desire seemed even more valuable to Naomi Dean personally than to anyone else. When she wanted to she even took this precious totem along with her wherever she might go, and yet despite all the serious warnings to the contrary, she refused to permit anyone to tell her where to safely hide it and yet it had been lost somewhere along the way back at The Sanctuary and no traces had been left and no clues as to its new place of residence. She had always kept it under an assortment of old letters, mementoes and tokens in a hollowed out book in her study at home. This mysterious objet d’art was a silver and gold USB stick attached to a black ribbon of about ten or eleven centimetres and came with one matching golden leafed fob from her uncle’s warehouse. Valued though it lacked both charm and character for most modern day viewers’ tastes and though she did not know where its matching part was, it was a prized acquisition. Wanting to explain the loss of the trinket Naomi made it clear to her uncle she had been “oh, totally wasted,” and that it could be found almost anywhere between two places on opposite sides of the town. She took out a cigarette and with her goodwill lighter from France, lit one for herself and one for the uncle who still had not given up smoking. Exhaling with a dramatic flourish she stubbed it out half way down and got up to leave within seconds of arriving.

“Anyway, keep your eyes peeled, and if you hear anything you let me know, won’t you?” Her uncle said. She was last seen a month later rushing along the country lanes in Kent in haste to where you can only conjecture.

As Naomi did believe in something supernatural at work here on earth, she would still not really notice the disappearance of an ornament as anything more than a careless, human error. Yet, no matter how atheist others might be it is hard to avoid leaping to the conclusion that Naomi was a bit too concerned about her valuable artefact for it to be quite as unimportant as she tried to suggest. Her alacrity in departure was very amusing, and her uncle could not help but smile when he remembered their heady past times together. But still it was like a pinprick in his side this desperate, furtive look in her eye and he renounced the running off without properly saying goodbye.

Although Naomi wanted to tell her children and maybe their children the whole story about those strange happenings at The Sanctuary, she decided that first she must try to find out and remember, if she could find a way, where the matching fob that was lost was, and why it was so intrinsically worthwhile to do that.

However, she needed to delay the quest while she met up with Agatha the same day. While the only other aspect of the afternoon’s events (other than the nostalgic) that printed itself on her memory was that Agatha didn’t seem to really register that she had met her at all, she didn’t seem with it, not really as though she were lying deliberatively, but as though she was scared and liable and taking a huge risk.

In the meantime her scientific approach, her innate ability to make accurate deductions from the pettiest of evidence would surely, presumed Naomi maximize her chances of discovering what the lost fob from the USB port was supposed to mean. She wondered hopefully that it’s uncanny power for the owner would soon be uncovered and unleashed.

Surprised by her own curious streak Naomi broke out from the age old mold, and shocked by her loss of this secret trinket, and symbol of success she started lying around the house at home pleading with all her heart, asking God to help her discover the true resting place of the lost fob. It’s first home was her uncle’s factory; its origin, its value and its use stayed anonymous. She lied to the height of her modest talents to all and sundry at the pensioner's home, first asking for general information about lost property and getting more and more specific as time wore on about who had hidden it, and as you may guess she got closer and closer to finding out, and getting found out.

\* \* \*

Lauren and Naomi, the two friends supposedly heading out for a cup of coffee but to all intents and purposes languishing in mental exile for the sins they had each inflicted on their family, were about to arrive at the café when the saga of Bertram's avoidance of Lauren, which only took a matter of seconds, unfolded before their eyes quite conspicuously for everyone to perk up their sensors at. They had talked enough and they looked over as Naomi decided that she wanted to play a little prank on her old friends, Mickey and Bertram, and ignore them for a while, so unfolding their napkins she placed them standing up on the table in front of her and thus hid both their faces. Naomi knew Mickey would never have noticed his friends around the corner, she only ever knew him vaguely, and she grinned a wide grin of mischievous delight knowing she had outfoxed him – however she did not yet realize what the full implications of not finding out enough about Lauren’s ex-boyfriend Bertram's latest obsession, was going to be.

Both Naomi and Lauren were reading each other’s thoughts in the down-market, dingy cafeteria where neither party ever celebrated again this façade of pleasures shared, this union of comradeship, this pulling the wool over the poor clown Bertram’s understanding. They laughed their horrendous laughter, they snarled their horrible teeth, and they snagged their horrid napkins sagaciously once more once he'd left. Once more they had to return to reality. Both of them terrified of the near future, though Lauren even more so as she had a heavier conscience, contemplated again the years that would be spent in exile from reality if they were to commit a mortal sin which pushed disbelief beyond and outside itself. The dark confines of one's habitat, the heinous sacrilege of living with a crime you had committed, and yet not knowing if you truly had been fully acquitted, thanking in part God’s infinite mercy. Then they described to one another what you would have to do in theory to atone for your past leisurely moral laxity to placate this supernatural power for your unspeakable act of maybe murder against mankind. It would not be any different if you were a sick woman like Lauren, or a vaguely wealthy one such as Naomi.

A furrow crossed Naomi's brow and it was sensed at that precise moment there was a deep unease, a general intuition, you might say that the talk had reached an impasse, it had grown sour, the theories were no longer reasoned. If the fellow customers were not listening in on their conversation they began muttering and clanging cutlery as if they could for they thought the hypothetical situation was getting just a bit too hypothetical for anyone’s good. Most people already knew about Lauren's vested interests, for example the way she was treated so offhandedly by Naomi – her friend – and you surely cannot forgive either of them for their horrible rudeness here in the cafe at large amongst strangers, damn it! Time did not eradicate past grievances between the two pals, never would they be able to extricate themselves from their horribly selfish behaviour of the past, and though they were required to speak to one another it was Lauren who made the overtures, her snide remarks which brought the flood gates crumbling down to concrete rubble.

They then proceeded to the waitress, to pay greetings to the over friendly waitress – they muttered polite words and with expressions of condescension they received back a perfunctory thank you for the big tip Naomi had given. She had never met in her lifetime two customers who could be so rude to her, she wouldn’t forget them in a hurry. She turned away and swore at herself. She felt they had wanted to mock her personage with their thin smiles, dissect her on the operating table for their own scientific research, and although this would necessarily be fairly limited she hoped uselessly someone would help her in the task of escaping their incriminating remarks.

Wandering aimlessly through the town for some time the two stopped to peer inside the windows of boutique shops. In her husky, confident voice Naomi remarked upon her sighting of Bertram: “I can’t help myself, I want to know who that person with him was and what the two of them have been up to because it all seemed rather cloak and dagger stuff if you ask me.” The emphasis in this statement was on the stuff to make it sound like she wasn’t that bothered about it and didn’t need the information that desperately, but it belied a greater uneasiness, a larger inquisitiveness crying out for confidential information about what Lauren suspected of Mickey and Bertram.

Doubtlessly Bertram worried enough about his projected image to ensure that he wouldn’t antagonize people with curious tidbits of knowledge or of personal stuff, he had learnt that lesson much, much earlier when he opened his soul to another resident of Ramsgate, namely Lauren, his first wife. She had turned the tables on him rightly and properly he thought, and he could quite succintly remember her words, clear as crystal: “Have you finished yet? Why don’t you see a shrink he’d be more up your alleyway,” and then she moved away with his daughter Claiborne. He really had been abused by that feisty petite but not weak lady, no doubts there, but the spurning only emboldened him to divulge yet more self-doubts as a form of secret warfare where only the finest passed his tests he was setting for them, like stepping adroitly and successfully over landmines in a war zone. The little chance discovery of the lost fob, engendered by the much younger woman Lauren, was one that could hardly go unnoticed. Especially in the antecedent months when it became clear to anyone with any degree of sanity except him that Bertram had lost his wits, so to speak, in other words he had been caught out in his parlor games where he was so patently obvious in his machinations with questions like: “Do you think I need to take antidepressants”, or “Do you find me boring?” so any potential suitors went home dissatisfied, and were hopelessly appalled at his lack of taste.

He saw it take place, and knew then it was going to provoke him. It was so astoundingly rude to do it in front of him. Who it was that created the window of opportunity we shall never know. No, it looked like it must have been Bertram who was from outside the family circle, somebody who didn’t know how these actions or these words could have ripples of repercussions, or, as here waves. Somebody began to lie, presumably somebody saw their opening and just went for it like a mad animal or beast of burden, they lied and never admitted it. This was the horrible part of the whole affair that someone from The Sanctuary stole those keys on the fob, and someone from Marlowe place with not so much as a grain of worth in them, in tandem lied that Morris was mentally disabled and did not get found out.

Then there was the aftermath of meeting Bertram near the café. But for so many years afterwards, Morris didn’t stand the slimmest of chances against the lie most of them had been tricked into believing. The unknown person, whoever it was, could never be traced and then the divorce from Agatha was mentioned. Not just once, but several times, though once was enough for the family to be rent asunder by its first initial utterance. The merest prospect of divorce destabilized the happy balance of power, and was the other contributing factor to the Deans’ eventual lapse and disgrace. Unlike most punishment which was handed out for murder or stealing and prevented it, there was no actual law in the land to extricate them from this knot of vipers. No one, not even a judge of the high court rescued him or paid him the least notice, let alone punished the liar, Bertram or whoever it was, that anonymously promoted the idea Morris was a psychotically disinclined retard.

I wondered why the Dean household were that naïve, that easily mistaken. It was surprising taking into account the anonymous person’s ineptness and brazen flouting of rules of social conduct. You may wonder how he could have turned their lives into a tragedy with the use of words on their own, but he or she was to make several illusions appear valid with pricey gifts, with a simplicity that was astounding, a knavery that was unfettered, a guilty guile which could not be recompensed, not even by Pirsig at the time of this story almost ten years or more later.

CHAPTER 16

Pirsig's friend and partner in the little bank, Adler, was known everywhere he went as a gambler and was a real fraudster through and through. He had always liked to don a porkpie hat to work, as a sort of personal trademark. He’d frighten his opponents by tipping his hat to one side and telling them he had made in the last two years, according to his own reports, millions on the markets and millions everywhere on wise investments, and was really an extremely talented broker or manager temporarily suffering setbacks and just enjoying a much needed breather from the hectic life of the upwardly mobile chap about town. Of course, relating this it does not sound very plausible that he was able to transform from asset manager to crook at will, but you would have to let hints and clues drop gradually over time to embrace properly his wily and vile series of deceptions. When he decided to take things another notch up his ladder, and out of his heartfelt derision of the entire Dean clan transform into a decisively nasty person, he nearly outwitted himself with his schemes and devices.

Their plan was to cause a mild amount of discomfort for the Deans because Pirsig was their arch-rival. Nobody could have dared believe a wealth manager had plotted so extreme and outrageous a sequence of catastrophes for such an innocent victim. He perhaps thought that the game was just to prank or jibe them, almost as if he was leading them a merry dance which would never get out of control.

“You do things this way, we do things that way, everyone says it’s like this, everyone knows it’s like that” he’d say in a contrived way. How could he know that people who took illegal drugs, who according to him were going to fit right in with his friend in Geneva and probably land a high-flying job in London in fact were instead of that going to end up working in fields doing piecemeal work for a meagre living no matter how elevated their status when they had sniffed enough lines of cocaine.

Yet Morris Dean was frail and fragile to his wicked demonstrations and this left him all but defenseless against the uncaring monster. It wasn’t the specific drug addiction lie he propounded, that Morris couldn’t prove or disprove, it was the ways Adler played with other hopes and fears – converting wrong into right – that to the Dean’s utter detriment were the most fascinating, and the most ruthlessly ambitious.

They sometimes wondered if Adler’s shifty and ambivalent remarks were really necessary, and whether there was in fact an alternative motive at stake but without clear motive their suspicions were instead soon laid to rest. Was it a motive that they needed to be more diligent about, or was it more than that even a cause to throw him out on his heels next time he showed his slightly tilted porkpie hat around the Deans’ doorway?

One day in the autumn of 2006, as Morris Dean read through the junk mail in the library at The Sanctuary, a place any visitors could be welcomed, and sifting through the offers of credit, piling them into a high heap so he too could avoid the monetary pitfalls so dangerous which lurked at every cornice of his life there was a loud rap at the door which disturbed his equipoise. And, who cheerfully kicked the door wide open? Why it was none other than dear old, friendly yet swarthy Adler, porkpie hat at unusual angle on side of head,

“Well look, I’ve got great news,” he proclaimed, “about a method of profiting out of the hundreds of loners and singletons. So don’t be naïve and open the mail and be blind to the rip offs and the scams.”

Mainly due to his foxiness he had made up his mind to let Morris in on a secret, which very few people knew about then and which was already making his pulse race and big waves in the finances sector of Marlowe place: specifically, the urchins from the wrong side of town were willing to work as farm hands for next to nothing on the estate if they were promised board and lodging here at the Dean’s residence Marlowe place, and they’d even throw in free drugs if the landlord “forgot” to mention it to the police. So this should solve the Dean’s nagging woes and give him a reason to carry on interfering and wooing Naomi, to his heart’s content.

The Dean family's crest on the letterhead, along with a picture of Marlowe place, could well provide an authentic and an upmarket effect to this plot to raise revenue, and then he pointed out and horrifically suggested that with their permission he could organize the entire advertising campaign with virtually no fuss.

Then he repeated this immoderately lucrative scheme's advantage because he thought Morris had misheard it. Were the Dean entourage to set up a hostel for any sundry vagrants to squat in? Or were the Dean family to help him send out fraudulent advertisements? What exactly was the point of this offer? He tried to explain himself quickly without giving away his actual intent.

Cruelty on this sort of scale was impossible to lie in wait for, and for the Deans their first foil for his line of attack happened to be a skeptical, and a wondering response. No suspicion had they at this moment however Adler wanted to treacherously manhandle their family and to sell them on a gimmick idea with no chance of success but really a high risk of being undermined and losing a considerable amount of money. Like a castle’s fortifications they should have bolted shut the portcullis and shot catapults at this invader if only they had somehow known earlier that he would leave them in peace. Trouble was his middle name and the prizes he proffered were so ludicrous and attractive that Morris was only dissuaded with considerable effort from actuating drastic action and backing out.

When Morris refused to listen, he soon perceived how annoying his presence was becoming to the family unit, and without any real justification almost psyched out, he lost his amiable front, and he stopped just short of declaring his loathing for them: "Only promise it, you don't have to really have them all as your tenants!" He almost raved and you could see if you only wanted to his mockery rising and bubbling to the surface. Concealing this he scraped his food off his plate from the lunch they had prepared for this intruder sent from Geneva and, his flushed complexion giving him away, he made a beeline for the exit apparently without so much as a thankyou or an apologetic air. He earnestly desired, as he walked down the hall putting his striated leather porkpie hat back on, one of them to hear him mutter under his breath:

“Maybe there are folk out there as stupid as this lot, who don’t know a joy ride and a freeload when they see one, but not likely!” The fraudster chuckled to himself as he said it, as if he was on display, he quickly returned to normal and resumed his defiant masking of his ulterior designs. He was not a fully paid up professional at the artistry malarkey but “I am going to see these dimwits crumble.” Thus he vowed the servile Deans and sick Morris were his property until the end of the world. His recently acquired deal with the local landowners was permanently set in place, after he telephoned the police anonymously to report the horrific substance abuse on the Marlowe place farm.

One of the interesting, and irritating upshots of his scheming characteristics was that he shared some traits with Naomi Dean by coincidence, and although it did not lend him any dignity it did humanize him in an abnormal way tethering him to the ground, and it indicated that in his circuitry there was a sum of humanity which otherwise could not be detected even if placed under the scrutiny of the most powerful sub atomic microscope. Both Adler and Naomi Dean fine-tuned their thoughts as if there was always a third party spying on them, they safeguarded their anonymity, and kept to their pedestals for others to admire them on which was really rather selfish as if they were both prized specimens locked in a cage at the zoo for the public to gaze at. They were both of them completely vain on the surface.

You might imagine a roisterous compere screaming out to make himself heard and to subdue a crowded big top:

“Roll up, roll up, here we have the greatest show on earth! For one night only we have here for your delight and delectation, from no nearer than the farthest ends of the globe, ladies and gentlemen, the great Doctor Veritas presents to you for a modest fee, the wild, the unknown, the danger-r-r-ous Adler and Virginia Dean!!”

- with the additional slightly useless advice: “all viewing by minors strictly prohibited unless accompanied by a responsible adult (in the shape of a parent) and a valid ticket shown on entry.” It wouldn’t really impress if you were able to stare into his mind as through a window, at any rate his subjective mindset was far less of a circus attraction than Naomi Dean’s who was endlessly dreaming about new stuff from the catalogues, her past grades at university and, in this case on a scale closely paralleling Pirsig's, her own general but rare prowess, and how to keep it safe from harm.

Morris and Agatha and the whole Dean entourage were until the last moment at Pirsig’s proxy’s feet, literally at his mercy kneeling down there. Adler’s fake posturings and dastardly pronouncements in defense of what Pirsig hoped for, only at the last minute and in the nick of time alerted them to the mischief. At once they aired the house, the culprit’s ordure was everywhere in the furniture and in the walls and when this purging was completed they did something else. They cleared away the plates and cutlery from the lunch table but then they were silent for a brief time of remembrance as they knew they had not been able to avoid the evil porkpie hat’s pervasive and undue influence. Their house was now tarnished by his brush and they had better watch out in future unless the sublime became ridiculous once more. However, this was too little knowledge, too late in the day, Morris was sentenced to being called mentally ill for his part in the contract over the use of the land at Marlowe place and it dragged their good name through the mud for many long years.

Morris and his daughter Naomi stayed ignorant and comfortable through the proceeding crisis until the last minute, but the shocking undulations from it; for instance colder, almost callous treatment from Pirsig's establishment and a new financial advisor, were never ignored again even by their feeble and uninquisitive minds. As I have said ten years was not enough to renew peace between the Dean household and Pirsig and Compagnie where an impostor had done his duty by his own laws to reach in his claws looking for some kind of bizarre, immoral, turgid ticket to hurt Morris irrevocably. The proxy had no sense of fair play, no fiber of reason to restrain him and they both got exactly what they had set out to achieve, namely destruction of any links. The split was initiated soon afterwards leaving the pensioners in no doubt that one of their bankers hated them beyond measure so that they existed side by side but deluded and out of the reach of their peers, alone and forgotten. There was also the matter of the missing investments in their final, next annual report which never were to surface, and which poured scorn down on the hardy father’s head with his misdiagnosis and ongoing shame. He wanted to complain or to report them to the Ombudsman, but tried to tone it down, and let them trample all over him for fear of Agatha seeing his unalloyed anger and judging him.

“Father,” remarked Morris’s daughter at a young age “probably would have been better off if he had been horrible. Then the horrible people would have to leave us alone.” Her parents knew she didn’t understand and they knew she was too immature to comprehend a mafia vendetta. This comment made by her when she was about nine or ten years old depicts how the harsh truth, or fact if you like, of their fall from grace was energetically and carefully blotted out, screened off from the child’s young eyes and heart. They vowed never to tell them, if they could possibly avoid it, about Adler's major crime, and his unfair treatment I will not discuss any further now. If I let the matter remain unsaid, unspoken of and his treachery will be understood well enough in its effects. Whilst for the present moment it did not create grave concern for the Dean’s daughter unnecessarily, until really things had gone another few steps too far.

“But then we wouldn’t be happy would we, if Papa was a horrible man, would we?” Naomi Dean asked, emphasizing the responsible role her father had signed up for before the first pregnancy was ever even a glint in her father’s eye.

Sometime later when their daughter had spots and was going through adolescence she began to try to find a reason to harp on about the whys and wherefores about how the disasters struck them one after another and she deliberated daily on the hidden reasons for her parents’ bitter and acrimonious divorce. Hardly anybody would have stayed in love with Morris under such strained conditions. He would have had to shout louder, complain more and argue much more to save his marriage.

The permanently cunning part as it was regarded by Morris and Agatha Dean was that they had contrived fairly plain and straightforward facts beforehand, a ten-year strategy, such as never saying they were as super-rich as the children may have once thought, not to, as they thought, deviously hoodwink their souls but also to solidify for them a more wholesome and a less perilous toehold in the outside world.

Their second child, a smaller daughter, because she was not yet old enough at that time to remember Pirsig's friend Adler and his devious, his callous experimentation, wasn’t really expected to discern, nor capable of ascertaining, the adult causes behind her parents’ nasty, plate-smasher of a faked divorce when the marriage was of such vital importance. And her curiosity got her into ever deeper waters like when the light disappeared and the water went cold and it was just you sensed it was deeper than it had been before because she couldn’t find the answers. Always searching for something she could tell her friends to show off to them at school about how much she knew at this premature stage in her life.

She invested a great amount of effort over time looking for an excuse or explanation of their combined situation, but never really covered enough territory because a mature memory of Pirsig and Adler just didn’t enter into the equation. The vendetta that reached out to her as well was carefully concealed and wrapped under a thick intransient skin of all-weather resilience to the elements; the knock on repercussions, the terrible nature of their losses from Adler was achieved by a complete conspiracy of silence about him. They had always refused to disparage him, or to even name him, only saying:

“That criminal, indeed!” but instead of following up Morris and Agatha held their peace knowing that long drawn out complaints were going to be a useless expenditure of one’s valuable and not limitless breath.

“The children must be led to think there is another deep seated reason why for our unluckiness and our hard times which can be spoon fed to them yet won’t seem trite or immature and which must this is of paramount importance not seem to be condescending to them or infantilising towards them.”

Whatever she wanted to say to them she wanted believed she felt this most strongly, and not seem patronizing although she grew distraught if they smelt something pungent like a false excuse and then shut themselves off. Her husband wasn’t listening as usual taking not the slightest interest in the kids before, during or after their marriage.

To lose her children as well as the benefaction of neighbours in the nearby vicinity and acquaintances was a consideration most repellent to Lauren Dean. She never lost sight of her name ruined in mud and shame. It was already in some people’s eyes the secret of their gullibility criticized and mocked once released to everyone by the awful Pirsig. Of course I don’t know, pondered Lauren Dean whether it is really all Stefan’s fault as there seems to be something else flooding us with insinuations and rebukes and it may be some of those awful people who moved into that rectory up the road a few years ago, but I can see no distinct correlation between what they could do and what has happened to us; and though I dislike them I am loath to admit it, truly I am, she pondered on.

“Do you think the children are too restless, honey?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Oh there you go again, leaving the difficult questions up to me to figure out.” Her husband said, irritably.

“Do I have to answer you if you are going to create a mountain out of a molehill every time?” She inquired, abandoning for once her calm exterior and looking him squarely in the eyes.

“Well, I’m not sure. If you were someone else I might expect at least an effort at a response.” At the same time she began to wonder why she had been so fond of this man whom she now couldn’t agree with under any conditions, who once upon a time she had loved dearly.

“It’s a simple question. Do you think they are bad or neutral to each other, or don’t you care one way or the other?” she said.

“I’d like to answer, dearest, but I think they are loud sometimes and we have to try to teach them what we know about life but I don’t think that historically speaking we have much chance of setting a good enough example, do we? Now I don’t have time, wait till I get back.” said her husband adjusting his cravat on the way out to a function to try and raise awareness for some hopeless charity event to do with the mental health unit he was involved with ten years ago.

“You idiot – do something!” she thought and said “Till later” and kissed him on his newly shaven cheek. Bidding her a goodbye he rushed out to the ageing Volvo 4x4 as he put the keys in the ignition he swore at her for not helping him and only caring about their children:

“Bloody hell.” He said and drove off at high speed into the night. Obliged to tuck the children up in bed, a process that usually took almost half an hour she told them that their daddy had gone out which raised a couple of “Oh mummi-i-i-ies.” And she thought how sweet her growing children as they lay wrapped up in the covers of their weary old lit bateau with just a nightlight on in the hallway, but:

“Oh how they wear me out.” and she meandered aimlessly down the staircase to watch Ally McBeal on television in the living room, semi-sobbing and popping to the loo every five minutes in distraction not to dab her eyes with a tissue at the thought of Bertram moping sullenly in the dormitory at the mental unit.

More than other cases their splicing up was a byword for inimicable it really was the most climactic hiatus when they finally split up that it surprised me said Morris at the gala dinner run by The Sanctuary to find out we had ever been married in the first place. The lack of emotion he went on to Agatha was there patently obvious clear as hell for anyone to witness she didn’t flinch, she didn’t raise an eyebrow but her placidity was almost mind numbing for me. You see we had been hitched in nineteen seventy four when we were fresh out of university, not late like today when you marry someone who’s been around the block if you’ll excuse the expression. And you will also realise I presume that we were faithful to each other all the way through at least I for my part was though I can’t speak for her I think she may have had a fondness for one or two but that’s not where it went into astro-anger. And it would have helped if I could ever clamp down on her intuitive paranoid fantasies. If it was that I was playing the field, she’d let me know, oh yeah she let me know, how she’d take it if I had anything more than a fondness for any other woman except her, and I was scared you understand of her temper, and her fits he told Agatha.

“But you two made such a happy couple,” she said. She gritted her teeth as she said it and wrung her hands hoping her envy would not get noticed this time especially as she was so near her goal now so near toppling the last great obstacle. Morris in his temper wasn’t going to spot a careering steam locomotive even if it blew its bugle in his ears so no wonder then that the traces of lust in his friend’s eyes were to him utterly absented.

They were both blushing and it made quite a fantastic scene the two aged crooners hiding dark secrets from one another the strange part being that the obvious factor, money, remained so adroitly concealed.

“I wanted to tell someone how much I hated her twenty years ago would you believe? But there were three reasons against doing that.” He said.

“Really?” She asked. “What were they? I promise not to tell…” and he went on:

“First was the whole problem of her parents, who I felt sorry for with a woman like that for a daughter, then was the fact that word might get out of her supposed infidelity and it wouldn’t do if I was considered to have been cuckolded (although I never knew for certain), then secondly that I might lose out on the sex part – which was amazing, right up until the end. And thirdly….”

“Tell me, did you ever regret, or lose faith, while she was arguing and shouting and ranting over money, as I presume she was. I don’t mean to be rude but it seems that you’ve done well to get out of this nasty little fix, and so I congratulate you.” With this, she turned to face her companion, leant forward and they raised their glass of sherry, and they both drank a toast to each other’s glorious future conquests.

You may think that Morris was a blot on the ancient pleasant meadows, the blossoming wild forests and vales which encapsulated the ideal of Kent’s rural landscapes. Through his base arrogance and his hindered self-awareness. I think that he evolved as a human being throughout the long disputes that sometimes lasted all night, throughout the protracted lonely procedure of a marriage where you could trace no love on either side as it was just motorized by automatic sex and by a sort of careworn attitude to the children. Bertram you might somehow forgive him.

Yet still when we see him interacting with Agatha here like he has not held a grudge against her and like he did not believe in her culpability, like he did no longer see her ways as evil, then it becomes harder to forgive him, to save him from disaster or to explain his side with equanimity or bBertramce. Opinion can no longer be divided, thought his children, when Lauren's children came to tell them of the meeting. Morris had never produced anything other than hindrances to the family, and was there with purely one aim in mind – to split up the two, man and wife, and to take away their unearned spoils recklessly and verily he came perilously close to achieving that much. Just in case you were speculating about his wife whether she was hideously unattractive or appallingly morose or what exactly her problem was in his gifted opinion, it was no more than that she had developed such a strain of altruism towards the homeless, in incessant charity work and campaigning that he who had always had a nice approach to such matters but felt the poor and needy had reaped their just desserts for their peculiar crimes grew more and more disenchanted. And he had a daughter at university with Agatha in Ramsgate. This interlinked him in a tenuous way with those Pirsig's cronies sought to rob of their livelihoods by smuggling themselves into the Dean threshold and stowing away there till he got his reward usually a superficially attractive one.

And yes Lauren did even now possess a modicum of beauty. In her silhouette she was honest and upright in her carriage she was perceived as intelligent in her pick of chosen phrases. Nonetheless, she graced the introverted, castrated town of Ramsgate with a much needed gift – that of humility. She cannot be praised enough for this despite the truism that she had no idea, she did not know, about her strengths and weaknesses, she could not have.

“I have no idea what you are talking about” said Lauren to Bertram one day when he was effusing major compliments all rather tastelessly presented like a huge department store shopping bag on sale time with garish adverts for perfumes at a price discounted. If you see what this means you’ll see how she regarded his prolonged and devout worshipping of her physical frame. She was not against him she just did not see the point of his inchoate, assertive (which was repellent), foolish and rather impolite pleasantries.

“Ah well. That was a good night I reckon, dearest” Bertram when he got home said to his wife “Just what I expected, just what the doctor ordered. I rather like that woman, Agatha. Very, very sweet. Mind you perhaps I talked to her for too long, though who can resist her subtle charms I wonder. No, only joking darling, I love you more than everyone else”. The fact was however Morris could not make such a confident assertion without the intuitive feeling that he was lying. She wished he would not keep saying the words “I love you” when she knew the time worn words meant absolutely zero to him, when she knew his heart strayed at the least, most minuscule provocation.

Naomi's husband was prompt to curb the rising tide of discontent against him, and, as he was once an actor his wife and others started questioning him why he had not devoted more time to this pursuit.

“Once your mind was alive, now it is dead, dead I tell you, to the noble arts and it seems you don’t know what to do”, his wife recommended, without real feeling, him into a course at the theatre. Somewhere he could speed up, not postpone his purpose, namely that of being a character in a play, a Hottentot prince or a male starlet it didn’t matter which one and he might raise some cash by the by. The alternative to hurrying darkness and doubt frivolous fame and fortune he tethered to the ground and he was dragged down to the pit wherein he was later to discover to his amazement nothing other than the monsters he had sought to avoid in this life. This beast was none other than real-life to which he arrogantly assigned little more than a minor role on an amateur stage.

His infidelity to her mandates was preposterously overt. As if the disinclination to obey wasn’t enough he Morrisimised the potential and to his wife’s deep sadness realised it. She knew he was a weak man but had forgiven him in the past yet now her unerring, unwavering stability, discretion was being knocked over, mown down and she only praised the heavens that not that many people around knew of his unacceptable ways of fantasizing about the svelte divorcee Agatha Nivat.

Nivat continued to jauntily revive their acquaintance on a regular basis though she had not as innocent a leaning as to think this woman could be trusted in the presence of her husband whose charms she could not vaccinate herself but holding court and expostulating exuberantly was clearly and fashionably the only way.

Morris had been to university at College. Afterwards he progressed to a state-run university in London where he dropped out without finishing his course to pursue theatrical sciences at a college near Margate from where he hadn’t moved far away in the last ten or fifteen years. The first to admit he covered much ground in this noble region of scientific advancement and memorably always used to claim to anyone concerned he had actually completed his studies in London until the unexpected accidentally occurred, he forgot his pretense, and made an almighty gaff by revealing his legacy of failures in London at some run of the mill dinner party. Sobriety was not his forte. He was engaged in a lengthy dispute with one of his colleagues from the mental health charity “Trust-y” where he had toiled selflessly as a volunteer for the better part of ten years never progressing or gaining in stature when the topic arose and in a sort of inverted moment of pride he realized it would be more efficacious to resolve their dispute if he said he had dropped out of college of his own free will as was being asserted by some underling or other who purported to have been at Margate when he was a student.

Morris was not dressed nearly as dandily as Agatha's brother was, yet he was more broad-minded, was notoriously defensive of the brethren of Kent, unlike Nivat, and he let Naomi Dean be treated as a sister to Agatha. By always letting her stay later into the night than appropriate and by being the most devoted man those two women ever met with this harmonious situation was put into place for years. His faulty dress sense was a sort of running joke amongst the other adults and not a nice one at that; his deference to the world of fashion remarked upon for its apparent existence and despite there being no sign of it in his attire he claimed a knowledge of the latest trends.

He himself thought he was “alright as I am” and said so when his wife offered a few times to buy him some new shirts or trousers, but he always thought the minimum he could do was to refuse and save her the trouble and the money.

“Don’t you realize everyone is basically better dressed than you here?” Agatha inquired.

“That, dear sweet person, is because they expend most of their time in front of the mirror. Now we don’t want that do we?” Hardly the reason for the matrimonial split it might just about have rancoured in son-in-law’s Bertram’s addled and since the Eurostar addicted mind this slovenliness but he thought he could let it pass, never once realizing the distance other people could, and would want to run with some fatal flaw so basic and so profoundly redolent of his age.

CHAPTER 17

Naomi was already meant to be on yet another one of her trips to Geneva, the third in so many months as a matter of fact; and she was lagging behind on her schedule from now onwards. Since this morning when she had breakfast, alone as usual, in her sister’s apartment in London, she had raced madly to catch up lost time and to finish her breakfast, and had read the newspaper in depth which sometimes, after reading for half an hour, she was convinced she featured in. Regaining the proverbial lost time was not as easy for Naomi as it sounds to you or me. She proceeded to murmur under her breath critically that she had done nothing, had just been taking it easy; she had been in fact quite lazy, for at least the last two months. But she had to pay the price for this: she had hardly any time now left to catch the flight to Geneva, and thereby she had found out she could not continue moving at as sluggish a pace as this all her life without things getting on top of her.

She threw her coat onto her shoulders, hurriedly gathered her equipment: her leather overnight bag, mobile phone and car keys and rushed out, calling to the maid to hold all letters for her, until she could read them at convenience upon her intended return the following Monday. Then she slammed the door behind her, and skipped full tilt downstairs. It was Thursday morning.

On the way to the airport she drove much faster than usual, and reached the turning she needed to take off the motorway extremely quickly which was lucky. She was holding ferociously onto the steering wheel of the car with both hands, but Naomi was gripping the wheel so hard that her hands sweat perspiration into it all the way. Furthermore, she felt querulous and irritable because of the dreadful traffic on this road she had been taking, for the last twenty-five minutes. Her usually calm but moderate persona had been transformed, had evaporated into the stifled atmosphere in the car; no more the gallantry and the bon-viveur; all of a sudden she had been turned into one more careless, rushed, and not a little less impatient business lady who had to meet priorities and urgent deadlines.

Under this kind of circumstance she soon fell prey without warning to a set of common vices which many people sometimes harbour and let fester inside their personalities as dormant, or latent traits. She began first to mutter phrases of irritation and aggravation, in monologue, which had been building up since the day before. However, as the kilometres passed by, these barely audible tones were replaced by the full-blown shouting of vehement and profane language only heard coming from unrepentant sinners. During what might be called a fit of rage she momentarily closed her eyes so she couldn’t see the slick with wet road ahead, and then at the precise second in which she did so she blacked out fear stricken because she had accelerated too fast, and done an inadvertent lane change. Like a mythological figure whose fate was utterly controlled by capricious gods. There were only a few short moments before she realized what had happened and recovered, and opened her blue eyes once more and with a look of dismay and disgust possibly even hubris she has ended up off the cold, slick road on the overgrown verge in a minor ditch, and in a badly damaged red sports car. It was rare to view a woman in quite such a mighty rage in the middle of the grey morning. She was fuming at this latest unexpected unfortunate incident and really cold gave out a yell and then commenced to stare pleadingly at the other motorists skidding past until one at last saw and took pity before he recklessly parked near to Naomi to proffer help, and rescue her from such a disturbing concatenation of events such as this one was. Her Blackberry had run on, and lost its signal it should be added. Not that which belonged to the approaching Samaritan but Naomi’s own lifeline was made momentarily useless.

This ostensibly friendly well-wisher was willing to assist partly from pure, unselfish concern and partly because he adored red Mercedes sports cars and he was keen to get close and inspect one. Having parked his far inferior brown Ford pick-up truck by the side of the jammed-up road he began to self-effacingly sidle up to Naomi, whilst deftly avoiding oncoming cars and lorries until he reached her side. From this stage on, Naomi was certainly perplexed because she knew with implicit faith and nigh on certain grace she could not reach her deathly appointment in Geneva, nor probably even dinner with her best friends in the city of luxury assuming she got safely to the airport even. Observing the brown truck owner with his moderate paced walk coming nearer, and nearer, as the moments passed she composed and prepared herself for his assistance by minutely adjusting her white blouse, and newly-acquired expensive high-end designer Swiss watch, and she commenced by lying to him just as casually and elegantly as any previous members of the Dean family ever had in their indolent lives:

“Hello? Hello there, kind man?” then next “Are you the rescue services by any chance?” Then the stranger casually said, “Need a hand with any of this?” and “Are you hurt?” He inquired, while he tapped far too roughly on the darkly-tinted window pane – Naomi clearly seemed not to have noticed, and stayed oblivious for a long period until she had accomplished that pseudo-impression of alertness with what was known as a fashionable wait. Still adjusting her feminine accoutrements for a moment longer, she said:

“Oh yes, no. I see now, greetings mister…?” Then, she spoke thus:

“I do have a small difficulty which has momentarily caused me to be stranded in this situation. I don’t suppose you would have the main telephone number of the airport? Yes, no.” With difficulty she had to raise her soft voice to be heard since stopping stock-still right there so near the general mechanical noise of the flowing traffic. And the drone or hubbub of the passing traffic was made much more dangerous as she was stationed only a little way from where the enormous trucks went rolling underneath and over a flyover. Left here her car would not be safe for long.

Evenly winding down the electric window she was shocked to discover, on further closer inspection, the Samaritan standing there hunched over. Somewhere in his early forties with lots of tiny dots, either acne or pockmarks, scattered densely over his cheeks, chin and in the area about his open, gaping mouth she grew slightly afraid. So horribly presented was this afflicted creature of the underworld that she was forced and compelled to lower her baffled gazing pretty much instantaneously so that, indeed, she had been caught on the hop, her ordinary cool as ice exterior was massively undermined from almost that moment on. Talking to him she could not help it, but had to avert obliquely her own swish, pedigreed aspect. The weather beaten man was only wanting to assist but letting him was going to mean humbling herself – a prim, newly kitted out lady – and would also signify the swallowing of her immense pride, the only sweetener becoming, she knew, some trivial emotional success for him that would not be unappreciated.

“I’ll be able to drive you whenever and wherever you want to go. Where are you headed by the way?” Despite, or maybe because of, the facial injuries he had undergone he was a capable resource in tricky or awkward situations like this one. He had met with a flurry of pithy adversity many times a week, and emerged, within reasonable bounds, gloriously triumphant. Many times he was made to show strength and prowess, for one reason and another, indeed he heralded it. However, Naomi acquiesced and stuck on such traits as these with her recently attained sheltered, privileged background of servants, money, life’s luxuries and every possible extra feature you may care to name; never by toil, struggle, nor effort did she have to achieve semi-celebrity status and success. In her favor, she did not have a choice there, did not choose the easy way out there – all this ease and comfort was thrust inevitably upon her by her background.

Similarly, she was taken away by destiny’s handiwork away from the fearful roads but not through any unfair, blameworthy fault. Anyway, this mess of a good Samaritan who was suggesting he could give her some free help was not rejected outright, she was not pushing his daring bravery away, was not being wickedly offensive to this mysterious chap’s lights. However, there was something going on that was not quite right.

It was largely she no longer had any chance, or opportunity, of being punctual for Geneva. She had become so enraged that she was blaming every friend in her circle, and accusing them of gross misconduct for never being there at needy, sensitive moments and, like a renegade, plotting ways never to see them again bizarre though most of them appeared. She would have telephoned ahead at that moment but it seemed circumstances had conspired against her this time which made her lessen her desire even further of meeting them again.

Her circle of friends, Rudy and Morris and Lauren were mostly needy and sensitive like her and irritable as well for they did not take to it kindly when given avoidable hassles, which were generally meant always to be swept under the uninspired, fluffy carpet because of their financial origins, present status, and the future mapped out for them by their status as society’s rebels.

And so, on edge and warily, the greatly tested Naomi stepped out upon the cracked slabs of grey concrete, and, gathering her possessions, she became a paragon of relaxed, friendly, genial attributes even under the glossed over pressures of the situation. Then she looked over at and addressed her refreshing, new-found friend in a manner adapted to be suited to her highly frustrated expectations of what they had earned and deserved:

“Yes, no. Well, I’d rather not miss my plane completely. First class ticket, you see. I’ll have to have words with the steward at the departure lounge at the airport; transfer ticket, later flight, all good, problem solved. Finito...” The bizarre Samaritan with the pockmarked skin accepted without question or commiseration that Mercedes drivers might truly be allowed to live like this and after one or two more unnecessary words:

“Would you be needing me for anything, or not?” and so with that he prepared to leave the scene. Any other normal person would not have stepped into the stereotyped role of a sort of servant of, in this case, a lord and master so proficiently. In response to this classic form of self-effacement he strolled away, his heavy tread leaving footprints on the dewy grass down the green and verdant embankment. As she saw him balefully sauntering away Naomi hastened to add, raising her voice so he could hear:

“Yes, no. I’m afraid so. Let’s get going to the airport. And don’t you dilly-dally for me. As fast as you can, if you please.” They both opened the doors to the Ford truck one gently, one forcefully, at the same moment, and the startlingly loud bang of the doors as they were shutting them was simultaneous too. The old rusting truck’s owner thoughtfully tried to begin conversation as best he could on several occasions, it was to no avail, however:

“So… Where are you from, girlie? Not around here I’d say from the accent.” His abundant generosity contained nothing at all if not for that self-same intention, but the goodwill remaining in him under all circumstances was not once reciprocated, except when he found his hitch-hiker was hiding behind a smooth veneer. Naomi’s cautious streak was hard to assuage or fathom, but instead of growing dispirited, he asked:

“Why not tell me where you are from, girlie? Surely you can’t lead that secret a life?” he asked. Naomi at this point began to feel like being uppity instead to her assistant yet she was accustomed to warming to these folk in an unexpected way as soon as she concealed anything and, moreover, knew because they’d soon be out of the hard wearing truck and at the big, international airport the risks were slightly reduced. In answer to this last interrogative she could have opted to keep up her guard or be open. The right decision was just out of reach this time as she ran the gauntlet.

“Well, to let you in on a secret, my name is Naomi and I come from Holland, from an old Dutch lineage, whose main residence was near Leiden.” She lied. “Yes, no. Obviously you will have heard of us lot – my name is Tweede-Waals. I am the last sole surviving descendant and if I do not marry, our bloodline will be extinct. You understand, don’t you. The title, the estates, the land, the house all will be given to some cousin I have never even met.” And then her assistant was taken by surprise, nay, impressed enough to venture a slight joke:

“Well, I’m afraid I don’t know any young men of marriageable age but I wish you luck and will be sure to tell my poor wife at home, who is very ill I might add, that I have met the famous Naomi Twede-Waals: a real-life aristocrat.” Because he was deeply intrigued by all this lying, and wished to know more about it, he added making it sound like an afterthought:

“How old are you, madam? If you don’t mind me asking you your age?” Naomi however paused for preparatory thought before giving him a satisfying answer to this one.

“Ask away. Not impertinent at all. It’s good to know someone still cares about the House of Waals! Yes, no. I am sixty one, sixty two on the twenty first of March next year.” she said, in a shallowly two-faced way.

“Ah ha! What a date. The date of the great people! Some people are truly blessed. I can see you will do many amazing things.” He chuckled gregariously.

“Do not doubt it, my good man. I myself believe that I am indeed destined to follow in the footsteps of the noble, and the good, and to increase the fame and the wealth of my family.” This wasn’t her true belief as she did not really have that much faith, or self-confidence, that she really would rise to the occasion and strike the high-notes in a post-modern, vicarious world such as this.

Their colloquy went on a short while until their journey down the dual carriageway’s end when they neutrally each bid one another adieu. Eventually, they both hastened away on their respective, individual journeys with the mechanic wondering at her pride, incessantly bewitched by the curiosity of her lineage and Naomi perplexed. Naomi’s first deception and mistake was complete because now lies and fraud had become an option.

According to her wont she walked through the seemingly influential vestibule into the main vast, yawning vestibule; and she strutted boldly this time, rather than simply minded her own business, nor at the bureau d’echange did she tone her perfect image down. Slightly less immodestly she searched the area for the signs to the check-in desk, and proceeded, in direct, maybe you could say insensitive, language of the sort we are used to: indistinguishable from the sort that trips off the tongue so easily to some who do not know that much when it comes to the crunch, and who speak in dictatorial fashion. She marched up to it, and said resolutely:

“Look here. Listen to me, lady. I want an upgrade. Yes, no? I want a private plane given to me, as I am late for my flight. I want you to provide this and I do not, repeat, do not expect to be kept waiting. For I, Naomi Dean, who is beheld in this room by you must be given what is required by her whenever, and wherever, it may be justifiably requested.” Harsh though this demand was she was awakened out of what you may call a rhapsody, by no less than the nicely affable, pretty young lady’s riposte who was taking her turn at the desk.

However, the entertaining altercation following on could have been that of any of the pleasant, friendly and at a glance seemingly classy girls who struggled through their shifts for a day’s pay there.

“Excuse me? Who on earth did you say you were?” This was a bolt out of the blue for the well turned out young lady Naomi. She couldn’t really hear her reply nor acknowledge it, her armour plated image was so irrevocably destroyed.

“I am a Lady. Now tell me, what is the matter with you? I demand compensation from Lufthansa. I booked myself a seat in first class, not a ride in the smoking section at the back of EasyJet. Yes?”

“I don’t see the point in this. I don’t see you helping me.” She went on. Expressing herself in a manner to which she was accustomed she revealed, and articulated her needs and views both in this way until she noticed her manner was creating a bit of a furore, a miniscule tempest. Soon the woman with her eyebrows arched sitting behind the desk was reinforced in her plan to soon call the busy manager to her assistance and was impelled to an action which she was understandably reluctant to administrate.

Finally, after beseeching every other member of staff apart from the manager in her division, she drew a result that was, by her own admission, positively brimming with potentials. The manager rushed forth from his lair and accepted as a result of his position he had to intervene as early as possible. He conceded to the irate customer that the flight company owed her some financial restitution; some compensation. He organized for her to be given a seat of an equivalent standard by the window on another flight a while later.

Unfortunately, the plane was crammed to the brim with holiday makers but in the area at the front of the plane much-subdued Naomi was directed towards there happened to be merely three other passengers in her view.

She graciously sat down near to an elderly couple drinking brandies and talking in subdued voices, which balanced the hubbub and general scrimmage emanating from the passengers heading for economy at the back. The pensioner’s seemed redolent of the ease and satisfaction garnered in a prosperous environment, not the garish city-broker types or fattened, sexed up D-list personalities who usually hyped themselves so loudly and drew all attention to them at any expense.

Naomi chose not to introduce herself to this rather unedifying but idle brandy swilling couple, but directed her focus to, elected instead to divert her attentions to the extremely attractive man just sitting down quietly diagonally across the aisle with a spare seat beside him. By appearing interested in her surroundings, and also utterly contented with them she unwittingly gave out to the handsome older man an aura which said at one and the same time “I am real, but I am also above you” but whether it was the vapor in the insulated aeroplane compartment as the doors were shutting that enhanced that vapid quality or her inherently equipoised character, or possibly her own satisfaction with her protected but futile existence, remained mysterious. For brutally ignoring her inferior she should have but did not expect consequences. It never occurred to her to expect it would make him more resolved, more determined to achieve something from the coincidence. For the selfsame reason she lied and perjured herself when with the good Samaritan – because she was half-blind to all the ensuing results. She even glossed over the most sinful and degrading acts as none of her business in the same way that Adler did many years ago.

“Yes, no. I suppose he fancies me. Hahaha, that’s a joke! He’ll mince his words if he tries to talk because he’s so, so, so old…” She thought inwardly. “I bet he’s the type who thinks he’s a match for me! Yes, indeed.” She reflected.

He sensed Naomi’s focal point in the package in one moment: her piercing aqua blue eyes along with her slimly built corporeal presence gave him fleshy goose bumps; then too, her genteel mannerisms; and instantly he set about trying to calculate her value in thousands and millions. The unrecognized man, whose full nomenclature was Frederick Adler, perceived the young woman as a future benefactor or guardian angel who could by no means not afford to keep him in health and wealth, whichever was more relevant. Adler who had been tipped off by the Samaritan about the exact timing, and had disguised himself behind a grey beard and grey hair knew there was absolutely no way on this earth that Naomi could possibly remember the way he used to look in the past before he had got what the thing he wanted.

He had even gone as far as decided after the space of a few short minutes, that he would like to make her a fine second wife if she was gullible enough for him to outwit. He had no fears whatsoever she would help him along through any possible times of trouble ahead. Adler became slowly more not less confident as the time wore on, as the evidence stacked up by degrees he was more determined to hook her and ensnare her but not always show any fondness of her because if she did at any moment appreciate her own high value in the marketplace it could ruin his illusion, the ruse. She was not aware of her great value and Adler found this actually quite funny. So he gave her one or two coy glances and semi-embarrassed smiles to sound her out, to test out if she recognized him as her father’s old enemy. He alerted her to the very real assets and the squandered aims that he said to himself he thought he could manage and enlarge skillfully for her, and hopefully to somehow embolden her to accept assistance from him in taking her the next stages along the well-known and old, worn road. “I mustn’t miss this opportunity, I have to make every second count,” he thought.

Naomi was grinning but inwardly at his timid signals of affection so hesitantly manifested, in contrast to her, as she thought, coy mannerisms. He constantly twiddled his fingers or played with an imaginary cravat or something, anticipating the sinfully successful times ahead. She

They came to the satisfying conclusion both had considered lust to be, and attraction to be delayed, or waited for, and hoped for: the most powerful force encountered by their kind. If they were right that was the case they were already way beyond making excuses. This instance of attraction although it still must be proved real thought Naomi, and although more than fifty percent lust of the eyes, was a refreshing gift, more than a passing fancy and a healthy ego-boost into the bargain.

In her teeming head there was more than a dim idea of the dangers and pitfalls of love, but she and all the other socialites felt it, and saw it happening: that the ends of abandonment were justified by the means. While beauty served for Adler a practical purpose of a higher order with more than any mere disappointment, or inane competitiveness, or dire rejection at its end. After several minutes sparring, skirting the integral axis he could contain his ambitious hopes no longer, and he took the plunge by speaking:

“My dear woman. You look so tired today sitting over there, is there some particular way in which I may be of any service to you?”

Saying this he was positively beaming from ear to ear; for he knew that nothing was certain, fixed or predictable with this game unless you were some robotic homunculus or a computer generated image. He hoped fervently that he hadn’t overstepped the dividing line between good sense and bad taste with his wild grinning. He was incorrect to be concerned for Naomi, he may have calculated her as a mild retiring type wrongly. She whose greatest satisfaction was staying safe from the harm created through suitors unwanted approaches, gave him a curt look that cried out he mustn’t be so rude again. Nevertheless, they probably understood a bit of flirtation was harmless, especially seeing each other seated cross-legged with a gap of such a distance, and both still safe from harm. They were surrounded by safety nets and by the plane’s hostesses still:

“Kind, too kind, sir. Yes… I don’t mean to be rude but where did you learn it is right to talk to strange women?” She meant to quietly suggest he continue in his forward advance, yet what she said sounded like an old, crackly audio tape recording because she had no experience of this life whatsoever. Her impression was almost as though she was a cosseted prude and an abused virgin:

“Let me introduce myself… Frederick.” he said, in a silly voice illustrating vocal coaching lessons, but not enough of them. Extending his right arm to show affinity, and to suggest, he hoped, he had the breeding not to be feared as a dangerous enemy, or an unknown threat:

“I am on my way to Geneva for a business meeting, to pay my respects to some old friends of the family. And you?” He continued in this vein with the seduction. Without being aware of any misgivings Naomi knew she had put Fred at his ease, and she could no longer sense the familiar portents of wanton sex and meaningless promises of deceitful partnerships generally arising from taboo being rashly broken in upon.

“I too am going to Geneva” she smiled: “Yes, no. Obviously… Mainly to visit my sick nephew but also to look around the shops there; shopping is nice, it’s such a worthless pastime and it’s the start of the season so I know that there’ll be quite a few outfits I’ll take.” She lied awkwardly blushing, in the hushed tones typical of a fearful pest’s squeak.

Her nose and ears were both fashionably small, out of proportion to the rest of her visage, and she had auburn but highlighted hair combed straight at the back with a fringe at the front. She was certainly not repulsive or unattractive even, yet she was not a hit with men and it seemed she had a spell cast upon her to stop her making and developing relationships connected to the heart. But she had a clever streak gained via a natural sense of her own position with regards to people and things.

“Ah, I see” Fred said, “You desire to spend copious quantities on your attire and then still hate what you look like – yes, like all beautiful people, faltering vanity. I too, being set apart from my peer group, love the allure of fine attire.” Then he, as the plane entered some turbulence, proceeded to describe by way of a dark contrast where he had bought his own suit of clothes: every city, every boutique and explained for what reason that was the case. The jet tilted to one side and the pilot swiftly exited the rough weather and there was no more hassle for the rest of the duration of the flight. Their conversation soon became more relaxed, less affected as they bought more beverages and as they became better acquainted; so that after a comparatively short time they were leaning closer towards one another, both with their legs crossed and in utter agreement.

“I like these flights, especially when you get a chance to meet someone new, don’t you?” He asked her.

“Yes, I do as well. Except you can sometimes meet or sit next to, I suppose, real oddballs.” She answered, honestly. Adler then wondered how he should inform the aristocrat of his innermost secret: “…but my circumstances, he reflected, will ruin it all. How should I tell her?” he dovetailed his problems together, and: “how do I not lose the sleek fascia, not appear a sly git and obliterate all entrenched hope of a bit of a fling?” It was such a difficulty to lie, as little or as much as he could get away with, with the one bleak notion left over he might continue this amusing dialogue, so that he could only shed light on the problematic matter to himself. He was artful in his language where she was naïve; he did all that he could to keep alert enough to vaguely perceive her intended meanings, and he did what he could to astonish, to gratify her curiosity without being unmasked.

Frederick considered feigning that he needed to take a trip to the bathroom to freshen up, and to get his bearings, but it was such a heavy task in contrast to talking endlessly with Naomi. She immensely enjoyed topics ranging from personal habits and foibles to political issues and concerns. In two hours seated beside one another they broached, or delved into, every subject his mind could conceive of minus the greatly feared one, divorces. They whiled away the hours with beverages, and he placed cigarette after cigarette in her grateful but almost subservient pedigreed hands.

“Care for another my dear? May I insist?” he asked.

“If you insist you can but this will be my second in twenty minutes so let’s go slow after this.” Naomi took charge, he could have given her drugs and she’d have thought it right – she blandly just adored those hands which he reluctantly defiled every twenty minutes with tobacco. In Adler’s opinion his love truly blossomed, though it wasn’t fate’s first choice destination.

Naomi realized they were about to betray all their candid feelings after not much longer; though maybe the pair foresaw the ominous risk there was of losing what they had, and to put in its place the utter dismay contingent upon failure. Naomi and Frederick Adler, she felt, reached that stage when potential existed dependent upon achieving a happy union through not being either too forward and overwhelming, nor too shy and retiring. It was a delicate, fragile admixture.

The expressions both wore on their visages, and which they tried to conceal, colourfully epitomized the powerful emotions they had for one another. Naomi failed to prevent herself forgetting and, staring at Adler’s features, everyone inferred she was gob-smacked, while he was so engrossed it transpired he could not focus or arrange his mind at all on his plans nor surroundings. Until at last they grew involved in a passionate and fervent discussion on religious divisions in Europe during the last five centuries; however, neither progressed onto the next level because of the intense attraction they bore one another. They laughed sarcastically at the sentimentality that followed automatically. It ought to have been noticed, unfeasible though it sounds, that their infatuation held the prospect of being self-destructive so momentously was it held by both parties. As with every true, justified affair of the heart as it may blossom so it might suddenly catch flame and melt, wither both lovers’ futures, at least in such a way Fred related the “amour propre” to himself. Then he offered her this, he proffered her that, as I said earlier and he said to her that he sensed intuitively what she desired to speak about, it was almost annoying. Their dialogue proceeded along ever-altering, ever-mutating conduits.

“Isn’t it brilliant we are both destined for the same place?” Naomi of course was hinting next that she would rather take him out than see her friends no matter how fond she was of them, of course she would only hint that much now.

“Yes. Ah, Lady, you don’t intend to make me depend on you to watch over me. I’m not a complete fool, I’m streetwise you know.” Naomi, you understand was not familiar with Switzerland, and she considered that to locate her chosen hotel would be traumatic and unfair, without wrinkled Adler to show her the way to get to it.

“But of course. It is my honour” she said. “On condition that you consent to please me yet further, over a dinner.” The apparently refined methods she employed to achieve the result she sought were deliciously smooth but she kicked herself in case of barren disappointment.

“Well, I’m not sure Lady…” Fred really wanted to extend this romantic rendezvous, he had never trusted a real stranger before, but he said he would be horribly aghast if Pirsig’s plot was abused, or he was taken advantage of by this girl who was only slightly more than a passing face, but indisputably much less than an actual companion, “Nevertheless” he said into the ether.

He had once before had a serious adult friend of the fairer sex: about five and a half years before he took up his post at Pirsig and Cie. But, he had to admit it had come to a halt because of a lack of trust between him and her after, committed to one another, friends had made them come round to the idea they weren’t suited and he assumed from that his fiancée was being unfaithful or, what’s worse, he suspected, she was being psychologically manipulative. It was an error of judgement he recalled as she did not lead him astray, not a bit of it, but simply allowed gossip and ill-rumours to go plain as day unchecked mainly because she couldn’t care less about whether or not her reputation was smeared. He was living in London during that relationship and, with the arduous temptations cohabiting in a big city sends forth, he tried desperately to forgive her; though found it nearly impossible to sit beside her, or even walk alongside her either so that he was compelled to end the sorry saga based upon his unproven suspicion, or so it seemed with hindsight. The girlfriend had not complained even slightly, maintained a front of “devil-may-care”; and then she had felt offended by his lack of concern and knew she had been only too accurate: he had been unmoved spiritually when he was with her, and, physically he “could go and do whatever he wanted, go and sling his hook”, without causing rifts once they had finished. Why he remembered these things now was of consequence, he mused, as the memories were manhandling the potential as he viewed it of carrying out Pirsig’s plan and maximizing the rose-tinted future bonding process that fluffily lay in store.

Before that bond of intimacy receded from view, Adler only attained the love of a woman on a bare minimum of separate occasions; he was in a position to claim that each one, a briefer interlude than the last, was a rip-off. He was inexperienced to be quite honest: immature you could say in that regard, so it would have been a stolen clinch had God ordained to give him any such fortunate opportunity to accept. For any of the scoundrels in Geneva, any streetwise city-slicker to accost him, apprehend him by surprise and to be abusive of him had clearly been a mainstay of the rife discontent. Once, his fiancée Gertrude had let him see just what most women thought by relating in no uncertain terms to him one morning just how little she really counted the surface mode with which he adored her:

“You epitomize everything I hate in mankind. From how you spend hours in front of the television to your silly obsession with middle names; and to me you are a Kevin, a curse and an omen in disguise.”

Her distaste was manifested in this vein in such wording for about five days until she found an excuse to erase him from her life, and home; and the remembrance often haunted him.

“It has been such a trying ordeal overall” She honestly volunteered to his friend who would come to her rescue when she was in need of a helpful listener who could empathise with such depressing matters.

“I don’t see how he wormed her way into your life. But we have both been stupid, he certainly is a sly one that one, pulled the wool right over your eyes. Yes he did!” Gertrude concurred with his friend, trying to sound full of pathos, and failing to achieve it except to cohere with Fred's too trusting, too gullible intellect.

“If only she had had a few more morals, or was more honest. She certainly wasn’t the catch I thought she would be at the start” he foolishly said to Naomi’s alerted ears.

“At the start she was so sweet but maybe a bit smarmy. We just couldn’t tell that she wouldn’t be willing to lift a finger to change if you needed her to” he added, and they went on moaning and complaining for an absolute age together.

“It was a trying ordeal overall and that was what made it a huge effort to once again devote myself to any woman.” This ardour, applied even to one such as Naomi, who had her heart in the right place and was in receipt of adorable traits, messed up the situation for Adler endlessly. He would not desert her, she presaged, but she could not have any idea at this stage of the level of trust in his personality, fugitives and deserters are not overwhelmingly conspicuous.

Anyway, this soul-searching Adler now has embarked upon was less than flamboyant or effective, in so far as he was at his core, a solitary person not to mention a lonely person to boot. Or perhaps a human island in a seething mass of strangers nothing more, and he needed no more.

His constant deference and obsequiousness to chief Pirsig who refused him, denied him, and rejected his investment decisions, depressed him. His inability to refute him irked him. To stop the evil Pirsig's nefarious plots put him in the midst of, and that which made him lean towards a state of servility, and dependence he found impossible.

It can be emphasized I suppose he was akin to Naomi, given permission to be alone by the universe. Her repudiated, shallow, and pointless friends, plopped there instead of fierce competitors or thoughtful lovers, as far as we can tell, drove her to the brink of despair and she sought to find peace by herself and a companion in what were essentially her own, usually circuitous, thoughts. Although she never made headway (they were nigh on jubilant about this) she nevertheless held fast to the belief it was a more wholesome, worthwhile existence energizing the mind than exposing herself to the enmity and jealousy of deceitful personages. Sometimes, it was sadly impossible not to observe that Adler, accustomed to a rude, male dominated company felt horribly disposed to criticise feminine wiles to this lady he had really only just met.

“I really do not understand why everyone cares about their own appearance” he had remarked and, to be polite, she had replied: “Yes, it’s really about pride. Certainly, I do not care for someone even if they are fantastic to look at if they do care too much about it.” Howsoever, it was only to display to him, to force him to realise that she was fond of him and was willing to disregard those damaging superficial traits she had assessed him to possess; and furthermore she contained any show of irritation. She considered that to be about to share a delightful meal with the stranger was somewhat premature, and she called herself a tart inwardly. Yet, aside from such-like misgivings, she felt compelled to touch him lightly on the arm and to give her consent, no matter how foolhardy and abrasive he was. He so clearly was a try-hard; and, without a care in the world and without caution, to go out to dinner with a new friend by the canal bridge who maybe she had put upon to an extent that night was patently risky.

There were extenuating circumstances for this as there always are. If she took into consideration the car disaster, the missed appointments and her general bad luck and realised that she, seated next to him with a very fake air of contentment and laissez-amour, needed someone to be kind, to be nice to and to alleviate her worn out spirits after retirement, in addition if someone was required to act as a counterfoil to her lesser errors: impudence, banality, curtness, and the like it stood to reason that Geneva held no risk in store.

She convinced all onlookers by her jovial laughter how she had accidentally spilt her coffee so that she had to ask a hostess to assist them, when she had a revelation of sorts that this was wrong. Could it be the right assessment that since she was having such a good time here, next to a man, there was still every possibility he was an impostor, a petty crook or villain just pretending to have the staple characteristics of a bon-viveur relishing this their first class flight, paid for with what may be stolen money. Like-wise he had his own concerns to take heed of:

“Really I should not be doing this. This is dangerous. What if she isn’t Naomi Dean? But everything suggests she is.” He mused steadily and immaturely on the trouble that would be in store for him in an hour if this was a double disguise, purely an act, to lure men like him into a hidden trap and he had been found out.

“What if she tries to run off?” he said to himself. He decided she might prove true if he would dare to run the gauntlet, and try to see if he could possibly look at the messages on her un-recharged mobile phone. They had a power point in the kitchen area for that. So, with trembling hands, and having innocently said he had no signal on his iPad asked her to hand over her phone so he might text a friend using it in advance for when they landed, he scrolled through her address book so he would know for sure. In it there were entered an abundance of rich and noble-sounding titles: inside were not just phone numbers for banks, hotels, car salesmen and lawyers as he had presupposed, there was also a numbered fob. Which he immediately put in his pocket. Surely this list meant her life was rife with contacts in the aristocracy and, moreover, he rested assured he was justified to name her Naomi.

Another person in the mobile he had observed, before returning it to its owner, was called Morris Dean, or her Dad, an acquaintance of his and a good client of the bank; so unless he became paranoid, there’d be no harm in travelling with her to a restaurant when their plane landed – he looked like he had won the lottery.

Not that he always guessed the truth about women far more trustworthy than him, for his paranoia was not without good reason. Once, several years before, he had been befriended and betrayed by a chap who, it transpired, was in fact employed by some enemies and though they seemed quite normal and quite the friendliest he could hope for, just the same they were sent to try him. Their main objective had been for him not to have a good time socially but they were trying very hard to undermine his confidence, to wreck his chances of getting married to the particularly elevated Gertrude. This had taken him down to the lowest position he had ever faced when it turned out they were not cool although their clothes, their attitudes and their use of lingo suggested differently. They were, to put it plainly, spies trying and failing to blend into the scenery, and affect things with his beloved Gertrude. The giveaway had dawned when he was walking through a crowd of people to get to an airport quite a few years before. One of them was wearing a coat they’d procured from another person he had spotted momentarily on the subway: it had the same sewed-on badge and an identical patch on the back. When he confronted them they merely said:

“Why you have a very vivid imagination! Shouldn’t you see a doctor for that?”

“I’m not imagining anything. You should realise what prats you are – the lot of you!” Why this had happened to Fred was one of those tortuous mysteries which left him desultorily unhappy, but victorious, and more determined than ever in his studious course, the machinations and ministrations of Pirsig, and more prepared to suffer for the cause, that of Swiss private banking.

On another tangent, at first both Naomi and Adler, because of their children, were justified, and matched one another’s endless enthusiasm for conversation. It was another altogether different question whether that utterly devoted state of affairs would last for any period of time given their pasts. However, Naomi intransigently refused to foresee that reciprocal feeling decaying at any stage in the near future.

“With me you must try not to be cool, someone you aren’t. I will notice it, and it will make me think the worse of you, I assure you it will. You are doing excellently as it is.” With this remark and others in a similarly honest and frank strain he magnetised her.

“And I assure you,” he continued, “that you mustn’t try to impress me nor will you. I know your failings, trust me.”

“It was just, I was feeling, well, a bit strange just then – please don’t fret about it.” As she spoke Naomi deliberately fixed her father figure with her trademark stare trying to repel him, impress him and allay his senile fears which must have left him unconvinced of her true mettle. A trademark stare that simply said she was spoilt and a loser. Still, the plane had to land eventually. It had been on a slow descent for a while now, and the announcement from the cockpit was heard on the Tannoy saying they were about to touchdown in Geneva.

Naomi was indifferent, of course. She possessed the air of true nonchBertramce, and was thinking solely of the time she would share with the enigmatic divorcee Fred Adler. Then the plane went lower, and lower before touching the solid tarmac that was sodden with water. Fred then subconsciously modified his tone of voice and mirrored that process. He was so in tune, so close to widow Naomi, about to land, she wanted to preserve the peaceful moment and capture it, as folk do with their photograph albums usually left to fade, and whither after the initial formation. Naomi, was weak and nervous; she was understanding him, and having a laugh, but amongst friends from her native land we all know she would have behaved much more disingenuously. Naomi wished to ask him to hold her hand; but instead resisted and merely accepted the offered assistance in unloading her baggage.

“Don’t do that, for my sake please. Please let me deter you, look at the rain. First you shall hand me those bags then once we have done all the piteous, boring, how do you say it, labour I will give them right back to you.”

“Oh! You are such a nice man, kind sir. How lucky I truly am to have not met anyone else. Much obliged I’m sure.” She had no intention of actually transporting her own bags, but enjoyed practising the gracefulness of a woman she was by all means able to carry off an impression of for a while. It seemed to some extent unseemly to her, and a misuse of time, all these languorous and tedious customs, but she determined to go along with it for his sake, and for the amusement. To a certain extent, he was perturbed about the derision she might have foisted upon him; for he showed her such esteem, when in his head she was a senseless plebeian. Indeed, he made up his mind now to resolve these doubts by phoning Pirsig, who was the only one of his friends who knew about nobility, who has an enormous turreted home in or near Istanbul. When the opportunity presented itself and they were waiting patiently for their luggage – hers hand-made leather, his Samsonite, to be brought round to them on the conveyor belt.

"Naomi I’m absolutely dying for the lavatory. Will you excuse me for just two ticks?” He signed off.

“Yeah, I mean yes rather, you don’t need my permission for that!” No trace of suspicion crossed her features. How was she supposed to know this was his tactic he used at dinner parties when he was “up to no good”? She was faced in the other direction when Fred darted away from the lavatories towards the telephones. Once there, he didn’t waste any time in tackling the burning issue: “Pirsig, I’ve met the woman, a bit of a Sharon you could say, but she is very beautiful and I am convinced she is minded to come onboard” he said.

“Nothing must hold you back. If you feel she is the right one, my friend. Just don’t bring her to my family in T-T-Turkey…” he said trembling at the very notion. This conjecture was typical of his unfrivolous nature.

“But you see, my dear Pirsig, she is not one of us, no real family you know, her background my God is a life in the centre of Kent, so she says anyway, which is full of those idiot English druggies. This is putting me off although she you told me she was some kind of disgraceful loose woman,” She laid claim to a noble heritage, he added for closure.

“Is she the client of ours, Adler? If she isn't dump her right now, my man. Ask yourself that and ignore her background, for heaven’s sake you might get laid for the first time in two decades.” He had no intention of preventing this misalliance, but ran a check of the customer database for the name "Morris Dean", a light and a bleep gave him the approval he needed.

“What puts me off is how the bankers will behave towards her. Will they be kind and friendly, or rude as you know you are, if you try? Answer me that, old chap.” His pitch was rising as he drew closer to the core of the issue: “I can’t talk now either, but I have personal reasons against being enemies of a family that never did anything wrong. My friend, be more relaxed I urge you, and know you will choose what is right for us and never, never bring our bank’s name into disrepute.” He muttered a thank you, replaced the receiver and hastened back to Naomi, whilst slicking his grey hair back, and hurrying to compose himself.

This was the first deception but if there were more to come, as in a domino effect, he had no way of knowing.

The atmosphere in the airport lounge was almost identical to the atmosphere in any other public place at any other time. Naomi and Fred both sensed, at the same time, the routine embarrassment caused by all the probing, inquisitive eyes as they emerged in each other’s company into the arrivals zone. Neither of them expected anybody while Naomi summoned up the courage to walk towards the savage crowd as though they were not there. Her ideas multiplied apace that morning, which was unusual for her, and which gave her some sort of hiding place and refuge to efface the tenderness she bore the man. Adler tried to describe his own antagonism to the mauling crowds.

“I was trying to look discreet but there is something unsettling about all those identikit people back there looking at you. You know what I mean?” So that means, he is just slightly timid Naomi imputed, and said:

“Yes, it is uncanny the way they stare, no? It is as if they are delving into your soul. I don’t like it one bit.” Naomi pretended she had often to endure some contact with the hoi polloi even though she had from her nephew, the diamond dealer, acquired such an insulated existence, and had got such a fine inherited style that this happened virtually never. It was her obelisk that she too was obliged to do ordinary things like pushing luggage trolleys, or going into newsagents, or merging with a sea of clones.

Although she must have appeared completely abnormal collecting a newspaper or buying cigarettes in a corner shop, for her part she always, always loved it, she proclaimed. She found it hugely pleasurable to mix, on some occasions, with the humbled proletariat; she had a fascination for the remote person, the normal other, the downtrodden. Not really acquainted with the eccentric or spontaneous Naomi to Adler it was new and unfamiliar when she, quite without warning, began to sprint energetically towards a stranger down the road past the taxi ranks. Only when she yelled a foreign name out did he grasp why she had bolted. Adler, instantly filled with a mild curiosity, hardly cared anymore once it struck him that Naomi who was stood there conversing volubly with the friend who had turned up, had not returned to him for several long minutes. He couldn’t help but notice every few minutes one of them cast a surreptitious glance backwards at him, and then he saw with clarity that Naomi was chatting about him with the new arrival, as he had already done a few minutes ago with his manager Pirsig.

“Oh, it’s you. Sorry I did not notice you but I am under lots of pressure these days. I’ve been sent by my job to England and it uses up every spare minute I can tell you. I never see my chums from home anymore and I have always to go and find officials from the government to tell them what I think of the EU. It’s tragic, believe you me.” The woman was extremely tall with the fair hair and gait of a proud and inbred Dutch woman. She was rather prepossessing, and smiled well, and although she talked too fast, and in a staccato manner, she was mildly amiable.

“I see, well I am in a hurry too I’m on my way to dinner with someone I met on the plane. He’s over there. I am too late to meet some chaps from the offices, after I crashed the f-ing Mercedes. Don’t you like what Fred – over there by the pillar – looks like, because I assure you he’s a rare specimen, a total delight trust me.” Naomi relished the chance at conversation about Adler; firstly, because she was sure they were both attired superlatively in contrast to the proportion of the passengers there; and, because she was convinced her friend was about to report back home what Fred was like, and of this she had every reason to be content, though perhaps not to some degree nonchBertramt and smug too. Her pastimes suddenly seemed to have paid off well, if not better than inherited wealth and nobility of spirit would ever do.

“I see him, with the grey hair, yah? Yes you are always so lucky. You must apologise to him on my behalf, needs must; persuade him that if under any other circumstances…” she said in her kind way.

“No, I understand. I would be jealous anyway as you are always charming my men.” She did not mean this wholeheartedly but she felt like playing to her friend’s weakness about men’s opinion of her, so she called a modicum of flattery into play.

“Yes, yes. Watch that jealousy – it could get the better of you, you know.” She remarked in Dutch.

“Anyway, let’s see what we can do. I’m not sure whether I am allowed to visit you after that last contretemps between my nephew in London and your family. All balderdash if you ask me. But you know you are welcome in my home whenever you feel that way inclined.” This last invitation signaled to her without any doubt that she, who was from a notch higher in the nobility, favoured leaving pretty soon. She divined the insinuation and they were soon exchanging voluble histrionic goodbyes, and generally feigning a parody of themselves. They were the centre of attention for passers-by, and all the while gesturing manically to a not so imaginary audience. Then, with what I suppose is known as a sly grin, she again made her way over to join Alder.

She tried to seem unaffected and chilled out when, in actual fact, she considered herself most uneasy and uncomfortable. Presently then Naomi gently taking her leave, and, with a flourish, returning again said:

“That was Virginie. She and I went to the university together. She hasn’t changed an iota since then; still good old Virginie.” Fred felt offended at being left alone so inconsiderately, and was wondering if the truth was that he had been faulting her because she was embarrassing him. Even in these modern times there were still all the factions and shame associated with notions of class belonging to an age so long forgotten.

Once she had stood next to Alder for a few moments, and they were waiting immobile for a free taxi to come and offer them assistance, he asked her about Virginie:

“Is she another aristocrat?” He had been inspired by her appearance, but was awe-struck by such a tall, amazonian female whose size made her seem like an idealised Nordic creation; furthermore, he would have been afraid of her if she wasn’t standing stock still several metres up the concourse.

“That was Virginie. She’s a good mate but she’s not that bright. Always had problems at university, of a sort of personal nature. She’s very honest, yet not enough brains there to know when to shut up, if you get my drift.” She lied. At times Naomi lapsed into slang; however, it sounded upper class, since it was her that was talking, but trying to blend in, mix in with properly. Fred's inhibitions fell away from then on, in his opinion she was attractive, but all the more easily seductive for being a touch down to earth.

CHAPTER 18

Stubbornly enduring half an hour in heavy rainfall, trying yet failing dismally to hail a taxi to help them they looked like their cause was lost. Ten or so minutes more of this and they surrendered to the idea of a cabby not trying to beat a road through the rain with maniac windscreen wipers just to save them.

It was about eleven-thirty in the morning by then, when in the shape of an unlicensed, atrociously badly-kept and battered Renault, a savior arrived who together they both recognized and assented was a last chance to get to a dry, warm place.

The savior was not as graceful as so many myths in tourist guides doubtlessly led most to expect of chauffeurs: he was surly and a heavily bearded gent with the disheveled appearance impossible for this career. And he had viciousness etched into his eyes, if you could somehow make them out because his dark sunglasses wisely obscured them in totality. The angry, bleating sound of Vespa and SUV tooting in the wet deafened, and was a constant daft distraction for the miserable, damp and shabby pair and because the cabby’s voice was muted and nasal his blurred command was inaudible. So they had to follow their instructions by his actions and gestures, not by language.

“Looking for a ride. This way then. Put your stuff in the trunk.” He said this very quietly, murmuring and blurring it, and making a sad pair they were probably required to acquiesce but sorely mistaken to without minding whether they had obeyed the tips and checked his official credentials so as to be sure he was worth placing their belongings with rather than some sourly unkempt member of a taxi rank Mafioso.

Adler knew from every city guide he had of criminals hiding in dark places to see tourists coming in droves out of the airports and train stations. Easy prey, fair game but he was terrible at assessing that along with Naomi he needed to be on the lookout in what could develop at any moment into a hard-boiled scenario.

So Adler could do nothing but hand over his heavy briefcase and her globetrotter suitcases to the dodgy cabby. Naomi saw only one reason to become suspicious abruptly. Since she rightly gave most of her underlings the benefit of the doubt and unless they were directly provocative or surly she never feared being ripped off. This time though the contrast between his shabby dress and his high end watch confused her senses.

She believed none of her servants considered her to be nor treated her as a potential miser or a vain blunder-head. She loved to delude herself that everyone she impinged upon thanked her for her special treatment and badly wanted to give to her the deference which ought to be afforded to one of her rank.

She was optimistic they were quite scared of and jealous of her, at least of the privileges and successes she was born into Marlowe place’s pantheon to reap the fringe benefits of, in particular her set of a handmade, ornamental, silver encrusted memory stick with the exactly matching shape fob.

Most of her underlings saw it as a misguidedly obtained paradise, and she was to have her fallacious comprehension of her role’s intrinsic worth shattered one day soon, they all said it, although only momentarily, they all presumed, as her aloofness would quickly return to its original starting place as her serious apprehensions always had a yo-yo effect.

While laboriously dragging bag after high-end bag to the Renault’s dark, open boot, only the taxi driver could guess their ride might be not the direct run to Avenue des Barracias, nor even be a departure from the concourse still safe, unapprehensive and on the right track for the hotel.

“God, these bags. Jesus. I often wonder why I need so very many of them,” Naomi said.

“Yes I wonder what you have in them. They do seem very heavy,” said Fred.

“I just like to make sure I don’t leave anything out of them. It’s such a nuisance when you’re miles away from home and you discover something is missing” Naomi said, letting him awkwardly heave the last of the globetrotter cases into the luggage compartment at the back of the taxi cab. His breathing had disintegrated by this early stage in the procedure.

Without a word and in silence the sullen, dark, bearded cabby had without the pair’s notice and without warning begun to drive off very fast. He’d really rather sneakily jumped into his car and taken up his driver’s seat in the front. The trunk of the car was still bobbing open and shut as he left the scene.

As he went away from view the stunned couple’s jawlines dropped in disbelief: so that their only recourse was to shout as loud as they could in order to stop him making off without them, and to alert the attention of security to the desperate problem of what would happen next.

As yet she hardly thought he was going away on purpose to steal their belongings and then to drop the bags off at some stolen goods handler across town somewhere. Naomi suspected at that time it was just a silly mistake and he would return as soon as he noticed his terrible error.

“No, no, this is a joke, surely?” Adler stated then: “Come back, stop him. Stop that car,” he screamed, now a large bellyful of lungs. Then turning to Naomi:

“Why didn’t you run after him?” To which he replied in a manner as removed from undignified as possible, yet still leagues beneath being self-assured:

“Maybe when he notices, which you ought to be convinced he will, he will come back to us. So there would be no use in chasing him. It would be far more efficient to call for a policeman don’t you agree?” he asked.

“No. I don’t bloody well agree”, she argued. “My possesions are in that car and I’m lost if I don’t get them back. I can’t believe you, you really are a joke.”

They argued more because Adler hadn’t perceived there was something important he should do to assist this bewildered and set-upon young woman who he dragged into the nightmare in the first place, through no fault of her own.

Adler had great expectations of Naomi and her capacity to handle situations like this in a proficient way but the fact was that she disintegrated under the pressure of the runaway driver, and he could not help her or stop her from bitterly complaining it was a major incident.

Just a moment before Naomi stubbed her third cigarette out, a van with the bright and clear airport markings on its side panels, drew up beside where they were huddled against the last drops of rain. Through the windows of the van she spotted somebody’s luggage which looked as though it was the same stuff which had been on a short journey out of the airport grounds. They ceased lambasting one another with critical insults for the next twenty minutes.

“Here, Madam, and Sir. Now you can be on to the town. You no worry anymore, nicht verstandig? Everything okay anymore.” The security personnel was not superb at explaining in English that they owed him 500 swiss francs for the rescue of their things. They never really spoke to the affluent passengers in Geneva airport. The recently met couple were reluctant to go hand in hand into the expensive foreign city, since their difference of opinion over the theft of the heavy suitcases, but they decided to go irrespective of that plain fact. They both were aware of the reduction in their amity but still: bowed down, but bonded still by this latest adversity they drove ahead.

The transportation took place efficiently, without any disturbances except slight damage to the high end bags, minimal wear but at the edges scuffing and dirt. They could both breathe slowly and normally once again, and each looked out the windows on either side of the taxi cab at architecturally excellent buildings. Looking askance, perhaps sheepishly to each other maybe to repair and to readjust the entente cordiale that sprung up between them, to not scuzz up any remaining chances of returning to their previous state of harmony and unsullied bliss.

Earlier, they were heading away from a drenched misery into something worse, a kidnapping of their possessions by an idiotic cab driver. The same as earlier, when given perfect warning signs, the sensations and sounds of this metropolis soon produced a set of clues that they were breaking with the old crimes of the past and making possible a fresh train of thought.

From past experience she remembered there were many exclusive restaurants in Geneva Naomi wanted to give her approval to, but one lodged fast in her memory as one to be avoided.

Someone mentioned it was doing well a long time previously. Importantly it nagged her to recall how and when and what she had heard of it. It was nigh on impossible to remember. Seldom she accessed these concealed vaults of information, seldom very important things but still she wasn’t specific enough about all of their origins to remember. Others they met that evening were not as fortunate as to acquire selective amnesia.

Instead of holding extensive amounts of trivial knowledge her memory was inconsequential and uncorroborated, like a drizzle of rain which evaporated right after it had fallen on the earth. After that Adler, who hadn't been listening to her gave his more reliable approval to the particular establishment that had been from some upmarket guidebook recommended to him as a fine eating house.

Even his earlier incompetence with the warning signs notwithstanding he was quite proficient at the nuanced skill of spending lots of cash, and that was why he was so good at certain things but she was so tragically retarded at others. Once they had come to a halt he jumped or bounced in a very enlivened way out of the taxi cab and took himself around to Naomi’s still closed door, risking an argument.

“Jerk. Don’t think this will make me think more highly of you,” She said.

“Me? A jerk? Come now, dearest. Let’s not argue, there’s no point,” She was contemplating leaving him just standing, mouth gawping wide open, and thought it her righteous prerogative to do precisely what she felt like.

She struggled to rein in her rage creditably last time and having had her idealized portrait of him destroyed she made the concerted effort to seem placated when she was broiling.

“Alright, Mister.” She said, turning back to face him.

After the first dinner and two hours later she was on the flight of steps of the hotel while he was left still milling around listlessly smoking Marlboros in the plaza below, to help him digest his food. He was calling after her:

“Come on. Let’s not go on like this. Let me come over later and I'll let you show me your room and then we’ll go out for drinks like we agreed.” He smiled his smile of vindicated pride and plopped his fag butt on the floor looking up the steps towards her.

“Still, called me a gentleman. Still up to my old tricks. Just on the way to another, yes another, beautiful woman’s room.” He smirked to himself. He said under his breath as he jauntily traversed the plaza to catch up with his emails first in his room.

Naomi, ascending the staircase far ahead of him was tired and had mused upon the ineluctable facts of her highly disturbed existence. The enormous wealth which she was to inherit from her special uncle who made her the keys with the fob she wanted kept secret, the friends she had accumulated she kept secret, her dead husband was forgotten, those who attacked her status and society’s regard about her apartment in London were sidelined.

She had talked to herself in a strange admixture of infant-speak and the colloquialisms of her forebears about her ongoing deception of Adler:

“I am beholden to nobody, I can do anything, or at least I could if it was possible,” thought Naomi. When he courageously ventured to her luxurious suite of rooms to fetch her he was bereft of compassion for the woman he found both foolish and a bit smarmy. This was largely due to his narcissism, or its converse, which initiated his inner lack of confidence, and thereby actuated an outward conceitedness and vanity.

He was always on edge, pitted against others and perturbed by his own inadequacy and it was made far worse when he saw the fierce competitive natures of other people; whether it be for gaudy attention or plain survival in pressurized situations. And in respect of his personal ideas and his inward being he often felt insecure and inadequate which meant he pitted himself against his enemies. This blurred his vision. He couldn’t have known Naomi was happy, happier than she had ever been.

Indeed, the elegant style which Naomi usually unveiled in public spaces, and the serene composure she found it so easy to facilitate was a mask, an outer shell, very fragile, very brittle, very necessary. But it was not his style and Adler was jealous of this contrivance of style. If it was a result of her conscious strivings he was blind to the fact.

Like a new jacket she tried it on and it fitted, but she could not remove it, and she was stuck in a pretty costume clinging to her image. Naomi may not have earned it but what was pithier she had never even thought to request a disguise or costume to cloak her naked true predicament. That was only a necessary precaution designed to hide the truth.

Tapping lightly on the door of Naomi’s suite he knew, and his imagination told him, without a shadow of a doubt, that he urgently needed to do something special now. Dispute arose to diminish her loyalty and enviable regard for him. He needed to forget about his jealousy, and to put away his blinkered viewpoints to charm Naomi and to think about what Pirsig had warned him about, which he too had foreseen as an inevitability. When she gingerly opened the door, hesitating she was predisposed to simply get rid of him:

“What are you doing here? I thought you got the message?” She rebuked him twice, having partially taken leave of her senses after the problem with their bags, and again in the first restaurant. She’d removed his sorry self from the approximate vicinity and she looked aghast at him. But he said:

“What are you saying? What has happened to you? Did you not accept my invitation?” he asked, not giving up that easily.

“Well, Fred, I’m afraid I did, but only on condition that you did not behave so atrociously at the airport,” she said, ending on a comparatively light-hearted note, with a slightly sadistic smile. Naomi had lost her grip on the situation. Such significance Adler set upon the lady's reciprocation he saw defeat and failure as a raven of doom in the sky whirling its way downwards to his vulnerable, imperfect person.

He asked her to stop to listen to what he had to say. He begged her to slow down to give him another chance to rebuild things with pleading. When he failed at that, he reverted to straightforward truth; he asked her to forgive him, to forget about his single vice: that sometimes his words and deeds were the behavior of a lout, not a member of her (technically) high society.

Desperately, Adler realized the sole reason. With hindsight, when Naomi ended up at The Sanctuary, dissed and rejected, she had coldly blamed every contact of hers in the highest echelons. She assured him again and again, this was still the case, but placed the blame on her treasured family heirlooms, from Marlowe Place which she admitted she had planned to burgle, and present to him.

Citing her sharp, little plan to pass her inheritance to her brother Morris junior, without gaining anything, she forswore the accusation of angry indignation and denied that she found in him any wrongdoing. He was not a despicable specimen, nor such a coward as he pretended he thought.

She admitted she was typical of those circles who distanced their frailty with pretentious words, and empty posturing. Only an idiot could attempt to convince someone of who and what she was but she was listened to and understood:

“Sir, you don’t see my heart was never yours, and it is not for a man like you to find fault, you who speaks so well only to cover up how weak, and insecure, you are.” There Naomi paused, debating whether he was like the rest of his ilk and underneath tolerating this bare-faced cheek from her: he was propelled outwards to the borderlines of reason; however, stifling a grin he tried to maintain his serious position and remain congenial.

“What should I say. You do not want me around, but if you do have faults so do I…” He cut off the sentence short when he realized he was being outspoken too, but wishing she'd understand if he told her what he was there for, something set him off:

“Ah, I see where you are coming from. I am not the one who assured me they were a Lady and then spoke like a circus freak.” He stopped there.

Pirsig’s wicked stratagem seemed finally to be gaining some ground. They were both aware of their displayed candor and both were aware of their own incompetent bluntness.

When they stopped to assess whether or not they should have enunciated those caviled phrases. When Naomi reconsidered admitting to him her scheme to rob Marlowe place, neither would be happy at the ingenuity they each needed to apologize to one another. This was the bit that was proving to be more difficult than anything else so far, Adler found.

“Naomi. Can you forgive me? Let’s put the whole silly episode behind us. We’re both in the wrong aren’t we? If we have feelings, why can’t we accept we are only human when it boils down to it, and we ought to attempt to live with that fact.” He said sadly.

“So you will forgive me then? My dear Fred, in that case, ought we not to be at a bar down town by now?” In reaching an agreement the result of which was laid bare through the first eye-contact since opening the door, they spared themselves the hardship of resorting to violent recriminations.

Fairly devoid of impact in a greater schematic order, or utterly useless even, as far as Pirsig was concerned, nevertheless this did signal a meeting of two minds hell-bent on pursuing their own unique goals. Emphases must be placed on the eye-contact as it signified not merely forgiveness, nor the hard-won acceptance of each other’s shortcomings. Provoked, he saw she was capable of laying aside prejudices and irrational loathing and of owning up to him. She saw with surprise however that his class ridden jaundice was quite able to:

a) Obscure the bases of friendship which they had formed and,

b) Remove the rewards of friendship which the future possibly otherwise held for them,

c) Accept that Naomi was a kleptomaniac.

It was decided, on both sides, that they should disappear almost immediately from the hotel. Once they had laughed a few pleasant laughs, and shed a few sorrowful tears, at the nearby bar (apart but together in spirit) and begun to wend their way back to the restaurant that was associated with an abyss of hatreds. Upstairs from the lobby she made a good effort to talk to Adler about his behavior and she put his mind at ease about what had maliciously left him in a shameful state of disarray at the airport. On this balmy evening the city was magnificent, as they strolled along. The cobbled street was bustling with the tourist trade, and every café and bar was beautifully lighted by a phallanx of faces and an azimuth of conversation. The Swiss have such taste for the appearance of their possessions and their heritage they seldom allowed heathens with no spirit, or idea of beauty to interfere and cause damage to the near-perfection of their streets and their buildings, as Naomi pointed this out of the numerous of the shops and sights Adler couldn’t resist and a little smile crept up.

“Why did you say you lived here when your surname is actually Dean? It’s hardly a German or French-sounding appellation is it? Answer me, Lady, and don’t try to lie – I’ll see through it.” She had got back to her natural state: un-cloyed, and unsullied. Tarnished neither by evil nor sanctimony she was ready equipped to fulfil her psychosomatic needs with sustenance, as well as her more diversified requirements that Adler could provide.

“You are too suspicious, I say. I live in two abodes. My mother lived her whole childhood in Switzerland. No, she had some time out of the country when her father was called to England for a few years, but it’s not easy to explain it without sounding too complicated.” She lied brazenly to him as he remembered the facts as they had been briefed to him. He surreptitiously turned his eyes to look into her petite aspect, but Naomi was averting her gaze which made it a somewhat onerous task to assess her true mood.

“Go for it, Lady. I am all ears. Explain,” He often liked using these slang expressions with her.

“What a sweet turn of phrase you have. Well, if you permit me, I shall. My mother lived on the shores of Lake Geneva, then she moved to England and, in those days, there was a party every night. Not that she was even that sociable. She was actually quite timid, timid and proud. She met my father rather late in life, and it, the marriage, was entered into in a hurry because they were madly in love; and she fell pregnant with me. Oh, this is what she told me…”

“You mean she left things out, Lady?” He said he was intrigued.

“I am not sure, but I have tried to ask her about that and usually got a cuff round the ear for my pains. It was taboo to poke my nose much further than that; after Morris junior they had problems having any more children.” She went on:

“Sometimes I blame myself. I didn’t want another brother or a sister. Perhaps this was because my father was a thwarted playboy. I expect that he was unfaithful to my mother often enough. And she must have found out, because he could not hide any secrets of that nature. He probably would have dismembered her if she had caused a fuss; and he was a powerful man so he would have seen to it she lost her membership of the highest stratas of society.” She breathed a grateful and deep sigh, with an air of finality, and looked across in pensive despair, in a far from prosaic way, at the gathering turbulence above their heads, as if she was scanning for comfortable answers. Fred glanced over querulously and nervously because this report of bad, possibly abusive parents sent shivers right down his spine it was so far from the idyllic upbringing he grudgingly experienced. It also made him sympathetic to her, at the same time as it concerned him, it gave him misgivings apropos of the mean plan Pirsig had prepared for her destruction.

“Ah, Naomi, it must have been terrible. Please try to go on since this is fascinating,” He said tongue-in-cheek.

“You think it’s hysterical” was her perceptive retort.

“No; I cannot comprehend what it is to know someone was doing such stuff: taking liberties in a relationship, and then you, and your mum, being unable to lift a finger; locked up to all intents and purposes, it’s unbearable!” By now the emotional transactions that had been predicated upon the lie scaled new emotionally bewildering heights. Pitches of affection usually just associated with many years of negotiating the hazards of life had been omitted and he greedily slurped up the vital information that she provided. When they turned the next corner later that night, and were within range of their dining place she sensed a need for censorship of her admiration of this attentive gentleman: the controversy of the evening before was wholly swept aside by Adler answering every doubt she had had of him and his authenticity. More than merely that: also his faked, confabulated identification was believed before it had been verified.

If integrity and honor and chivalry were qualities he looked on with reverence he kept his periscope up for when they might present themselves in people, particularly beautiful but lonely or victimized women. Adler seldom noticed when they lacked these genuine honors, nor when they had other qualities as replacements. As an illustration, there was no point being a sexy looker, or being so cool you were freezing, or even in showing charity to the helpless and in distress. No point. Because you needed to show a backbone of integrity to gain his approval.

Naomi’s blatant confabulations and tricks went some way to elevating her chances in his mind, and far outweighed the argument from Pirsig’s reportage that she was fractionally on the meek or cowardly side, in certain aspects. Another few steps, and they were led to their table outdoors in a courtyard, with Naomi chattering on in fluent French. Although still uneasy about hanging out so readily with a stranger never before was she prepared to stick up for herself, fend for herself, and she enjoyed her newly found dependence on the mystery that was Adler.

Then it occurred to him, whilst attempting to listen to Naomi select the wine and food that was the finest, that the mild-mannered and shy women were precisely the ones who had a tendency to be implicated in the worst nightmares. That Naomi with her assumed suavity and feisty and debonair attitudes may never become a victim and might even at a later stage fiercely and cruelly deny him any success in Pirsig's evil plot. Because and in spite of that fact he loved her genuine courage. Adler wanted to hold on to his target of an affectionate impulse and also his freedom to choose, his foreseeable chances of playing the field, and that was why he, like everyone else in those days, backed away from and evaded the old, time-honored structures of relationships. He would have denied being in love with Naomi.

Naomi made no effort to be pleasant or philanthropic to anybody except to Adler to whom she made a pledge in her heart of the precious silver memory stick with matching fob; she was pronouncing a verdict or issuing a command whenever she asked for more water or bread.

Naomi persisted in replenishing Adler's glass of wine from the carafe. If she had been less giving in that respect she would have had less likelihood of making the next wrong move.

The dinner became the highlight of the night with a delicious array of fruit as an appetizer, then some veal escalopes as a second course, and then a third course of pastas and gnocchi for Adler.

The last portion of the meal was a generous serving of more meat which was now more than enough for two starring characters but a paltry offering in dining terms. Naomi was mischievously and rapidly garbling her words throughout. Humorously carrying on she never for a second took stock to notice Fred's sombre and lachrymose mood which had fallen upon him like some unexpected thunderstorm somewhere in Arizona.

Although inhibition fell upon him at restaurants Naomi was too selfish and arrogant to pick up on either it, or her own lack of considerateness. It went unmentioned by Naomi since she was on another self-involved circuitous non-sequitur, and had lost touch with the modesty and bashfulness, the integrity and backbone that he’d been shamming all along.

Without so much as a by-your-leave, a bedraggled figure moseyed over to where the besotted couple were sitting, preparing to polish off their delicious feast.

The painlessly slow diminuendo of the feast was awkwardly and irrevocably interrupted by this mess of a man, who made out his name was Thomas and who later was to describe himself as a hack journalist. Thomas was to attempt to interfere in their lives or rather Naomi’s life on account of his superiors who had ordered him to go to this exclusive, almost invisible eating-place to take photographs of Naomi, and to pester Adler with no ulterior aim in his mind apart from churning out yet another piece about how the CULT was rumoured to have allegedly ensured a new stay of execution from being shut down by taking out some gagging order or other on the press.

Naomi was at a loss to provide Adler with some kind of rationale for why she nearly had a ruckus with this inquisitive pest, this unexpected addition, whose mode of living relied upon going back to his deputy editor with well-founded information, or an important news story about Naomi’s abortive role in the CULT.

By now Naomi was getting up from the dining table, and leaning aggressively over the low surrounding wall which ran around the tables sealing it off from the pedestrian walkways, and the throng milling about and was waving at him to shoo him away.

In unison the spectators looked over in total disbelief as Naomi attempted to remove his brightly flashing camera which David had insecurely tied on a cord from around his long neck. In the process, some part of a striped shirt tore loose – one of them had gone and ripped off an item of clothing but as soon as that had happened they were both cursing volubly, and the crowd began shouting out the worst expletives; Adler couldn’t possibly have imagined it unless he had somehow known in advance. Not in a terribly loud voice but rather subdued by contrast, he indicated to the shocked passers-by, who no longer were applying uncertain terms, the scandalous imputations about Naomi’s links to the CULT and its brainwashing techniques that the hack David Thomas was trying to prove by capturing her on film for his editor back at their headquarters in Kent.

“Come on now. I know who you are. Don’t. Just leave it. Give me one photo – that’s all I ask. Look you have nearly broken it. I have a mind to sue you.” He said.

“You wouldn’t get away with it. Now leave us alone, right. I’ll report you for meddling” Naomi said in retort.

Ignorant that the CULT’s notorious reputation was why he was investigating her, Naomi was grappling and groping with the dishevelled or nefarious impostor, whose type of assignment she disdained. It transpired that David’s honour depended on the big scoop because if he did not produce one decent scurrilous piece of news about thought control that was worthy of his glossy magazine back in Kent, and although he had long ago ceased showing he cared, he’d soon get sacked summarily.

David tried to convince himself he was still a great news hound, and he went on clinging avidly to the conviction that he was being unfairly dismissed by malpractice and politicised competition in the media. He saw there was no career, or point, in behaving according to his lights, or maintaining any other moral standard previously held: he had been demoted four times since Christmas last. Unless he gained sway over a miracle-worker, a magic spell-master, or an A list celebrity in connection to the New Religious Movement or the local Raffle, his ambition of one day being a serious player in his own right was nothing but a dream and his moral standards, and his lights, could slip through his fingers like granules seeping away to nothing down the steep slope on the inside of a timer.

The waiters would have risen up to take notice, and to pay attention if it did not require so very much to jolt them out of depressingly indolent complacency.

Alongside two of them, the manager, having ascertained in disbelief from other guests in attendance what had just transpired, sped over weaving in and out of tables to quash the arguments, and diffuse the crowd of onlookers assembling just inches beyond the low wall.

No sooner had they crept close enough to the table than in the scuffle, Naomi was drenched, absolutely soaked through with most of the contents of a carafe of wine. The wine would certainly stain her clothes, and the prospect of such a “boring” result drove her virtually hopping mad. Too late, she could do naught else except quietly seethe, however, because before she knew what was happening the manager and the two waiters rushed around abruptly to David Thomas as they tried to arrest the furore before it became any worse or descended into a sheer anarchic maul.

By running off he gave the impression he was temporarily leaving to skulk about for celebrity models. For the rest of the night in all probability he was going to try to go back again to take yet more photographs from behind the bushes which he was probably optimistic would be published in the next edition by virtue of the snaps being fairly controversial: “mesmerised aristocrat caught brawling in public with half her clothes removed,” etcetera; had he not been permanently prevented from such covert fantasies by the on-surge of Swiss citizens who were now sidling up to make a line against him. It was a strange but unlucky coincidence since they were in all likelihood the self-same types who purchased the rogue title, drooled over the topless models, and boosted its (albeit small) international market share.

When they thought the incident had dissipated into nothing the gathered customers were surprised to find a surreptitious woman had cast herself on top of Naomi's back and clung on while she articulated herself so that everyone within the courtyard could tell with precision what she was driving at in her ferocity.

She had recognised Naomi from those countless lost hours she had spent delving into, and poring over her image in the shiny pages of, the magazine which she bought for her scanty pleasure without fail every month, for the express purpose of researching her positively dreary, ordinary and unfortunate state of mind.

At any rate this middle-aged, larger than life, woman went by the name Polly David, and considered herself intensely dull. She consumed hundreds of pages of trivial facts anyone could find out about Naomi and her family’s associates, as well as their highly envied sensuous utopia at The Sanctuary. She ran full speed over to Thomas, the hack's, side.

“You lot. You’re crazy. Don’t you know who that slimy jerk over there is? It’s Dean, Naomi of that mental ward The Sanctuary! She’s a criminal, a liar, and a trespasser on us ordinary folk. And she ain’t rich, at least she doesn’t act as if she is. She’s lost all her family’s loot in the casinos, and then went off with a drug dealer and now she’s at it again, of course, but mark my words she ought to be locked up.” She flapped her flabby arms wildly but ineffectually, and cosying up with Thomas they teamed together to protect themselves, like dancers linking arms to bow in a show-stopping curtain call.

“Yes I am in the right. I told you she was a criminal, not I.” A grim renunciation, David announced this to the gathered crowd and an obsequious further grimace said it was fine to harass others if and when profiting and gaining from them but only if you yourself led a flawless existence. He flourished at his comrade David bombastically.

Polly who worked hard would be envious, fearless even, if Adler and his companion could be seen as sybaritic, idle and languorous, living the good life for themselves when she could never get in on the same vibe. She was made aware their positions in the stratosphere were louche and self-aggrandizing when paired up next to the general populous with their second-hand cars and stressful jobs and lack of valuable prospects. The main impediments to hopeful ambition:

“Why my friends do you loathe me so?” Naomi, replying to the raising of chanting after the slander, undercut and denied this reprobate's very real attack on her moniker with a bemused, in essence indignant air which she could not replace with what her enemies wanted nor remove by heeding what her enemies were saying to slate her image.

Though she was chafed to have to protect her credibility she quivered with pent up indignation, ultimately a faith in herself that resulted from the highest love of her family and a sense of guilty compassion for her inferiors – her entourage, as she termed them and this privileged indignation was now clearly going to fade away because of those she tried not to alienate, in spite of her best efforts.

She was in a difficult sense no longer competing with the cognoscenti but instead the hoi polloi, just for the sake of some barbarous hack.

“I have done nothing to you. You must realise that I am misunderstood. You don’t have any concept of what I really am,” she said, as she was knocked down by cries from the cold street of “You deserved everything you get,” and “You had it coming,” which was not the exact sound effect she was hoping to have to greet with on her way out. The strength of the gang stemmed largely from what Thomas had accused her of but equally the tone of voice she used to employ with lesser beings and the way she carried herself. It was so precise, so utterly foreign to themselves. But in this respect she was not dissimilar to any other of her ageing friends from the landed gentry.

Although Adler and Naomi were to some extent clued up enough about the differences from their underlings in their attire, their manner and in their wealth, and their often very sheltered backgrounds were of no use yet they couldn’t swipe away the problem here without reducing her assumed identities to servitude in argument and this enmity truly frightened her and made it hard for Naomi to repress elevated wrath at the present state of affairs.

How David proceeded to cajole and to convert them from self-effacement, to sheer disgust and venom did not defy conventional modes of explanation. The two waiters, the small crowd, and the plain clothes police officer who had been loitering in the shadows near the bushes a little way away were not mysteriously swayed. Had the target audience been informed and made aware, had the bystanders seen through her subtly disguised motives, and enlightened themselves as to her disturbed agenda Naomi stood a good chance, regardless of whether she was mad or not, of remaining as popular as before:

“Can’t you see? The woman is mad, she is ill. Someone have her contained and keep her where she ought to be – the asylum!” In this way David tried to guide them all to see Naomi and Fred not for who they actually were, but as two accomplices being judged purely and unfairly on their appearance.

Naomi was as vilified as evil-minded Thomas. With her standing in the community abolished, and her look of cowardice bearing judicial witness to it, it seemed to a soundly critical view that an absurd circumstance had been restored. She wasn’t regarded judgementally before, but it was agreed they had higher ideals for a heroine such as Naomi was asssumed to be.

“The geezer with her is a fraud I tell you, a hallucination more like. He deserves to be humiliated. Let’s strip him down, and see how he fares,” David did not intend to but the threat, if convincing enough, would stain Naomi’s name and her handsome companion’s opinion of her. Her aim, apart from wowing David Thomas, carrying out his every instruction, was basic. She simply wanted to destroy the evening out for her heroine and to prevent her ever making off with her flash cash – the bling-bling, ching-ching of the magazines.

David still thought Thomas was a tourist, and gathered they weren’t safe there. The manager had warned them that to spoil any more of his guests’ dinner with suchlike shenanigans was wrong and plotted avowedly extreme remedies as had the police officer on the corner.

They haphazardly determined to canter away from the dangerous scene fast and without any possible intervention, or intermediation.

Another good policy the two resolved was to use a guerrilla tactic and to retreat across the fully dank courtyard, and down the wet avenue in order not to have any more confrontations of that ilk, then to stay out of view while things died down. Away they went, at a halfway house between running and a mad walk with the obese woman David leading their way, with both looking back now and again. Intoxicated by the day’s victory for piety rejoicing juvenilely at the severe emotional distress given Naomi, and at the impropriety generated for an enthralled, albeit mildly frowning Adler.

Following timidly a short distance behind her Thomas who felt a bewildering sense of alarm at the exploit said it was a nice idea to shelter from the chaotic absurdity they had created in the vestibule to a shut art gallery that was over the road, just the other side of a downmarket news-stand.

David’s toxic company, spilling over alerted Thomas’s instinctive suspicions and rubbed off onto him while her aggression fortified his want of it. The atmosphere out there in the avenue, permeated and taut with prying eyes akin to those that glow brightly in the dark. He bolted away with her, but it was inevitable he’d get arrested later.

When she looked over at Thomas David's mounting veniality increased tenfold. His teeth were clattering like keys played badly on a piano, and his mouth, it seemed temporarily lodged into a twisted contortion. His thoughts reverberated maddeningly. He tried to justify what happened. He argued his way out of the distress he was in, by saying he hadn’t done a thing that went against his tried and tested carefulness. He didn’t find his own defence a difficult case to win. Arguing for the default notion of rootless paranoia at having made a gross scene he persuaded himself to rein himself in, to doubt his own moral fibre, and to loosen his previously tight grip on reason more.

David was waddling obsequiously over to him, glancing at her she displeasured him even more.

They leant against a broad doric pillar at the far side of the gallery and discussed why Fred Adler with only his esteemed gentility, with merely his affected aura, with also an emphatically self-contained set of beliefs was so shocked, almost as though feigning surprise, when he learnt the paparazzi had risen in similar perplexing and problematic ways many times in the past. Was he a foe in some cryptic yet solid way at fault, or a good friend?

David was ever the champion of incontrovertible facts. Of the love that made Naomi Dean, without prospect, without youth, without a care in the world blinded to Fred's shortfalls, David couldn’t have cared less. At last Naomi managed to formulate a careful plan to handle the way the door was left open for the pursuit Thomas so clearly wanted to follow.

Thomas’s wounded pride had no limit. There was no way to hinder him from acting unmentionably. He was livid with both the celebrity and her hanger-on Fred for achieving things he never could, showing again how he took to matters and why they usually ended up in disappointment. Naomi still believed she had handled herself with aplomb and panache in a trying set of circumstances. She lifted Fred's spirits and if she'd been able to would have liked to stop his histrionic worrying. As a result of the debacle he saw her as a traitor from restraint; he said she was devoid of meaning or purpose. Combatting the fear she had engendered she distracted him by noticing the noisy, raucous bystanders on another table farther away from the overarching feeling of presences at every corner.

So they moved quietly to a different table that was reserved for latecomers who had no reservations as Naomi embarked upon a lengthy and hushed talk with one of the waiting staff members who had watched the debacle successfully containing a mirthful grin.

The waiter was meant to stay there until closing time he informed Fred later, and then with a crew of his closest friends he transformed himself as instructed by Naomi into the role of a hitman.

Part private eye and part cold-blooded avenger, as opposed to baulking he assented to the prospect with gusto and passion. The first step was an obvious preliminary.

The waiter Emilio had a notebook with him back in the room behind the kitchen, and in it was the phone number of a contact of his in the Mafia. He knew that he vowed to never contact this contact unless he had a very worthwhile reason. The truth was he could get a bullet in the brain for wasting the guy’s time. The reason needed to be important enough and sufficiently worthwhile to put his mind at rest, and to thwart his fear that he would somehow become no more than a corpse, a nuisance that had been buried deep.

The repercussions would be disastrous if he did not stay on the right side of this chap, if he did not keep bribing him, and also bartering in alleyways at night for him; he would be always on the lookout for a mission on behalf of the contact which might prove financially lucrative even. Murder and adultery were no longer deadly taboo matters for this clone of the Mafia. To break the laws of society was just another component of life lived in the top gear.

“Hi, my friend. Emilio here. I’ve got a job you might be interested in.” This was his opening gambit. He was exposing himself to his vitriol, even by being this harmless and inane he ought to have known, but didn't, the Dean family were a target already.

“Don’t mistake me, you’ve heard of Naomi Dean. You know I took a ride over to ‘The Sanctuary’ in England once a long time ago with you? Well, she was in the restaurant this evening with someone she obviously has ideas of becoming a partner to, and then as I was offering the two of them dessert this almighty row went up as two people came from way across the dark side of the street and, crying out, they made everyone give up their meal and listen attentively to their pathetic threatening patois.” The Mafia scoundrel interrupted with the odd bellowing “yeah” and “go on, I see”; while the waiter babbled, a smile crept onto his lips, about how justice had not been done that night, that beautiful lady had been denied victory over her detractors, and the ultimate effect was he wanted to give the journalist and the fat sidekick David a proper scare, at the very least a warning which he said would be a laugh, no matter what else happened.

“Fuck you, man. What do I want with this, Emilio. I ain’t got the time man. Go home to mamma.”

“No you go home. This is Naomi Dean we are talking about, it’s no joke. And she has a lot of dough, see…” The waiter was always in the dark as to what the Mafia could and couldn’t do. The mafia dude had been abandoned by his parents when just a little child; all he had left were his mother’s jewellery, diaries, a few keepsakes and memories to boot, but he suspected this travesty of justice against Naomi had a large amount to do with Mafia territorial warfare over Kent. Rather than considering the reasons, he said, it might not be a good idea to proceed. He was more concerned with the pay off and less with the why, wherefore and the blame. Having known already about Naomi's presence in Geneva the Mafia don refused point blank to do anything about it as a result.

“Anyone want a job with the pretty girl, that Naomi Dean?” he called to the rest of the crew at the taxi cab offices where he was located and as there was not one reply as nobody even nodded in assent he turned back the way he was facing and in a croaky, jagged voice withdrew his support stating angrily he couldn’t give a damn what this Naomi Dean was up to, and that he should phone him again when he had something useful to say to him.

A heavy blow to the tired waiter as he had no inkling of how Naomi was going to respond to his failure. The waiter felt guilty, and went back apologetically to tell Naomi and Adler that his best efforts to garner support were to no avail. Naomi listened intently to the ensuing altercation between the two. There appeared to be no answer, and she was at a loss until a private thought distilled through her consciousness.

“What would you do if this had happened to someone else? Hell, I wouldn’t rely on anybody. Fred, lend me your ear. Couldn’t we take some action ourselves?” She spoke slowly and pensively, brooding all the while, as Adler listened.

“Well, Naomi. Should we not telephone the police as a first step?” He suggested.

“I don’t particularly agree with that. “We should phone the police” indeed, let’s do something ourselves in addition. They are so useless they would probably not do anything for weeks, and that’s time we cannot afford to lose.”

“Maybe you are right, Naomi. Let me pause a moment for thought.” The clever and sagacious Adler was applying all his mental acumen to the issues and being as sly as he possibly could be. Emilio was taken aback and frightened. With his tense features, and heavy brow he revealed alarm and consternation.

Before the strange goings-on of the evening had dissipated, they reached a decision: in a lower voice Naomi had said: “We must agree that that is the necessary course of action. If we are to fool those hideous criminals it is, I believe, the only way.”

A little more guardedly by this juncture the trio all murmured their assent. The waiter and Fred assumed that the scheming Naomi would in all probability quite easily apprehend and get the police to punish the photo-journalist and his sidekick. Adler and Emilio were mere novices at intrigue of this sort and her bravura façade was really invaluable, also truly inevitable. Playing at games of chance in an adept manner may have been her forte earlier but not keeping her promises nor ratifying her speeches she needed to prove in effect that she possessed more than a light coating of theoretical skill.

“Death does not frighten me” she announced, “I would infinitely rather not live a long and monochrome existence but maintain my dignity now that I have been the source of such a villain’s merriment.” Naomi was an imposing and striking woman but the belittlement of others arose spontaneously in her as it made underlings wonder at her prowess in matters of comportment, for no good reason. Usually sceptical types, Fred and the waiter did not believe for a second she was wrong, that she didn’t have a normal plan but a fantastic one no less. Although their faith was applied as a result of her bravura facade, this trust stemmed from a deeply ingrained fear that otherwise they would not meet with a favourable conclusion but a disastrous one, as Thomas was obviously deeply aggrieved and could come to do anything even against her friends.

Easily prevailing upon the waiter to pose as an undercover agent of a fickle and furious rival dynasty to Naomi’s extant dynasty the plan had nothing new or striking, yet it would be awkward to implement.

In the lazy assumption that David Thomas and the fat David could be hoodwinked by the waiter by following them to their den at the doric pillar where he could surreptitiously ambush them was an inverted logic and it could be awkward to implement.

When combined with the massive down-payment Naomi supplied upfront the fact that hardly ever a celebrity tried to get revenge anywhere let alone out of court surprised Emilio. Perhaps sometimes a lawsuit or a repeal in the columns denying involvement with some too illustrious or too unwholesome type led to the supposition that Emilio could be labelled incredibly generous to assent to a menial role most would be forced to reject as a matter of course it being unworthy of their self-esteem, their ideas of identity and for reasons of the improbability of success. And in addition for fears connected to Naomi's inexperience or Adler's blatant passivity in these matters.

Courage, bullish and reticent, and a lack of intelligence, spurious and unhelpful, did figure in his acceptance though offset by his bravura willingness to assist a heroine. Although he had less to lose in a sense than Adler it was taking a risk since the don had told him not to bother. By this he wanted to make a good impression amongst the other class of people from whom it was invariably assessed healthy to be on the right side of even if for no really rooted reason. Nothing motivated him except to further Naomi’s mapped out way of getting justice done, or at least a levelling. For fear it would drive off her quaking compatriots through unreasonably demanding questions, and unseasonably difficult requests Naomi omitted to mention essential details of her mapped out advance.

“Now don’t you two start getting the jitters here. I don’t want to know if you’re scared, this is what we are going to do. No two ways about it.” A slowly burgeoning realization crossed her old mind like a ripple or a wave that they might be able to put together an argument strong enough to stop the press's motions, which for her family would be a triumph beyond all reasonable reckoning, yet for Adler and Emilio it would be an irrelevant and unimportant consideration. As the attack was directed entirely at her persona it was her prerogative to concoct viable methods of finding the pair’s location by the pillars, and of launching a dual-pronged assault on both of them.

This would erase both those twin evils, unjust slander and proud embarrassment, with aplomb and eradicate them untraceably in an effective and concise manner. Naomi owned scarcely enough imagination to vaguely envisage for herself how agents of extant, rival dynasties would probably behave in similar circumstances. Any knowledge which she had was inherently limited not to the confabulated, but consigned to the past long gone but nonetheless she instructed Emilio quickly with a set of basics.

Unparalleled as it was, and vague and obscure as her vision was she found herself unable to create a good enough insight out of her fertile mind about an attack of high street piracy of this sort.

She hurriedly offered a plethora of guidelines to Emilio as to what to do when he met the duo, but she also took many sly precautions for unexpected eventualities happening outside and beyond the ordinary scope of prediction. The telephone in the flat taken off the hook: to sound engaged at all times during the mapped out exercise, thereby constricted ways out for Thomas.

She told Emilio how to adopt a sincere approach by showing an aptitude to litter his sentences with certain key phrases to display how honest and genuinely convincing an aristocrat he was really. He had to constantly make remarks which denigrated himself, and he had to consistently make none too obvious expressions of sympathy: patting his shoulder, touching him lightly, turning his palms upwards to trick David and by inference the rest of the general public by his use of body language and by predicting David’s responses.

Modesty was not easy to learn and set up for one uninitiated, a bit uneducated person in the space of a short five-minute walk from the centre of Geneva with two strangers he paid such deference to, and whose sound advice furthermore was against his own inner judgement.

Whether Emilio would turn out malleable enough, limber enough to play a part which was an unnatural one and without any formal training was another of the risks Naomi just needed to take.

“Now what I want you to do is…listen carefully…just as you are approaching them, when they have seen that it is them you are looking at, then pretend you couldn’t quite make them out properly, but you do; and you show you recognize them like this…” Here she lifted her eyebrows quickly several times in succession and started to run away from Adler to a different waiter and bombastically but also vehemently shook his hand.

"Like you are his greatest fan, right?" She said.

Her regrettable aim was to make him carry out the long awaited and violent attack of revenge that would commit them to a more regrettable crime than abusive language or public misconduct and would bring down the full weight of guilt on their persons if not reduced by an inadvertent mishap.

She helped him to waft away his breeding worries about the inferior David and any pollenating fears of a dead end. It took some time to get all the germinating particulars right.

Emilio kept misunderstanding and repeatedly asked little questions on how to act here and what to do when he was there. He kept querying her for the lengthy explanation of one look, one phrases effects after another. Naomi knew like a master how this sham, posh-frock minion of hers would talk in a conspiracy such as this with its increasingly dangerous outcome and how a debonair gentleman would portray himself in the home of such strange fellows especially if the duo were engrossed by disreputable pursuits.

Adler propped her up with his own vaguely useful suggestions asking, unremarkably but astutely given the circumstances, whether it was not much clearer thinking just to advance upon them all three together, affront them with a rough, old bust up and then leave it at that.

His submerged fear to harm someone to such a great extent revulsed him, and he emphasized the “maybe” when he verbalised his tottering indecision could be more hurtful and dangerous in the long run than rushing the enemies onto a merry dance, a crooked dance, to the edge of legality.

“Obviously you are just being a coward. What can possibly happen? They are not exactly fugitive criminals on the run. Now are they the most wanted on the planet or are they merely troublemakers?” Naomi said this with a hiss under her breath and it came across to frail Adler as emphatic. Adler convinced her yet again of the fool-proof vein of her schemes, and of the dimly lit, sluggish and unwieldy awareness of their newfound enemies. There was a wicked latitude in Naomi which manifested itself in jaunty, excusable ways. But now the hard-edge of her temperament started to nudge the flailing Adler who was an unverifiable quantity and who could, if he chose to report to the authorities instead of kowtowing, seriously punish her this time were things to go awry and they were seen.

The first few steps the logistics and mathematics of the little expedition turned out aright. Nobody subscribed to the mathematics that this trip would always pan out into the eventual format. The data Thomas and his magazine collated about the paparazzi, being actually only assumptions and guesswork, prior to embarking on this impromptu mission was not sufficient to avoid overall disappointment and so they welcomed his new information from Emilio who they trusted from the beginning.

After Emilio arrived to draw them under his umbrella of beguilement, and never compromising Naomi’s strictly delineated mapped out form of social warfare, it reached the stage when David and David were quite willing to address Emilio, rip Emilio off and trail along with his unconvincing platitudes that they trusted was sound, knowledgeable left-handed advice. They even took their artlessness and gullibility to an extreme by publicizing to him their grievance in the harshest of tones.

“Yes, now. Wouldn’t you happen to have a house around here? Where we could go and talk some more; get down to details, as you say.” The disguised waiter by way of response performed his chat up line blemish-free. He looked and played the part given to him, he didn’t know he was on the same level as a paid actor, there was no middle of the road, averagely apt dissimulation. His slight concern was not necessarily to do anything classic but to enjoy this disguised role as rebel he was cast in and when it was removed from his grasp, he understandably became dissatisfied, morose and irritable like some surly child and could not have accepted he had to return to reality once the plot had reached its termination in a conclusive certitude.

He smudged the boundaries between a masked persona of a revolutionary and an old identity as a lowly waiter. He liked it that he was being sent by an aristocrat so much that he could not shake it off ever again for fear of being denied any massive bonus that eventually would turn up, he believed.

After the disagreeable journalist led us ostensibly accidentally to his own shabby, untidy apartment on the outskirts of Geneva, and after Thomas followed Emilio’s every sentence with suppliant, spurious remarks like: “Oh yes, I never saw it that way.” Or “You’re right. How astonishing it is to meet somebody with such great insight,” Emilio concentrated on more personal and probing talk scared all the while not to be discovered to have joined forces with or be in league with, their hated opposition.

He made no attempt to glean what he could of David’s career background and network of friends, but feared for his safety as the ambience became slightly heavier, thick with solace, and he had to remain contented with his inadequate acting abilities.

Well, what could you expect I asked myself, of a journalist who was astute but emotionally limited, running out of time to get recognition, and with only a caption to a photograph published in six whole long months?

The flat was a wreck inside, unlike Thomas had said, when Emilio had waited impatiently wanting to see something different. In the flat, finally, both intellectual books and manuscripts were overflowing, bursting out of the high stacked bookshelves. But all to no avail obviously, because of the confusion of the ramshackle mess he had never cleaned. He’d strewn shoddy, badly looked after notebooks amongst his own media reports everywhere over the years and everything was to his mind of undue irrelevance.

On the low table, the disgusting detritus of unwashed plates and unwashed coffee mugs made the room seem inhabitable for the vagrant journalist. He lived and would one day die in the lair of a philistine, an inversion of Naomi not a reflection. The flat smacked of failure and dismay, the belittling of one's own higher notions of success, purity and ideals. To be sure, Naomi had righteously warned Emilio of any complacency when misleading yet charming so forthrightly two people who may not have initiated the events or the world itself, may never done more than slip stupidly into some sort of difficulty and were but by the innate act of drawing breath, letting their guard down and being amenable to insecure friendships, like a haul of precious stones hidden in the undergrowth, undiscovered gems.

After we had instructed Emilio according to our pre-prepared formulas, Naomi and I went in up the rickety flight of old creaky stairs onto the cramped landing, and stood to one side of the darkened doorway which led into the decrepit lodgings. Just a few short minutes ago we were saying to each other we saw three figures moving about in the lit up window, and we both had sensed intuitively almost exactly where the conversation inside was pointed. Next, where no bright street lamps could malevolently shine a light to expose our fairly dastardly aims, in a vantage point on the ground level we decided to rest our fatigued limbs. Fuelled by our instinctual whims, impulses and desires we nearly shot our scheme to pieces giggling in an undertone, not robustly, at Thomas and his lack of gravity, his insouciance. Thomas had traversed his sitting room to draw the threadbare curtains. I was certain David, having heard us, was alert to our presence because she was looking askance and I only saw this last action out of the periphery of my vision but I knew in advance any warning sign at all would give them time to play with at least. Although it was after dusk from out of such a glaring, well-lit room's window we could observe everything, except a tiny luminous monkey playing the drums daintily with a red suit sitting on the mantelpiece. Adjusting our stances, I straightened my favourite pork-pie. And stopping for another cigarette, (the hallmark of an assertive person as far as I was concerned) I had one or two more serious and this time whispered words with my pretty charge, and then we glided silently, studiously, steadfastly up again to the entrance to the block.

Neither of us expected much if any resistance at all. As planned, Emilio had left the lock to the door of the flat unhinged, slightly off its cradle. We must have given a clue and a signal as to our presence by laughing as we trespassed, manhandled and entered upon David’s private property. Even Emilio with his back turned flatly to the mantel piece to ensure Thomas and David’s backs were pointing at the doorway to optimise the impact of the moment, sensed success in the pending tension, and said he felt that was the moment we already had succeeded in this first leg of our infiltration.

I heard an explosive noise as Naomi with aggression led the onslaught. We had not made allowance for the defensive skill the plain, hapless and insignificant allies would muster against this invasive advance. We had all agreed we would overwhelm them but not all of us had consented to injure them mortally.

“Leave off. Leave. Get out of my flat…” David looked tougher than Emilio and threw himself into the commotion between him and David in a completely uncharacteristic show of bravery. I carried out my part in it as we had rehearsed, true to form. Naomi leapt at David with her whole small body off the surface of the riddled floor as David cursed her with:

“You won’t get away with this, no way, Hose.” he tried to mutter. After Naomi gagged his mouth with a strip ripped out of his own duvet cover she pinned him down by straddling his body and shifting all her puny weight onto his shoulder. Meanwhile a rush of fatigue started to take over my mind, while I absentmindedly toked on the last of my cigarettes from a stylish pack of twenty much too quickly needing to be replenished. Whilst Emilio removed his disguise, and inserted the hat and scarf and gloves into Naomi’s ample sized tote bag he got down onto his knees next to David flat out on the floor in a heap having fainted at the developments.

Naomi commanded David to tell her where the bank statements were so it would look like a theft, an ordinary, commonplace theft had transpired. Having a brief glance at the half torn letters she told me, gulping, the extent of David’s savings accounts it highly amused her and the numerous credit cards he held. As we efficiently tied the two up nothing but the long arm of the law could stop us. With their hands behind their backs and strips of duvet stuffed into their mouths it was difficult for me to restrain a wry frown of bemusement at this unexpected event.

Our next idea, which fell short of stripping them naked and which had not been discussed earlier, was that which upon some premises and in some places is held to be unfair namely to bash David and Polly on their knees for a few minutes with any kitchen utensil we could lay our hands on. It also involved frogmarching them downstairs and outside, returning towards the red light district where we had had our meal, via the backstreets. A few feet ahead Emilio the waiter turned round suddenly, and ordered us to be as silent as possible and to stop walking right where we stood on the pavement.

At some distance away down a side street a police officer under a lamp at a road they were poised to turn into was giving parking tickets. They struggled to hold onto the prisoners, and could not keep them pinned to the wall behind a slightly too new silver van illegally parked on one side. Naomi and I abruptly left them standing there alone. They distracted the oncoming policeman, meanwhile, with a passionate French-kiss beneath a different, nearby lamp-post.

“Have they gone?” whispered Naomi.

“Sssh, yes I think so…Hey, don’t stop. I was enjoying that.” I pronounced.

“Anyway,” giving me a gladly-received final peck on the cheek “We had better get a move on if we are going to get away with this. That was a close encounter!”

Contrary to the pact to hurt these two Polly was as yet unmolested and unharmed physically. I had not weighed up Naomi’s bile adequately in this particular instance. Her diminutive figure stalking down the road ahead belied a viciousness and aggression hitherto un-thought of and outside the scope of any pact. So, when another or was it the same policeman? returned and started interrogating me about the sound of anonymous scuffles and suppressed groans emanating from my vicinity it appeared that the Dean family were to avoid being dealt a crushing blow and to escape the lurid spreading of rumour into the bargain, by Naomi’s next map of action.

“Look Fred, I’m getting bored of this. Why don’t we end it?”

“End it? Whatever do you mean – sounds ominous?”

“I mean. I’ve got a knife from his kitchenette. Put two and two together.” She said. With a rush she bolted up to David and inserted the knife lifted from his kitchen silently and quickly into his chest. Emotion did not show on her face. Yet the emotion she later showed to the magistrates after we had conclusively indicted her was beyond comparison. She didn’t want many years languishing in jail. A high profile court case was not what her family wanted.

**CHAPTER 19**

Listlessly making her way through to the garage, ex-social recluse Lauren pushed back the awarded Almanac, successfully repossessed from the pawn shop, over to her daughter’s outstretched and likewise bony-gripping hands.

He lingered with an in-depth exploration of the multiple utilities of, and the catalysis of the esoteric Almanac. Bertram bevelled into it for a lengthy period as he reassured himself it was some object with a pugnacious bearing on his dilemma and with punchy relevance for a mature adult’s cause whose aimed-for agenda lay not iron clad above a gimmick Almanac and its scope and which should be nary shunted off. He added that to the prospects of an escape hatch, or a get out clause, and their underbelly: to rescue him from relentless poverty. And, adding to that the purpose of the numeric codicils and the perhaps faulty functioning of a device like an artisan Almanac. And adding that again to the fading, dog-eared, greying, stencilled pictures; and the worn-away diagrammatic hopes, which entertained even the smallest children, Bertram felt hopeful. Bertram, who had asked that they bring their cheapy toy with them to divert him with displays of its extensively invaluable talents, before it was too late and sequestered away again by his estranged daughter, Claiborne.

Gearing themselves up to agree obligingly to lunch with Bertram and Denny in Dover, the leaders bit of fluff Lauren with Claiborne tugging along behind, took the initial piffling but proactive step and relinquished the comforts of their small house in Ramsgate. The aggregated disparate followers of the secret cult, aspiring to be led away formulaically to an Arcadia free of insult, rambunctiously and ebulliently were preparing to spend a weekend at the main hub the Sanctuary, which they yet turned to as a supportive base, to a care-home for their particular breed of floundering revenant.

The erstwhile leader Rudy as was customary for every revenant was to be espied at the Sanctuary flailing out his long, sinewy arms like some mad spinning dervishes do with the least grand of bribes. Some interested newbie outsiders had seen videos or heard tell of his outrageously idiosyncratic mannerisms, other cliquey members in Kent just admitted they backed him up as they withered under the out of date assumption that they turned up today not only because of these manic, stellar gestures but also this grandly adamant, never-to-be toppled, nudging away from the singular and firmly trusted to standpoint that all of them could one day attain his permission to quit work, to down tools and strike out for a millionaire’s paradise if they followed the hardy principles and footsteps of his New Age sect.

The pair let Claiborne out of their car in a perfidious part of Dover an hour earlier and they said she soon afterwards found her stilting way to the main tributary of ingress, near the first floor fire escape of an adjacent warehouse downtown, locked super-tight and debarred on the ground floor. She ventured to gain by going out of the stairwell and ascending up a precariously narrow and rickety, routinely corroded outside staircase and harnessed chute into the darker corner watching the upheavals and blusterings of the New Religious sect’s erstwhile leader. From the lonesome and lofty thicketed nest position above them she watched down below’s histrionics with no little amusement as Rudy played his praised sine qua non to the gathering. In respect of the vibrant malevolence against pietas as cordoned off and warned against by Rudy , and as for the waivering bluster about humanity’s demonic problems, the leader had not readily realized that Claiborne’s huddled, cat or faun-like sylvan figure of absolution was peeking down at him grounded on the roster from a high, high corner, in fact from the warehouse rafters.

A part that comprised the Sanctuary’s attic capacious storage in its entirety. What was more he was trying his utmost to lessen the meaning of the fact that Claiborne’s red-eyes were bulging and widening into bulbous holes of orbs. That her ascendant but still blameless druggy teen life was getting to be more and more of a dereliction of duty for the growing up child put him off his lectures. That morsel of hard fought knowledge hadn’t eluded her either as she poured down out of a cornice of her eye-line to see the silver fumes from her pipes nozzle drifting a bit and swirling overhead from the inner windowsill in the high corners near enough to the rafters to go undetected.

In essence, while the staunchly volatile and yet startling leader of the sect was enjoying another undeserved day off for a parequal passage of time the sect still continued in their fervent element fomenting ideas and plans, but without his clammy ministrations. They were often told by Rudy ’s epistolary communications in a no frills weekly newsletter what it meant in olden days of sorcery and magical fortune if one of the members, even for a fraction of a second, paused and debited the New Religious Movement with uncalled for doubt. They were always told what was indicated if a single one of the guileless members hunkered down aspersions on the utilities or plans of the movement, or worse, Rudy ’s dumbfounded stockpiled accusatory oratory so often remarked upon.

Sometimes such ignoramuses they did not have a thread of a haute-answer whatever for why bad things had happened and had led the followers to this tranquil spot in the urban forest. If a child had got a-hold of a worsening drug habit and if that kid, teen, parent had mutated and begun parodying a fraudulently angelic stalker by spying on fellows they were once in cahoots with it was informative, it was telling, it was precious. The cult was rashly tempted to launch out into a rodomontade of expletives and said it was minded to angrily denounce any newly-disfigured vagabond.

But this time Rudy set store by the signified that they should recoil against the preconceived notions of the movements tactics and contraindicate the fact of the railroad most monks from the movement would have had to use. Anger.

The leader Rudy had to think and when he had he said he went with the decision to imbue Claiborne with his privy sealed knowledge as he mapped out how to bring the demure one into the close confines of the Sanctuary by waltzing through the arches of modern religion and science, dancing through the welcome embrace of the cult to his very own chamber of beliefs. After taking the un-rewindable steps of traffic signalling Claiborne down from the inferior and chaotic space she had just scudded a sound in, to a safer and saner place, from the upstairs window ledge to be amongst the followers down below instead where he wanted her. By beckoning to her motionless corporeal presence, and with the others removing her fear of the leadership and her animosity to the divorce her birth parents were undertaking they had conjoined that to this.

A couple of hours later after a long bout of anger, there may have been heard the sweet but muzzled scrunching of gravel on the driveway of Bertram’s abode in the port of Dover. Full of cognizance that he was not close family the leader carefully put one leg out of the sports car. First and slowly, like he was phased but not annoyed despite high centigrade pressure to be, he went behind the swish car of his and opening its boot he said he had commenced to grumble about the debasing of his affairs and to fumble with their belongings for quite some extent of time.

Apparently they came late and the leader emphatically enunciated his disgusted missing of the cult tri-weekly reception. Bertram’s frigid appearances he thought said he was completely unjittery, and understood nothing of this. His clapper, his pret a porter laxness even said something that hinted at the tedium of the tri-weekly bash or had that effect. Lauren could only shun and hold herself aloft from the melee and listen in horror to them as helter-skelter her rapidly dwindling savings account, namely the subject of money, skyrocketed within the next few seconds. The leader, always on or at least encouraging red alert admitted he sometimes made irrelevant faux pas because he was trying to help and because he didn’t really understand the situation there with enough semblances of clarity. Because he was to such an elongated extent privileged and highly rich, it was expected that he must try to help, to fit in, to contribute to the output. So he went along with Bertram’s chosen subject of conversation forbidding his own doubts or so he said.

The situation was fraught with convulsing tension and this fell like a heavy measure on Bertram, and why he hadn’t paid the child maintenance for Claiborne, despite winning at the local Raffle so recently. Bertram, for whom the leader’s assets were some kind of horribly lewd jest and not representative of any familial in-situ difficulty found in his paradigmatic mind-set; Bertram for whom financial assistance, lucrative though it was, and rapidly dwindling savings accounts could not and should not be squared up to or tackled purely because they were similar in logistical vein to a conscience smote with guilt over trifling crimes or petty errors, just ignored the difficulty.

Bertram felt he would have to be awarded a quid pro quo trinket or a prize equal in value i.e. equal in hassle for the giver, for the hitherto unknown harsh, abrasive feeling it gave rise to in his outer psyche if he had to make do with contending with such gravid, serious matters for other people: a beer, an afternoon off or some other trite treat he’d desire just for the mentioning of, what?

Honking, cackling, derisive laughs from Bertram and Claiborne exploited him unstoppably in the main room while, quenching a long lost thirst for knowledge, Rudy , nervous and reddened with rage, peeled open up the leafs of the Almanac; but also as a temperate foil to the leader’s rich carriage and pouting mien, a darker twinge strafed across no-one else’s face. Bertram was transfixed by Lauren’s expression, he gleefully hoped Rudy might not notice and assailed himself with ways to go on hooting with merriment, concertinaing himself in an embrace with Claiborne. His heart joints pounded fast as he hijacked the Almanac and the others all had to stifle their surprise as he lobbed it up and away into the stratosphere and caught it again macho-style, in some early attempt to engrave on their minds that his interest was well-cloaked seriousness, and not in fact either an unfounded wrath or a slight jocularity.

Lauren just rankled on and on to the mocking and deaf auditors about the Almanac’s teetering provenance and did do her best. To prove her reliability, Rudy ’s foundation for his affection, to prompt the leader to explain away its unsure origins better than she could: to reify its job in some matter-of-fact way she pulled out the Scytale. Bertram, alighting with mirth on its legerdemain markings noticed that it looked really vintage and tactilely caressing its texture said, depending on its alien manufacturer, it could be something or perhaps nothing. Lauren hated his clear-cut self-propelled deceits. Rudy ’s best claim to stem the rampant jeering was he had never heard of a Scytale, or an Almanac ever in his life before and looked irritably around. Lauren used very many layperson’s terms to explain every little wisp of information that she knew of about cryptographic devices, to engineer his renewable trust. A cryptogram’s point and purpose her darling inquired of her: what would that be when it’s at home?

She lied, conniving throughout. She was attempting various ways of acting so foolish so that Bertram and she could more easily commandeer the thingamajig at the end of the weekend’s foray into that old madness of guides or ciphers. Did Lauren really understand what that was? How exactly did that work?

Bertram was by now catching on and eager to offer himself to address Lauren and the leader and misinform the pairing of an Almanac’s highly likely chronological history. He was characteristically dead settled into a line against anyone reaching out for any hasty conclusions not because he was boring but because he knew, although he actually only presumed, it had no materialistic climax or financial result at its core.

Perhaps it was just to send a heavily cloaked message between secret government agencies and he added, sounding specious, that it may probably have next to nothing to do with their buried treasure whatsoever.

Tight-lipped he mourned they were wrong and bid them protect against raising their optimism to any rocky heights or heady passes which could cave under. He went as far as he could go on a prayer to console them that to decode a phantasmagoria so cryptic and special may actually have been riven with compromises if not actual agreements for antagonists, if they didn’t already know that.

Willing to admit that he too knew a factor too much about the easy road out of poverty’s steep incline, and as an overriding concern this might have been the de facto agreement, but had it been more than just convenient for Rudy and his family? They were there when he needed them he complacently acquiesced. It was to the advantage for him and for Lauren they gradually began over-exposing lesser and lesser real obloquy or even solicitude for his plight and they didn’t care in a sincere but only an ornamental way for the Scytale. Bertram was left shuddering and at a loss what to think after he had finished.

“If only I could, maybe, look after it for a while, I’ll see what I can find out…,” he said “I’ll try to find out what it’s for. Ask around the place if you know what I mean?” Bertram said.

Again he tussled with the mystique of the decrypter focussing on its ancient glory, with its cylindrical markings on the scroll pages. The director nonchalantly took in a skein of true anger in Bertram’s visage as he had predicted he would arouse, and so when less vigilant but watchful still Lauren asseverated a reluctance to let go of the Scytale he felt he ought to recommend that she lend it to her ex anyway for a short trial period as a compromise.

“It won’t do any harm.” He said to her, the anger dissipating.

“But just to show it to that Uncle of his…?” she remarked utterly bewildered later.

“I don’t know. Perhaps Denny’s got contacts or something. That’ll be what it is.”

After restraining himself throughout the conduits of the earlier conversation Bertram didn’t deny any more that a big chunk was curiosity about it, and he beseeched them to give him some much needed time alone with it.

Yet at the moment of the closing in of the afternoon, and after the time was exhausted studying it carefully once more, before the uninvited light faded to chiarascuro she sent them all along down to the gastro pub, where Denny the uncle could be found amusing himself, and where they could check their desires with proofs from someone who was not going to: report the Scytale to the Citizens Advice Bureau, steal it away from under their sight, lose it in a fit of spleen or break it, or even think it was a waste of everyone’s time and chuck it away in some incineration device somewhere…

As a last resort, they did not curb a stance aligned with forsworn allegiance to Uncle Denny who, in his glorified statuesque renown as hard-drinker and as derring-do wise-cracker about the port of Dover, garnered in the almanac’s widened after-wake a composition of rakish and riff-raffish elements, and this it was the leader and his darling Lauren made the prime spark of their liminal mistakes:

“But even with those scrolls, we cannot be guaranteed a result.” Uncle Denny said.

“Well, it is worth trying anyway isn’t it?” his nephew Bertram said.

“Yes, Denny, but at least let’s make sure” said Bertram.

“Well sure, but I have to tell you that I need a few days to figure the whole thing out.” Denny said.

“Even if it doesn’t fit with the scrolls at least we’ll know.” Bertram said.

“Yeah, but it’s not a question of that. It’s a question of that and it’s a question of whether I’ve got the full length of scroll out of just four pages to make a code…,” he said.

Denny scoured and scoped out the scrolls his nephew had ripped from the clairvoyant pawnshop owner’s Almanac and for nearly a whole two weeks he would ponder. A fortnight was just scarcely satisfying to extrapolate from it and learn how to traduce it to his heart’s content. As he thought it expeditious to secure himself complete dominion over the Scytale scrolls, he sharply gave Bertram the blanket order to meet him down at the gastropub the self-same evening.

For quite some time Uncle Denny had with sleeves of tattoos, and with febrile king-size roll-ups continually at the ready in case he ran out of Marlboro, still stood unbowed like some military sentry before the threshold of the Scytale scrolls: in case someone else should have got the chance to appear that should have made him a man richer than other men, or if that would be unpalatable or if it would lapse from his agenda, a very powerful man, or if not that then at least a more cheerful one than other ones.

His hooded eyes momentarily lit up and exploded into mutant’s orbs at the prospect of any, any fundamental ledge upon which he should formulate his ripening schemes. Normally nobody got to comment on his slightly unsure ploys to grab a series of Raffle draws that totalled £500 million for a wonderland of a future festooned with rollicking goodness for himself, or those star-like orbs, but normally nobody else cared.

So, he hatched out another little Parnassist scheme. If the set of seven numerically digitised symbols on the Almanac’s scrolls were in a correctly written algorithm conforming to the £500 million Raffle, he may as well hoist his flagging ensigns, mount his white steed, and freewheel off into the sunset.

The plan entailed a few superstition-laden deals on a casuist’s chart with the naturally obligatory promises of how wisely and changelessly the precious windfall would be spent if he won it, how pompously sacred it would be if he shared it out, apportioned the despoliated company’s coffers as he swore he could, and how the haul could be with peevish effort by him kept a quiet secret and therefore seem but a fearless puppy in magnitude compared to the mastiff £500 million.

These were loving oaths made up and put into the guise of deals, not in public but in a secret arena of the mind which fructified and leveraged Denny’s own selfishly striving purpose. Hardily unhappy with a pathetic £500,000 from the Raffle he didn’t suppress his focal point to an average-size jackpot pay-out. Pinpointing and targeting an alpha series of consecutive wins by means fair or foul consumed him, it consolidated and confirmed what was long ago expected; that by eviscerating a few specific tactical routes, the scroll and the Almanac would be match-made.

He promised he would give to plenty of charitable causes. The nature of his target promises forbade him to set up a bogus company as a front so nobody could ever suspect the truth, but this was another of the rancid vows. Promising to splice it up with particularly needy shops was another. Or, to munificently transmit 50% of the size of the haul to side-lined charity, that was the last.

“Thanks Lauren, I’ll see you later,” The leader said making his way to the gastropub where Denny and he were to have their first actual meeting.

“Give him two weeks with it? And then let us know,” Bertram said.

“Yeah two weeks, and be sure he doesn’t run off anywhere with it,” Lauren said.

Denny was ebullient. He was glowing after the tryst as the others seemed to term it, and already that night knew what it was tending towards. As long as he could show his competitive streak to these gentle bens and snare or captivate them so as they would not enter the Raffle then his potential trickery, his cocooned plans and schematic devices were settling in to eventually bring about a jackpot of such sizeable proportions that it was no longer merely a game, but a bigger than epic conquest.

Denny’s materialistic and falsely gathered hopes melted his thoughts into a riot, his miracle-born lack of empathy for poverty melted his words and promises to lies, and his fetish or lust for secrets liquidated his actions and activities as nefarious, so his ideas took shape in a deal-laden notebook to his inspirational muses which only one human person was freely granted access, and that was Bertram. Although Denny felt they could not afford to get by without the innocuously sturdy, shatter proof leader, who he incidentally already harboured a suspicion of having read their lost compendium of private notebooks, he wanted to delay the arrival of his interfering presence for as long as was discreet, and keep the next fifty wins to himself.

This vile kind of insolence to the new religious movement, the members sensed wafting in, over and out of the comprehensive awareness the two of them had from time to time, like a wave upon wave of sordid deeds ebb inwards only to flow outwards again, like a uncrisply delineated cloud the insults and affronts appeared, but then dissipated.

They knew brainwashing him was not the only route to extinguish his proud boasting, to sever him from his blustering orientations. The infiltrating of his reasonable background, his vaunting of his family honour, his odd belongings were some of the other ways with which to engineer submission to the sect and the leader. Still, besides Bertram and Denny, the followers sporadically scoured the mailing list to check there weren’t any either happenstance moles in service, opportunistic spies being feloniously incubated by the movement.

And the easiest route to do either of those was the tried and tested one, which was to look for more, many more clues. Those in Geneva reluctantly maintained a blind eye to Bertram’s note-taking for a time, because through his journals they hoped they could get the chance to mount a possibly ekphrastic and clearly watchful eye over the whole sect, and its droves of hangers-on.

\* \* \*

Claiborne was still levitating to, hovering about near, the mantelpiece bedecked with cards for Christmastide and was rereading her Almanac curled up close to the embers of the fireplace below. It was about 5 ‘o clock on a dingy afternoon. Suddenly something interrupted her transfixed staring, some flicker in her absorbed concentrating jolted her at speed out of the complacent, recumbent pose she had allowed to sweep her into a phantasm.

“She looks like she’s a bit phased. What’s she on? Crack, or summat?”

“Nope,” said Lauren ashamed by her ex at whose door she flung down blame. Not only because Claiborne had not been behaving as properly as lately she wanted, but because their entire regiment of friends were devoured by disappointment when they heard of Claiborne’s dabbling and more in club drugs at such a young age, in other words of her recreational swipes at the drugs of the stars.

“Nope,” said Lauren, “she’s fine now,” For several years she had been reluctant, she was resistant to doing it but considered explaining to Rudy about the Almanac. Yet fearing lest it would create a seismic rift with the leader who often pleaded with Lauren to give him more influence over her upbringing and to be placed more centrally, she had dissented from her own opinion and chosen to bury herself, her personal preference, in the sands of time. At that moment, he had been milling around outside in the garage checking the oil gauge on his car readying the old Porsche for the Christmastide cruise to the gastro pub that very night.

“What’s this Claiborne? You been keeping secrets?” Bertram asked.

“Nope. Umm it’s just a toy…” she says.

“Looks more than a toy…here, give it Claiborne, let’s have a look,” He said.

Claiborne shifted in her place on the bench in front of the fire and snapped at him, slamming the Almanac shut. She had been diverting her addled mind but she was not so petulant or engrossed that she could exactly avoid doing as she was told. She slowly padded to him across the cold anthracite flooring, and, saying “Can I have it back in a minute?” gave the heavily-troped and densely compressed volume to Rudy – whose insane interest it was far from possible to ring-fence.

When Rudy happened to notice, flapping, a long list of calendar dates, a smile of wickedness crept up onto his lips, and he shouted out:

“Hey, Lauren, get over here, quickly!” The whole nefarious jinx of the scytale and scroll was that it produced seven sets of digits, but this he knew only too well. But simultaneously it did not produce exact times for when these numbers would appear as the numbers on the balls from the local Raffle’s lucky wheel. The scrolls if, but only if, added to the pages torn out from the Almanac were sufficiently informative to have ensured that they got the payoff.

\* \* \*

Similarly, amidst carnage at the gastropub, so at the Sanctuary. A couple of tinctured hours of persuading her and she had de-scaled onto the ground floor. At the sect they accomplished the easiest part: coaxing Claiborne to be open about her problem with drugs, and to offload any attachment to them and to resist drugs forever. Her unmanned problem had set in in earnest at a comparatively young age and had readily disinhibited the various subconscious totemic symptoms of a drug-induced mania. To nurse and care for this lost, wayward child and her predicament was like a barrier pressing against them. She blurted a stunted line or two out about Jock’s great rip-off, and, like she was wading into that which it might be too late to rescue her from, as a piece of ventriloquism, she was jarred and jammed by the tentacles of a cavernously depressing underworld. Her lines were indeed slurred, her mannerisms were on a mad plane of being, and in fact her razor thin hairs were trembling to indicate she needed a fix then and there. The leader didn’t know how the CULT would salvage the docile and uncertain, demure and worried, but mindful little space-cadet from the clutches of the horrible habit.

The sad fact of her radical addiction, what with its effective blunting of her composure and destructive impact on her bearing scrambled them out of their complacency. And never to be condoned; their cushioned, sleepy, comforting poises which the sect had become so used to being the agents of, were ejected as anyone was who tried to undermine the system of the CULT.

Finding the sect so warm, so inviolable and so inviting, now in representing Claiborne so badly the followers were discovering every last one of them was impervious to the needs, mania and servitude incumbent on being turned from multiple saviours, into victims of their own inadequate affliction: humanity.

The group let their shrieking, neurotic passions in unison. They bubbled up over the edge – everyone pledged to affirm remedies to restore spindly Claiborne’s chubbiness at some point in time in the near future.

There they were, all pledging to splinter off and to find ways to lift the scales from the surface of their fluffy, indolent pasts and to steam into effectual action like a legion of an army against the automatic terror of one of the members not wallowing, but fully underwater, in some forsaken territory out of the reach of any normative hired help except from strong medicine, or a saviour such as the leader.

A swathe of the commune placed their almost feral convictions in the leader, and asked him to be not dolorous, but at the least to confer with the arrant daughter as to how some mutant specimen would help themselves, not someone for whom only a top secret medical antidote looming large could do the job of easing their painful torment. Claiborne felt her stress was part and parcel of the ever shakier home she enduringly lived in, coming from a broken apart background. Many money concerns may certainly have played their strenuous but essential role in the disenchantment she was now feeling and turning on the leader.

Not only that but for that shaky home-life Claiborne suffered at the hands of, there was an addendum, within a sort of parenthesis an ex officio, indemnity clause. The addendum tactlessly meant that Claiborne would still be welcomed into the cult, but ruefully, as valid persons but also as strays.

It meant that swelled up inside the others an illusory and again materialistic tot of hope that, regardless of its truth or falsehood, nursed and pampered their consciences and this foreshadowing was reflected in their innermost dimly lit recesses. As the leader and Lauren took off to a distant corner of the Sanctuary the followers seemed to be happier, and Claiborne expounded her troubles by emitting at the end a bluff noise that smacked of both immense satisfaction, and what seemed intended to be seen as gratitude.

After the drubbing she got from Jock and his pal Volley; after she was brushing invisible hairs and just barely real flecks of dust, crumbs even from her lapel, she spun perfectly balanced around on her toes, and, with a fun twinkle of delirium that idiosyncratically slated her past alliances, said she had appreciated their compassionate way, and their cause was a success.

The textured chaos of Claiborne’s mental state at that time versus her inapt insight into normality and which for some of them implied her inner deprivation was no more, as if it was almost finally finished, as though it was certain it was only too soon going to become a thing of many years past, indicated in hindsight the drug had had in fact to be debarred forever, much earlier by express command from the leader himself, because her ethical helix was still too far gone to resuscitate.

Like a stray pollutant oxidized, or some putrid contaminant cleaned up the whole sad saga’s root inkling was put aside, and flung permanently to disintegration,

“It is o-o-over” she said to the fore-thinking and optimistic majority of the Sanctuary.

Trying to maintain a sober yet upbeat front, when in point of fact a more determined and intense fascia could not be imagined to descry how she was pitted against them, she took the pledge of loyal service to the CULT.

She let out a bold grunt and, with that, a dispirited flow of words, hieratic oaths fleshed themselves out, until:

“What about the police?” asked Claiborne. But to counter her brandished fears the director spelled out his own counter-intuitive arguments: the echoing of his words reverberated round the stony coldness of the icily recalcitrant cult’s hall.

Nine ‘o clock struck and the platoon of about sixty men, women and children huddling around her dispersed clutching, as to fortune itself, her pledges to reform and to join them, to dream of the future glory in her now narrowed path to freedom. Claiborne cut her way through the stunned, amazed throng of sixty and sloped, sidled off to the room’s exit, to head back downtown to the hideout – leaving behind a trace of the mirage of past self-inflicted defeats she had strewn across the townscape, to rapidly dissolve into nothingness in the wake of a sincerely undertaken pledge of honour.

By being delineated, the Raffle aspect of the Almanac which she pictured to herself was assuredly and with a high level of certitude that which was projecting forbearingly most of her anguish and anxiety down onto her, not just the illegal drug’s chemical toxins.

She was remiss in not being more open-ended about the permutations; it took the New Religious Movement almost 9 months indeed to extricate any falsities or libellous guarantees from her before she scarpered completely; in amongst the tear jerker withdrawal effects as the drug slowly depleted over the next months, she manfully struggled for upwards of a week to keep this hidden under a smoke screen as if the codes were in no way contaminating her present sorrowful plight, in a way blotting out the wealth the Almanac had to offer from the other side of the imaginary arras, and exercising the potential to promote her father Bertram, also maybe to take his life away.

Because at this junction he had reached, Claiborne’s garbled talk was incoherent and not making much sense he felt provoked to say to her that he would definitely help her out, but with the binding condition attached that she tell the CULT how the confounded toxins had begun to derail her nerves, and he requested her to go slower so that the CULT fully understood. I asked her to remember back to when this Almanac had exerted a grip on her, had roped her in, but they just got a mumbo jumbo response and were left at the drawing board to work it out for themselves…

“From my point of view, you mean?” She asked.

“Yes, Claiborne, tell us everything you can remember right up to the end,” the leader said.

“Right. Well, there I am in the shop, and, apparently the woman wanted to give me her Almanac. So she did. But I dunno if she knew what it was for, or anything. Anyway, like I said, I get given the Almanac because, I dunno, the woman didn’t have any kids of her own, or something. So I got the book and I kept it in my room for I don’t know how many years. Maybe three, maybe more. Me and mum were trying to get by; basically we were not making much headway with that.” She said, and continuing:

“We were always skipping meals cos’ of money. Basically, I dunno, money was hard to come by and the Almanac, well, it was just lying underneath loads of junk upstairs in my room. It was somewhere under my bed and I never thought to read it, look at it, or anything like that. Then y’know Bertram gets lucky on the Raffle and all that.” She said.

“He goes around buying up all this stuff, everything he ever wanted, well he just goes ahead and gets it. Me and mum we just hear about it from my pal Jock: about the Raffle, I mean and I get really angry. I’m angrier than I’ve ever been in my life and Dad’s not giving mum any of his Raffle money which I knew she would have appreciated ‘cos I thought it a nice thing to do. But he didn’t. Not a penny, not a pound. About that time, I meet Volley from school and, ‘course, he does drugs and he’s always trying to get others roped into his world. He does a lot of drugs, basically. He’s a vagabond at root, and his way of seeing things was new, different to the boring stuff I was used to, like homework, sport, all that stuff….” She added.

“So I figured if I wasn’t being treated fair by my own father, whether that was ‘cos of Denny I don’t know; but if Bertram was being a git to mum and me by not ever talking to us or seeing us and I’m damn sure he was hearing about us and doing nothing about it, then I sort of felt awful and made up for lost time and started getting stoned with Volley. I never even liked Volley, I’d done a few field trips with him, and they weren’t nothing special, but I really, really wanted to forget, just to forget all about my Dad, my Mum, and the Almanac, so I decided. I decided that if I tripped out of my head everyday I’d not have to bother worrying anymore, but as you can tell things don’t always work out the way you plan. I planned to let myself have the fun that money problems were stopping me having. The plan was simple, y’know, really simple.”

However, she dovetailed the speech and in a dogged way murmured how when she’d been doing the drugs for some time she had known that the dusty old Almanac was there under her bed, and used to like reading it really, really, slowly sometimes just a page or less in one whole day, and how she got such a great laugh out of it, it somehow typified an anchorage to her, a barometer of appealing dogmatism to her amongst the later than late nights of manic stupefaction from the toxins of the drugs.

“After I’d been wandering the street from A to B, just before I’d plunged into my usual funked out stupor, I’d be there flicking the pages: every single time I’d need to check if I wasn’t careful enough because there was always another way to look at the pages in the Almanac. So, the Almanac kept me awake late thinking to myself: is there a pattern, and, what are all these sequences of numbers? I was intrigued then, but to tell you the truth I couldn’t see through the nonsense, I couldn’t learn myself of its structures but I knew one thing: that about four pages were missing and opposite the torn out pages there were a lot of dates, all void of the year without a list of months or the days of those months. First off, I began waiting. I began waiting for the first of the numbers to arrive, and when nothing much happened I cursed my luck and that was around about when I went to Bertram’s pad in Dover and he comes over all serious and, like, avuncular fashion asks me to lend it to him…”

Rudy interrupted Claiborne’s little spiel of a sketch, not least because she painted the bleak story too clearly for them, and he himself couldn’t help but wonder if it tended towards some very nasty insinuations, about Denny and Bertram and their rabid greed.

It came as no surprise that she, of anyone even of the elite, had had something on the cusp of her seventeenth birthday so preciously alien looted from her possession by the evilly grasping and cavilling uncle would be driven to omnipresent distraction. In this Bertram sprang from the same stockpile as Denny and he showed concrete signs of emulating and imitating Denny’s most disgusting lineaments of a transient and dubious personality.

In those few snippets Claiborne harkened back to feeling a cell of surprise welling up, it pulled her in with a whirlpool situation that dropped her down weak and feeble: she told us Volleys, the rogue male’s, theft, featured first at the lowest point in the curve. It had happened in a pulsation, he left her without recourse to a legal or moral framework, no change let alone refunds given. She could have foreseen the possibility of assistance from the sect agents, but she bided the time and kept her cakehole shut fast. It was formed to gain and to help others gain xyz specifically, and Volley suited the company’s armature generating intentions and she swerved to look at Rudy expectantly.

Poised now to contend with multiple sticking points arising from her moot fears and wants this was the prelude to an eternal string of obstacles for Claiborne before her joyful release. Before, though, her mother returned to move her from her familiar home, prise her away from her chaste confinement, she contended with facing head on a glaringly striking blind-spot in her knowledge bases. It transpired that it had as yet evaded Lauren’s wits that there was any sort of linkage between the Scytale and the antiquated Almanac. She, not yet concerned herself to delve very far beneath the skin of things, remained to come home and find out that something, some kind of material value, did exist submerged far below the first impressive but useless experience of the Almanac, in the four torn out pages.

**CHAPTER 20**

They reacted harshly to the gross imposition their actions were nothing short of ordinary. Such rebels in the entourage were doing what seemed everyday to visitors and the rest of the social circle. If only they had by chance tape-recorded the scintillating conversations at night, and with a morsel of certainty this was stated, found a valuable gift dropped harmlessly in a neigbour’s garden.

Behind him he closed the door, on the Sanctuary, on the world. Though the claim of banality was no longer endorsed, categorically the members now set themselves up against a search, pursuit of truth, the mission for enlightenment, such a quest for money and lots of it.

An instance was the holistic meditation trip they chose not to embark on to a beach in Goa, in India, because after expending some thought on the matter in their lives they had raised hotly disputed questions and come up with an answer. That voyages to fulfilment lay in doing absolutely nothing. The search for the foot of the rainbow landed them up in a miasma of doubt, and the extravagant and unwieldy cost that they would pay along the way mattered not.

“I am not above considering other options.” Said Morris to inquisitive Naomi around the time that Lauren and Jacques experienced their problems because of that financial shark, the fat cat Pirsig romantic pursuing of Lauren, and their fragile marital situation deteriorated. Not to mention the fracas a lot later with the loony “bomber” in the Eurotunnel.

Morris, because he had declined to write off weakness and failings of other people and objects, and because he was accustomed to ascribe anything that went awry or that was null around him, such as the expulsions from the Abbey to their own low moral but also low spiritual standpoint, dismayed all of them with his fervent praise of Mr Byrom.

Not dissimilar to a lot of our species, cognition, poverty and old age took its toll on Morris over time, and made him say he viewed the whole shebang of scouring the world for millions of pounds as free of any worth; he perceived himself like either a sinner or a grossly inadequate person, an aspersion to which Mr Byrom was inclined to assign worth precisely because it made him happier.

Like a veteran of war, and just like a mad monk, Byrom would say until the Raffles commenced that he was relieved and glad the tribulations of this quest had never begun in earnest.

Behind the scenes, as far as anyone could tell fin de siecle England was not an arena, not a battlefield and not a matadorial conquest and Morris was mentally diminishing rather than only in a state of physical exhaustion.

In a hurry, three months shy of the dust settling Byrom felt ready to once again call him restored to scratch-free health and he discarded or forgot the powerful grief he underwent in those years before, when Morris had failed to embrace Agatha, the woman he loved, for such a long, long period. It could have been fifteen years in October.

Byrom will have been targeted and singled out by a strange force or weird prescience ever since that fateful day that last summer when Morris changed his natural direction by stepping quite far off course and aiming higher than ever he had.

People used to say that they liked him for his lazy attitudes and carefree nature, but Byrom believed Morris was way off base in that he was so determined to extract or steal money from any bank or client of a bank there was, in spite of, or was it because of, the opposing party's status?

In Morris’s harmless fashion he posted the disputed letter to a wonderful woman; not once contemplating, Byrom said afterwards, those obstacles most would suspect it might and indeed did encounter.

Justified the retribution, he said, it brought down on him. So….what seemed an amusing joke at that point in time to outdo Bertram - like The Revue a pointless exercise to make money – he claimed later he had no real sense anything major could arise from the content of Morris’s begging letter, but it acquired a lot of weight for the rest of the pensioners.

Even though he had been proven a disastrous defeat in his effort at romance ten years earlier. Although no teachings of those completely petty, but totally illicit; wrong but nevertheless trivial actions and language, and those antique love letters such as he had written from time to time; and none of the bizarre collocations throughout his autopsy, each remembered by unseen auditors, that created the fall toward ignominy for Morris-kind: none of these could stop him from influencing his group, in a decidedly big way. Wherein before a wise maturity set in, almost nothing became substance, nor were there any knocks upon the portcullises of humanity, purely from these half-realized thoughts and the concomitant petty love letters. After wise maturity, however, the rest of the gang saddled the burden of the consequences. That is after he reached wisdom and advanced to true Morris-hood.

However much he tried to stir them up and rise to the top in the Abbey, to the contrary it appeared initially that the rest would bland-facedly blot out his money-making schemes: for instance, yet to find a “buried treasure” was one which he strove to achieve in various ineffectual ways.

The most lunatic notion which everyone at the Abbey considered downright ridiculous when Morris confessed and never stopped telling them, was the wish that some of his illustrious ancestors had stored away a cartload of loot which had been forgotten about. He had then found it hidden in a Swiss bank account somewhere: surprise, surprise, he made himself nouveau pauvre after the thirty years of it lying in a state of incumbent dormancy. Anyway, mostly his efforts to accomplish anything seemed to result in the possible danger of being shot down dead by jealous rivals at the top of the social hierarchy, or of being cast out from the Sanctuary as a delusional, or as a leper.

His febrile attempts to make a worthy and an indelible mark upon his enemies were to be utterly vain until the real upshot of his old age happened to drop like a ton weight. Consequently, and perhaps it explicated why he resorted to a drug-dealer’s stance, one that proclaimed “I couldn’t care less about them”, and “It’s not my choice – it’s theirs” he grew steadily more and more depressed at his lack of vitality, his want of money, and his failings. Out of sympathy, his pals at the Sanctuary did their best to assuage their sadness at that failure of judgement, at their friend's self-aware, yet unoriginal insights. It resulted in a humorous and very far from deadpan, somewhat pathetic semi-letter or semi-note to a powerful heroine, to replace locating a missing inheritance.

His fellow tenants, enormously surprised at this shown modesty in him, condoned it. He had not met the woman and had not even a clear and definite guess at her personality, yet he knew only too well from the Sunday papers she definitely represented much more than just wealth.

As if he had not possessed these basic elements of knowledge he would in all likelihood have resisted pursuit of such a gravely erratic direction. Later, he would think because of this, while half asleep on that narrow, single bed of his, that one should never send a letter to the exact same person who if they chose to could trace you and make you miserable till the end of your life. This should have been his principle: as a guiding light in a night sky to avoid anyone with “connections”. Certainly, there was no foil of his meagre life in the billionairess’s crowd of acquaintances.

It seemed an infernally long time since Morris had shared living quarters with Naomi Dean. Nowadays, they hung out together in the CULT lodgings run by Rudy, near to London, in Kent, called The Sanctuary. Their old union had been restored to its previous state. They both maintained over the years and many vicissitudes the attachment. They both looked upon it as an a-physical and platonic bond of congress. In the pensioners' refectory when they found no solace their planned strategies were shredded, so no help could be found, and so the two friends soon found that life in The Sanctuary was not everything the residents had told them it was.

The glowing reportage in the newspaper articles they tended to read at weekends bought from the nearby village shop had projected an cloyed, tarnished image of perfection to every outsider. This made nine in ten pensioners feel a total let down and unaffectionate to the establishment of the CULT, especially when they discovered they had been perceptually misled, and bamboozled by the fallacious press’s opinions of New Religious Movements in general.

However much they at home or at the lodgings strove to achieve personal improvement or progress, to the contrary, it appeared that their surroundings and their guardians ignored their bravado. Any of their efforts to accomplish things, any struggling to lay down an uneraseable mark upon their environment and their family, was utterly in vain forever and Naomi was as perplexed as Morris was at nothing happening of significance.

The rooms they had stayed in for ten years were within some beautiful, old eighteenth-century extensions about three floors up with a medieval window which had a bird’s eye view over an adjoining courtyard, blocked by a newly built chemical laboratory factory. Morris and Naomi were repelled somehow by, yet on the brink of a platonic but illicit relationship just the same certainly in Adler’s opinion.

He could reach out to touch the tense air of electricity with which people bustled past the lovelorn Naomi in the long corridors. The pensioner would see, smell, touch almost those greedy staring eyes following behind his crooked, hunched back and they might have observed Morris's quiet complete denial that there was any blunt conspiracy against the pair’s continuation of their fledgling romance.

The other followers were not able to accept his candour: That a not-so-virile, wiry old man with a small sense of what was going on around him could waste his last moments in time with an older “biddy” if he were not trying probably to stick his rabid tongue down her throat somehow and more.

Everyone thought he was wrong to forget his dead friends so easily and decided they should be highly, and dangerously to the azimuth of fanaticism jealous of any concrete relationship that seemed insincere but was, as they presumed, based on more than the most limited and tasteless and disenchanting bonds of physical congress.

So the pair fretted endlessly about their safety in the gardens, passages and libraries of the Sanctuary. He was flawless and cool. She was held to be a bit of a tart.

There was no match in their respective, long-gone parents’ status: Morris’s father had driven a most inoffensive Ford estate model which was a hundred thousand miles past its inglorious prime. While Naomi’s mother, Martha, it was known by everyone had her unlimited access to a highly expensive topaz Bentley sports car with matt black alloy wheels as an additional luxury. She encouraged him to approach her.

At this stage in 2006, the bar chart of economic success and financial hardship did not arise for them; it was not even almost a thorny issue. Naomi made the point tacitly only, and would certainly never vilify others openly if they elected to gloat, show off or boast about such an irrelevant matter as their long-gone parents’ compendium of successes.

Morris and the rest of the cool ones who were less well-off, greeted that whole concern with a silent acquiescence and a polite shirking, and if he did argue against it it was not meant to provoke alarm. Morris was pressured to show dismay and even envy at Naomi's material wealth but he couldn’t always keep it bottled up. He felt a pointed need to commence a life of crime, to rashly write a letter and to disregard the mockery and joviality it stood for, to rudely request limitless amounts of money. They were opposites in their social stature, on a psychic level in the mind, and later in the arena of "no work" and the other pensioners wanted the episode to finish naturally quickly.

When they took into account her histrionic behaviour or her illusions, it was no surprise people had plans to put an end to her role playing. Naomi used to act a comedienne with great prowess, so when she lost her temper with them she would try to spoil their fun by assuming a strange accent and bizarre mannerisms. By the end if they met her they had to forgive her because she was so ridiculous and outré. She was seething inside over some slight misdemeanor which people had used to try to break their relationship up.

Naomi felt more assured of her direction than ever before when she listened to Morris admit to her in a listless way what he had gone ahead and done. It goaded Naomi and it incensed her to have listened to him describing with arrogant glee his “illicit” act. It served no purpose to try to bring him down to earth, and she believed his indiscretion meant it was not going to pan out well.

She wondered why he couldn't just spend his free time writing the next edition of "The Revue." He would hear none of he overall intention to force him to analyze what he was doing wrong.

Any question mark she gloomily pointed out over his ethics was met with a curt put down which only went to show he wasn’t listening. Morris was far too old and too involved to see he was fallible, and harsh criticism from his closest friend he was surely not to take too seriously, and he ingeniously assured her it in no way upset him.

It was too late to amend his ways, and too much brooding about his inadequacy had already led Morris off on an elliptical, digressive path;

Should she blame possibly gluttony, at work in his grand pursuit here or some deep-seated inferiority against those who had enough money, she wondered?

Morris sat there at his wooden table with the angle-poise for roughly two and a half hours just staring idlely out into space. Morris asked some truly “rhetorical” questions next time she entered, until then he proceeded to stub out his HB lead pencils repeatedly, in stern dismay. Meanwhile as he ripped out pages and muttering “Damn!” or “Blast, I’ve had enough!” to unseen auditors, he needed to find out if his own enthusiasm actuated jealousy or failure and low self-worth in an environment where money was not needed, as it was not necessary in the Garden of Eden either.

“Why do I want to write to such a powerful person? She’s hardly going to answer it I assure you. She is far too busy. She will no doubt be offended, and no matter how delightful as a person she will not see me in that light.” Morris said. Entering the box-like, untidy room, and seeing the litter spread on the floor beneath the wooden table Naomi found forgiveness hard no matter how many superlative qualities she knew of him. Although she liked that she was reputed a far from nonsense character, whether there was a realistic chance this female billionaire would be Morris’s benefactor seemed a question to more than just pique her innate curiosity.

“Because I suppose, I think that I shall have a good laugh, that’s all. I would like to see if I would get a reply. I’m into it, goddammit. You will never know unless you try and I have to now, don’t I? Right now. It’s almost as if I can touch the lovely money already.”

“Yes, well I suppose that as one of the richest people in the world she must have some lying around somewhere. She is not a fool, though. So mark my words that you must create a good impression.” Hearing her humour him he became more and more disheartened and huddled over the rough copy of the letter, he tried instead appearing busy when editing the letter for the fifth time. In a flippant nonetheless sympathetic manner, Naomi said:

“It cannot do any harm. Do you mind me telling someone?”

Ignoring her Morris toyed with the novel idea of procuring his gold dream of treasure with threats but it sounded a little harsh and he had not yet been refused it, so he stowed it away for next time. Raging at the prospect of losing out to anyone else in any competitive arena and summning up all the forces of the underworld to his aid with prayers and incantations of various sorts, he wrote:

“I love you, I love your love, and I love to love your love – my love. I am in love with you, yet…yet I need your love, I need your money. Don’t you see it all works, makes sense. I have always needed your money, I cannot love you without it. Please help me…I want to kill you, to shoot your head off, but only because I love you; and I don’t know you. But I will shoot you if you don’t give me my right, my reward, my cake which I shall eat. Remember I love you for no other reason than love. I will do anything for you I will show you what trust truly means. I will obey you in everything. Give the money to me; or you will know what hate is.” He scrawled his signature Morris Fascino.

Perching there Morris had already decided he wouldn’t give up easily, not without a proper fight. Naomi could tell from his disposition he had already made up his mind before due reflection he was owed this money and that his life was a disastrous one of cheap tat and jealousy – there was the reason to deserve it, the pay-off and reward for the miscarriage of justice his life was turning out to be, in a final analysis. Only he had never viewed life in an CULT as such a bleak one, and never regretted or mocked perfectly normal accidents or mistakes before.

The battles in store ahead were going to be for nothing, but he over-endowed them with resonances. The answers that Naomi had been hopefully seeking from Morris eluded her, and she was completely at a loss as to what to do to try to prevent him from embarrassing himself, and estranging his limited group of friends. The middle of the night and she lay under the sheets, wakefully: Did he have no sense of correct form? She was sorry to say he had none, but if she persuaded him to forsake this poison pen letter tomorrow it would be a great accomplishment.

Seeing the next morning as she showered and dressed that she could not be certain of anything she set herself the goal of inquiring how much Morris, her platonic boyfriend, was chasing after.

Morris rebuffed her as they strolled the rounds for being “a bit nosy”, and said he had formulated no specific amount to state. He had no barometer with which to appraise value accurately, Naomi knew that. Naomi was much better than he at arguing so he turned to her for sound advice which was less effort. She implored him to at least listen to her argument cussing what he planned to do or in fact had already done; but the letter had been posted that self-same morning. She said she thought it sensible to not make any ludicrous demands. In these moments of insight, more prolonged than usual, she advised not to ask for any more than adequate funds, but his expression immediately revealed how this hurt Morris. Naomi needed a new plan of attack.

She had made a shocking presumption on two counts. One was that the richest folk were inherently similar to ordinary fellows, and the second was that a request for an insignificant sum might impress the billionaire when a massive one might win only derision and insults.

“How much do you think I need Naomi? How much can I spend in six, seven years?” Morris fidgeted with his eraser as he abruptly probed into these basic facts on the unmentionable subject of real money that was usually above his social position and was supposed to destroy him like a hurricane a village if she thought about it. He had reduced income, expenditure, outgoings on necessities or payments for luxury items to their new worth in the light of the Almanac. His fidgeting lessened, it would assist him to make some impression on the billionaire’s associates, raise his profile a tad. She found that forlorn shadow crossing his happy face, and trying to conceal his plots said: “no less than 500 million, or else, and take my designs and sell them if you need a reason.” He was going wild when he presumed the richest woman in the world was willing to take the ideas of a serf such as himself and make them a reality like a pesky Almanac had done. His excuse: with her help he would be elevated from no higher than a snivelling flea to, well, what he dreamt of. The fidgeting soon halted.

His unicentric, far from agile and stolid mind {Morris had mild dysmorphia} hit upon the likely problems associated with what he would be like if rewarded with a happy outcome.

To Naomi the prospects of failing and equivalent jealousy didn’t strike her as particularly tiresome: they were just other gnats who fancied wealth but maybe strove to get by with what was adequate also. She discovered him in mid train of saying the distaste and the demeaning were not worth turning his back on in the long term. He had a limited degree of insight, he worried needlessly and far from purposed about serious migraine-inducing matters like this.

As she recalled, Naomi had not heard of any case in point that prefigured someone would give an individual a donation of such magnitude. Uneasy throughout this, struggling to keep calm, her lips twitching at the corners, and a smile almost erupting as she scratched her scalp in a vague laurel and hardy-esque manner, these were some of the ways she’d throw a smoke screen over her reasonable astonishment at Morris’s next more falsified move.

Naomi hoped to relay her foreboding and scepticism to him in an effort to convey a morale boost however, swept away into a dreamlike state, Morris awoke with a jolt to every clandestine deed he was partaking in: writing to a stranger was worse than annoying, looking at his conscience as a nuisance, shrugging it away, he tried to proceed further irrespective of its commands, in a mode his principled guardian angels would forbid. Good deeds he methodically pretended to see as a menace that existed solely to throttle his internal heartfelt desire.

“I don’t think much of this idea. I must say that even you cannot honestly believe it is a good one! Try something else instead.” She said to him.

“You may say that, my friend. However, I may as well give up on ordinary ways of finding a few quid. You see that, I know.” The reasoning Morris risked losing his honourable reputation in quite a dire way for, were he to fail to reach his clandestine targets, was preposterous.

It was a stressful afternoon as he now had to keep his drafts sealed and protected from Naomi’s vain conceits and desires, the importance and likes of which had never entered into his reasoning hitherto, and to focus on success even at the expense of his life-line here at the CULT.

He was unhappily underachieving and sorely tempted to shift the blame for his lack of money on to his friends, their friendships and their psychological tactics. There were methods he had never even speculated on before but now he went downhill any innocent remark became tainted with menace or he saw it as some kind of bullying or power play. Naomi made some inroads, and tried to prevent him forsaking his good name. Were he not to stall and contemplate for a while on more energetic ways of succeeding, like hard work that never aroused suspicion?

“Do you know what you are getting yourself into here? It’s not necessarily fun to be rich” Naomi found it tiring to suggest, in as polite a way as she saw right. “Lavish do’s and parties don’t last forever, a country estate isn’t actually what you think it is now. The idea palls and its impression fades after its first manifestation. I can tell you.” He frowned at her.

He thought: oh, she wouldn't want that would she! But he managed to stymie her deliberately wide yawn with his death stare, instead of resorting to mistakes of violence.

“It does and they are. I’m after glamour, no half measures for me and see if I don’t prove that I deserve it. I’ll work after she sends it. It’ll be a romp, like a fairy tale.” He thought he would strangle her when she had tried to contradict him, and had said everybody regularly hosted festivals at their homes just to flaunt their flash trimmings.

He didn’t after all want to either lose Naomi’s attention or to have his mr nice guy image busted for harassing this – the richest woman in the western world. He desperately wanted as an antithesis to be different to the herd, and also to portray himself as a free spirit, a swish operator. For this billionaire to open a letter within which would be sentiments that made it stand out from any other letter of its type was, unfortunately, looking less likely by the minute.

Scene, time, pov

The bundle of letters that Pirsig found a photostatic copy of in the thick portfolios was covered with quirky asides and exclamation marks. Morris put coloured ink arrows leading from the main body of the faded text along to postscripts and down the page to captions. Little notes were in every column and margin, and underlinings and highlights bedded within the text facilitated Pirsig’s inquiry and sadly helped to bring home his message. Morris had meanly reassured himself these would have the mildly salutary effect. He called her a literally supernatural, mythical and heroic personage not least in terms of her money and those cathartic powers he believed in now.

How smart to put ascribe and even if he might have been adept at being a letter writer of no uncertain capability and significance (he decided he was less than perfect when it came to other spheres of life) to translate feelings into words, to extricate himself from this shaky, unsteady mess of poverty. He repelled the areas set apart from making swathes of sexy cash. He glided, still with theatrically grandiose effort, through the balls of scrunched up, smudged paper over to the narrow, straight doorway.

Throughout the hazards of human exchange to beg was his forte, his adopted vocation, he said rhetorically and yet very contemplatively by a more than middling standard a remnant of a gone-away life. She worked him out: if he refused to stop, would he make another plan B which risked losing the continuance of a decent sort of existence of peaceful cowardice and passive obedience?

In a dramatic bolt of realisation and knowledge it entered his mind that he only stood a chance of persuading her if he kept it a secret from Naomi’s reckoning. Naomi who was watching him from the other side of the rooms, and if he fleeced the woman and the rest of them that way if no other he could fend for himself.

This seemed the right way to manoeuvre around. Giving his heiress direct and at times aggressive instructions he was maximizing a risk of punitive legal action; alongside this he aligned a premonition of an entire global media descending on the billionairess for a worryingly witty news story. These qualms flooded his innermost soul. He feared he’d be shown mercy if only he was a loner, and funnier too if none of his friends knew and his life, rather than a boring and private supply of microcosmic experience would play out as a huge public showcase of his private desires and not-so-secret, and definitely by then requited, love of swag and bluster.

Spy/Adler

On travelling down the rickety staircase to walk outside to a post-box in the crisp autumn air Morris sensed an observer following from a variety of angles and tracking him cogitating on his steps, vaguely striding motion as he wended his way back from a nearby post-box. An uncomfortable phenomenon of being investigated as he cheerfully watched the light blue envelope drop through the aperture of the pillar-box, made him weary. He didn’t feel at ease and he did want to connect the tickling pressure with the bodge job letter that he assumed his foe had been sent secretly to place under observation.

It transpired that of a never ending succession of vitally important dissensions and highly serious translations of human rights into human wrongs Morris was bound to lose this one particular stage in the run.

Neither the private surveillance team led by Herr Michael Adler, nor the covert misinterpreting of new-fangled bribery laws for supposed greater justice in a safer society, had much to do with this problem.

Morris made the error of letting his thoughts float off as he inhaled ostentatiously of the fresh, crisp, bitter air and a nuance of guiltiness surrounded and boxed him in at his intended blackmail. Guilt that he was tantamount to an eloping prisoner. Misery had infected the spy’s privacy also when he saw him make the envelope fall into the letter box for at that moment he knew his mission for what it was really. Misery that his route forward seemed more horrible and harder to forgive than if it was for global love and universal passivity.

There was no chance to turn back the clock and to return to the CULT. Inappropriately not paying much heed to anything in particular, they labelled him an obsessive or an enthusiastic anorak-wearing train-spotter when he appeared to have tried to recoup his former honour and integrity.

Especially when out-of-hours pastimes: training camps, shooting expeditions, assault courses, disposing of evidence invariably created a cloudy and dissolute nervous sensation in well-off clients of the boss; so Adler panicked at his assignments throughout every portion of his suddenly misery-stricken life.

“I hope that strange chap, hiding over there, doesn’t really mean to do anything.” Morris muttered to himself, alone again on his way home.

As he did not have the faintest suspicion of what the signs and suggestions of his decline indicated to them, for a while Morris’s soul kept its purity.

He would vow to send another letter at the earliest opportunity, he shrugged off the foe, the stranger with the pork-pie hat and the black briefcase as well as the anonymous, dark-glasses wearing women who ground down to a standstill as he approached them, or who acted busily doing nothing until he had turned a corner when they ceased and hurried away into that brown-grey landscape of Kent, where his dreams were and he hopefully trusted they lay hidden.

A badly distressed and dishevelled vagabond, or one of their type, fumbled around in his things and murmured as Morris passed along recoiling from the warning: “Got debts to pay.”

Denny, down on his luck, was a relatively usual occurrence here in town, nevertheless the alarm bells rang out clear, not at the billionaire brigade’s Adler, but at a dusty, about to get busted vagrant, like he assumed this had been until he realised his meaning, and he thought: there was no way on earth he was to come to be involved with him later.

At once an old flame crossed the road, looking in the opposite direction; he stopped short where he was. He howled over at her, and preliminaries after many years apart took place. The old flame of attraction was steadily burning, Morris would have liked to invest her life with as much joy and love as he possibly could, but something was amiss and it was generally creating a wrong impression.

“How is it with you? Are you well, my dear?” Mabel, the old friend asked. He responded only curtly because he was thinking aloud:

“Yes, I think I’m okay, but only just. Do you know what it’s like to feel some unknown quantity is watching your each and every movement?” At this slip of the tongue she blushed. How did old Morris, of all people the most reticent she had ever met, manage to latch onto the issue she wanted to satisfy her extreme curiosity. To this she said:

“Morris, are you being facetious? Surely you don’t mean to try to have me believe that you are being stalked by Mi5 or someone? Sounds like more and more general foolishness,” Mabel Nivat, Jacques’s daughter, had quite a few issues of her own to fume about, but wanted to tease and cajole him for his silliness, as she put it, for his sinister aversion.

“No, I’m not depressed about that really.” He lied:

“I have my health of that I am sure. However, it is not permanent.” Her old love interest adjusted himself accordingly and tried, by transmitting to her those looks emblematic of concern and solicitude, to relax a measure because of her cadaverous company.

When the ceremony should have reverted to schemes in his letter, Morris blathered on about a dreamt up pseudo-illness, but as luck would have it Mabel doubted the motives, the situation, and how needy a case his medical issue was.

Whilst avoiding more eye to eye contact he convincingly bragged, enhanced and boasted about his falsified prospects in the nearly rosy future. She backed him up on the basis of a couple of letters of application to a mature student’s course in homeopathy when he spoke to her about them adding how glamorous and how sought after the tutorial was.

Mabel, used to blokes arrogating their futures, about to say what preyed like a beast of burdens on her, had a tinge of nervousness. The only words she incapable to dream up at the moment expressed a dire need of finding part-time employment by this summer’s end, preferably. She didn’t say that she had no experience of a potentially faked letter to some training college being announced with so much excitement before, nor with such unripe enthusiasm. The notional value of a period of hardships leading to lesser rather than greater, she couldn’t utter to Morris without splintering his persona and his sanguine aspirations. She wondered inwardly why he gave these two letters so much emphatically special treatment.

“He has grown up so much, never before was he so mature, I am impressed. I kind of thought he would be writing to a sweepstakes or what have you.” She said inwardly.

There has been little, so far anyway, that Morris could take on that would break this precious grasp on these idealized hopes, or on this heightened state of hyper-sensitivity. He decided. Not to hanker after the parasites from Mi5 or wherever we were from, who were indeed scanning him everywhere we went. Nor to ever tell or drop clues to the truth about the intended recipients of, and the corrupt reasons for, the letters.

That bitch Mabel must never catch him out. What takes place will be hush hush, have no doubt, he said, riled with his confidence.

He was very motherly of his agenda to secure the world’s richest womans favour, though he made risky plans to write again. To nurture it as carefully as he would nurture a foundling. Would he out in the world acquire praise and honours on a par with the leaders or would he be condemned like a criminal opportunist, almost like some Raffle winners? He longed for it to be proved a major success. A successful, skilled, savvy rich man.

Also, with Mabel knowing nothing of his preoccupation with money and continuing to not know he paused; thought and listed the main points which might hammer home his flaying case in the follow-up letter, sent by recorded delivery this round.

Calling her later, Mabel in her conventional way cooperated. Not in the modus vivendi that her era welcomed, she was habitually out of fashion; but modestly feisty would be the best way to describe her assent to partner up with Morris.

I might improve my odds if I show a copy of my identity card to the woman, he said. He decided to use a photograph of Rudy, the leader, he could say it was himself Morris pleaded with her before Mabel tried to get one of him for Morris.

Naomi here.

Another provision floated into the arena of rates of income, figures of financial expense, things like mathematical perfect tetra-magic cubes and leisurely indolence.

He ran a meagre and basic current account with which he banked, and to receive the funds inserted the exactly specific details of this: its account number, clearing number, Iban and swift code; done haphazardly as post-scripts somewhere along the margins. A genius step. If it pleased her he would now wait for an international wire-transfer by N-sys from a European (probably Swiss or German) private bank without telling him. Her bank would then stay private and secret. The account details: name of bank, size of balance, beneficial owner, powers of attorney masked by a series of chaotic transfers from “Bankhaus” to “Stadt-sparkasse” to “Raiffeisen”. He had implicit faith she looked after him like a guardian angel when the step of adding in this information materialized out of the nous and knew it was the right time for him to shrug at Pirsig’s vanguard of spies.

Organizing for a cheque, he etched his home address onto the onion skin paper, rapidly. Not something he could do lightly without worry. An unknown stranger but, attaining of his materialistic aim was more important than the CULT’s protection even, so he risked it. Trivia of details such as names of his parents and his place of birth he inadvertently scribbled as a postscript. In order to inject authenticity he decided to type it up. To him these afterthoughts proved valuable in the plan’s thickening.

He intended to check his statement at the local bank branch at the beginning of the next week, although he didn’t foresee it happening that fast, and at the beginning of every week after that. He sent the envelope along with a notarized copy of his I.D. document. In this case his own driver’s license with a photograph of his friend, the leader of the Sanctuary.

The sweetener: he manipulated his moderate charms to produce a curling, swirly signature as a pivotal and an impressive sign of a bold personality.

This turned her in my favour he thought much later when in prison for corruption and money-laundering.

When she handed the photograph of Rudy to him, he announced to Naomi he had grown foolish and fond of his target and he placed her close to his heart in spite of all the media’s harsh enunciation and in spite of the fact that he had only heard of her name about a fortnight before. The fledgling idea of writing this “begging letter” formed in his mind after hearing a rare radio interview. To drive home his plot he added a description of his faux-devotion to her business operations and her multitude of companies though he wasn’t concerned in the slightest.

When he compared the struggle to maintain genuine character and integrity with that inability to maintain worldly success: a fair talent in the forum of work and of rest; and piling on top the steeled woman’s worldly prowess when seen alongside his raw, failed approach to things.…. he drew up and alluded to comparisons that he then enthused over.

By lying at her doorstep with those shared equalities; by enthusing over them, that was how to ingratiate someone into the steeled woman’s humor without outside intervention.

Prepared to argue with them later in some quasi-philosophical “soul-searching session”, Morris confessed he suffered at the lower end of a municipal scale with half-wits Mabel, Claiborne and Naomi dragging him yet further downwards. Why was he denied equal footing with his peer-group, why was he obliged to sink into torpor, stagnation, and ultimately lack and envy? Why?

Falling to a temptation in his teenage years was no fault of his but it had destroyed all hopes of an erudite aim in the golden years. He tried to amass enough arguments and information against his destiny at the Sanctuary to sway her steely and hard opinion.

He set aside the usual sob stories. Not competent enough to use devious tricks he demanded of his inner-self why he needed the money – that cool, hard cash?

He denied being any kind of glutton point-blank, though he admitted a ravenous need for excitement which he seldom consumed in this particular track, in this particular county named Kent. This money potentially made it possible to bring a sense of interest into his quiet lodgings. To perform that feat on his own or to try to on a personal level was, he said, a mistake. He equated himself with his struggle against boredom and his poverty was the mainstay of that. It was nowadays part and parcel of his current identity.

Opening the letters that her secretary gave her, while laughing hysterically and saying: “You have to read these!”, they brought shocked surprise. Although Rachel had suppressed it hoping she would meet different people, be on a better footing with them, if she read her fanmail at weekends.

Never having to care about money or lack of it meant she could spend time on less mundane activities; interesting activities that she said cheered her hungry soul. The billionaire mused that Morris must have re-checked the letter perfunctorily and sealed it without a second glance. Fond of her fan base she had to admit she was scared by this specific writer who now and then had to have sounded so very threatening.

The billionaire found his little post-it note inside the envelope calling her an imbecile, and other worse names so she had to have pledged to play safe.

A week before he impractically overlooked the air mail postage to the United States of America.

With a set of three first-class stamps he hastily hoped to cover it. Morris resided on an astral plane hoping for a reply, ethereally awaiting a promise of free cash as a result of his threats. They prevented Rachel emptying the rubbish, keeping to agreements or exercising regularly.

So the saga went on and scarcely anybody, the steely woman, would have liked to risk begging such enormous an amount. Honour, safety and the safety of the address the Sanctuary was at stake, now the future of the rich woman had been jeopardised.

Morris directed his steps to a post office down the main road as before with the second horrible letter inside his grey jacket. A fretful, doom-laden intuition that he would never go anywhere he hoped, nor be an emissary for material success must have come upon him. She mentally pictured him throwing away each and every prospect of earning a sou by posting and dreaming manic depressively, at length, about this mad and probably just about illegal request.

Obviously, it was clear to go on with this particular track was desirable only to him. This path distanced him from them who he held closest in his heart of hearts since year dot: the everyman. The steely woman along with everyone else was sure, he should have turned back.

“If the majority of churches in the past had seen alms-giving as one of the most lawful, harmless pursuits, if he had as his purpose a lawful pursuit it would reduce the perilousness of his quest massively, certainly in my opinion,” Grover was a victor and regarded as an international heroine by everybody, near and far. “Yes, they adore and adulate me,” she mused, “for my investment abilities, not for showing mercy to a stranger, not for turning the other cheek to an impudent scoundrel like this… umm…Morris.” Then the thought of the Sanctuary and Morris’s links to the New Religious Movement hit home as it dawned on her she was risking a press debacle not having received many like requests whilst in New York, and enjoying her time at the top of the roost meant she was ever aware of the danger of falling back on illegal or harmful pursuits, at least in her audience’s opinions.

“What is holding me back?” Grover said rhetorically to her Personal Assistant. It was consistently suggested by the age she lived in, and the rise of the machine in modern society, that she needed swathes of dollars to fulfil her actual, chosen intention but charity had not been a priority until this weirdly cobbled together letter touched a raw nerve. Whether it was the idea of money-laundering, being stolen from, helping an CULT or worse Morris had not failed to touch a nerve. In striking a chord he had altered her in a small but important way: “Grover, you will be the perfect example of benevolence.” Simultaneously, her Personal Assistant pointed out that virtuous intentions had been turned. as if by some alchemist into corrupted pursuits: “It is no more than flagrant abuse of your true nature…” she said, not liking the idea in question and trying to stop her from anything rash.

Grover’s abased ideology contained many nefarious, infernal ways of wasting the precious dollar bills. Without a desire of earning the equivalent cash by normal channels like by a long career curve, or like by the setting up of a legitimate foundation. She cared not a whit if our global economy locked horns with another tax evasion or recession scandal. No devaluing of the currency irked her scam: lust for dollar bills and carefree abandonment.

No opportunity had risen ever before to get up to par with or ahead of the pack unless she wanted to trade in her abstract, untethered spirit for dollar bills again. Grover was about to embrace the pleasures of freedom and fun, honesty and purity which life had always held in store as she shrugged off self-aggrandizement and made big promissory claims to endear herself to Morris.

Writing it down firstly in note form she made an effort to garner an ultimate reward by this unconventional route to paradise.

Rachel Groves made hasty, rash bargains and pacts as delineated in her private notes. Swearing that she would leave her family amongst other things that she would break with her abased religion too and, lying obviously, that she would even become bisexual if he refused to accept. She was hoping to trick, and outwit him with these pledges. So it was she made many misplaced vows that later she refused to keep including changing her newest holding company’s name to Morris and Co ltd.

The saddest but also heftiest moment in this was when on her way to bed she made up her mind to avow never to seek out an adulterous partner ever again. Giving her youthless body over to a life of celibacy and to the Sanctuary as well she might, her composure broke, her spoon-fed beliefs so far were altered beyond any recognition and at once she turned into a beast, a wild ox and erased any a priori or a posteriori knowledge got through normal, fair channels.

She had a vivid dream that night when she fell, plopping, onto her feather-stuffed mattress exhausted which she couldn’t forget about.

Her madcap testimony was not purified after the steely Grover had woken from her dream. The dream was right and at this stage encouraged her idling aspirings. Her undocumented reveille revolved about an old figurine in a pallid, cream-coloured gilet, attired with a mastiff-headed umbrella tilted daintily inwards, who masqueraded as some onyx genius or leader floating up there in the air about head height. Her conscience said she must trust and try him as a VIP, and she heard much that was really topical yet to her dismay she seemed to find he was surrounded by only a handful of hardened followers. His favourite phrase on the subject of get-rich-quick schemes: “I don’t like working for it. Just don’t bother working for it…” Yes, I’d love to give that Sanctuary money she thought.

Morris that day was bemusedly puzzling over who might be an authentic and seemingly puissant character to petition Grover on his behalf, but not to any avail, unless Rudy came into it.

At a loss the next morning, as Grover wiped the sleep from her eyes, Morris was already up from his afternoon siesta and attempted fervently to remember the dictates spoken by the leader at their meeting.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, looking amused at his own contorted reflection he stared at himself listlessly trying to see a good angle, but simultaneously kept his eyes half-fixed on the semi-open creaking door behind him as he washed his face for a full five minutes. Pessimism and cowardice of the spying had infiltrated him anew.

About to notice this, he had reapplied his eyes to the freaky critter above the low basin, yet he could still conjure stuff up and savouring one more of the leader’s phrases which he almost didn’t grasp: “You might try lots of other ways, but why not go for ten million pounds?” Morris’s new-found mentor had held beside his form at the last lecture in his right hand a smarter than umbrella which was more for show than derived from any real need to support any business of his. That said something about the way in which Grover’s speaking figurine and the CULT leader looked like they had things in common with each other, and it stuck out as unimportant but also very true.

In 2005 when Morris’s mind should but would not normally have turned to more essential and important matters like when the next meeting of the gang was and learning things from Rudy’s interminable speeches it failed to do so. He was bogged down in a pit yet even though he remembered the dream figurine had never told him who he was, he needed to know more. His mind was trapped in a fantasy as if it had ascended to some numinous, more important plane. He believed that he had won the final battle…”where’s he going about to…” prematurely. No high priest had materialized before in front of him, only an idiot would believe in that sort of hocuspocus. So he assumed it was best to keep it secret for the time being.

“I can’t tell anyone about this.” He murmured “Methinks it is dangerous. Seems important though so I’ll try to remember more later on this morning. I’ll never give up.” So Morris meditated. Depending upon which way we judged it his next decision was a big mistake. “Forget those assurances I made. Who cares? I can’t keep to my word. Never mind I hope I get away with it, so long as I still tell them that I will keep my promises.”

So his expectations took shape with considerations hitherto consigned to oblivion. The greatest insight Morris had about money so far was: “Who needs money? I want to enjoy life and have a good time, but still not be a fat cat.” Or it was: “Give me ten million pounds for nothing, I’ll pay you back later. Much later…” He was not careering from it nor towards it in any traditional mode: monetary loot's traditional mercenary ways of being earnt simply did not fascinate him, as Naomi’s attitude to him did not fascinate him anymore either.

The other letter poured forth naturally and flowed like a cascading waterfall not through his own abject motives, but by instinct it evolved in a decidedly less than sombre manner. He remained cheerful but at the same time not silly, it was upbeat but you wouldn’t say it was overly so. He had had to sound urbane yet not appear too ingenuous fearing his demands would be rejected for such an unsophisticated a crime as urbanity, and he succeeded, and with a new more relaxed tone he was up to creating that façade...

“I had better not be myself, or when she meets me she may take it back realizing it’s just harmless little me.” He went on arguing in circles in this way, once he had finished showering that morning, about how to create a persona for himself – a simulacrum which would only put shade where there should naturally be light.

If he could not progress past the company’s minions at the outer walls of the castle that was her conglomerate, then he should not attempt to lay siege to it.

The conglomerate would no doubt censor unsolicited mail from all over the world, but Morris just longed that he be refused on some other basis than being labelled as junk mail, while he struggled to paraphrase the leader’s beguiling diction. Because of the tenuous ethical biases which outlawed letters like his Grover may have turned him down outright hardly pausing on the real reasons, not dwelling on the need he had become so aware of recently.

An innate problem was how was his demand different to the rest of the solicitations, the entries to the Raffle contest, the pleas for post-graduate employment which she was confronted with every day? Though not as essential, he would have to choose soon whether to address her by her first name as that sort of almost friendliness was still a moot point.

It seemed so perfectly logical. Then arrived the instant, optimistic realization that Grover lived in their human realm and was like the rest of them, and fathomable: he soon found out that although easily irreproachable, Grover was far from easily approachable.

**CHAPTER 21**

Rudy’s Reportage

Lauren left out so much about Claiborne. The fact of going to and from the Sanctuary at the start and end of their weekend in Ashford. The fear of a break down. The prophecy of getting lost.

Journeying to the place where Claiborne planned to live with Bertram she redacted the past. It was not easy. Claiborne: whose induced cerebral fear, what must be termed supreme cowardice, made her ineffectual; whose inability to cope with school assignments; whose failures at the simplest tasks, she rubbed out from historic reportage.

Claiborne’s two acquaintances were at a small gathering in a sprawling Georgian pile of a country house near Ashford. It was November of 2006, and only Volley had gone there before. There was no greater journey according to their standards. A house-warming party for Bertram, it was a much-anticipated event, she said. Only a few from Claiborne and Jock’s inner circle had been invited a month before.

Claiborne had assured Jock and Volley they would not see anyone from outside their closed off, narrow set. The venue, Marlowe place, furnished unstintingly, without signs of normative parental supervision, nor the influence of the next generation impressed them...

The vague pong of gambling and of unearned financial acumen combined with a stench of excessive, delighted decorators working around the house.

A recollection of the seismic events that weekend was but with the greatest toil carried out. Claiborne was obliterated by drugs during it, while Bertram’s guests had their instincts put into context.

Claiborne experienced first-hand the possible upshot of her quaking fear and her miserable inability fall into place.

Bertram could never have planned ahead what was to happen.

There was no evidence of decency in the attributes of this house when taken at face-value. From wallpaper to tables and from the chairs to the curtains there was no element of restraint which would have hurt unreigned-in greed. The host of this party prized loud finesse and immodest values when he was not even the wealthiest pensioners in the Ashford. Money was never an answer for Bertram, and it was not certain that it could validate his life either.

Two intentions taste and integrity were completely absent at his gathering: in the heavy oak tables and plush chairs, from the guest's seating to the unlocked study. There are more worthwhile aims than this profligate overindulgence, even if a means were suddenly available. This was the terror Lauren expected after the Almanac.

Party part two.

He did his normal duties like taking delivery of medicine, voluntary charity work, dishing out the odd parcel to the elderly, but when he listened to the music at his party the cult were watching and waited for a way to divert his new cash in their basic direction.

Obstacles blocked the path now that he had accrued his new wealth. A sensitive mindset, a frail frame his, he understood how a nauseating medicine for arthritis was converted into an obstacle. If a car’s exhaust let off any noise it frightened him, if a cup of water slid off his desk onto the floor it scared him. The list of phobias was innumerable after that.

He leant forward and scowled.

He hunched his bony shoulders up over the desk when he searched for a way to defeat the cult’s agents, for a way out from the unholy sepulchre. Breaking silence, he grumbled pandemically:

“I can see you, you know. You might as well leave. Right now. Get it?” The moaners artless complaints; the confused ramblings of the churlish man who was tormented by the NRM, produced no remedy by itself.

Beyond that were a few other options: having an inventive mind of sorts never sent him ideas devoid of meaning, reimbursed him with thoughts which he could not put to some important use or purpose. Except this time. He longed to escape from Marlowe place, to go to the harbour and take the boat, like last summer before he joined the cult; to sail aimlessly to a quiet, peaceful island in the Adriatic; no more to be disturbed nor hounded by the cult’s agents that were making him paranoid.

He had lost his footing in everyday, crude reality. More often than previously his lapsed faculties churned over why and how and what the cult’s agents actually wanted. They were shadowing in greater numbers his quotidian and ordinary existence. As he struggled to regain his senses, he chortled to himself, “Heh-heh. I am not the first that they have followed, I shouldn’t wonder. Heh-heh! It all serves to suggest it was them who want to steal the cash from my account…” he said.

Laughing, his brow creased up, Bertramcackled like a bizarre, alchemical professor. The ordinary sky no longer belonged to a powerful crime boss. The sun and moon wanted to heed, not hinder his bidding. The darkness and the light were despairing of their own utterly inoperative power in the face of competition from this genius, this mastermind. The waves of the sea were like ornaments on an independent asset manager's sceptre. The earth his firmament. A furrowed scowl replaced the smile, Bertram was the only one who enjoyed the prospects of dominion over everyone. Everyone relied on his supernal ruling capabilities.

He wished that someone would tell him why Lauren should not have just dissolved from sight once she had found out about the techniques and expenses-not-spared in grasping his hungry ideas.

Both Bertram and Lauren had insisted they would never clutch onto dosh, or any other reward, even if it was got just moderately amorally.

Although this was all a hypocritical sham because they certainly never complained of how they hadn’t enough cash, even just to buy new clothes.

They were all surprisingly devoid of self-knowledge and Bertram surmised he could just about get lots of dosh too; until he lost his marbles because he it was who was beset by trials on his personality which were until then completely alien and foreign to him.

Vague notes of irritation hung like boughs of a tree over his words and disposition. Everything and everybody had, a week earlier, acquired a hue and a shadow unfamiliarly and unpleasantly discoloured yet everything was his fault.

A week into the affair: from the cashier at the bank to the doctors on duty at The Sanctuary, from some of his friends who were less than close to Claiborne, from close friends nonetheless to pathetic strangers, he realized without realizing that there might be pressurizations and a series of strains he was wholly unacquainted with.

Soon he crumbled under the weight of the acquaintance and he lost his wherewithal for some time.

He tried to put his suede jacket on. Grossly preoccupied his pace quickened. He started turning the sleeves of the new jacket inside and out, quicker and quicker. Until he couldn’t resist tearing the inner lining instead of flicking his arms into them.

Fearing to damage his new dreamt-of suede jacket he became horribly angry, motivated by sheer ego-mania.

He had never known how to hide emotion. He tried to pass himself off as in charge of this despair. An anger, but peaceful and contained nonetheless.

To mask this new negative quality, he mildly criticized anything that was inferior and it became clear: he could risk going to extremes and accusing, threatening, even hurting anyone who would not permit him to practice his practices which he nearly adored, off the record.

He was put in touch with reality but was without Lauren and with the rest of the gang of allies.

He gave the gamut of familiar emotions full rein. He forsook restraint and decency when Claiborne threatened his secret guilt, or showed capacity to have subverted his place as “numero uno” in the pecking order. The previous coping strategy of gazing wistfully into the distance to intuitively hide his newfound happiness and security did not help one bit after these matters.

Everything of excitement he had encountered before became as plain and ordinary as a bullish doorman to a nightclub, or the dozy official behind the desk at reception until eventually.... it became clear to the cult that as long as he had the dosh something strange but not actually nice, something unusual but not really allright was likely to be happening to them and on their lookout...

Like a caged animal being transported across the sea in a heavily chained mesh he raged and broiled at the bars of a metaphorical prison. If anyone told him his hiding the truth would not help, it made him yet still more aggressive. A threat of exposure made him conceal his feelings. Beyond that he sometimes but rarely managed a certain smile, a peaceful nod, or a little gregarious wink if someone liked his boxfresh, jejeune clothes. Unimpressive to none.

Every action, even the flap of a butterflys wings, which benefits a person or thing, so the karmic theory tells us, is caused by good or bad things being done by others as an inevitable reaction to even the smallest movement of an invisible high frequency sound wave.

So Bertram who had every right to fete this majesty he had acquired caused untold damage to himself by creating this friction. Incapable of strictly defining their feelings, he ate and moved around in new ways – slowly and laboriously perception of him had changed – many had been drawn to his modesty, his languid stare and the disarray of his clothes. They had forgotten that rather readily.

The old meekness was replaced only with nasty self-satisfaction. Now this cash boost had acquired some darker wisdom with it too. With a brand new jewel of a jacket with special detachable hoodie backing him up he even wrote furious letters to his old enemies and much more, and in parenthesis to risk a quantum warp of the natural order in tune with the karma of action and equal reaction.

**Rudy**

Nine ‘o clock, and Bertram went out to bank Pirsig and Cie without so much as a miserable fiver in any of his pockets. It had most abruptly descended into a gloomy, downcast morning without anything promissory of a kindly return to the sensational radiance of the last three sultry months. The man himself strode or frogmarched to the local branch of the bank inquisitive as was normal. He saw his ego’s image in the reflected shapes from the mirrors, fortified by his Guarana chewing gum and the iota of a smart pill he had lovingly popped the night before. With the tip of his nose twitching at the nearly inhumane responses to his urban uniform of combat boots, chinos, and suede jacket he’d lackadaisically joined a queue for the cashier desk which would, if he queued a bit more, let Bertram deposit a hundred or so pounds without much upset.

He progressed laboriously, starting to sweat, shifting his body’s weight from one planted foot to the other to ignore the tiring, liminal wait until he got himself out and miles away from the stifling, torpid denial of liberal munificence. The air-conditioning wasn’t switched on. The auras of the other clients and the hotness were stuff to make his head mix giddily with preoccupations of fresh air. He heard a pinging buzzer ring out at long last. He mopped that sweat off his brow with his jacket cuff as was his accustomed manner, and casually hurried over to the waiting cashier desk.

He had a very faulty memory for a lot of facts, in particular he got selective amnesia about anything nasty, embarrassing or harsh. Naomi pointed out these tasty morsels to her friends, much to his consternation when otherwise they would scarcely have noticed the disadvantage. Snippets he chose to forget included: delightful experiences, joyous moments and happy endings. This time, however, while he set eyes on the bank teller he remembered her as the same person who had served him a couple of months before; and although it was blurred he believed nothing much had been missed (he had asked for his monthly statements). He hurriedly searched his mental compartments to recall what they talked about, and if it had not been something of huge significance or similar.

He whisked through the caverns and labyrinths of his brain’s stores until he cleverly at last distinguished an answer. The missing link, a stupefying antiquated passbook, was the vital key. Quite clearly other than visits to the cash machines outside, as stamped in the pages of his passbook, it was two months since his previous visit. This information was enough to unlock his memory, like a prompt for a stroke victim, and he could confirm that he’d asked the cashier only a week ago how many zeroes a billion had in it...why?

He crawled right up to their file of desks and stuck his skull through the hole, whapped his documentation out from his inner pouch, and in a dusky voice requested his statements to be forwarded to him, and also demanded his money. The cashiers looked put off, they didn’t even do to Bertram the small courtesy of answering, but after aversion came acceptance, and glancing over to the side one of them got up, casually crept over to a more senior member of staff. Whispering together for what must have been only a few seconds, they afterwards tried to gobble banker’s-speak to him with those false and hushed voices of theirs. Creating some sort of cover-up or barrier-reef from the rest of the floorspace, they raised no scandal at their knowledge of advanced financial mathematics. With t he news bursting the dams, there was this momentous and doom-laden hiatus. The passing of time more and more slowly became a reason for anybody’s speculation, yet, before it went to complete inertia, she spoke thus:

“You’ve got eight hundred million pounds sterling, one of your American “colleagues” transferred it to you. I think...you’ve got…some explaining to do…”

“But how? Why?”

“I’m not sure. Read for yourself. This is their name, go see if you can find out. Hold on, wait! Do you even know them?” Bertram was flabbergasted, she shocked him forward into the future and backwards into a past he had all but forgotten. He could not understand much of anything as his universe seemed to flip upside down, but at least, at least he had the hard facts of the evidence. With those he would make his case stronger and stronger. Presumably.

“How can someone possibly be rich enough to give away that much money? Eight hundred million pounds? It’s unheard of. Unbelievable! Crikey.” He said.

Bertram thought that such derring-do it was to try adjusting to his brand new life with hordes, literally vatfuls, an amount of money, the stuff legends are made of given away. To Bertram and no-one else was given a promised land of millionaire’s dreams acquired without much effort. This would have required some rationalisation, should have deserved some, but Bertram was so happy and righteously pleased, and the answer to who the special donor might be, the bank clerk said was a foreign lady. He couldn’t hear properly yet he could have known it had to have been none other than that lovely woman Grover he had written to two months before.

“Possibly money-laundering,” he mused, “Am I in trouble?” he asked. However, so unperturbed about any peril he foresaw and those dangers he didn’t predict, he took a massive leap of blind faith and propped his ordinary future up on knowing what the hell was going on around him.

“Yeah”, he hesitated, “I know that. That is my in law's name – their married name – they died recently.” Whether or not this was true was debatable, and was something the lowly bank clerk would be able to prove one way or the other, but not right now.

“Anyway…has the cheque cleared?” he asked wisely forgetting all about the letters they knew nothing about.

The alteration the statement gave rise to herein had seemed so far off, and such a wild, untenable hypothetical rumour that it took every possible drop of power in his bones to rip her off anymore about the ultimate: money, and therefore making numerous excuse after variable lie exited the bank with a draft for just over half the full amount. It was all the clerk could clear and obviously the bankers being what they are she was reluctant at that.

He pushed to the side some other, smaller amounts to show largesse to his brother and sister also; yet, with the nagging worry that his banker’s draft was considered actual cash, and if disposed of by theft, accident or force majeure the ultimate would be lost in a mire, boggled his timidly-set weakling mind.

Much to the teller’s dismay she was forced to see Bertram’s figure dwindling into the vista as he walked nonchalantly away, an oddity of voices in his head, perhaps from the leader, perhaps not, whispering their slanders and urging him (wisely) not to tell anyone – not even darling Lauren. Or, if that was somehow to have failed, he had to avoid returning to its rightful owner the full, true extent of his massive haul. The bank clerk’s situation was perilous, more than that it was totally stricken. The inordinate sum of money which was enough to feed and clothe a well-populated city, gone and well out of the reach of their hands, grubby and oily and very empty.

Bertram felt ravaged by complete guilt at what he had done, or allowed to happen, or not really cared to notice. It was illicit, and the rate at which he scooted down the street bore witness to the truth. He would not have a chance unless he employed his discretion, and kept his lips tightly sealed and his actions more demure in future.

There had to be modesty, humility and no bragging to the cult. There had to be the sagacious choice of words, and not the customary unscrupulous, hyperbolical reports to anyone, whether or not they appeared partly trustworthy. To tell it straight, Bertram was out of the cult’s control and completely beyond their idea of redemption. No, he would never be freed although, in a way, he indeed had risen to get to the state of grace he longed for so much whether a single soul companion, an in-law, liked it or not. No, there was more money in his draft than microbial crystalline particles in the droplets of a billowing snowstorm and he felt accurately he was alone.

Elation at his success and celebration was completely forbidden by the reality. His sensitive plans to rejoice soon became superseded by the planned for risk of exposure. In serious dubiety about any ability to cheat doom, unable to specify what personal destruction was really like he cast cares and inabilities away as perturbed little paranoiac’s theorems and a few forgotten minutes later he was attracting the scopes of everyone who saw him: walking erratically, practically swerving across the street, off balance, and if he had not remembered somehow to keep shtoom he would have gone from risk of doom to dysphoric disaster anyway.

**CHAPTER 24**

The explanation was this tome of codicils undercutting Bertram, and muddling Denny, both of whom populated a roster of manfully furtive, and needlessly dispirited, adjectives. Hardly even considering that point, they collaboratively produced another feeble lie as a reason to put their nouses together to conceal the serious call of their quest and to reflect in the larder on one or two of the subsequent stages in the sabotage of the codicils’ true design. Quietly and slyly their whispers so low that neither Rudy nor Lauren learnt a smidgin of their overt intentions; out of earshot mumbling indecipherable words about the arresting inordinate benefit dangling from, and to be garnered from, the Almanac – because the size and dimensions seemed to fit snugly and perfectly to those of the scrolls which they had, so fondly, kept under a wrapper at home for a lengthy space of time; their comparatively small Raffle win was soundly withering and diminishing in value because of this - their newly-acquired or commandeered cryptogram’s potential gain and aggrandizement.

An ensuing hush puppy of a discussion centered on how best to convey to Lauren the pivotal urgency of parting from her codicils. With bad jests, with warnings or advice, radiating out from appeals to insults? As luck would have it Lauren’s ennui in the lounge that afternoon got the better of her and fortunately she moved gingerly over to the door jamb to listen in. The mutterings therein about this and that, from what she gleaned of scattered words and phrases that were interspersed with appallingly bad copies of gangster phrases, Bertram and Denny were both uncertainly up to no good.

“Busted.” She thought. “xyz”

She gathered that they we re afraid of her adamant refusal to permit them the use of this object, this stupendous worthless distraction. Astonished to learn that they plotted to use it on the Raffle, to apply it to of all intents and purposes the least expected of designs, her eyebrows marked the moment of epiphany but… she made a vague noise in error – a distinctive abrasive scud of her shoes on the kitchen floor.

Denny woke from his sublime reveries suddenly and fell into a state of red alert and surveying the scene another faint sound of speed and motion away arrested him in the middle of another copy of well-worn underground jargon. Woeful Bertram primed himself in a second and made the course of the dialogue change permanently to less sensitive issues but still was wise enough to bang the cupboards and to pour some water out of one of the taps fastened on the wall behind him as a clever ruse, just one way of distracting and scaring off the eavesdropper.

Lauren had turned herself about a bit awkwardly, and a little sullenly went back towards the welcoming comfort zone of the lounge hardly able to disseminate the advantage of creeping silently, or of letting them hear her residual footsteps dying out on the hall-way’s resonating, parquet flooring, as she left and quit the charade, her swindle, for the sake of everyone’s peace.

He could easily pull off nasty tricks like this one that had to be met with nothing but malice. She remembered the dodgy times when Claiborne was younger and things were not progressing forward very well with Bertram. And even though he tried every trick in the book: the guilt-ridden faces and his pathetic assurances, they never managed to sway matters in his favor. On occasion, annoyingly, he would seem almost to beg to get caught for some travesty like drinking too much. This was the whole reason for their nightmare split apart.

Lauren recalled finding his private journals, and waiting with caution to examine his doodles and sketches because he had already expressed massive reluctance to reveal them to anyone, even to her. For a tenuous, nigh on unbelievable reason Bertram subtly transported the dinky red jotter pads from place to place, locus to locus, from the back of a drawer in the dressing table to somewhere, probably under a pile of some towels in the airing cupboard, specifically so that they would evade anyone’s inspection.

Despite these jaunty antics and other rakish, doomed attempts to breach or evade rules of trust and integrity, she eventually discovered his hidden jotter trapped in the closet under the stairs, and ransacked that locus soon after, not only for a joke but also out of swelling indignation. “You silly buffoon…

Instead of those doodles and fledgling artworks that she anticipated, (commemorative plaque-style at a formal, private ceremony of VIP guests) Lauren found out, to her great dismay and shock that he had shamelessly inhabited his precious red-hued jotter with the reams and reams of methods and plans for some wild self-aggrandizing scheme for which a grand failure was inevitable. From then on he took preventative measures, like those taken in deadly extreme situations, to wipe out any further invasive entity’s influence over his mad plots. “But I was tanked up…they are only my personal notes…

These notes and plans scribbled clumsily in a ferret’s scrawl he ungenerously claimed were just the by-product of a penchant for the inane outpouring of privately held sentiment.

However, some part of Lauren said that something was undeniably tragic, the keywords “bribe” and “disaster” stood out in flashing, neon strobes as well. Trying to beg, persuade and pressurize lottery Head Quarters for a Raffle victory, and to make these plans which were in the main gratuitous and quite probably doomed oaths to cause, unduly influence and then sustain the illusion of such a fantastically ludicrous prize.

Personally I’d always believed that luck, joy, and triumph would necessarily fall always upon the victor who stood out as a representative for good qualities of positivity, and at worst harsh necessity, but not be brought about through these cunning pledges. “I vow to uphold etc…” he wrote.

When she confronted him later about these wicked memos he averred he was sorry but she had to attempt to understand that he had a very virtuous excuse – maybe it was not an excuse that she could possibly dream of agreeing with and so he said that she must not blame him if he chose not to explain in any more depth the desperately embarrassing and roguish remedies undertaken to ensure their conjoint future fortunes, to entrap this vast, dark, powerful whirligig of fortune called the Raffle.

\* \* \*

As for Claiborne something greatly unhinged her, something trivial had greatly disturbed her peace of mind. Something, some unquantifiable lurking problem which would have been of consequence if it wasn’t for Lauren’s flippant and vacuous tone lay just around the corner:

“Come on. There’s nothing wrong with you…” she retorted.

She swiveled around, planted her feet stock still and it seemed that in that instant the powers of scrutinizing or deducing what was true from what was false deserted her more than momentarily. An instant later Claiborne advanced then retreated from her outstretched fist, lunging then backtracking, somehow unsettled and in a way perturbed by something, a non-descript shadow.

With some modicum of sympathetic ingenuity Lauren tried to calm her daughter’s obvious manifestation of disquietude but she was prickly to the touch like a seemingly dead cactus in a pot that you might give away as a small present to someone who you didn’t like.

“I’m tired, so let’s get going.” Her mother said undeterred.

Claiborne, whose Almanack had not passed through metaphorical customs, had not been inspected and had not even been verified by visa only succumbed to her entreaties after a long expanse of time. She did so. Duty bound to abide, cajoled into acquiescence by her mother’s flippant and vacuous, yet entirely sanctioned, appraisal of the current climax of those far off events in the off-license years earlier.

“All right, I promise. You can look at it when we get home.” She said after much pleading, many arguments, and a lot of consoling herself that the child’s mind-set was little more than temporary.

The point of interest, the bone of contention, soon became that whereas Lauren chose the safe and the secure, so far Claiborne invariably always plumped for the unsafe, those paths children pursued whose only dangers were minor, petty though frequently near at hand.

Much less perturbed by her mother hailing a taxi than interested in the Almanack and its odd predictions and ciphers Claiborne was risking running headlong into the heady delights of the furthest reaches of what made everything composed, scientifically ordered, everything completely believed. Things and notions like community policemen all lined up against a wall for death by firing squad. For why else would Lauren opt for the route of wagering her ISAs on the Raffle when the real risks of losing were a thousand-fold worse than the chances of success, and were much more probable than the equivalent risk of getting railroaded into acquiescence by an actor clown who might have picked you out to tease you at a trip to the circus. Neither of them though could perceive that much yet.

One of them still saw the Raffle as an entity with formal existence and both of them mulled it over, obsessed over it, dwelt upon it and highlighted it until just before it became some “cause celebre”, a moot point; until days before they turned that corner and it became a real component of their conjoint livelihoods.

Claiborne looked eagerly on as Lauren gave her thanks to the driver.

The easy part was extending your hand to shake hands with someone. The part that was less easy was researching the facts to find out everything you needed to about someone. This Lauren had always done masterfully; with a flurry of distracting aphorisms, a plume of cigarette smoke and a direct line to God, she could quite without awkwardness, and in a few short minutes masterfully plumb the depths of people’s characters. More than one person’s character had been investigated in the following manner: Upon walking into a room where people happened too often to stare, observe, see you and then pass their tedious, deadpan comments, the bad ones used to be criticized and the good ones praised, the in-between ones never added anything which landed them in danger.

Whether this actually took place at bars and clubs was not in doubt: whether she wanted this to happen was and remained a mystery of mysteries. Sometimes Lauren’d want a reception from someone who would say his ovations were the best, thanks. And whether this happened by means fair or foul was and stays unknowable.

They tended to give their heartfelt sentiments to or about her after they had shaken her hand, but for some strange reason, the nastier elements didn’t feel fond of her at all anymore. Convenient, that.

They called Lauren a good loser. But these snide, sneering jeers did not worry her one jot. It almost seemed as if Lauren liked the slander and taunts, and that she encouraged and thrived off evil remarks. But, in her defense these hatreds vis-a-vis fortified her because they were so near to being the reason itself to join the New Religious Movement.

For her the bad ones passed their evil comments and were side-lined. Convenient. Once they found out that she actually approved wholesale of this they began, conveniently, to hate her.

They had just gone through the depressing doorway to their home when Claiborne began to whine sententiously that her mother was playing horrid tricks on her. On the way home she had groaned until Lauren had deposited the shopping baskets onto the kitchen floor and groaned until after the unusual book was finally unveiled in all its glory onto the top of the counter.

“Here it is. I promised. So you can have it. Take it” She said sliding it over to Claiborne.

Now that it is years afterwards, Claiborne felt pressured by the heavy burden of the Almanack most of the time. Amongst the many secrets she was currently host to was one which stood out as the most important. The problem was that the longer she kept this Almanack’s knowledge a secret the more it burdened her, and the heavier the burden became as time passed.

The secret started off as an insignificant matter, and, over the years as people got nearer and nearer to finding it out, the secret had become a huge pressure and he wanted to tell someone so that he’d shed the onerous burden of guilt from his conscience.

It used to only be one a month that she would think about the Almanack but, as he felt more and more guilty, he tended to think about it more and more. Eventually he couldn’t go for more than a few moments without getting lost in contemplation of Claiborne’s terrible secret Almanack’s warning.

These things that he has not told anyone are making it harder for him to live a normative life. And, try as he might he has felt wracked with guilt, wracked with fear, until now. He did not reveal this to anyone, but he was under siege, besieged by his fear that he will one day use the Almanack and end up killing Bertram as indeed it predicted Claiborne would. He doubted telling anyone will help matters one jot, nor save his life. Perhaps it might have helped if he told someone to prevent the prophecy, but how he possibly could have known for sure whether this would pan out that way, as he of course hoped not to end up a murderer?

“Perhaps I ought to keep my secret a secret until I die or get caught…if I tell somebody what will that mean? That they know something personal that I don’t even want them to know?” He thought.

He delved ever deeper into his conscience over the years, struggling to find answers, solutions that may help him decide whether to use the Almanack with his mother’s Scytale from the cellar to win at Raffle anyway…even if it was so accursed and infernal that he or Claiborne could do as the Almanack predicted and kill Bertram, their actual supposed father. However, even to mention this idea would be tantamount to an admission of murderous intent, he claimed, or at least greedy instincts, or failing that at least gullible superstitions for their belief and trust in the Almanack’s implications.

“So nobody will treat me seriously, so no, this is something which I have to go figure out for myself.” He said to his friend Volley.

“They won’t understand at all that before I read the Almanack I was a completely innocent boy and now here I am harassed by my own undercurrents, without escape in sight from my own hateful desires.” Claiborne still had no chance to turn to anyone responsible and in this canyon of emotional rollercoaster riding he wistfully and lyrically recalled to mind the time before the secret was brought to bear so heavy on his soul.

“Ah! I wish they had just found out!” He said. I enjoyed this immensely, I hate to admit.

Things had now returned to normal, our upset voices holding no sway over her dwindling form after Claiborne sped off leaving Claiborne and I behind in a twilight of understanding. It had only been a few weeks since we were last touched so very emotionally by her great despair, but it was set to be many more dramatic months until any of us spoke to her cowering, diminutive form again.

“She was right, dear followers, she is right. This Raffle could be a bonanza for us too. It helps the lame who cannot get around, and …”

As the leader opportunely launched into his grand soliloquy the assembly listening around the room, in a way representatives of humanity, shuffled in their individual seats, bustled to their respective points. In a way emblematic of an array of religious or sacred opinions, and in a way they were similar to a tribunal, they listened long and hard, the jury, as though their lives lots were symbolically entwined with the leader’s bombastic, pompous, in-your-face, and yet also persuasive, ethereal, if not heavily charged grand monologue.

I easily observed from the initial, introductory words a special sort of resonance as he pontificated. It was a more intense soliloquy than everyday speech that lent credence to his forced arguments; and what was more, the pathos-laden emphases and strange quirkiness which was not borrowed from anywhere, nor had been bought over the counter from anyone, embraced a polyglot of manners, a kaleidoscope of both petty and valuable significances.

What I remembered the most I felt obliged to report were his excuses, excuses for opinionated, pejorative phrasings that in the main he utilized to cleanse sullied thoughts, to wash his stained hands of a candid significance which to most of humanity was unbearable, clearly there right between the lines, and probably going to be illegal from henceforth, if a regulator of psycho-social travesties were enforceable.

From time to time he would thump his palms down – thwack, thwack, on his broadly immobile thighs and this mannerism effectively rescinded all manner of dubiety as to his sacred meaning, to his unequivocal and blessed intent to find a way for the cult to win big at the Raffle.

**CHAPTER 25**

At a time actually very near to this time, I now know, there was somewhere unspecific somewhere along latitude 120 in an Eastern county flung out of any contact with twenty first century England. There was a place nestled somewhere Eastern and alien. So obscure that neither Christianity nor moral scruples, neither the entertainment industry nor even modern technology had made any significant inroads. A nest somewhere not even touched lightly with ecumenical or capitalist zeal. A lofty resting place for philistines. And for Claiborne.

The Sanctuary defended itself with high walls too vertiginous for any unskilled, rudimentary amateur to scale by ropeladder or by tying the ends of bedsheets to each other. Upon the few scant separate ways to pierce the lair’s defences Claiborne expended many of her days in inordinate thought. In troubled meditation sessions she revealed it in notes in a book known as an Almanack sent to her mentor in the New Religious Movement. Jock found it.

It was convenient that such a pitiful place still held onto its last lifeline, existed as a desperate tribute to the bygone ages of primitive monkeys roaming at liberty, and wild men of the forests charging down their bait with spears. With lush meadows like in Kent surrounding, it’s a place of no return, of metaphorical despair, that the sun unwillingly shines its wan light upon, and where darkness falls only to cover up the evil. The grey stone wall at which she could eternally stare, the air that something awfully tragic had taken place she breathed, the eery silence she felt rubbed against the skin, but the true atmosphere of injustice folk in Kent fortunately will never get to know or come to understand.

None of the tribal children, sadly, live or play in the approximate neighborhood anymore, the pitfalls of this territory barricade, blockade that from happening. Their fearful families escaped long ago to another place of greater safety many miles from this Sanctuary of discontent.

In its extraordinary outward crumbling façade she found only its shallow appearance of similarity to a reputable ancient monastery, in its inner corridors and tunnels she avowed to exist modern cells and units housing her and the bereft, long lost creatures. And in its ill-famed reputation as a mythical, non-existent place set aside for symbolic repentance, like Shangri-la, metaphorical explications, and ironic regretful longings, she found guilt-ridden philistines nestled. Those whose fervent apologetic longings for release, and those wiped out personalities, are theoretically absolutely required, not just politely requested. We know Claiborne sometimes recalled to mind, without meaning to, the legacy of her litany of petty misdemeanors, and her one greater mistake miles away here in England’s Raffle-obsessed land.

Without verdant moors around it, no roads led inwards, of course, no passageways led outwards, no means of access to this rumored place except by Sherpa across the valleys on a tedious and relentless three-day journey existed. The castle hoped to exist unexplored, unknown, unfound like this by any foolhardy or overly sanctimonious adventurer, and by any sheer presumptuous English voice of authority.

We knew it was a massive surprise then that life, vibrant animalistic life, or desiccated imprisoned human life, can have continued in this form for the last two hundred years since some eccentric, but very wealthy, personage found out and then purchased the place and its rough-hewn land around and about.

Hardly anyone from the West played visitor or tourist to the steep cliff upon the mountainside where Claiborne, clad in western dress, a philistine in every pore, stayed and the rats have incarcerated her, since hitting the jackpot, for nearly two years already. The bats periodically emanated howling from their sheltered caves, and the birds of prey took on a chemically-induced form both larger and more life-like here in this lost and forsaken eastern land.

Patrolling this symbolic shambles of a monument to the impulses, proclivities, criminal tendencies frowned upon by west and east alike, packs of bizarre biologically enhanced mammals, bionic and raging rodents, fearsome foxes and snide squirrellers, who knew no true leader, and who have sworn to the utmost secrecy about their punitive habits before they are called upon as a squadron, eventually, after many years of training, and indoctrination, to set foot astride here. Ironically, for reasons of plenteously gainful remuneration paid for by a corrupt government.

We need to point out that partly because there had never been trade with the west, and partially because there are no wares to take to market, in the area the rare influx of money was prized very highly, above any real culprit, moral complications.

Claiborne felt rightly that her fate bore no resemblance to an ordinary book, but she unraveled in her journals when she saw the plot twists which meant she had not learnt enough from her glaringly obvious mistakes made with the Raffle tickets and the CULT and had not developed herself fully as a character. She felt pressurized by the heavy burden of the secret Almanack’s scrolls and the Scytale almost all the time. Amongst the many secrets she currently kept this one stood out as the most important. The whole problem was that the longer the Almanack’s esoteric knowledge was a secret, the more it burdened her, and the heavier her sorrow grew.

Some left that sad, untrodden place said to be devoid of proper police, eventually. Or some staked a claim to have borne witness to those who had left penniless to find their independent paths, for freedom of speech and act and thought, to some new dead-zone, eventually.

Some others arrived, lived, ate, breathed and then died in confusion and shame there, through an amalgam of their past, fun-filled mistakes and some of their present undertakings. Captives, hardened prisoners, thieves, killers like Volley and Claiborne, are bewildered by their own shared misfortune.

We knew that the rest of the inmates talked to each other at therapy meetings or in the refectory, of their losses, of their wins, and their failings, their mistakes, with some sort of theatrical pantomime of insight. Their heinous crimes in the west did not usually warrant an escape before a full ten years had passed and they were forced to explain, promised to abide by certain codes of conduct and behavior while in the bleak, stone monastery poised precariously atop a cliff there. With no fresh running water anywhere on the map and no address, it’s hardly a surprise no letters arrived there for months.

The Almanack’s triumph started off as a small secret and, over the years, and as people got closer and ever closer to finding it out, the secret grew to become an unbearable pressure, and Claiborne wanted more and more to tell someone so she might shed the onerous burden of guilt from her conscience.

It used to be only once a month that she’d flip out thinking about it, but she’d feel more and more guilty, she would think about it more and more until she could not go for more than a few minutes even without contemplating this dark and terrible secret. These things that she hadn’t told anyone were making it harder and harder to lead a worthwhile life, and try as we might the seventy of us in the CULT have felt wracked with guilt in every waking hour about the loss of Claiborne.

Until now. They did not disclose this to anyone but the pair were under siege, besieged by their secret fear that if they used the Almanack one of the CULT members would kill someone as it predicted. And so I doubted it would help matters in the slightest if I tried to tell anyone else, even the leader.

“Perhaps it would help if we told everyone but how could we possibly know whether it would pan out as we hope?” The leader said.

“Perhaps we ought to keep our secrets just that: secret, until we all die, or get caught.” I replied.

“If I tell somebody what will that mean? That they know something personal that I don’t want them to know?” Daniel, our second in command asked.

They delved ever deeper into their communal conscience trying to find the answers; answers that helped them to decide whether to use Denny’s mysterious scrolls (two pages torn out of the Almanack), and Claiborne’s mother’s Scytale to land the 500 million pound jackpot anyway, even if the Almanack was so cursed and infernal that one of them would do as the book predicted and murder several people, and thereby be transported away from their natural habitat to the monastery...

“So nobody will treat me seriously? So no, this is something which I have to go figure out for myself.” Daniel said to the rest of us.

“They won’t understand that before I read that Almanack I was a completely different person and now here I am harassed by my own negative undercurrents with no escape from my own hateful desires in sight.” I said. None of the CULT, therefore, had any chance at all of turning to anyone else, and in their canyon of vehement emotion and self-loathing they wistfully recalled the time before the secret of the Almanack was brought down to bear. “Oh, if only they had just found out!” The members agreed, as they virtually decided to spill the beans to the legal officials about the surefire way to cheat, to win 500 million and beat the odds.

Raffle winners who society had rejected, or who culture refused to accept, were forced straight there, to the raging, malformed rodents called guards there in Shangri-la. In extinction, the honest monks would never repopulate the empty vessel of a residence; where once they could be witnessed scattered about at prayer, working and fasting in dark coloured robes, their holy whispers heard, now there were guardian monsters infesting the ancient residence, their snarling noises unthinkable to any but the most well-trained and experienced assassins as they enforce law for the unlucky few transgressors who had been sent there in the olden days.

\* \* \*

At a time fairly near to this one, Claiborne casually sat herself down, eyes cast apparently on the floor, upon the mattress, unconcernedly beginning to take little sips of her usual tea in the late afternoon when she suddenly leapt into a frenzy, she told us, as she saw to her utter horror, the fearsome armed guards, entering marching, to check on their raging, barely human bounty who had been caged here in the awful unit for very nearly the last two and a half years.…and, “man,” she told us in the Almanack entry “it was definitely dragging on a bit.”

"There she is over there, in the corner..." one of the terrible, vile, guards said to another and pointed in a straight line at the very tip of Claiborne2’s nose. The first one she'd met when he came to inspect her innumerable times, the other one, with the fiercest of fixed stares, was a completely different stranger.

Claiborne worried the new one wanted to tear her apart or rape her, and her indolent, not so lamb-like impersonation, in a trice. Doubtless, he acted as if he was the most senior one yet of all the guards who had come to interview her, and to relay his findings to Headquarters, trapped in the shabby quarters in a corner by the wall on a low form of cushioning akin to a mattress, but not quite as good as her comfortable bed in the hideout back home.

Claiborne seemed taken aback and righteously perturbed that her nice and calm self-effacing behavior, into which she had injected so much energy, the bestial security officers had not found acceptable in the unit during the last few months of her intolerable confinement. She told us she had no idea of her terrible fall from favor.

"Ow! This is much too hot!" Claiborne exclaimed in surprise, we sensed the roof of her delicate mouth burn and her tongue sizzled and fried just beforehand, now that her frenzy had calmed down a lot.

"What's the matter, what's wrong, Claiborne, you're not doing it properly." Said the pest-like camouflaged, uniformed guard to his prisoner.

Looming above her outline, like a juggernaut, he grinned warmly, while the other one didn’t, his horrible tenebrous shadow flicked and flickered menacingly upon the blank, concrete walls that late afternoon. Claiborne painted everything for us with her imagination, and over time turned the view into a post-modern impressionist narrative landscape, for sale, at any price, to anyone who has an ounce of sense. Even me.

"Is the prisoner fit and well?" The second guard asked, now concerned about her plight he planned to go to the commandant's offices afterwards to report on her state of health because they decided they wanted to move her to a different cage in the terrible unit: “Is she ready to leave?” She felt she just about heard them saying.

"She's a bit unhappy, I can see a bruise, but nothing that a good night's rest and a square meal wouldn't fix." He replied and, as she jotted down later that night in the Almanack, observed him forcing onto his heavily-lined features a weak and ironic smile that, as intended, did not go unnoticed by his companion who seemed to have the same idea.

"Splutter, splutter, ugh, cough." Claiborne spat out that scalding, corrosive liquid, onto the thinly covered cushion akin to a mattress below, and tried to waft, with the journal in her clasped right hand as a fan, some bits of cool air into her delicate, burnt mouth to no avail. When this failed to help the situation, in fact made it matter much more, she whipped out her consummate acting abilities, and slippery though I knew it to be, donned a clearly false and sheepish, innocent and pathos-ridden expression much to her vile captor’s dismay. Claiborne still remained on form however.

“He-heh”. She mumbled silently.

"How is she psychologically, at least?" The other guard wanted to know, but I know his vicious type of face and I don't like the sound of it. I thought to myself at this point, what the hell was that supposed to mean?

Claiborne misunderstood how the losing streak began, or when, or even where. What she knew, though, was that they stuck her in penal servitude inside here, miles from anywhere she knew, her every sallow breath, and every lonely beat of her heart being closely inspected, also monitored by some animalistic menacing sentries, in a unit in some kind of a wicked far-flung monastery surrounded by four high porticoed concrete walls, a remnant of a smouldering, crumbling hearth and no allies, and she was not even due for any early release, or anything like that. I didn’t know when the losing streak began either, but as friends of Claiborne and her mother Lauren, I indeed understood the cause; it was when she was given the confounded Almanack.

“If only they would let me talk to them, just for a while…hey you, are you listening? Can you post a letter for me?” The rats hated Claiborne because it was reported she stole from their client’s people, “No? Oh well then leave me alone! Get out!” she says. The sealed parcel to us containing the Almanack with her diary entries remained in the cell in Claiborne’s possession. Here she tapered off, the new-born lamb façade suddenly turned a very different hue.

Although she didn't know whose fault this was, we don't know if they cared, or even if the CULT cared anymore; whether she died here miserably in some Eastern land, or somehow managed to stay alive in this hell-hole of a unit for another three long, terrible years until the time came that the rodents promised her they would release her back to her own homelands wasn’t their concern. It wasn’t as if anyone rigged the logic of the universe to their own personal conceits or designs, but it seemed that was the real crime for most of the filthy guards and their victimized clients.

The most she could possibly have hoped for, wished for was out of reach. That she may try to figure out and assess how it all began, to pinpoint the mysterious origins of this her hugely tragic fate, this terrible, and even strangely comic travesty, the fatal blow from which not one of us shall certainly ever rescue her, or bring her back.

“When I know who did this to me, who put me here, as you would the opposite of a jack-in-the-box then I shall know, I shall ensure, they will no longer rejoice in their lives, but will experience remorse and guilt for their ways, their unfair infractions.” She wrote in the Almanack she was about to send to her mentor at the CULT.

Claiborne exerted all the strength she had left to lift herself up out of never-ending apathy in harsh tirades, urgent complaints, and verbal forays directed against the remaining presence of the unwieldy guards who, having left, have curbed her motions, straitened them as a narrowed gate into private spheres of pure pleasure.

"...What I needed, ta." The girl feverishly lit up the last of the horrible, cheap imported American tobacco, supplied by one of the overly huge security rats on his way out out of a filament of kindness that Claiborne did not yet fully understand.

She has very little except for a taste for tobacco products from the south – remnants of her former life and passions; a memorial, a glance back over her shoulder to her rebellious youth.

"Yeah that's alright. You're welcome I suppose. Remember though, only if you’re lucky, the next batch comes in on Tuesday." The guard warned.

Her guard said goodbye, taking the parcel, and a straightforward furrow, in union, crossed both of their brows, and she rediscovered a long lost sympathy with other living things even if artificially modified, in those two simple furrows.

\* \* \*

The cult members all reminisced wistfully on the, at the outset, angelic, beautiful dreams that later turned into some seedy drug-addled and vice-ridden nightmares which if it hadn't been for her “dear friend Volley”, she suspected, would not have led to Claiborne’s eventual downfall for murdering her estranged father Bertram, and caused Claiborne’s imprisonment for greedily stealing, thieving a portion of what we thought was just some loser lotto winner's money, after she had accepted a free gift from a strange woman in a shop?

Somebody was at fault, we indeed laid the blame on somebody for Claiborne’s fall from favor. The truth remained that the other yardies like Jock and I ousted her categorically and emphatically, fellow criminals and bug a lugs jeered at her, and she could never, ever return to the old haunts where they looked at her like a princess, envied yes, leered at no, lucky and happy maybe so.

Claiborne really believed injustice could not happen to her, but even to expect it doesn’t allay it or prevent it when luck and probability takes control. That’s when somebody needs to think about joining an CULT.

The way Claiborne perceived it, even the bigwigs like Rudy back at home felt sorry for her and her plight, as she tried to stay asleep on her bedding today. And there was no reprieve, the beat carried on, and there was no chance to bring back her lost honor after these sternly vicious specimens here in the monastery had beaten and maltreated her. Later on, when her speech and even her means of expression was broken to smithereens, when the marauding hand of fate took justice away from its rightful place, the assurance was that she would see the truth and although the CULT would probably feel sorry for her, they wouldn't lend a helping hand. She won't let the CULT or Jock or me help, and anyway, even if they do find her we won’t save her because hers was a poisonous Almanack.

**CHAPTER 26**

This sounds like we should have been put up in a pulpit, but we want to put the record straight now Naomi is in jail for intent to murder, Bertram for a crime he did not commit and Bertram in jail for money laundering; but it is a separate thornier issue that Bertram does his time for drug abuse. Seeing them walking along the street, aged about sixty on a rainy day in autumn younger strangers could tell that they as a clique were vulnerable.

When Bertram went to draw the money out from the bank the cashiers looking at his hunched figure would certainly know his place or rather his social position and cast any amount of aspersions at him.

When Naomi traipsed along into the sophisticated bars when she was sixty odd she always made her friends wait too long for her to meet them without tacit or understood reason and then again after visiting the bathroom meaning she was cool – an old person with a pension nearly enough to match her legal fees. Once at The Sanctuary Morris Dean just nipped out of meditation class for a cigarette at lunchtime which happened to last a considerable two hours for these in their dotage. He was lingering by a stile on a wooden fence near a rundown shack half a mile from the lodgings when he was supposed to be composing some new blissful transcendental music. Somebody else, Bertram, had arrived before him and they collided with each other as he rounded the darkened corner of the degenerate building. They spoke together for a couple of minutes until something that made him shudder violently did not escape his notice.

“What’s eating you? Split up with Agatha have you?” Tact came easily to Bertram if he ever attempted it, but on this occasion accidental weakness held sway and he bordered on rude. He had a number of failings, shortcomings like my memory in recounting these events from hearsay, gossip, the neighbors and guesswork too. This was the primary reason trouble’s polar extreme seemed to draw him towards it like a very powerful electromagnet.

“The less you know the better. No I haven’t split up with her. I need to talk to my friends about that magazine. I told you, no shut up, not a porn mag, The Revue.” The budding author and cartoonist Bertram confided thus, earnestly and honestly to his enemy.

“Oh! The one Naomi, Agatha and Virginia went and got involved with? Yeah, they told me. I was tanked up.” Bertram had no interest in The Revue and had not got involved as he had been far more interested in following the football on the television all that summer.

“Yup, that’s right. It’s heavy – we’ve been found out. Somebody told somebody, and it’s all in the open and we’ve all been summoned this evening. Shit really.” They were to fall under the searchlights of the military authorities because of the risks they had all taken without knowing.

“Yup, I was eventually persuaded to see the old codger” Bertram continued. “Last night as I returned an hour and a half late after dark he was waiting for me there. It was eleven thirty. It was not a pleasurable conversation and I couldn’t get away. He kept pressing me with inquisitive comments. As if I wouldn’t notice! Some people are completely unnerving.” He said.

Apparently he had been caught through someone in the gang spilling their guts about the satirical magazine they had collaborated on and disseminated. Of course, Bertram did not have any idea who had done it but he was soon going to find everything out.

Who knows why this unnamed member of the editorial team effectively broke their obligation and their promise. Bertram thought it must have been too early a stage for him to accept the certain prospects and evident futures mapped out for the writers by those promises connected to the Revue. It was definitely someone living at The Sanctuary. But it was as though once rewarded for intellectual valor they had cheated pitiably to keep it and to increase it, to elongate it and they had it by illegal pathways.

The future of his cool, suave reputation which he had sacrificed meant more to the mystery person than Bertram knew then, it was dearer to him than anything, it was a priceless bejeweled object not to be stolen.

After all, Bertram was healthy he was of higher than average intelligence although there were quite a few with more ability and more gifted in respect of their natural ability. Above all he “said things” and he could “adapt” to his environment. In other words, if dropped in a time of war by parachute onto any end of the earth he could survive even if the pack opened with too much difficulty. He molded himself for others and never used people, nor was he a deceiver, nor shapeless. Yet Bertram would be surprised as he did not already know him well, and did not know how easy it was to ignore his appearance, and did not know how proficient he was at making those he didn’t like or the newcomer or the enemy feel uneasy and undermined.

After Bertram had left the ramshackle building for a short space of time swearing internally Bertram let himself drift, lost in contemplation. Not merely staring out into a distant horizon but in the meantime ruminating and blinking his eyes and also chewing on his upper lip and then sniffing intermittently.

He wondered at great length what he should do next. He could not make up his mind whether to just sit down alone there and think, or to walk with his cane into the town and perhaps find some younger woman such as Agatha to vaguely ogle or harass.

Immersed thoroughly in his own thoughts he drew a hipflask filled with ouzo from his pocket and unable to withstand the temptation commenced to gulp almost thirstily at it.

“Bertram, Naomi and Agatha. They all got on with doctor what’s-his-face… do they not?” He reflected.

Then he speed-dialed Agatha on his friend’s mobile to see what the developments in the commotion were about, drawing his best asset out of his un-used other jacket’s inner pocket. By now drunk Bertram bawled at her down his latest fashionable gizmo which made him inordinately proud and made her more than truthful.

“Agatha, you bitch,” he continued “don’t do it. It will be your funeral. Winter’s a sly old fox. Watch out!” he cried. Having warned her he tried to make her reconsider her planned coup de grace.

“We’re going to talk about what will happen to us” said Agatha. “But I don’t intend that he shall know that. He’ll think it was someone else." She said.

"We’re intending to carry out the most brazen attack against the establishment. What we need is a team effort to shift the blame from us to those idiots over in B Block. They won’t be able to pin it on us if we keep underneath their radar and we can have the pleasure of seeing them get messed up. You’ll like that Bertram won’t you and so will Virginia. It’d be a cinch to pull the wool over the eyes of the governors too I shouldn’t wonder. It’ll be slick I tell you.” She said.

Agatha argued her case in a long gone and affable American-esque way. He thought it was fun but irritating to hear her speak when like this because she took him away from the drab familiarity of everyday speech with its pointless red herrings and dead end avenues even when she had slipped up.

“I’m concerned about this. Everyone’s watching you at the moment. You should be more careful.” He said. The library of Block B housed Bertram and he phoned Agatha and Naomi on Bertram’s mobile to find out where each of them was.

Next, Bertram thinking aloud yet again realized he might have let it show on his face that Morris had grossly annoyed him when he had taken the phone and for effectively cooking up for himself this harebrained scheme of owning up for someone else. He was feeling the pain from walking back to the safety of the grounds from Block C but swiveled around on his heels and yelled like he had never yelled before: “Let’s get off sometime, honey!!” His sense of humor was usually but not always used to hide serious sentiments such as anger, envy and what have you. He knew Agatha who was still within earshot wouldn’t take it literally because that was not the intention. He meandered as if he had a guilty thought-bubble atop his head through the pathways slowly homeward.

Already it was after four o’clock in the afternoon. It was getting late by their standards. In their director’s rooms father and daughter, Naomi and Morris were ensconced by the deep plush chintz armchairs.

They were chatting this way and that about the magazine The Revue and what would or alternatively what should happen to the scandalous diatribe’s authors. Mr. Winter was prone to sounding quite pejorative about the matter, harsh though it seemed. He argued they should be treated magnanimously and given a summary request to leave the organization for setting a bad example and disrupting the order, and the imagined inherent peace therein.

A big obstacle arose when Mr. Winter, in order to persuade Naomi, Morris and Agatha to own up and hand the rebels over to the authority of The Sanctuary suggested that they first turn themselves into double agents. A blend of skullduggery reared itself up and suddenly hopelessly the trio found themselves enmeshed in a game of cat and mouse. Mainly hypothetical and sometimes theoretical reasoning appeared to take rein. As Morris and the other two skirted close to the edge of anger and hurt when they desperately tried to avoid wrack and ruin for publishing what they felt was true on an emotional level about the realm of The Sanctuary/Sanctuary, far from what they really knew was true. They could really almost palpably touch with their fingertips some highly dangerous comeuppance.

“What sort of people would think it was funny? I mean, to write such a scurrilous piece of literature and insult so many decent folk?” Mr. Daniel/Winter asked.

At the same time as they received an intuitive glimpse of the peril they were in they noticed all at once someone open the door of the study. None other than the most senior nurse the director traipsed in; they could not imagine a worse fate.

“He’ll surely be able to put two and two together.” mused Naomi. Then, swinging open the door, the great, the feared, the hallowed director/the leader entered the room into the middle of this rabble. Immediately and with a very pronounced scowl blackening his narrow face he proceeded to the hearth of the study and stationed stood there with his arms folded across his big chest. Bolt upright and stock still there on the hearth, the trio stared at him no less formidable than a Kubla-Khan or an Ozymandias.

Rather than creating admiration he always petrified everyone present in the room. As well as being amazed at his stature or his form he incited and demanded and received respectful treatment from the timidity and humility of the onlookers. So, waiting to know the real reason for this confraternity he struck suddenly and mercilessly intentionally in as harsh a vein as anybody could have envisioned.

“What exactly is this, Winter? I’d like to have a few words with you. Outside.” He said.

“Of course. This is just a, err, a discussion about the cleaning rota.” He said.

“Well, hurry up.” Sitting lodged in the corner of the spacious and very conservatively furnished room Winters huffed and pushed himself up onto his hush puppies. All that Naomi Dean wanted was to roll around on the floor laughing when she confronted with the hysterical and obsequious ways he raised the waistband of his trousers as he erected himself and wiggled his midriff.

He exposed a fair amount of flabby grey flesh when his grey slacks had fallen below their right position. Clear rage and irritation at this eventuality would arise in an even more apparent way to the others around but for the fact everyone had tried to keep poker straight faces and deny their disgusted sense of shame. Winters as he was called by the Abbey cried himself to sleep at night about socialization between men and women of such an advanced age. Naomi, Morris, Virginie and the rest could hear him criticizing this misconduct which would lead to disruption, to put it in no uncertain terms.

“Are you being lax, Winters? I think you are and I won’t stand for it.” He said.

“I will have you know I am punishing the four reprobates for drinking alcohol at this very minute on the premises.” He said.

“I see, Winters. Well, I’ll remember this, and make sure you give the trio of nasty little rats in their den their due. In my establishment there can and must be no moral weakness and none of this persistent and quite perverse favouritism.” Another of his severely strict monologues concerning humanity's inherent and natural waywardness intercepted the mini-lecture after this.

“Goodbye,” said Winters whispering under his breath “I hope I never see your great lumbering hulk around this study again.” Then with a highly visible and un-mistakeable look of relief he spun around and returned speedily to the room with two of the other residents he was overtly fond of; one of them being Bertram. Also hanging around waiting for him the two others informed Bertram that they needed his help as Lauren, now in a wheelchair, but nonetheless a good friend of theirs, had been violently sick in one of the corridors. She was writhing and spewing upstairs and was rejecting any offers of assistance so they were asking what was supposed to be done.

“We’ll have to leave it there, friends. But…I would like to speak with you all later on this matter as it has set me thinking and I believe I know what we could do. Be here at eleven in the morning tomorrow, if you please.” The director said.

“Thank you, leader.” they chorused. Winters was really sweating too. Any energy he had preserved after the exertions during the course of the day were utterly spent. And he was drained of any energy he would otherwise have had. You could read exhaustion in his eyes. The eyes on his face had deep grooves etched somehow beneath them and they were glazed over to boot. Winters’ ethical beliefs were void, negated, caput. They were tragically flawed and destructive of his livelihood. This is the reason why about his purposes and motivation for interviewing Naomi and the others, he had lied to Rudy . His schemes never played with spontaneity. He certainly needed to feel worshipped and admired more than most and was both rather curious and even confounded as to why he could not hold an ad hoc impromptu private tete a tete. To get this praise and friendship from the pensioners he turned his livelihood into a cynical tactical manoeuvre, if it was true that they were wrongdoers at least he had not cared one jot.

However even in those good moments Naomi, Agatha and Jock were jaded by what had occurred on the previous two evenings and Daniel/Winters was incapacitated to assist with tampering with what had already happened.

\* \* \*

Lauren was just nipping out for a cigarette after dinner: dinner lasted two hours then they had about an hour before they had to be back tucked up safely in their spartan rooms. Lauren had just lit up her slim-line Silk Cut cigarette after recovering from her episode of puking when Jock, always a good friend to her, turned up and said sadly that he wanted to talk to his duty officer about The Revue. She said she thought it far safer if only a limited few people knew anything about it. It transpired that the director had already eliminated Jock or disregarded what he had hitherto suspected. Volley the main proponent behind it inhaled the air with great billowing inhalations and leant back with both arms on the hard railing beside Lauren’s wheelchair. He looked a bit like a pirate who has swash-buckled himself to exhaustion at the end of a long career fighting ableseamen. The Revue was generating insurmountable obstacles and the writers were afraid the slanderous if not libellous jokes were risky, the rebellious non-traditional attempts at insurrection just asked for trouble. He wiped his forehead with a shirt sleeve saying he needed a couple of puffs then taking six long drags admitted he had finally given up all hopes of securing a contract for The Revue. He had totally wasted his valued time and the hundred quid it cost at the printers.

He'd finished mopping his brow. Turning to face the moon his face caught a shimmer as he resembled some sad old man of the sea he faced his accomplice forlornly and went off, but before doing so he had a prediction to explore: that there were turbulent times ahead and trembling almost shaking with indignation he confessed the Revue and the uprising was about to climax in ultimate failure if the squares or the staff got the lawyers and the magistrates roped in to it.

Volley no longer still felt that going and talking about it even if he did directly implicate himself was justifiable as a very cunning manœuvre, if he really wanted to use some sense and to avoid libel proceedings for spreading documents of sedition. Eventually he persuaded himself to go and see Winters/Daniel with the others; this turned out to be quite a major mistake of judgement because upon his return an hour and a half after their bedtime he was questioned by the nurses in charge of Block C the very next morning.

**CHAPTER 27**

The conversation of that first meeting the next morning was hardly long-winded and not of a type Bertram was accustomed to having. Bertram and Jock were both still on very bad terms with their director so they did think it strange in truth that they should have to laugh, joke and chat with him. They found it unnerving and annoying and as a result said hardly anything feeling uncomfortable throughout this odd but brief masquerade. They talked about what should happen to the clique which had produced the magazine and if they heard on the rumor mill who had made it. Whether then Woburn/Rudy the director would suggest that they tell them somehow to own up and accept responsibility for their wicked deeds.

Indeed contrary to expectations he said for the sake of argument the magistrates and the staff were blowing the whole matter up out of all proportions and he was sure the punishment was going to be light when they saw the truth. He smiled at them complicitly and they innocently put all their faith in him.

This conversation went on with hypothetical questions about them: if they were caught, if they apologized, for example, if the other staff could not be influenced to eventually see the light.

After a long time discussing what led the anonymous persons to write the magazine, who had sold it, and what sort of result was expected by doing so not considering the depraved nature of the material the director tried to sum the case up:

Including other factors he was really disappointed that The Revue set a very bad example to the other old people’s homes in the country although this he thought did not irritate him beyond all limits and that it wouldn’t have been half as funny if it hadn’t been for the ruder parts but it was going to be a big problem to deal with nonetheless.

He also went on to ask of the clique what they thought the authors behind it expected to get – their aims in the first place and their reaction to the response of the dismayed audience. Bertram felt somewhat excluded now as these two friends of his had obviously been groomed and spoilt from an earlier age and therefore were able to speak to their members of staff on an equal footing. The Deans always regarded Rudy as on a different and far lower level beneath them. For Naomi and Morris the staff were there to be buddies with and their only purpose was not too seriously to irk their clients and to strictly enforce the rules, the situation seemed to say.

He thought that in a way Bertram, busy having a faux serious, seemingly choreographed argument wasn’t subordinating himself to Rudy enough. What made the situation worse, it seemed with hindsight or foresight, depending which way you look at it was the fact that before that evening he had even spoken to Rudy privately about his qualms. While Naomi might have been ashamed that he had not heard her name and even that he had not the faintest clue who she was. But he had nothing of importance to say to her and when his offhand attitudes had started to drag her downwards she had been completely unsettled by his tone mixing informality with comparatively stern.

Another aspect which bothered Naomi was how they were supposed to look and act innocent when Bertram, Lauren and Agatha were well known for their determined pursuit of a second childhood or a second innings. Fame had nothing to attract Naomi and she was known not to be a hothead nor naughty enough, and the merest germ of a suggestion she pushed for The Revue as an original idea was not entertained by anyone in their right mind. Only a churl could think that her uncle over there making jewelery in London had ever done more than back her up with The Revue's artwork. It was suspicious that she was in any way connected to the saga.

The director accused Lauren not Naomi. She was the only person childish enough and clever enough to have written some of the lines in The Revue with her acidic wit. You may assume however that though the articles in the magazine were set to be highfalutin they did not aspire to achieve high poetic accolades. Their objectives were not money nor were they supposed in the least pretentious either. When all the excerpts were read they awed you and you would be stunned by their infantile mockery plus their intellectual prowess, while their tone was very likely recognized as juvenile delinquent. Agatha had not spoken throughout the interview until Rudy having decided to ask what she in particular thought of some matter, inquired if Agatha had any information.

“Do you know the people well?” Mr. Woburn asked.

“Yes, well, fairly well. We tried to block them from publishing it.” Agatha said as a way of sidestepping the question.

“We found out about it a couple of days before it came out. They wanted to tell us, it was just an accident. We guessed it was them – some people started rumors. It could have been someone other than them if you look at the articles. It’s not their sense of humor.” She hardly seemed to relish sticking her neck out in this way.

It was quite tempting I suppose to behave with such unfettered arrogance once they knew that The Revue had received a harsh reception. They were always going to be skating on thin ice. The probing questions the leader asked and the sternest looks Daniel communicated showed that the other two had been forced unfairly into a very bizarre situation. The pair struggled inwardly to blend fiction with fact to convince them. At one point they were all asked straight out if they had done it.

“Now, tell me the truth. Did you do it, Naomi?” It seemed that all along the leader Rudy knew who was to blame but he had to actually ask this point blank.

“No, she didn’t. And if she did, what would happen to her anyway?” Bertram inquired with an ironic expression on his features.

“If she was a nurse who had got tanked up would she be ‘demoted’?” He added mentally but out loud, taking a swipe at the innate hierarchical boundaries of everything important there.

“I don’t know.” Rudy said. Rudy would probably have at least admitted it was true. Bertram suspected he was pandering.

“I haven’t spoken to any of the other staff about it yet. But it is quite serious, and I don’t think they will be able to just overlook it. Also I haven’t got a copy of it so it would be imprudent of me to say anything at this juncture.”

Of course, this provided the cue for feckless and drunk Morris to warily offer to show his loathed area nurse his own ragged, bedraggled copy of the magazine. Rudy always superior turned down this offer saying he had heard that it was very rude and he was not sure he wanted anyone at all to read it especially as it contained an article about his reported homosexuality with a theoretical client. Then by way of an alternative he tried though not successfully to confiscate their dog eared copies of The Revue. After Morris said he had lost his, Rudy resignedly commented that he was happy to wait until even the following day to get a hold of it.

“I suppose, I am relatively lucky not to have read it considering what you have told me about it.” This attitude was news no one welcomed and as soon as Morris burst the bubble with a revolting impression of a burp, Virginia said she thought there was at least a slight chance that those in the staff with acumen would not be so immune to the quick puns that the surefooted jokes were wasted.

She had started out poorly-considered by the staff who did not like the way Virginie rapidly became more and more friendly, and therefore more and more dangerously hostile, and the burping made them suspicious of Morris’s answers. Because he had assured them that he‘d keep the meeting in strict confidence the authors just assumed the director could be trusted and was a safe bet to talk to. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case for the next morning Virginie informed Morris's doctor Mr. Collins of his essential role. So that was his last evening of freedom. He was then to be followed by Mr. Collins after breakfast in the morning saying:

“Did you have any part in what is called The Revue?”

“No, I didn’t, no way.” Morris arrogantly but calmly replied while mid step.

“No. I heard you did. Get to the director’s office immediately.” Morris feared to ask him how he knew and started passing the buck to sundry people left, right and even centre - in his mind no one was innocent, no one a friend.

This time Morris thought wrongly. Was it okay to talk to the leader because he saw him as in a way trustworthy? Perhaps he should have resisted questioning Rudy ’s motives for the way he brought about their demise? They were every single one of them going to be caught anyway, but still they thought and said they thought after all these years they could be forgiven for the crime of letting fate spin out its natural course. All the peril, all the excitement resided in being found out and unforgiven.

After all they had created The Revue in secret, printed it in secret, sold it on the quiet. They were proud of it and to be caught made them yet happier. Perhaps they decided it was more banal or something not to get found out. They had a lot of grave matters on their mind including inheritance pressures, health issues, family requests for help and therefore they were not prepared to give up everything just for one issue of a satirical magazine. None of them knew how unforgiveable it was to do this thing and therefore a triumphant pursuit.

The spoof articles did not seem all that heavily graven but afterwards there was clearly a feeling delineated amongst the troop of some imminent danger which was just as much blurred and unspecific as it was powerful and serious to attempt to contain.

When he returned, in a total daze of fear, and hobbled shuffling up to his block of rooms in his comfortable furry slippers wet from being out in the rain most people were already fast asleep. Most people in the lower rooms, and it appeared the nurses had gone to bed, and the lights were certainly off behind the curtains. When he knocked on a friend’s door nobody was in or willing to answer so he rashly decided to proceed and see if he could somehow use his guile to locate him. After trying moronically several other fast asleep darkened bedrooms he hit upon one whose owner was still semi awake, subliminally dreaming, and he told him when he opened the door wrapped up in his dressing gown about some sort of nocturnal gathering on the upper floor in somebody’s attic rooms. He felt nervous. Firstly, because tiredness had overwhelmed him, and secondly because he held the honest belief he needed to find out if their duty nurse or whichever one was on duty that evening, had noticed his blatant absenteeism. At this stage he felt the need to find out without explaining why he had been in the other house for so long was paramount as anyone who knew this could incriminate him indubitably he prefigured. It was a relief, for when he eventually found a few people in another room chatting, in a fugg of odors and stale smoke, and poring over the finer points and closer details of Lauren's pursuits with an open book called The Revue in front of them.

“Where have you been?” the friend asked Bertram. The abruptness and sullen expression with which he asked this indicated that his prolonged night of absence might well have been detected by a doctor, not just his late night friend. It came out sounding almost like a rasp then. The friend would not help but made Bertram a bit afraid. His late return which normally would be the result of some night-time drinking or smoking shenanigans didn’t have the normal welcome. It aroused partly some jealousy but also partly the sense in Bertram's opinion that although he was acting irresponsibly his friend was in the thrall of, as a rogue agent, the director. He too was in his dotage and I think he believed and he would have confessed to it that Bertram had not deserved to have been put by the other denizens into such a position of popularity and of social standing which he just "flouted brazenly".

“Over in Hall B. Talking to Daniel.” Bertram informed him of too much but given the circumstances there seemed not to be many options of placating the curiosity of his lost friend.

“Why? What were you talking about?" Sidestepping the issue he said that Naomi and Bertram wanted him to go along with them to have no more than a, just a “a general natter.”

Then he tried to direct the attention away from that onto the open hard cover book conspicuously resting on the table and taking up most of the space: “What’s this?” He begged to question the group in the room.

“Oh, that’s just Virginia’s dictionary of slang quotations.” he was answered. “We were looking at it because Virginia said there might be some stuff in it I could use in a politics article I’m writing for the local reporter.” He said caustically and wryly.

“I see, have any of you seen Naomi about?” He could not properly hear the reply to this last question merely a jumble of maybes and I’m not sure. It transpired that one of them saw her earlier on that evening but nobody was sure what she had been up to in the elapsed time since 7 o’clock. It flashed across Bertram’s mind like an optimistic vision that ordinarily he would have gladly sat down to join in the disreputable colloquy and catch up on the day’s news but, as much as he might have liked to do this he still sensed the exhilaration from performing the day’s Revue-related activities and none of those in this room smoked menthol fags and that was probably held uppermost in his mind while he wrestled with the sense he must not stay there a moment longer. The first occasion he realized these other followers knew about The Revue happened abruptly and unheralded a couple of seconds later.

“Did you do the Revue?” Virginia demanded out of the blue yonder in a tone so harsh and severe it astounded none of the room's denizens save Bertram.

“I heard you did…”

There was no viable riposte and no cordial response that Morris could summon up to give to this particular question from his ex of all people. An adequate response was made on the spur of the moment all the more difficult if you understand that he had always liked, in fact relied on, the notion that Virginia was more than loyal, and Morris did not want to have to have that altered by telling her what was an outright lie. She seemed to know things from some uncertain, ill-defined source and all the high jinks and the past parties and the drinking sessions Morris had gone to with her as her partner and the future ones, she would have annulled by extraordinary dispensation for the sake of her loathing of the Revue.

Upon asking for an explanation that he wisely withheld, reformed and pious Virginia told him that she’d heard enough about his scandalous attempt at garnering a cheap laugh from scumbags and she’d be in a ready position to have him dobbed in even though it was only three days since the magazine was published.

This came as quite a disastrous revelation for Morris, and as he could not be sure who had informed her of his shameful indiscretion he raged and broiled against everything in the same manner as one who has been led on in bad faith by a trusted partner, or as a judge who has been misled by a vocal jury member. Now his pal had turned on him he had to get out of there as quickly as possible without getting any more implicated and without getting angry.

He left, turning round and over his shoulder, saying that if he got a chance he would try and talk to them later to apologize and explain and that he was definitely going to find out who had been spreading these black rumors that tarnished his reputation. This was however the second unexpected vigorous assault on the clique’s simulation of innocence of purity, of guiltlessness.

The first foray to breach their clear consciences had occurred the next day during an informal group discussion. The topic of The Revue was raised to a conversational subject, and people were trying their best to tell the director about it. To remind you, completely out of the blue one of their fellow pensioners paused the discussion to point a direct accusation at two of them. The intensely worded accusation of a person who had been considered a mate seemed to Morris and Morris very tasteless.

He had been invited out to pubs together, had joined him to skive off in meditation classes together, and they had even invited him to go around to his house together twice. Admittedly Morris appreciated full well they had sort of broken off contact since then, as he expected so often happened in old age, and yet there was usually some ties or bonds of comradeship left over in residue from which you can never dislodge your romantic nostalgia. There was a limit to the reasons and extent that a person can change for, and the overwhelming influence of his recently acquired considered-sexy girlfriend Lauren the rest of them wished they could hold to account.

I suppose that maybe by the passing on of his wife, he had made connected in his head her and the Sanctuary and this might have fermented his feelings of inferiority, and blossomed into the sense that he shouldn’t do the right and accepted thing anymore. Possibly he combined this with the blind, passionate hope that the pensioner foresaw some pittance of a small reward to be gained from everyone’s punishment, their failure, and their capture by whoever the staff wanted.

After this terribly treacherous, unlucky remark had been dropped plumb into the midst of a therapeutic session nobody of any generous disposition at all could be bothered or believed the old friend with the issues. Bertram snoozed away still high on some marijuana and after a deft poke from a truer sort of comrade lifted his head with a start from where it nestled on his folded arms, and getting a hint of the idea was incapable of remaining silent blurting out distracting ideas and complaining to waste time until the general conversation turned to other matters.

It happened through him putting on an act of some vociferous agitation while still listening to everyone’s sharp comments now about the magazine. The specific someone only said malevolently not that he did not have a clue who was involved but that he would try his best to rectify the issue in time for the next session.

Uncertain about evasion as the right strategy to deal with it Jock still didn’t mentally project that it would have been right to have just blurted out the truth in front of them when directly questioned and under all those pressures. Crucially with honesty as the right policy, every good lawbreaker discovered to pretend to use fake truth when faced with the potential confiscation of their lucrative illegal merchandise, whether in a warehouse or an office or a pamphlet in an institution- anywhere that viewpoints changed from approval to refusal and back again.

Had one of them spoken proudly of their heavily involved contribution to it when caught, they would then not have had to lie so appallingly later in the day and might even have reduced the punishment they loathed as such an unfair and lowly insult. That result which they were too worried to actually entertain the prospected chance of before it happened meant their choice of tactics was massively flawed.

It was classically amusing to notice the bewildered and lost expressions and the blankly inquisitive faces of the inmates. Although he was sure that their gangster tendencies were now printed in black and white upon paper it interested Bertram and Jock’s spirits to entertain alternative way of regarding these events from a perilous new angle. Never before nor after such a nervous fragile position as this one when the punishment had been inflicted, did Jock so nearly break the bounds of sense and flare into a rage of hatred – against anyone who blocked his way out.

There was mounting concern about the perilousness of their ludicrous position amongst the little gang of them; they were all encountering similar experiences and brushing against what was predestined for the lot of them, ultimately, but now was non-existent. Nevertheless, Bertram Nivat tried to remain cool and calm in order for his utter hatred to be the sole defence against an increasingly gloomy backdrop. The air he experimented with of being inherently mad since the train, but consciously casual and like some made up person who had an affected swagger proved fairly difficult for him to maintain and it fell on deaf ears, so he saved it for when the staff arrived.

The meditation course had taken place in Block B in the fetid, dank surroundings there. The arrangements made for seating you couldn’t help but notice because almost everyone else was sitting cross-legged on cushions on the floor, while Bertram had rushed to get one of the comfortable armchairs thus making himself a large amount more exposed and a little bit more comfortable.

Anyway the tense atmosphere had mounted. It seemed it had reached its peak, but he did not lose his self-control again and after only a few moments everyone stopped chattering and sat down again and for half an hour other topics seemed to be broached at last. Not much more misfortune lay in store. The general chit chat went back to the subject of the Revue when someone referred to it as being in the same humorous, but shallow, vein as when someone put a “for sale” sign on the top of one of the main Sanctuary buildings. In amidst the general hilarity and jocularity there were more remarks about The Revue: who was behind it, what it was for, and as if that wasn’t enough the leader began to show a keen interest and ask more probing questions of the group.

Enough has been said of the interview at the meditation session. Not much more happened except that on their way out an hour or so later a couple of insignificant losers from Block A stalked bellicosely up to Bertram and grabbing him aggressively by his shoulders demanded if he happened to have heard anyone talk about The Revue – had he anything whatsoever to say that he couldn't allow himself to divulge in front of the rest of the inquisitive group, and also they force-fed him so he would not be able to deny he had an inkling of some of the latest updates by way of the gossip and rumors about him that were circulating in the lobby downstairs at that very same instant. He never mentioned the stalwart concern that had been wracking their waking lives that something enormous, but muffled behind the enormous gentrified façade of The Sanctuary was bound to take place imminently if there were any incipient doubts about what might happen to the perpetrators. The widely assented to idea of a mere couple of pounds charge for The Revue had of course incensed the morose control of the directors and these two losers were manhandling the affair as if it was the polar opposite of good, benevolent, auspicious by focusing their attention on the price at first.

“Apparently Foxe was in tears about it!” they additionally told him. Miss Foxe was a highly unpopular but vaguely pretty spinster whom they had majorly and totally ineffectively lampooned in the magazine. She had been depicted as an over-sexed lesbian, and her attempted lawsuit had possibly been one of the worst reactions they had received out of all the rest of the affected actresses incorporated into the whole idiotic theatre. Neither of them had ever even spoken a word to her whereas those who had the opportunity to converse with her definitely agreed that she deserved the ribald laughter which was provoked and directed at her femininity.

Later however their mood became more serious, sullen in fact, when she started saying that The Revue was invocative of Satan and libelous, and that they could be sued by her for legal damages for such a gutter press misplaced satire. Although they never allowed this to happen it remained as emblematic of the way in which a scurrilous piece of filthy trash The Revue was received by most of the CULT who were usually fairly open minded. They would spurn then sue a bunch of useless OAP's but I don’t think any good lawyer in his right mind would have taken them and their so called “case” on because of the publicity partly, but in the main because it was plain and outmoded and last generation.

It just showed the attitude the leader and some of the others used to approach silly matters in general with as highly censorious and for some whimsical offbeat prejudice they'd have an attitude of snarling disgust.

There was a big difference in attitudes amongst the staff, and as to the ways they responded to The Revue there was also a great divide. Some of them were quite accepting of it by treating it as a futile prank while others claimed they saw it as a tranche of writing devoid of meaning and humorless and unsophisticated. Whilst it downright incensed some: embarrassing others called it and interpreted it as a treacherous plot to shame and to bring down the CULT’s edifice and to reduce properly balanced sentiment to the level of recycled waste.

The dark and critical questions in the quiet staff room would inevitably have continued until the next awful scandal if they had not got rid of the guilty perpetrators from their viewfinder so early on. I think that inwardly some of them were amused by their antics or impressed by some of what had happened and amusingly some thought it was the handiwork of the newest follower, but outwardly for effect of course the targeted victims' attitudes were identical: revulsion, dismay and disgust.

Tradition gave them no choice except to show there was nothing but revulsion, dismay and disgust and tradition was upheld by these agents of the establishment as they considered themselves. Because no avuncular dictates in the rule book provided the CULT with a defined scheme, strategy or end orientated approach to deal with the publishing of seditious magazines by OAP’s. Pirsig’s copy which was still there in the krankschaft completely intact led him to further detective work around the author’s fates at the CULT. Once he’d looked up the relevant page in the diary entry corresponding to the date upside down in fluorescent highlighter in the top left hand side of The Revue, his eyes glazed over with triumph as he discovered the names of the writers were there in the journal left for him to guard over.

Somehow and it remains a mystery to me today and probably shall remain in the many tomorrow's ahead as there isn’t anyone left alive who really knows the prompt of why the leader commanded both Agatha and Morris to go to the director after morning breakfast at seven o’clock a little less than forty-eight hours after The Revue had been read and dissected.

With nearly everyone in the other quarters weeping if ever their heroine Agatha was mentioned it was certainly quite a shock. She knew from the get go that she was under suspicion. Her senior had accused her only the day before; but she said to her that her flat denial then would serve to attenuate her just desserts, the punishment, and it sufficed as an honorable excuse.

They soon took the opportunity to search her untidy and small rooms for forgotten evidence of any other note-worthy crimes afoot before the dance with death when unexpectedly Rudy along with his good old deputy inspected the nonchalant and smug culprit Morris’s room.

It was nerve-wracking to walk into the office daunted by its preponderance of empty spaces right next to old world old fashioned but perfectly looked after leather armchairs. Asking to be permitted to visit the head director while standing in front of the secretary’s desk wracked his quite steady nerves. The building itself was ancient, almost Norman, but inside it was new, clean and fresh. It smelled new and fresh. It wasn’t even very easy to see the boss man (as they all called him); Morris had to subserviently explain that he did not have a date with destiny, nor a contract with the most supreme being but he decided to say that he went there to blow their albeit slim chances of getting away with this insufferable publication which had led to an escalation beyond any noted historical boundaries: The Revue.

The secretary was no doubt about to arrange a proper appointment for him when the two most highly feared people in the Movement came up in front of Morris who was shrinking in importance.

“Bertram told me to come and see you.” He plainly said.

“What for?” was the questioning reply.

“It’s about that magazine.” He answered.

“Then you had better come up. Follow me, slacker.” Rudy said.

Trying to sound as they wished and assumed he would, he began sniveling and to get his frightened act going but this led to the feeling there was nothing he could do about it now except give up everyone and everything in his life to their corrosive sentence. Walking movements took on a strange momentum, for as he clambered the spiral staircase up to the boss man’s study it was as if he was actually moving without transmitting the corresponding thoughts to his unruly limbs.

The interview Pirsig said he thought one may have only really described adequately in long words with a great amount of effort after this lengthy a gap as one’s senses were overloaded by it, and caught off guard, one might easily think the affair was to be blamed for everything that happened. Nobody could be more nervous than Morris. For at first a slight arrogance stemming from being victim number one assuaged this, but arising from the knowledge that the censored mag had caused the boss man and his deputies to get really outrageously stern was indeed something a hardened drinker number one such as himself dreaded.

It made them unhappy it should not be under-emphasized this fact, and also surely to examine Morris and the others with smiling countenances and idle chatter was as likely a prospect as any Pirsig could concoct from any amount of evidence. A few days previously they had felt on top of this world – he and Morris were untouchable; now this had led to him facing Morris, who was already in the room, and to feeling the leader’s impending wrath was about to ricochet off him onto his friends lives like a heavy falling slab of concrete onto the perfect trampoline. Fact.

He followed them both into the region of the stairwell which led to the old office upstairs high up in the clouds, in an uneasy silence. They then neared the immaculately tended study: enormous of course and very well maintained kept in tip top condition not for delinquent OAPs, for any panels from the board of religious organizations to be received with proper aplomb.

Those armchairs they just fell down upon and sunk into were comfortable beyond belief and Morris sinking into one like he was a privileged member of a secret sect likened the aroma given off to his favorite smell and could and even would have fallen asleep then and there since it reminded him of Dean’s spoilt daughter’s bedroom.

Morris suddenly brought himself back round to consciousness as if he'd been given a thousand voltage wake up call to the state of his actual existence by the darkening, furrowed expressions on their two defiant faces. A place can seem very different to you when you are enjoying Pimm’s or light refreshments to when there is no light-hearted chatter to take refuge in. If it was just yourself in an armchair by yourself, about to avoid doing yourself the biggest disservice you could in fact do at that time and in that the queerest of times and places.

He took the armchair which was draped by traditional chintz – truly it had no special meaning – but it held onto a vestige of important undertakings, it resonated of power in that only intellectual types from the high echelons had sat upon it apart from certain fellow Sanctuary residents about to die, or about to be asked to leave for incessantly smoking drugs.

He found it easy to prepare what exactly he should say: yes, he was busted, but he would state he had so far denied any but a minor knowledge of it to his carer or to his nurse. He rightly convinced himself that it had not been such a marvelous conceit to apologize on behalf of the writers to Virginia, the meditation instructor, only minutes earlier on that other morning for The Revue and she had been taken aback and he regretted it. This had probably led to the summons. There was nobody specifically they could accuse of having unearthed their identities nor of having done their duty and reported them other than her so they still had one last chance to get out of the mutinous magazine unscathed. Morris toyed with the prospect of denying it point blank which led to a period of stultifying silence. But Agatha couldn’t imagine him accomplishing that when he would have to claim another innocent person or persons had done it which would be a bit disparaging. No, that was far too vindictive. It seemed he could take full responsibility for it himself and the rest of them especially Morris and Naomi get out of trouble completely that way.

Yet again Morris failed to keep a grasp on the reality at hand, he grew irate, and he hated both of these solutions, both of which led to ignominy or dishonor. Though Morris’s approval was nothing to be sneered at. No more was he in that blessed land of innocence where everything was clear and bright as Naomi's sparkling eyes. He could see his unexpected demise defined and on the cards, imminent, and out of Morris’s power to aid him to escape or to avoid it. It had had to commence somewhere, and they weren't treated politely merely asked after a pregnant pause brimming with something close to disgust: “Well, what have you to say?”

Many thoughts had passed in quick succession in such a tiny interval that neither had any verbal preparation for this.

“Not much. My nurses said that I’d better come up.” Speaking made him feel diminished as well as self-conscious and seated lordly next to his deputy, the leader said:

“Right. Well, hurry up tell us what you must tell us Mr. Dean. Presumably you have done something that’s not allowed.” The leader of the CULT thought himself to be highly refined and therefore feigned complete disregard for what he had obviously heard in the common room.

“I know who produced The Revue” He replied confident he could assert his need to avoid big, big trouble, and he realized that he had to make up his mind callously, coldly to blame someone else in another Block, and never own up; however by way of a plan B he was ready to shoulder the blame, but whether he could do it without compunction, to protect and safeguard effectively the others by sacrificing himself… this meant admitting defeat by a pointless petty rebellion but at least Morris would be out of danger. Morris knew without a shadow or morsel of the slightest doubt that Jock’s name would get him out of deep trouble.

If it was humanly impossible to lie casually or easily, by that I mean quickly, rapidly and on the spur of the moment like he often did when his clothes smelled of smoke from drugs after numerous warnings from the infirmary, and he had said it had been other smokers on a train, or the glorious time that the study was hazy with the stench of putrefied ouzo after a midnight gathering he wished that he could have subtly hoodwinked the duo like he did when the stakes were low, but this time the tension went absolutely hyper, and the authority of the CULT bayed for his blood and led to the final reprisals.

**CHAPTER 28**

Lauren crept soundlessly up. The CULT leader, Rudy , still, after several hours surrounded by books, clasped his head with his hands in loose fashion. Then, Lauren lost her patience for once and planned a little surprise, and he had not even heard anyone entering the room.

It was easy to startle the leader from his fixed position hunched there bent over an oversize wooden desk with heavy, heavy metal legs; he faced directly towards a uniformly blank meridian, and the barest of walls. He had not been seen for even as much as a day in the last month, and Lauren harbored during the last month a desire, an anguished desire, to discuss with him the peril that the CULT plummeted towards, ever closer, every day.

She proceeded to tap him on one side of his back, and, peering over the top of his firm shoulder made him jump up suddenly, involuntarily from his immobile position.

When he removed her outstretched palm from his shoulder she replaced it. Whenever he made a move as if to prise himself out of his chair she put him back in his chair with a light but decisive redirection of his bulky frame. He got up finally, but he was forced back down, again and again. The space around her head was fleetingly glanced up into, but it was too late for she had already settled herself into an armchair on the further side of the study. With her legs crossed in a performative manner, she coughed abrasively and began quizzing the leader on his part in the ongoing conspiracy against Claiborne.

Lauren said to him: “It cannot go on like this Rudy . Something has got to be done.” She went on: “The Almanack has predicted,” she explained, “something tragic will happen to Bertram.” Although the Almanack had indicated neither when nor where. What was going to happen was monstrous and awful – and the Almanack stated that it was going to happen because of the leader of the CULT.

“If you don’t somehow get hold of Claiborne’s Almanack with its prophecies” it had prophesied the death of Bertram, “The death of Bertram shall be a certainty and Claiborne the murderer.” Lauren continued: “Why, it is practically a foregone conclusion. If you would only care. You must know that Bertram and Denny have been sojourning with jackpot after jackpot for so long without the briefest pause to reflect about Claiborne or me, for that matter.” She said.

The leader then told her they had no proof, and no solid evidence, no logical reason existed to tangle with or to impede Bertram’s liberty, his destined end. Just a moment before Lauren rose up and promenaded out of the room, he appeared almost dejected enough to sate Lauren’s protecting, maternal urges (although he was mostly disinclined to wretched sorrow) and he added:

“I will do anything I can to help stop her hurting him.” By this remark he intended to bring Claiborne under his custody, into the jurisdiction of his cult at the soonest possible moment. As the door clicked closed behind her the leader returned to face the blank wall at his wooden desk with the four solid metal legs supporting it, and lifted the telephone receiver to dial Daniel at the Sanctuary, their headquarters.

\* \* \*

That day Daniel had complete and total omnipotence. He was in blessed contentment until a telephone call came in to him which he would struggle in vain to avoid. He had no chance. Glancing at his wristwatch, he slammed the door shut but the phone kept on bleeping, he strode over to the far side of the room, but giving up, he relented and dove for the telephone possibly on the twentieth bleep.

He said hurriedly: “Make no bones about it, Daniel, Claiborne’s got to be closely observed.” The leader told him about the Almanack, and what he knew.

“Why should the Almanack be treated with the utmost care?” He added that Claiborne was already under careful investigation by every single one of the followers at the CULT since her shambolic intoxicated appearance last Thursday night.

The leader had not much difficulty enunciating his dismal, barren expectations; he side-lined the real stakes by just saying “The Almanack says so…”and, knowing he would be trusted charted Claiborne’s slow descent to perfidy. Apparently, Daniel heard, her capacity for filtering fact from fiction, her natural ability to separate what was true from what was false had deserted her, so that she could no longer be relied upon to make sense of the nonsense in the Almanack, nor to qualify her habitual flippancy with reasonable scrutiny.

“Her paltry, useless excuses for selecting the insecure and unsafe has led Lauren and I to try to suggest that she take a holiday.” However, as the leader’s mete advice had not been listened to, they had been obliged to dismiss her lacklustre and outrageous acts, her categorically weird manner as, “arguably the direct result of drug abuse.” He scoffed, could he provide no other explanation?

This was why he said; and why other people, the majority of whom were so firmly rooted in their mediocre and moderate walks of life, were inclined to understand his anguished sighs.

That last sighting of Claiborne when the only striking memento she impressed on him was the attire and gait of a junkie was neither tempered nor toned down by her rationalising insights. The leader made mention of the way he had interpreted her self-referencing, as evidence against her stability. Claiborne had had it pointed out to her that they had both noted a changed mien since finding out from them about the scrolls. She viewed it as a glaring gap at the time but now, when interwoven with the new information, she had lost touch with the real world, he said, at the exact moment that the prospect of splicing together the Scytale and the scrolls resented itself as a productive and entirely viable alternative to a void of boredom, and perhaps even despair.

That was that, Bertram and Claiborne struck a good deal, a pact of the least insincere variety. They shook on it. They were obliged to bind themselves to this contract, adhere to it as it stood as though in the dock being accused. Each agreed to share with the other a certain portion of their recent, shocking discoveries. Bertram called the scroll in the attic his own, and he used it thinking it rightfully belonged only to him. The stratagem he devised stood that as Claiborne2 wanted to seek answers to the riddles in her book of codes, and as she could not vitiate this prospective idea unless Bertram and Denny kept to their side of the bargain, she agreed, in principle, to submit to the strategy.

At the most 48 hours later Bertram needed to check for correspondences, cross references amidst the cryptic codes; links to the scroll’s precise dimensions: its diameter, its structure, its breadth. Both assented not to let anything interfere or meddle with the mutually enhancing aim of translating the medley of hieroglyphic characters into the fixed and firm set of results that they both gladly anticipated with trepidation.

Of course, the great thrill was that no witnesses existed to their benevolent deal. With a backdrop of familial ties the mistrust existed only slightly, and this meant that they looked likely to succeed and be rewarded. As the exchange was undertaken the potential gains materialised. Tacitly they understood there would be no reprisals, no dismissal, for any contravention of the rules: the two obligated parties were not amenable to any blockages nor enthusiastic for any delay to their great plan.

And the obvious but lamentable proviso that should one of them decide not to cleave to the contract, no real punishment was going to be inflicted, nothing inaugurated, nothing stopping them, this they liked glazing over, glossing over without any consideration or afterthought.

The world became one of uncanny magic and impossibility where right might replace wrong, when fairness would soon have to be superseded by betrayal, and it expanded and multiplied at a fast rate. It was because trust in the family broke soon enough, and, when what was required was considerateness, deference and respect, what was on offer was its counterweight. Claiborne could hope for the best, despite her excess of pleasure in acquiring the codes in the book, she could aspire to the pinnacle of truth, much more than any mountain of money at the end of her quest.

She never used to bully and to victimise her own father before this. His dishonest victory over the Raffle she regarded as an abrasive failure, a subversion, and her own personal scandal.

Although overtly fair enough in fictive terms, in fact covertly the truth was not exactly correct or rational; especially since she never gave up her last resorted to hope that she or a benevolent entity might lift her affliction and bring her father back down to the mundane and ordinary world; to reinstate the situation to what it was prior to ripping off the goliath Plunderball.

Lauren resolutely refused to let the idea of the Almanack provoke her, and to store any sort of belief in supernatural or divine justice was just a sanitizing conjecture. Just to go ahead and open it up, ask the book a question when she was in a state on the brink of bankruptcy – to expect an answer or a pointer to the buried treasure trove – resulted in a conceptually lost, inherently broken faith in the supernatural. If she used it in conjunction with the Scytale then maybe those lost, borrowed, stolen scrolls might turn up answers more believable than some tenuous subliminal state or some greatly farfetched jackpot.

The cryptic nature of the dual finds could somehow go and shine a beacon on the procedures whereby some people flowered and flourished, at the expense of other lesser mortals. The lucky cost of the Almanack occurred to her again and again.

She aimed to use the Plunderball only partly for her own purposes, but unselfishly also to help others, perhaps hoping to pay for rehab for Claiborne who for a long time had trailed a long way behind her fellow pupils at school. And what of her sombre thoughts surging on to the disabled child for whom nobody wasted a thought because a long time ago bad luck had led them to the gateway of great celebration. Trying her utmost to put it out of her mind the ideas recurred several times a day, that the fairness she disputed could be harnessed if … if, for example, the Raffle winners who had purloined her Scytale passed away of sudden, unexplained causes.

Every thought was dismissed. It frightened her that these ideas of a superlative justice were now within her grasp, but the notion of what the eventual cost was to be she sought to expel from her mind before they could be nurtured or even planted there.

She reluctantly recognised she had of late become preposterously indignant and that nobody knew how or why. She decided to conceal this preposterous underbelly from any observer. The attainment of this savvy skill became a driving force behind her motives. Lying, became a thing of pale insignificance, she said to observers she loved it that lame casualties were much worse off when they lost a fortune to cap it all. Lying, she skimmed over the immense, unlabelled jealousy that the monetary games of chance brought to unhappy losers was too, too simple. To never say what she really thought about the many optional slanders against random Raffle and to argue for and with those who condemned its mafia ties, this was also easy.

Yet, alone, eventually she began to think more, and cogitate more, and as this took place in her soul she sought out books, articles, anything that might give an explanation for what pleased her in the Raffle. Whether it existed at all, or was a phoney con, nearly nudged her into a second wave of intentions too diabolical to admit: that one cheating Raffle winner, one who had not chosen his numbers at random but had instead with the aid of some impossibly alien technological device, elected to steal the prize scientifically if one ever could, minded her towards murder.

Magic, and Plunderball lost its thrill, as did the CULT. Allure, science and its unidentifiable techniques took precedence in favour of the cheat or the thief, so that Lauren and the audience who watched from a safe distance had to be pacified somehow.

By failure to mention her misgivings in discussion with Claiborne this assured and rapidly evolved deception held itself up just fine. In public, the Raffle was one of the worst developments of modernity, in Claiborne’s opinion. Claiborne said publically, at least, there was absolutely no seedling of, or germ for controversy.

Not then that privately secured, carefully concealed wish to harm any gold-diggers or their hangers on out there, but that dissembling of mirth and agreeable fun that the Raffle invoked in her, doomed Lauren to a starkly unillustrious fate. Not that anyone was privy, at this juncture, to any knowledge of the disaster that awaited because of this feigning and dissemblance of positive vibes. Yes it was thumbs up for the Raffle – the escape it made available for the impoverished few, and maybe also its weighty benefits for the ambitious, the greedy and the sceptical. Yes they would all sniff sour grapes if Claiborne or 2 enunciated her close to depressing view that people were sacrificed by the indomitable and placid Plunderball and Raffle to cheats; that honest lives were casually shipwrecked by the psychic ciphers that may have been cropping up at regular intervals since the first spins of the Raffle wheel.

What was freely attainable for her group or class of people, Lauren told Claiborne, was just about anything that nobody else really wanted. It was becoming clear that modern society with its materialism, its mirages, its crocks of gold, gave bounteously its (albeit illusory) rewards to the superficial bimbos. Furthermore, Lauren told her, it had naught to reward one of her mind set with except maybe some pretty dark and nasty plans.

Lauren took to dwelling alone in despair. Her acting skills so tremendously professional there was no fear she would ever be discovered by her daughter. Never, even for an instant, did Claiborne suppose Lauren was tricking her. Though she would have noticed, under normal circumstances, if her mother was really playing the part of the proficient liar, she was too immersed in the chase after money, and in hopes, and in the end of strife, that any smidgeon of doubt was gainsayed even before it hit the atmosphere. Until much later when the swindle was abruptly exposed mother and daughter were at loggerheads.

\* \* \*

“Denny … hey, Denny! Listen. Listen to me.” Virtually no persuasion tactic that Claiborne could rustle up, no argumentative method that Claiborne was aware of, made him surrender to her. She attacked from many angles probing for a weakness or a gap into which she could insert her point of view. His threats were surging away with themselves, his imperviousness remained a constant. Claiborne strove to tell him what the best and expedient mode of action was but he shielded himself, retreated shamming under his hard exterior shell like a deserter.

Hard exterior…

**CHAPTER 29**

Claiborne had only an extremely small chance against his pure, unfettered greed. Claiborne fervently wished Bertram would one day admit he had criminally wronged her by his bare-faced swindles, not only her but many others besides, hurt her on a cognitive, subcutaneous layer, which also meant some harm might come upon others as a direct effect.

The extreme breadth of his want was deplorably erratic, but her words and her examples proved to him nothing was amiss. At a disadvantage before now, Claiborne’s proofs and her truths, could never alter his disenchanted state. She even made timid forays into insults, in a last vile attempt to convert him, to make him see some sense for once, but he brazenly repudiated these new, and cowardly slights with oblique ripostes.

She tried to mock his flash cash mentality – she foundered dismally. She attempted again to embarrass his grand notions of “deserved” wealth and she failed again. Unperturbed she suspected she was on the road to illuminating his shadowy psyche with the Almanack and success beckoned at long last. Yet after these first inroads the dark returned and persuasion was completely benighted. The hankered after win he had accrued from the Scytale was really clutched with the utmost strength. This characteristic, in and of itself, Claiborne had to admire despite her misgivings. There was quality in his avowedly crude, yet in a way (pragmatically speaking) necessarily crude, defences. Unable to break the high walls down she departed at that point leaving him in stunned silence, and made her way over to the Sanctuary where she might ask for some other means of subverting his claim and where they might have special ways of undermining barriers such as Denny’s. Her allies at the CULT, as was to be expected from such a purposeful and helpful lot, she relied upon. The CULT was quite happy to orchestrate an alliance; by clubbing together they mobilised, sharing from the start a craving to help her get some compensation.

That this rogue permanently removed the enjoyable aspects, that the fun facets of the spinning Raffle wheel belonged within the CULT’s remit was never called into doubt. The news reports stated whole estates had won vast sums, but this they coped with; the way in which Bertram and Denny had insensitively controverted the exotic and special, the way he had ignorantly assumed he would not get caught, had been just a touch too unlucky for the other entrants.

Often the case with monetary luck was that it coincided with a particular sort of glowing temperament. Those who were fortunate, were also, sometimes, without a hope, completely at a loss in other matters. With an artistic temperament, it often startled a natural observer on the side-lines. Financial luck only ever appeared if it was not really wanted or thought highly of anyway.

Claiborne meant that Denny’s windfall seemed out of place, somehow wrong; with his badly kept promises to share, his extraordinary bribes, with his exaggerations of the actual amount, and his non-charitable intent, the boon (were word to spread around) might discourage as opposed to spur on the Raffle players. What if everyone refused to enter anymore under the new circumstances?

What, for instance, would the result be if Denny’s past came into the open, or if she could show his gigantic haul as a gigantic folly, orchestrated by an Almanack that interfered with statistics, that ruined the odds, and that mocked the other contestants’ legitimate and certainly not dishonest intentions? If she could show and put under the microscope his dishonest deals and his underhand means of procuring the scrolls then, and brought it into the open, surely it would spell the end to this mad rigging of the familiar truth, the twisting of fate.

In the future if this scenario took place yet again one event would naturally lead from and towards another, so that in the final analysis, the mystery person or persons nobody knew the assumed identity of, who had been planting indicators and positioning clues of the winning lines in the midst of a fairly familiar and legal operation – a Raffle, would one day bear the brunt of and for, cheating; and furthermore perhaps the victims of the trampling and tampering done by the mystery figure would be destined by fate to receive abundant and lascivious reward. Only, perhaps.

She supposed Daniel and his followers, before too many weeks elapsed and the mistakes were left forgotten too, and only the CULT was capable of impounding Denny, Bertram and the mystery man, bringing a semblance of normality to this, almost impossible, crime. This infraction whereby some unfamiliar human agent manipulated the Raffle and manhandled it, reducing its famous power of rectifying social injustice, whilst at the same time moulding it to suit themselves, became not merely a matter of rigid honour but also a question of firm trust that affected not just a few urchins like Claiborne but any and every saint and sinner who fixed their implicit and emphatic trust on an old system that was not meant to be queried.

Mainly because only such a big project as the Raffle was relied upon for weekly or fortnightly feats of heroism Daniel said. Its impact was really graver than Daniel reckoned and really Claiborne envisaged a possible permutation which greatly frightened her natural senses. She said she envisioned Denny going public with the £500 million win, she saw exactly where his lying, thieving nature would lead him. Not solely into trouble, but they agreed it would tend to create dire problems for countless, unknown others who were not to be accused.

Only an official organ like the CULT had the necessary leverage to help this pluricity of victims, with the help of Claiborne, the ability also to denounce and capture Denny. The others were of a lesser significance; the cogs of the machine were at risk, undoubtedly, but Claiborne could not compute where and why to go hunting more scapegoats of the Raffle. Nor did Daniel foresee the logic of a scandal stretching on interminably, doing untold damage and breeding a rift of mistrust, needlessly, that would never be forgotten.

“Truth and falsehood. There must be some way your lot at the Sanctuary can redeem these two. Please help me. You know the truth,” said Claiborne, “You must step in to do something or there will be more of them short-changed out of their rightful lot.” Her words needed no more explication of the way the unnatural rigging took place, the methodology seemed as dark and foreboding as anything the deputy had ever dreamed; and twisted and wild though reality was for the unsuspecting entrants, the CULT decided to try to build a case, to allow logic to be known irrespective of how tedious life might seem to be at the end of their quest.

Why was there such magnetism surrounding the Raffle? The deputy leader wondered. How should one rationalise the mass hysteria that had such a multitude of willing and increasingly addicted victims? It was the summertime now, and he liked to dally on his route home from work at the office, and happened to pass by an art gallery as he wended his leisurely homeward route, past the bustling high street and the shrugging florists. The thought crossed his mind that the artists’ portfolios online might provide him with easy answers, so he vowed to devote some time to rationalise the whole conundrum once he got back to his latest acquisition, his laptop computer.

He had the endearing qualities of a curious mind that could not sleep that night, rest or relax until it solved the problem which it faced temporarily. He didn’t know what he might uncover on the internet, so when he stumbled on several Dutch masters’ depictions of wealthy members of the community he started wondering in a well-meaning but vexed way how the Raffle would be presented or depicted by some hitherto unrecognised artist who also had looked to throw up answers to the hypnotic knock-on effects, the tidal wave that was wealth.

He needed to scan his vibrant and curious mind to relocate any seams of what he himself might have painted were he for some reason required to delineate in picture form adoration of thousands, alongside the blindfolding of many, who were totally entrapped, caught up in the crossfire of rags to riches.

Despite an innate degree of snobbery he was not prevented from easily going down to the Raffle terminals in the immediate vicinity and checking the expressions on the fairly docile, yet still very normal faces there. Before he got flung out by staff for indecently spying and loitering without buying a thing, he noticed a fair amount, and he eavesdropped on a fair number of the placid customers.

At one of the shops he visited the thriving horde stretched right around the front counter, and he could not manage to prise his way into the confused throng there. He did not feel wholly certain whether his difficult quest was going to add up to the sum total he had prefigured in his mind which was that art had the answer. The hankering after wealth became an objective not worth underestimating, and his so precious quest for investigation into the lives of the anonymous entrants was superseded by the agonising wait for a chance to enter as enthusiastically as all the rest of them there.

Here he was distracted, not as normally by the drab or shabby attire of the disparate Raffle hopefuls nor by the hardy stances on the other people queuing, but he could not concentrate on learning anything new, or enlightening, so thrilling was the prospect of claiming immediate riches. Over and above his previous role – to question, to elucidate and to solve the difficulty of the Raffle’s ever increasing popularity, here he grew slowly more aware of a chance for escape from his outside observer status; that station, that station that was a target for mockery, and insults, from the contestants whose views he had not once even entertained before, let alone identified with.

To the detriment of his occupation, this Raffle seemed to think it would make him wait an immense time before teasing him, and tantalising him with a prospect, no doubt real, but far from reliant on artistry, skill, skulduggery.

That self-same evening he moped around his des res abode thinking about the Raffle and its place in the lives of its entrants, and he tried to formulate how he could express his anxiety to Lauren and Claiborne when they had been benignly disconnected from the game also.

For in the three years since it had begun it had inexplicably slid past, or under, the roving eye of both of them. Those three whole years may have elapsed without disaster, natural or unnatural, but alongside this the game that had been skyrocketing in popularity was hard to fathom, and even harder to comment on seeing as it had never connected itself to him at any time in those three short years.

In shock, he scoured his last two diaries for a trace, a sign of the game. Perhaps it was possible that he had an opinion, but possible too that it had dissipated from realisation, from sheer lack of excitement. Or, on the other hand, the game could have, theoretically, angered him: it could have been a bit of a sore point, and he’d wisely decided to refrain from voicing his perspective. He couldn’t remember. He tried to follow his memory but he could only suggest a slew of possible answers, nothing hard or fixed. Nothing at all put itself forward as registered evidence, he was pretty certain, nothing reminded him that he had at any point watched the television programme, it was like an elusive mirage or an illusion – the game had simply not featured in his life on any tangible plane.

So he had missed out on it. So, he had really existed in a complete vacuum, shielded from this strange artificial reality. By who or what was he deceived, and how to persuade them or it to let him in on the party now, if not already too late – these thoughts diverted him until dawn the next morning. As he ransacked his desk contents a slip of paper fell out and floated down to the floor. His jaw dropped, he swallowed hard, and leant down to lift the unmarked Raffle ticket out of the place it had fluttered down to on the floor, balanced on the top of some ring-binders which were piled on top of each other.

This was too much evidence to simply ignore, forget, discard even though no one wanted him to find it. He reached down in startled surprise and gawped at the little slip of paper. How it got into his possession he could not say. What it meant to him, what it was when he had never acquired it, this gap in his knowledge of his own life raised question marks over memory, everything. “So, the gambling mania, like a rebel uprising, had cast its influence even here, into my home.” He decided urgently to talk to someone, but not Lauren or Claiborne, about this weird find. He did not appreciate impossibility entering without permission, and as his personality preferred to remain in complete control as a domineering law-giver (organising others was his forte) he despaired of this black hole in his brain’s memory, which, if extrapolated from could lead to other holes in his memory; an idea that he wished he’d never given any grounds to at all even if, even if, it led to the £500,000.

He prepared for the worst. He returned downstairs and kept looking back on the previous two or three years trying to compromise, hoping to find a salvo to ease his highly disturbing fear-laden conscience. Why he needed to fix this for himself was to bring back safety and honesty where it now appeared to have left forever. It was dangerous at best, pathologically antithetic to the tenets he had stood by all his days. At worst, it was a threat and an insult, that somebody knew he had wandered about the place, dazed and blinkered, going on with running the CULT, acquiring new recruits and saving vulnerable people from people or situations, when in actuality a laughable mess, nearly an idiot of the greatest magnitude if he could stash a ticket there without having awareness of it.

He realised that he was not fit for the job, he was incompetent, if he continued to the logical conclusion.

If he took his fear just a few steps further therefore he conceived that those last three years were in essence a parody of his place, of his status, and of his role. Of course, on his way to the Sanctuary later he eventually saw the good in himself, after a while he was obliged (darkly) to forbid these worries and to compromise. Yet it was a compromise, and not one he was proud of, to admit defeat by and from an anonymous amnesia-creating quarter might put his whole CULT in serious jeopardy. Never to mention it was one way forward but he really suspected that his enemies presumably laughed all the time at his omissions, his arrogance, his pride. The thought made him shiver that perhaps even the lowliest, most servile member of the CULT was higher up the ladder, a better person, further advanced than him without excuse for this idiocy he had identified and presumably bungled.

Picking his way the next morning through the morass at the checkout, he conceived it would be sophisticated if he bought twenty new tickets, not for enjoyment nor to waste time but to make honourable amends to his fragile situation.

Jock greeted him at the corner shop with wide eyes and a friendly grin. Jock, the ex-con, the wretch. An exposure, quite possibly, posited Daniel. Jock refused to give him enough to go on, but it was catastrophically obvious to him that even the merest actions, there in town, unless he presently dismissed him, uncovered him and left him bare. Jock, the criminal also saw to it that he received a proper welcome from the CULT leader. A few pertinent inquiries as to Claiborne and 2’s fraught situation, whether or not things had improved since Jock’s last sightings. Then the situation darkened and Daniel was irked because Jock couldn’t not notice a change in his composure and a rather clear-cut fidgeting on his part, while having such a lot tasking him. So many innumerable opinions presented themselves that Daniel grew confused and meshed one ploy with another, so that he was almost undone again. Only he could avoid capsizing like a flimsy vessel here so early in his vow, but he saved himself from shipwreck. He regained a decent balance of composure, a singular confidence was enough this time, and he sailed away from Jock’s murky presence into calmer waters. Alone, where he could deliberate, he checked the printout. He saw it as a sample ticket but wanted to know if it could be properly effective. He ran to get on a bus omitting to consider Jock, his imagination straining to understand aright (more literally than figuratively) all the fifteen million possible outcomes of his new purchase in the shop. Fear of danger now was replaced by the utmost hope.

In the meantime, Jock reached the front of the queue several seconds after Daniel dropped out of sight around the corner somewhere outside. He slid his play-slip over the counter unusually deftly, casting his choice of numbers in with the rest of the thronging masses. The cashier almost but not quite shrugging, and the rude, middle-aged man behind him jostling impatiently, he dexterously whisked up his tickets and then silently zigzagged away from the amorphous mass of tired, broken custom. He considered it important and lucrative to go gambling but also ridiculous of him to go gambling at the bookmakers, for he valued their values, he held their affection affectionately, and he relied upon their help, if from other more legit quarters help was whisked away.

He drew out fifty pounds, cautiously this time, and donated it through the cubicle glass, soberly, without even meeting the pretty woman at the till’s gaze, without risking any eye-to-eye contact he tried to trust to his techniques, and stayed right in there steadfastly gambling until the bitter end, throughout his period of bad luck. Once he went outside onto the parking lot again, he checked for any messages left on his answer phone, two of which turned out to be from Claiborne. He made a motion as if he intended to respond by text message but then deliberately swiped the alert away with more important financial matters on his mind.

If Daniel ever heard about his vile insolence, his rudely disrespectful manhandling of teenaged Claiborne’s luck, that knowledge explained his strange abnormal off-ishness at the lottery kiosk, and even his alarming put-on smirking, if that’s what it was. Daniel’s mind flew back to the rendezvous where Daniel had darted away into invisibility, almost as if Jock was a trap set in the forest and he the seen but not yet caught, timid quarry.

It led him to speculate circumspectly that not just because he skanked Claiborne out of her winnings and more recently out of fifty pounds, but also because he partook of drug shenanigans his reputation and alliances had lain in tatters for that much longer than the period of bad luck lasting a fortnight at most. This mattered to him, as his false pretences of an unblemished image as a law-abiding, conscientious member of the community was predicated on and sustained by other innocent folk, specifically Daniel and others of Daniel’s set from the CULT. If the good image he fronted broke or evaporated one day, he speculated, that spelt the premature conclusion to just under three whole years of high times and wasting since the age of thirteen.

Of course Daniel’s purchase of a Raffle ticket that day did not automatically entail belief in any sob story that Claiborne might have resorted to telling. But nevertheless, it was much more than a hint in his manner, it was even more than an alacrity in leaving when usually he’d lingered to chat, it was mainly that Daniel, not having seen Jock for quite some months, stayed mysteriously aloof and did not tarry; leaving hastily with just the blunt words; which sounded to Jock like more than a minor, petty, insubstantial coincidence: see you later Caliborne2.

**CHAPTER 30**

There he stood, after leaving the Raffle counter, planting his light summer Dunlop green flash to the grille beneath him, a few yards from the bookmakers, and looking over at a mini-roundabout.

“A trick!” Jock stammered “He’s forgotten my name!” Not ready yet to face up to the facts, he stole a glance leftwards, and so before he looked to the right he observed the post office, and his bank’s branch. Like most it had just had an overhaul, and it certainly needed a better rate of interest, unlike the vast majority he reflected. The makeover it deserved, less essential than the quality of the customer services therein, it needed on the outside. He worked his way towards it, forbearing to indulge in any red herrings, and in nearly no time at all pushed open wide the doors to a daunting, irreproachable vestibule that stretched cavernously on towards its back office at its deep end. A whole fifty metres or so differentiated his locus from the compliance officer’s one.

He stepped another ten yards or so, and he stealthily scratched his head amazed at his significantly inferior ability to recall what there was there. A few years ago, bafflingly, he had been beyond the tall walled partition to one of the rooms, but the actual product was so small an issue, his cause so insignificant a reason that he had to confess to letting the interview fade to nothing. Today, the other rooms looked far much more exciting than that one. He moseyed on towards the desks with a concern about an overdraft and a credit limit increase. When he met with the fragile, hesitant helper there his graceless contrivances came into play exactly on cue.

One false move and then he would have to back away from this helper. He needed to be as anxious as a loyal customer would be, as powerful as the office manager should be, and as pathologically over-modest as a client advisor could be, to sway their generosity and to pull a cloak over his riled and facetious interior monologue.

Jock’s request was dutifully recorded, and then it was shunted across the hall by relay to an office somewhere at the deepest reach of this regional branch. After ten minutes he knew he’d been there too long and left a few seconds afterwards in spite of catching the cashier’s attention, in lieu of waiting for an answer; he dallied no longer, but, looked backwards over the shoulder at the electric sliding doors only to catch a fleeting impression of minds that didn’t change, of promises that didn’t break, and words that were never erased.

In front of the ATM, the frantically busy pavement trampled upon by thousands of other people wearing Dunlop green and blue flashes not doing any harm to it in its solid and undeniable presence, yet their harmlessness staggered and scared when juxtaposed with Jock’s tricks and conniving. He astonishingly, withdrew a crisp fifty pound note but to open up the inner workings of his corrupted mind was too arduous, suffice to say the note was not meant for, nor destined for Claiborne.

The note, when the machine spewed it, did point out his debt to Claiborne and it did aggravate matters by reminding him of his oversight. Even after he had slipped the fifty into his jacket pocket his craven thirst for release from that tiresome debt was uppermost. Even just checking it was still there or transferring the flimsy piece of paper to his wallet reiterated that he still owed this sum to Claiborne, his wheeler dealer.

Every stall, shop and home boarded up to him, with his unintentional staring intrusion, because each day the windows threw back a picture of Jock, not wholly undesired: the noir coat - a remnant from a bygone era, his tartan trousers, his fringed top. Yet the response from the inhabitants never upended his surefootedness, his blasé and confidence-ridden fake punk air. As for that response would it always be one of envy, maliciously hidden? He asked himself this after glimpsing with dread that emotionally laden old spinster her straggly grey locks all mishmash as her head lolled forward but her eyes peered up into his own face. Or, on the other hand, could it not have been a less infrequently shown, often undisguised look of loathing and dismissal of that loathing as too unpleasant, too acute to be extrapolated into their honorific pantheon as they saw him pass, he asked himself again.

In every last seam and thread, in the tiny particles that comprised his bearing and his attire, and from his punk-rock style to the unnatural and colourful mix of tastes, that subliminal composure raffish Jock was host to, there seemed an as yet unknown cause or causes which owed all to the rogue element that he was in on. Not privy to everything he could be, he edged his way forward, still playing his part mildly, as in the bank, through the park gate way into the garden with its scant cladding of unused twigs and leaves on the jig-sawed floor, and took his pew to reconsider.

\* \* \*

Until Daniel decided on the roots of attraction itself he disposed of the Raffle tickets dispassionately. He could not care less. He found no answer in artist’s work nor in beauty. After he met his partner at the cult there had been advantages in that her attractiveness had counted to him. It was forbidden by the cult to count sexual allure, into the analysis, and when measuring the Raffle’s magnetic impulse it was also debunked. When he set up any analogous comparisons with other desirable objects he could not connect the tickets and the gyrations of the Raffle with anything else in his scope other than outward looks, until he set up the cult with Rudy .

He measured the joy, he divided it by its cost, factored in its potential and equated the untrodden pastures with the cult. What left him in a static quandary was the tense initial reaction of a few of the followers, and knowing not to delve deeper into his ratiocinations he calmly got up and shuffled over to the sideboard, and picked up the tickets he had bought earlier from their lair and chucked them impassionedly to the dustbin underneath the sideboard. He knew from experience more than one parallel game at a time was a distraction too hot to handle, so inevitably any comparisons between two disparate entities whether that be art or beauty could be advantageously loped off.

Then an intellectual prognosis revoked his arbitrary, advancing instinct, and his small, pasty hand dove into the dustbin to pluck out the tickets. And he just anticipated rather eagerly the fulfilment of his wish to be able to afford a new life with his weighty prognostics about art and beauty brought into play.

Daniel’s mild nature, on route to a collision of hitherto unbelievable severity, went snap. Like a karate chop, his foundations were broken asunder so much so that a tirade ensued in the upstairs rooms against his life’s lot. Sensing an intransigence in the Raffle after he lost, down flew the shelves off the walls, the Raffle would never help him to help the CULT, up and away burst his porcelain, up and over went the Wiccan scripts, the Raffle would not even condescend to reciprocate her loving ten-pound fee with her shamelessly ignoble aspiration: to win the money the cult needed.

“Not to mess with the furniture. Not to mess with what bloody furniture?” he cried. “Not mine by any chance!” he cursed, and then burst the fish tank, his effectiveness in carrying out an impromptu and funny storm in a teacup rude, but remarkable, at least for the goldfish dazing lifelessly on the green soaked floor. As he slammed the door he invoked all manner of demon to rescue him with what he termed reasonable energies, to alter the course of the flailing cult followers, his needy and unhappy charges.

He sent himself flying outside into the garden, stopping in the kitchen to get something, broke through his falsified and pathetic attraction to funding the movement, broke down in the middle of his middle class lawn and herbiage, and did it.

He was dead five minutes later, at a quarter past six.

**CHAPTER 31**

Looking at Daniel, ranged out on the slab at the morgue; white laboratory coats, angular contours and silver encoated cabinets, not a soft covering or a comfortable chair and no vital signs to be reaped in the building, the followers from the cult could have developed opinions on the clearly depressing suicide.

However, doubtless these theories would have been forestalled at Checkpoint Charlie because, up until the night before, not a sign, not a single indication, no reason for suicide could be determined. The modus operandi of many, the doctor said, developed over weeks in fact months, but in Daniel’s immediately achieved self-destruction, nobody from the CULT had been able to pinpoint a good enough excuse.

Their best assumption was still abject reasoning, their explanations still pitiful, they used these to assuage their great collective guilt, and it must never have touched on any inordinate fancy, nor, by my inverse logic any extreme antipathy of mood, or disturbance of the mind.

The most aghast of all was the leader, whose pampered and comparatively mollycoddled life, not to mention his narrow tunnel vision which never dwelt on, or lingered briefly on, or even brushed against anything bad; whose penchant was more of the aerial view, than the participant, the bystander, or even the proverbial fly on the wall, the leader was truly outfoxed by this brutal concatenation of events.

Although his character liked to have cloudy mysteries to unravel and endemic problems to observe, he would infinitely have preferred any old easy life to stay free of death than for it to descend into vice and anarchy. Even if he was paid a vast bribe by the authorities I am fairly convinced that if a choice presented itself to our leader it would have contented him to act as a natural commentator or an unseen legislator. He did not seek financial recompense: peace of mind, psychotic distancing and aloofness from Daniel’s catastrophic demise meant we could remain impervious.

If I hurled myself into the melee and resigned from my role as fan or spectator then I might perpetrate an act of horrendous physical depravity, and expose my own dark mysteries to others, which is something I strove to step aside from at all costs. Then I was struck by matters going on beyond my field of vision, imposed by parents, teachers and managers I felt intrigued if not, in point of fact, liberated. Since I could not admit whatever it was to myself I termed it being aghast, the most aghast I had ever been. How I hoped and prayed that my natural curiosity would not be so totally overwhelmed any time in the near future again.

My own permanent thirst for knowledge was nearly slaked by a flood of insight like that which had been brought on by this man’s hari-kari.

Hari-kari was out of my sphere of experience so it left me aghast, yes, but it left me hungering for hands on experience of distant worlds, for knowledge of Daniel’s death, to espy more about the CULT and to file it all in my archive, for later. If that Raffle ticket had led Daniel to take his own life then why hadn’t, because it is morbidly and bleakly serious, his legacy’s depressing end led to any greater or higher improvements in its wake; slight or minor improvements; or brought about a reversal or two for the future, a £500 million jackpot even?

We had nothing to do for the next few weeks except wait, for the slow, laborious forensic investigations to churn out its final examination results. It was more than six weeks afterwards when it transpired that there could be found no proven evidence in his diaries, or journals or log entries; after frantically searching no evidence from friends, relatives or colleagues pointed an arrow to undue or severe psychological stress. Not a single one of his doctor’s records had any minor hint or suggestion, and for sure warning of life threatening illnesses would have shown up.

It seemed an interminably long time to wait. Our habitual lives did not move ahead for those 6 weeks and we did not need any reminder, so fire-branded on the collective memory the deputy leader had been, that we needed to telephone the mortuary to inquire about the case. Our contact reaffirmed at weekly intervals that he did not have any news to alleviate or exacerbate our pallid sadness and miserable anguish.

A couple of times, he dangled us a morsel of hope, we thought, by brushing up on the latest scientific results and finds. The ongoing delays severely tested the mettle of our patience. It befell to me to hand round placatory assurances at the Sanctuary that murder was completely out of the question; and so that they did not doubt or provoke questioning I produced plausible but wholly false reasons to divert or waylay their worst case premonitions.

To safeguard the bitter acrimony of a life denied, I could often be tracked down to cafes and delis about the town where I liked to sit and shut up effectively and just listen to numerous propositions about the contiguous malarkey that the doctors suspected from their key witness.

It never really tested my honed power to pretend a blithe lack of concern, a disaffected disinterest, to dissimulate feigned contentment; and then slipping away into the recesses after listlessly hearing their mental torpor, and having tried to pacify everyone’s dismay. Choosing ruthlessly not to explore their spiritual torpor in greater depth meant both that I could not succeed in helping much, and nor could I fail to identify those untouched few who weren’t sorry to see their deputy leader depart.

It amounted to two tantalizingly close calls that tested and might have unmasked my true, shambolic personality. My actions and essences were both examined minutely, and both risked creating a situation where who I was, and what my life’s purpose really was, could have been rustled up and delivered.

Jock and Claiborne were nearby, the police statement closed, a predator and a victim, the ripples circling out to the extreme outer edges, within the confinement of their circle, masters and slaves, heroes and targets, none went without the guilt that everyone must feel when the finger is pointed at them.

Still, astute Jock, having forgotten the morning he had met him at the Raffle kiosk, found it difficult to stomach that Daniel had turned into a gambler, so when he heard news of this suicide – a tragic and badly fitting finale for the CULT, he just could not bring himself to pass blame onto the Raffle. He even talked to the police about the signals he had managed to glean from Daniel’s nervous disposition and vitally about his awkwardness at the kiosk, but it simply never crossed his mind, not even the lightest smattering of a surmise that somehow this shiftiness and sallowness was honestly the Raffle’s fault.

Both Denny and his nephew Bertram laughed and chuckled that the game was stretching its tentacles out into so many people’s lives because they knew it would be their route to good times, and good luck.

The notional, pragmatic concerns that gambling was a blight on people’s real livelihoods featured as a politely important, but still irrelevant and useless, consideration when conversing with strangers at bars or if some figure of the establishment was within earshot; in private the real blight, the bane of the Raffle was probably best left glossed over, as the boon and the blessing, the much needed antithesis to a life of drudgery and dullness for a select joyous few.

Denny, in a conspiratorial mode easily recalled the conversations and also even the chance encounter when Daniel sashayed or forayed into the Raffle, he remembered chortling about Daniel pointlessly buying a whole ten quid’s worth of losing tickets.

To this pair of oafs it mattered hardly at all. Daniel’s weak nature, in contradistinction to Denny’s strong constitution and roughneck upbringing, was so irreversibly contaminated and infected by the Raffle. What one of them understood easily with the help of the ciphers and a scroll manufactured, was indeed for the other one something ghastly and terrifying which must have boggled or blitzed his head.

The sky outside was turning slowly more pale. They either didn’t actually notice or they thought they had mastery over any such cares, trifles, regrets. The palest gray then turning into nearly black, the heavy clouds closed, Denny and Bertram, peered out to poke some fun at the breaking storm coming towards them to spoil their afternoon.

“Oh, look at it…do you suggest I fetch myself an umbrella?” Denny laughed.

“Yes but…no, but it’s only a little rain, not enough to write home to Daddy about, is it.” Bertram laughed too.

“See those pathetic plankton scrambling for cover, what are they so afraid of Bertram?” he asked him.

“Probably worrying about their kids getting soaked through at kindergarten, eh Denny, or maybe worried about getting their side-partings all messed up?” he said.

**CHAPTER 32**

With the mistaken assumption Volley was miles out of the picture for now, thank God, the moment presented itself for Claiborne to send out to her foes a graven message of her intent to exert power, wield influence and superiority over the false claimants, the hostile villains, and the rest of the weaklings who had minded themselves to impede her heroic mission. Without much to do, or a by your leave, she angled herself toward the umbrageous terrain of a life renewed where she could, with a little help from the leader, seek recompense for the ill she was being overwhelmed by now. Which was…/

She had dealt with Volley’s threatening behaviour sanguinely and decisively by dismissing him outright…../

The only help the movement could offer was to instill her with enough confidence to break Volley’s stranglehold over her, for the leader paid Claiborne back her stolen fifty pounds with the greatest prudence, and the highest level of snobbery. He said to her not to shrink from nor to flinch at his hard exterior, I told her this was a sham and I said that if she followed my instructions she could not be harmed in any way, unless she had greatly diminished and decreased his outer appearance which the leader had dismissed as a cheap scam.

He knew because it was his forte, a proudly held up strength, but from my personal stance it was compromised by comparison to the others who we ran with in those days. For him it was so precious that it became his justification for, almost his reason for, the swagger and put on airs, not an attribute but instead a negative replacement for the very highly prized and yet oddly, and depressingly, absent attributes the whole pack were denied. Volley was vain.

Their main aim was to pretend they were violent. Their subsidiary, tertiary plans were never realized, were signed over to the price of their false images. So, Volley and Jock’s mission to confound Claiborne and Claiborne’s jolly quest, as they pronounced in their lair late at night when Volley hoped nobody was listening who he couldn’t trust, dwindled almost into insignificance. He was so easily distracted and led astray by his fervent need to maintain a cool image. This image was the sole way to avoid, interrupt or defeat him.

The only effect of the leader’s understated brand of snobbery for Claiborne was her lost money had been paid back to them, the terms of the contract were understood and honored. The effects and ramifications of the leader’s prudent handling of Claiborne’s precarious, vertiginous psychic state almost since the outset, by contrast were not. He had salvaged her from homelessness, and intended good towards her mother Lauren, not only because he possessed a naïve sense of fairness, but also because he had always afforded to any especially risky manoeuvre a carefully thought out and, in practice, a rationally ordered, somewhat sensitive standpoint on money, the movement and the combination of the two.

His stance resuscitated the aspects of Claiborne’s character that would make her the heroine, the prime mover and the only being who faced up to the ineluctably harsh reality of Denny’s takings and Jock’s hassle. She felt guilty and grateful and decided that she would soon hand the Almanack over to the leader, come what may.

The case as it stood rested on his ability to summon up much needed signs of encouragement, and the best way of mustering up Claiborne’s own courage was to take her aside and lecture her about the important things she was liable to have forgotten. For she was prone to skim over her bond with her mother, the emotional links with the Sanctuary, and above all else injustice everywhere. The horrible success of those villains who’d stolen the pages from her book, the traitors and criminals whose minds were at work to aptly and potently remove the promise of victory from out of her grasp, and to land her in the murky mire was something she never glossed over.

As my main employment was to continue to carefully delve under the skin and regard the influence of the CULT amongst the hobos and junkies in town, I tried to dissuade her from any regrettable course of action, in particular any one act that might hurt the leader’s good name, the CULT itself or any of the innocent followers.

**CHAPTER 33**

Certain beautiful women from Moscow had entertained the pensioners. Having met them on holiday Naomi Dean invited them to any celebration including a stroll or even a therapy session and had seen to it that they weren’t absent from the Sanctuary. When an actual real and substantially significant event happened they rolled in. They refused to diffidently to adhere to the admonitions of the rule book and the other tenants by not smoking drugs and they had created a negative and fairly unfavorable impression, had tipped the balances and the equilibrium in their favour by carrying highly fearsome handguns. Bertram thought of the novel and exciting women from Moscow and Prague. He thought deeply of the fact they were Roman Catholic which in itself defamiliarized him and intoxicated him. Possibly he suspected they could act as a scapegoat for the Revue but perhaps he wasn’t close enough friends with them and they might use their handguns in some unforeseen and dangerous fashion.

On second thoughts it would probably not elate them if someone instigated investigations into their dimly lit lives. Vivid, fictitious pictures raced into his head of crossfire in the cult's yard. Unfortunately, one of Daniel's narrow mindset wasn’t really interested in anyone at all. Bertram felt that if he had lived at an institute less filled with potential of a low caliber then maybe they wouldn’t get people to instruct there who could just as easily have positions of high office.

If he had lived his old age at one of those institutions where the flotsam and jetsam of the world went to bully scare and ward off pensioners he would probably have been handed a light punishment and never heard of it again. Nevertheless, different types of retirement establishments would sometimes react in the same way to seditious newspapers though he supposed they might manage to avoid such strict punishment as was doled out at this one and therefore it was likely they'd be able to expand and go underground.

A type of Orwellian State did exist for the lovesick old inhabitants in that era and the price for freedom of speech remained quite high and the more you wanted to say the more you would have to be willing to give up but now the ex-models were here maybe there was a way they could shoulder the blame for something.

The interrogations continued for a while but he couldn’t remember how long for or what lines of investigations they flowed along. Precisely the ones he didn’t like their inquiries definitely weren’t expected. Somehow they managed to argue and lead him around over and under until when the interviews were done they pronounced a verdict he had been acting in a gang with the sexy ex-models in the hare-brained scheme.

His casual attitude and lazy reflections about life stopped working effectually anymore in the company of these figures' rampant attack. Unlike with Bertram, for Morris they did not have the same soulful heart-rending effect on him when he entered so forlornly.

He actually lost his self-control they said and his self-possession with the director and his deputy and continued his cruel campaign against the establishment despite the consequences.

They asked him, blanking and stifling any interruption, why he had set out to damage so lasciviously and lewdly the cult and its reputation. I think that it was their vicious manner and their hypocritical stance which made him say that they would never get any even half-hearted apology from him for The Revue. This infuriated them to the point of shaking a fist at him because they never looked favorably upon those who had the audacious impudence to disagree with their reasons and opinions.

“How many copies did you make?” they had asked him foolishly they realized when he said he did not make enough.

“You’re gambling your future away” they said. “You have your place here to think about.” They meditated how much fun it was going to be to wreck the guy’s life by sending him off some place from which he'd never return. I think it crossed the deputy's mind to ask if anyone took drugs for which he'd a plan or two stored up.

“Until you accept that you haven’t a right to tell me what to do I will not give up to your unreasonable demands.” Morris said. He actually decided not to capitulate falter and cave in in this situation and thought it wise to argue his case more strongly – it was something he truly believed in. Not all of them would have done the same thing in the calamitous situation and for his tried-for bravery he soon paid a price. I do not think that the legality of the matter was really in question; I think that the antagonism probably took place on a personal level.

Musing that his penance would be confined to a spell at home with his family he grew to be exhilarating to listen to, to hear him taking swipes at them no holds barred until he tried to stand up and nicely segue out. He went nowhere fast. The leader lined up other staff members for reinforcements like a whistle his message went far and wide to every straggler of the phallanx.

For the other one Naomi her interview took much the same form as that although word spread later that the cult generally perceived her ignorantly blamelessly to have gone astray into an imaginary realm because of the rest of the group. While the leader and a conscientious ex-priest could not quite understand the content of the furious articles he chose the most obvious route in declaring to her, playing on her weaknesses, much of what she had written heresy not just blasphemy. He almost thought her aim sinful and evil and motivated by desperate deathly measures. She addressed his intention as appearing biased in favor of passivity in all spheres of the pensioner’s life. While nothing used to surprise him nothing she said could force him not to attend to or to waver from his firmly held set of beliefs. Even righteous arguments if in opposition to his cozy comfortable ideology were thrown into a proverbial store where any harsh truth went for messing things up for the system she had benighted. Many people will have come to notice broad and wide-ranging similarities between this cult leader and other domineering figures at different stages in their own lives presumably. He was prone to investigate all evidence of the breaking of rules or the flaunting of codes of conduct to the best of his ability. Never before had he scoured his contact list for some way to victimize the guilty group and to win for himself popularity with some elements of the movement, but he supposed his posting depended on it at last.

This tendency the clique would see led him to pick out the most minor offences excursions from an accepted code of conduct which he would systematically exaggerate into the wildest and most blatant fantastical disregard of what he stood for and was at all times supposed to enforce. For example, when Claiborne was found one ordinary afternoon absent-mindedly strolling past the window of his office swallowing large gulps out of a can of fizzy Coca-Cola he rushed out of the meeting he had going on and flew out of control at her the poor old dear.

“What are you doing? Stop that, Claiborne. Finish it inside. You’re not allowed to drink outside.” Rudy prayerful of some disaster happening to the retired urchin controlled his rage yet he was seething he was about to order that the can of Coca-Cola be removed from her mouth mid-gulp and the remainder finished only when out of the sight of passers-by who almost certainly would be mortified by such an intense lack of rectitude.

At least the suspicion was true that he spent whole swathes of time peering out of his window observing people. And he must have been a very unhappy sort of person himself if such minor accidents could provoke him quite that much. Terrifying for Bertram to assume how he’d react if he ever found out about the girls on his terrain from Moscow or wherever they truly hatched from. He staunchly sought out new ways of taking steps towards a form of ultimate control over his grey haired charges; capital punishment was forbidden but persuading his rich contacts to send them somewhere like a jail gave him such solace he dreamed of it everyday that something wrongful erupted.

Once they had managed to acquire enough to be almost sure they had the culprits, there came the search of where they stayed to be yet more sure they had the culprits. Seeing as everything connected to the writers in the last seventy-two hours had become tinged with hideousness and the devil. Swift and immediate was the assumption that clear confirmation of one guilty crime could constitute many further guilt-ridden actions: the punishment was also swift and immediate. It took minutes for rooms, cupboards beds to be ransacked and possessions searched thoroughly. Because there had not been time to either hide it properly or remove it to any safer place the battered typewriter was found quickly. If they tried to find other marks of the crime they were by the end of the first month after their deportation to another home successful.

Bertram was not acting properly or carrying out his duties ever according to the rules. In one of the cupboards was a boxful of collected detritus – cigarette packs and the empty bottles of alcohol – and this product plentifully signified that it was him who was the ringleader and that he had been a brazen conspirator in the decline that had set in at the Sanctuary two summers before.

The others did not have problems as whale-sized as his turned out to be many years later. To admit to his role in the magazine he had had to go up ascending furtively the forbidding stairway. But as Jock was merely removed for a week or two they must have felt some desire to keep Morris there. Although he smoked there was nothing conducive to proving this. He was able to go home and explain things to his doting grandchildren safe in the knowledge that no real lasting damage was going to be done to his untarnished self-image. In their eyes his mental health issues were all some kind of conspiracy, and he was being labelled so that he could be erased. They didn’t realize the half of it.

While he was away, he missed out on the traditional silence during Sunday morning prayers which was an age-old method for the pensioners to subdue, not express their feelings and a way which en masse could not really be retaliated against. You would on some of those traditional occasions either sing the songs too loud or as a whole stop singing completely. It got them nowhere.

Bertram still managed to persuade the replacement deputy leader to give him the glowing reports that paved the way for a hard won place in the mature department at the Open University.

Of course there were those who this filled with envy and its partner malice because they felt it was unfair and agreed that Bertram was inordinately silly and thick. But perhaps in the wider world the world of romance true and inevitable people had a clearer perspective on this sort of concern. Lauren didn’t have any clear definitive answers or explanations for that; maybe it was just his personality shining through despite the strained credentials and assessments the cult followers would have provided for him if they hadn’t focused on Jock and Morris. Possibly and in order to give him a second chance everyone was willing to let the past recede apace it was as if they had been forgiven for a cardinal error or murder. Numerous problems arose at home for both Agatha and Jock. Their oddball forty-something kids were informed and as they lived abroad at that time they had to return to their enfolding humble embraces.

“Really we ought to do more, you see. It is very serious indeed and I shall be talking to the board of organizations about him and the two others involved.”

“But, can’t you see it was just a very mature thing to do and his punishment should be the less due to the fact he is not an actual adult, he is in fact senile?” the two sets of pensioners pleaded with them scared of the threat of maximum disgrace.

Then the argument went round and round with the deputy leader threatening to sue and generally being his usual intimidating cowardly self to his weak opponents. As a result of this Agatha's wealthy offspring who were unaccustomed to this sort of thing (unless you included the numerous calls for them to get a proper haircut) came away feeling let down and enraged at what they discerned was the inadequacy of the cult's quality of care. They should have taken some solace from the fact that they had not caught and removed Agatha and Jock for some run-of-the-mill reason such as could be found in the cult's rulebook. It had novelty value, Naomi said.

The upshot was the comparatively minor input Naomi had had in The Revue was outweighed by the end results. It wasn’t even her idea because she immediately blamed some person the others called her uncle, who gave her some keys. The silver-plated keys. She was used to pawing them and fumbling with them but they were hardly relevant so perhaps she had just gone along with the others for the sake of one or two bad not altogether witty jokes. Like the suicide victim who achieves only moments too late the resolution to her woes and knows it was easy to find.

The staff in the cult didn’t care now about the good intention behind all of it. What had begun as harmless fun hadn’t been interpreted in the right light so that results were achieved so that scapegoats were made. For example, the article spoofing a conversation between two apparently gay men on the telephone made to look like a version of the leaked conversation between two celebrities was not their ideal. Nor was the “10 things not to say when you are caught smoking drugs” plus “10 things to do when you are not caught smoking drugs” their perfect ideal. It had ten quips including “Get lost” or “Oh. I didn’t realise the cigarette was there in my fingers” or “Just let me finish it then I’ll come with you”. They seemed witty to themselves anyway. When the aghast followers heard about the kind of content therein they pleaded the humor was not intended for the leaders nor would they have gained much from it. They were not standing up for the jokes and humorous sketches it had but for their friends’ rights to a fair taste of justice tempered with mercy.

The episode affected the other members of the Dean family in differing ways. His young sister starting out at the Abbey was repelled by everything, she was slightly reserved and shy. “The Revue's diary is pleased to announce that the nurses have all been demoted for gross acts of lunacy and/or perversion.” Jock thought some status might be garnered from it in itself but an indefinite eviction had more of a negative effect than anything else he could whip up from his satirical reserves. For his family members it never really reached a point where they said they considered themselves unfortunate or where they did not go across to the point where they considered it to be more than a vaguely misguided plot or furthermore they felt it was sheer lunacy to allow this to happen on top of the smoking.

In any case, Bertram soon left the cult. Packing his bag took hardly any time at all and though he felt he had many possessions the brevity of the gathering-up and stowing-away process still blew his mind. He had no more clothing than he needed for day-to-day living and they all fell neatly into a single carry-case in five minutes. Bertram paused for once, took stock, looked around him and reflected on his success on his failure on how he could so rapidly have lifted up and swept away these ties to the fixed and stable universe of residing at the Sanctuary.

There remained the hi-fi of course – a good quality one with a lighted-up panel on the front that flaunted an ever-changing graphic equalizer – no problem, that too went into cardboard boxes in a matter of seconds. The posters on the wall of Leonardo da Vinci and the Tower of Babel pulled down and rolled up and placed tearfully with all the books leaving their pre-appointed home and travelling off to a new abode went as well.

And then went the Asian tapestry rug his aunt had returned with from her travels too and it struck them all as passionately as ever it did how low he had stooped and they baulked at what his aunt’s analysis would be of the whole affair. Before you go away on a holiday or a foreign trip you usually have to book in advance and you have to choose carefully what clothes you will need for the likely changes of weather and different predicaments you might come across. This was different. He may have occupied himself with taking everything away but no sincere forethought had occurred. He had not decided to leave of his own accord and he acted upon instructions given half an hour earlier to be concluded an hour later. He did not even have time to go and fetch some food not that he relished that as an idea.

The confidence he had in preserving himself and his needs had dissolved the moment when Morris had knocked on his door and without waiting for any answer demanded to be told what exactly he had done with the typewriter. He had found out he used it and the ditzy look on his face summed it up:

“So it was you?” he said, smiling. “None of my business? Don’t worry I’m not going to tell anyone anyway. You can trust me...” And his psychiatric doctor entered the room from around a nearby corner. This was of course not the end of the story. Three of the troop headed back home and one managed to stay on as a tenant on a temporary Sanctuary visa. The second instalment of the Revue five years later never lived up to the sparkling wit of the first.

Walking downstairs, escorted by Morris’s frowning shrink, from his now bare little study Bertram met no-one. He did not even have to put his bags down on the asphalt ground as his daughter already waited there for him. Not quite crying Lauren had already projected an image into her mind of her old man deserving very much less ill-treatment and unfair comment. She never actually implemented it but she perceived herself tempted to launch a personal crusade on his behalf.

She kicked back against the cult’s system’s sorrows more than her mother who they had yet to tell. Her brothers and sister also in the cult rallied around telling her it made them dizzy with happiness and they could see nothing to worry about. As the car revved up and moved slowly away from the curb a group of pathetic pensioner’s was gathering. Bertram disconsolately waved his own form of goodbye to a few of them and then he and Lauren made their departure for the next few weeks of comfort in Lauren’s country house in the county of Kent.

\* \* \*

A lot now depended heavily upon the next week. On the day when Morris decided to go back to the Sanctuary’s territory he arranged to meet Naomi and Agatha in a hotel restaurant near the station at about lunchtime. When they had all arrived one or two minor topics cropped up that they wished to broach. Jock now shared lodgings with his new best friend Volley. He desperately needed cash but considered it dishonorable to accept any from Naomi who offered to help him out financially. He noticed his reluctance to do it and refused it in a way both soft and firm.

Possibly it would have eased and erased any feelings of guilt he had over the result of the Revue affair. Of course camaraderie still existed between them but the joking around they put firmly in the past and it was tainted with regret at what tangible knock-on effects the magazine had brought tumbling down from the void. They were nearly the oldest God-less urchins in existence.

The meeting continued somewhat hollow though now in that the rather more than serious consequences rather less than funny consequences could never be ignored to create a semblance of happiness and contentment. Naomi Dean and Agatha both dressed in casual attire of jeans, blouses whereas Morris still clothed himself in the grey baggy slacks and grey thrift store merchandise of Rudy ’s times. Both knew that it would be difficult to maintain any close ties now that they had taken off from the common ground of the locale and the allure of nasty lucre had replaced that unity.

Agatha and Naomi considerately invited themselves to go along to have a look-see at this new flat and would have gone but when he said no they preferred to head back and haunt the Sanctuary's precincts with the models. Later they would be able to exploit the models’ untold infamy to both visit Morris and discreetly to see Jock.

Strolling along they took in the old buildings like tourists and a model led them into one of them without any of the movement’s cronies spotting their presence. Agatha duly exploited to the hilt this newly-acquired position and status. Donning the act of the laxity and lack of probity of a girl about twenty-five years old and an upstanding citizen was half the battle. She could have really cemented her image by lighting up a fag right in the middle of the courtyard.

It was around this time that Morris’s innate nature was put to a slight test. As they now considered him an outlaw as well as in a very slight way a brave hero to many younger people he had to still behave according to his principles and act responsibly so as not to increase his notoriety as a hack.

Whilst many people were around who would welcome and thrive on a level of fame it yet remained for Morris to reject the corruption and vanity which lay therein. A smaller stage can still contain all the tests of character that those in the public eye are faced with. Not that Morris showed any natural inclination to those qualities most celebrities are in possession of to any extent. This fact had not as yet worked against him had not spewed him out as love had and enabled him to survive despite acquiring much less than illustrious personal attributes shyness, depression, fear held him back from such glorious quests.

Really long before he found very little to look forward to apart from these evenings away from the cult and just one in ten would stand out memorably. An advantage of the current predicament was that (as ex-tenants) Morris and Bertram could just turn up there without seeking the cult's permission or signing their name in before they left and then again when they came back.

Bertram was reveling in the liberty his new lodgings granted him:

“It’s so strange this. Not having to get up at eight in the morning, not having any deadlines to meet.” he said. Nobody around there ordered him about or dictated to his every movement, but I think perhaps that stood as an example how seldom they cared for what happened. Though only a couple of days ago, already times had moved on and few people still talked about it in town. Bertram had expected wrongly the leader to call him in again but it never happened to materialize. The next new piece of information to arrive was that, by a strange twist of fate, he could make his personal choice between them asking him to leave forever and becoming a visitor. It seemed Rudy thought both Bertram and Morris exerted an unhealthy influence over the, in particular, attractive female members of the Sanctuary and his removing him from the small stage would wipe out any potential for further damage of that sort.

They remembered the time they discovered Bertram reading some nefarious piece from letters in a magazine called “Forum” to the ladies in the next-door rooms when a follower surprised him by then entering doing her tour of duty. Some fumbling and secreting of the journalism piece then an unnerving silence that spread throughout the room at the high speed with which they gathered someone was standing there incognito. The follower knew full well something was going wrong for the ladies but decided to let it pass making movements as though on her way out and then immediately attacking again still holding fast to the errand which had sent her there in the first place. Bertram said:

“I was just reading them out one of my old bedtime tales.” He hollered to the follower on his own way out.

“Shouldn’t your lights be out by now?” she inquired.

This brought to mind the other earlier instances she had stumbled upon them: instances of Morris and Agatha in various stages of composure. In one instance a guided tour being given to some prospective oldies and with a knock on the door the guide had just walked in without waiting and certainly had not expected anybody to occupy the study during lesson time. A gap in the timetable that afternoon meant he had to return to his rooms which he had chosen to fill with some time spent with this pleasant lady who he knew not very well at that stage but just well enough to be alone with at a very nice quiet time. The old couple did not overly impress the nurse by what they then let the visitors see or what the husband saw because the husband quickly and proudly shielded his wife’s eyes. By blocking her view and then shoving her out the door whence they came he protected her from our illustrious personages state of semi-undressedness.

The guide had very little left to say and made some excuses as they trundled dazedly down the corridor about how he would check the other rooms were emptied in future and therefore they just had to wait and he would set a more glowing example of the residents' of the cult's overall deportment.

**CHAPTER 35**

A long time before an important incident took place during one evening when the old boys were supposed to be fasting for their blood tests and haemoglobin levels the next day. Although Morris had not done any especially strenuous exercise for a few weeks if not months he lay down on his bed and fell fast asleep having forgotten entirely about his parsimonious instructions for the evening before: fasting and drinking only water or the craft and design work he had to have completed by that time tomorrow. Whether it was the effect of having one or two illicit beers at the pub in town or not, I could not say, but his face betrayed all the contentment of a resting angel after a strenuous day’s good deeds.

They rudely foreshortened his tranquility though when the follower on duty who was also a sports instructor slash monk came suddenly into the festering room and decided that this scene could brew up no longer. His volleyed words sounded as though they were coming from a long way off and Morris only caught the last of them.

“What are you doing there? Are you tired?” the follower uttered questioningly.

“Too much sporting pursuits today. Got tanked up. Sorry ‘bout that.” he said. Even in a state of exhaustion and only just waking from reverie he snappily concocted some false information about his antics with which to cunningly deceive the follower and therefore to continue with putting notes in his draft of The Revue’s predecessor from a few months earlier. More than pleased with himself he went immediately back to peaceful sleep when the follower had left the study without even bothering about reminding him of anything other than the big meeting scheduled for the next day.

On some occasions then he did not seem to live up to any sort of fantastic reputation or deserve the high position of greatest responsibility others had placed him in. Of course Morris never said profound things nor did he ever say particularly wise things but merely by existing into old age he had somehow nearly achieved and held onto a most decent position in this social scene.

\* \* \*

Lauren was after all Bertram’s partner – his interest, his symbol of desirability and his distraction from all things mundane or every day. She smoked and still smokes heavily to this day without fear of disease or dying. Now though she behaves far differently to the way she did then, on any score other than that. Unfortunately for Bertram, she had gone wading through a myriad of other apposite swarthy guys starting a new one within days of ending one; the last one a businessman, the next a lawyer. She maintained friendships with a lot of the blokes, most of whom thought her to be a handsomer specimen than the proportion. She started off her relationships herself, and the offer they hardly ever turned down simply because of her appearance. Unbeknown to Bertram, she always guaranteed success and could choose whoever she wished to go out with she exerted such a strong magnetism. Undoubtedly it became clear Bertram considered her the best turned out in the cult anyway and their relationship lasted longer than most relationships that literally died.

Although they both kept in touch after it had all virtually ended with Pirsig and although they both maintained a semblance of good spirits after the fact when in company together they did not feel, according to Adler’s interpretation, as much for each other as once upon a time before Pirsig had intervened.

At any rate, she always used to keep in contact with blokes unless they died claiming it was harmless of course, after she had shunted them off, which might be seen cynically as holding on to what you hope will come around again or it may just be an innocent expression of … of … well cynically speaking it might appear just odd.

Some people seemed to be more inclined to forgive other’s faults and to see foibles and faults just as part of a wider package so they didn’t even hope for perfection and that was fine with Bertram. One should remain optimistic in spite of the actual facts and try not to judge other people based on one’s own experience. He for his part suspected it was just social not personal. Fair enough then.

Lauren not the brightest nor the most intellectual girl found a friend in Bertram from about the age of fifty though never any real, memorable, sexual chemistry between them at all evolved. They lived near to each other although sometimes months passed when they did not so much as exchange a glance through each other’s windows although this did not make much difference to either of them and luckily they could carry on with their lives daily dealings neither of them feeling guilty or hurt.

Bertram now sojourned at home trying to work on his very essential work for the Open University when there came a rap on the window. This proved to be difficult no plain-sailing like other subjects he soon got discovered when he began to make up erroneous dates and invented events about which he was completely ignorant and at a loss. He shoved open the lint.

“How is it going?” his friend would ask him.

“Not too well. I really need Lauren to give me some advice.”

“How important is it?” the friend asked him.

“Not that essential” he lied.

“Perhaps we ought to send you on a religion conversion course at Easter” he remarked. These impromptu meetings were amusing escapades where no-one worked and they both drank a lot of illicit alcohol but sometimes against all odds information would be cajoled out of the air somehow and favourably improve the situations at hand.

Forms of subtle innuendoes set themselves up for people who did not put in the required effort or weren’t popular enough in short, but Bertram intended to give Lauren a positive report while he was there as now more than ever he had depression at how appallingly and incontrovertibly erroneous his oversight of her intrinsic sexual value was seen to have become, not to mention heard to be by his friends after Agatha’s death. Her situation has deteriorated because of me, he thought to himself, leaving only a little optimism for the intransigent future for the events as displayed herein.

When Lauren left the awkwardness behind, the plateau phase of complete depression now set in. Earlier in the day she had had to cope with harsh rejection from her favored target. Bertram’s system was as yet still unsuitable for one of her temperament; her prowess lay in those spheres which remained invisible to the powers of reason at the hallowed grounds of the Sanctuary as we have just seen after Naomi sparked off The Revue by sheer coincidence, purely for her diamond dealing uncle's furtherance of pleasure.

The length and breadth of the country none had taken notice of her endearing, beguiling but distracting charms and heart-rending honesty, except Bertram her devoted follower. Everyone soured, he took everyone aback, everyone could say they nearly took it to heart when he decided to apply most optimistic terms to Lauren in public. He proclaimed she was a fantastic coup de grace but mostly she was thought to be an irritant of catastrophic size to him.

The forces of superiority on the other hand could see no essential reason for such a diatribe as The Revue. You see it wasn’t physical but they would describe it as an assault, an onslaught if The Revue had been more real not merely imagined, and had been tangibly published or if it had generated profit. Harmless joviality was the prime motive and the conspirators thought that the abuse meted out only equaled the hard treatment that they had already received from the forces of superiority. The authors had known that rules stayed in place if they served a decent purpose, but remember the majority of the time this purpose eluded their senile minds reach and none loved the laws more for that.

Many of the cults sought to redefine and reduce the individuality of people with strictness and lethargy. The staff took extreme pleasure to do this as it obviated boredom for them, instilled that sense of power, and provided everyone on the board with a raison d’etre. The aforesaid aim: to instill the intention to improve failed, and the most avid, most strenuous efforts would never alter their objective to break the laws of the cult but then they said summarily “If I take that drug then I’ll probably be punished.” But maybe if you don’t steal, break rules or have passionate sex then it’ll go some way to relieving the punishment for the drug taking. The posse also wanted to think for themselves about money, to have their own identity, and to decide what was right and what was wrong by themselves in the outside world not just in this Rudy ’s cult of wrack and ruin.

The need for the pensioners to try and branch out into the public sphere with The Revue was trimmed back by staff therefore, and more extremely by the deputy leader who certainly managed to make them into scapegoats rather than into editors.

Sometimes for a minor offence like accidental light-fingeredness in the movement’s shop or feeling sick too often they would lure you forever into the role of martyr. Jock was renowned for that time he destroyed the toilets. Yet he possessed remarkable abilities at that feat and others, not least of which was a total adherence to rule-breaking even to poisoning. There were greater crimes of arson and lesser crimes of graffiti which you might have thought would not go without punishment because others regarded them as even more incendiary. In fact, the paradox was that flouting the larger of the rules in the rulebook more usually went under the radar of the law than breaking minor petty rules which they had discounted from the map.

Lauren tried to appease the surly deputy director with her pleas that The Revue was far better to have taken part in than say vice or racketeering. She felt terrible but she knew like time everything slips away, and not slowly, but it seeps away like a torrent down the streets’ drainage systems. But no analogy would suffice to shield her from her new-found role as a major enemy of the super-atomic framework they were enmeshed in, not as one of the herd and a follower in a pack of famished critics.

The deputy director certainly would pay no more lip service to the underlying reasons for the battery against the establishment even though it was at a more microscopic level than that.

Allow some people their interpretations, but everyone wanted to step into the breach: it was a formula to say they were going too far off track. So I suppose the troop hoped to save their little super-atomic realm from implosion. Or perhaps they saved themselves from forcibly becoming an island in the establishment of the townsfolk by slanderous and humorous critiques. The articles which sported with taped phone calls between adulterous lovers; mocking their deceit, their lust and their immorality, did not find a target in anyone in particular. To young, inexperienced students of gerontology, they would have seemed like they would raise a laugh, but not set fire to an established hierarchy handed down from generation to generation. The “ten things to say when you are caught taking drugs” dubiously had ten or so short quips which really went nowhere hurt no-one except someone with a chip on their shoulder or a selfish streak for misinterpretation.

Bertram paced frantically up and down when bad tidings struck him; news that displeased him greatly, that staggered him. The reports said that the deputy director had given them a choice between retracting everything they had said in the magazine for a petty nominal punishment or holding steadfast to their opinions and being metaphysically annihilated. The dilemma appeared then that Rudy thought Jock had molested a tenant (politically or metaphorically speaking) and he likened him to Socrates and that if he removed him from our sanctuary of the cult his potential infractions could be put aside never to harass anyone again.

Several times before, I think you should understand, he had apprehended Bertram aggressively: whilst reading to younger pupils and instigating rebellious ideas and whilst publicly criticizing those rated inferior by general consensus slagging off unfortunate specimens such as Lauren because she was immature and a healthier specimen with a limited appeal to the “cool crew”.

When the staff who were searching for other misdemeanors of far less note discovered him skipping exercise and locking bicycles to lamp posts, he so ready to oblige, showed himself so friendly polite and self-effacing that they tended to acquit him to skirt round too great a problem.

Lauren moped around as she used to do most mornings in the resting rooms at eleven o’ clock during break between more breaks. She did not feel tired but went on the prowl for some fun with her friends like Naomi who all kept themselves to themselves reading, drinking tea, sharing gossip until they had to go back to their learning.

Suddenly without any notice an unfamiliar or foreign voice hailed her cheerfully as she progressed down a corridor. The voice at the top of the hallway belonged to a friend from outside whom she had formed an attachment to at a party in the Christmas holidays and he approached her enthusiastically unlike most of her peers with his arms ready for an embrace and she paused to remember he was a lot older than her from his manner his appearance and felt now slightly overawed and slightly bashful.

Concealing that feeling Naomi told him in no uncertain terms they ought to try to escape to the changing rooms with haste to stop any squares, such as Lauren I suppose, reproving her for having a visitor without anyone’s permission. Already minutes later she had glimpsed one of her peers casting a jealously critical eye so briefly she barely noticed it but she absorbed magnanimously the resentment therein.

“Let’s go in here. We can have a fag or whatever.”

“What! Just a fag? You want just a fag?” He said this sounding similar to the genie who offers all gifts to you but mostly at an inconvenient and momentous cost. They both entered the bathrooms a bit cautiously as it was as ever insalubrious and not very conducive to romantic or any other activities.

“Yuck. This place is disgusting” he joked. “Quick, in here.” Naomi nervously hurried into the cubicle and, in seconds, had locked the door behind them. Looking at him he terrified her. He really seemed to her a huge amount younger and what was worse he seemed nicer than before so nice in fact she was on the point of falling head over heels in love then and there on the spot.

“What’s the matter? You look uncomfortable?” he said in a solicitous and tender way.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just I haven’t seen you for a while. It’s a bit odd for me you rolling up unannounced.” She kicked herself and bit her lip in anguish: here back in town she heard herself talking like a true angst-ridden teenager which was exactly what she tried her best to cover up. There was so much shame in the feelings this man breathed life into inside her reluctant frame. Anyway they then proceeded to have the most wonderful conversation about…well not about anything per se.

It went in and out of subjects around and under until Naomi knew not what they had spoken of for the last half an hour. At the very least half an hour. For in her state it seemed like both twenty seconds and in terms of their linking of minds two days.

Naomi was perhaps in a state of bliss as regards boredom and yet it could all shatter so suddenly if one of her residence mates had overheard them speaking that truthfully to one another. Or again if they wanted to use this to begrudge her what she had uncovered of thrilling experience, when their lives on the other hand were so mundane and so very petty. She began to feel more powerful than they and knowing this to be virtually criminal tried to tone it down so they would not regard it as some fault of hers; the awful crime of overarching and worthless atheism. The illusory and mysterious guest now before he left her alone again wanted to give her some of the latest news which he warned her would displease and dishearten her but that was something she must know:

“I know I have got it now and…and I want to die. Will you help me?”

“What do you mean?” Naomi asked shocked, bewildered, frightened and searching for ways to dissuade him from any such plan of action. She had no intention of helping him but when she refused to assist him in committing suicide she saw with dismay and sympathy the invisible damp tear coursing down his cheek and his chin.

“I beg you. You’re the only one that can help.”

“I’m sorry, there are many things which I would gladly do for you but you said you weren’t even sure you have Aids.” She said.

“Well I am sure so…” He produced a short knife from somewhere. Then he told her that it wouldn’t hurt him as he was prepared and he was in love with her, nothing she could do with the dagger would hurt him.

“There’s no way I’m doing this, the cops would call it murder!” Naomi went on to ask the usual serious questions: if he had had a test, how he got it and whether it was painful at the moment. They had talked for nigh on an hour in the toilets about the Christmas holidays about his other irrelevant girlfriends. He had six or so continuously apparently, and planned on waiting till he was about fifty to decide which one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with – in a more down-to-earth and homely manner. He disliked the idea he used them or deceived them in any way but they were so besotted by him and they all knew he did take the heroin or most of them knew anyway.

At this juncture a door was opened and voices laughing and some loud uncouth movements became noticeable. Her fair weather friends playing silly games pretending to be fighting over nothing. Sniffing the air like rodents the couple caught a whiff of smoke and breaking the embrace turned around to witness them banging noisily on the door to the cubicle for a whole minute. When they lost interest in that pastime they rushed off to another place to pursue the jests of typical cult pensioners. However not without flinging a sinister threat that they would tell the director next time they saw him of the illicit shenanigans that was going on behind the closed cubicle door.

Normally sweet Naomi was aggravated badly so she sounded the alarm at the impending possibility of the angry leader’s punishments, and for good measure he shunted her outside of her mundane realms of experience as regards her anonymous Russian acquaintance’s bizarre request. Naomi with her current brown spiked hairstyle morphed into someone all the more redoubtable for these extensive pressures and knew full well she had to get out of there at this very instant.

Really trying to desert him quietly and without making a massive scene there she excused herself as politely and as naively as she possibly could and made her way off without conveying an impression of utter simplicity to the very someone whose implicit trust she still thought she needed so much.

“Okay, I’ll see you later” came the sullen and morose reply which suggested that such depression and such severe dejection no amount of consolation from her (or anyone else) was going to alleviate. Nobody else had the wherewithal for this and to help lift the mood. Her brain stayed at dizzying heights; nor did she really want to remain awake another moment. What she wanted was to sleep and sleep a long sleep and to absorb this strange concatenation of events.

When after nearly two hours of rest she could not give her friends the gift of an excuse for her comatose condition their astonishment was beyond categorization and beyond belief, and they felt they were being treated like dirt.

After Naomi had woken from her slumber that morning she went to the changing room, like yesterday, urgently. While recouping her strength there as some strangers were outside she listened with great care. Several minutes went by during which she simply could not match the voices to those of anybody who was in the cult. What is more they were in an unfamiliar form of dialect arguing and shouting; although she had no idea why it deeply unsettled her mind. She knew full well that at the Sanctuary no-one talked like this.

Next on her menu was to go outside and see with her own eyes who or what these foreigners were who caused the commotions. Gradually on the other side of the door the voices grew milder and more subdued. In spite of that as soon as Naomi set foot outside the door of the changing rooms the orators began mauling her with unexplained and as unexpected force. She panicked and it became more than obvious no excuse, apology, or amount of ignorance would make them leave her in peace. What she saw for herself was that they were expressing as would doting mothers their desire to nourish, protect, and defend the foreign man she had been seen with in the toilets earlier the previous day.

Naomi managed to resist calling on her friends Lauren, or Bertram who she had seen around earlier. She used all the means at her disposal to try in vain that day outside the cloakroom to reach a mutually agreeable understanding, or a form of treaty with these good-natured but temperamental associates of that creepy man possibly sent by Pirsig who had contracted Aids and wanted her to kill him.

Once his associates had claimed that the police force ought to be called in Naomi knew there was naught else for her to do except try to with as much alacrity as possible make her departure from that pernicious situation as quickly as possible. She ran for it. Despite not rating her chances as highly as usually, and despite knowing she should not have many and various options left at her disposal she made for the door outside.

One of the grand-mothers grabbed her by the thin arm and tried her best to pull her backwards inside the old building. This fell short of its aim however and as luck would have it she availed herself of most of her dissipating strength to bolt rapidly away across the old, familiar courtyard. It would have made quite an ornate picture; however, there was no-one around to discern her miniature sprinting figure dwindling down the horizon.

Such a shame that speeding away across a yard which was a customary place of refuge and safety but was now under threat, she was on the run and under danger of arrest. When she looked around over her shoulder the mal a droits were far out of sight – still she could hear their squawks echoing from some unidentifiable dark corner or other. It was a little further to go until she would really feel safe, out of reach of the mal a droits and when she passed under the heavy half-shut gate she slowed almost to a standstill and stooped to her knees crouching breathless and panting. So having regained her composure and having paused for a few breaths she took stock and had to make a plan that would suffice.

“Where can I hide? Until now everything in my life has been like Jackanory. Now it’s suddenly turned into Stephen King. What can I do? I’m obviously on my own and who’ll believe my side of the story?” she said. With such gloomy ruminations she knew why it would take more than a few years to recover her former innocence and wished with all her palpitating heart she could become more of a heroic and responsible adult at once. Then possibly she could think laterally about an escape from the quandary she now found herself immersed in as opposed to the after effects, the come down from the drugs.

Then, sinking deeper and deeper into a morass of shame, guilt and self-torture she drew attention from other The Sanctuary pensioners completely unaware of the reasons for her plight. Not blind however to the fear imprinted on her wizened face like a stamp of necessity they inquired what the hell mattered so much, but she considered her life to be in danger from some evil quarter and telling them could offer no real way out or assistance now that this scandal had taken place. Off she went to the next stage in her holiday from reality and wishing it was so she began to mutter to them how powerful she was and how the force of her innate soul had to be reckoned with in order to ward off the supernatural enemy who was so clearly hurtling towards her pushing her in the wrong direction. By this I mean the military authorities in hot pursuit.

**THE END**

Extra material:

Notes…..

Claiborne was at home, in tears. She had beaten someone up, again. But this time she had not turned on the waterworks because of the fighting, but because her mother had decided not to let her remain in the school another minute longer. She was inside the main building saying goodbye to Volley, when Jock approached the pair. Lunging at Jock, Claiborne’s wrath was not due to being summarily expelled from “Silver-land High School”, it was owing to Jock’s surprise entrance. Jock himself, flabbergasted that he was unlucky enough to meet her, especially considering the fifty pound note was on his person at this stage, defended himself from her physical abuse. Soon the abuse got rowdy: and soon they both flew into a rage which Volley only wanted to make worse and worse.

Bertram

Mostly Naomi and likewise Agatha, on the other hand, were the ones who knew and avoided the pitfalls of the nouveau riche, but of course they too had picked up negative malignant character traits as a result of pursuing wealth matters. Naomi usually did not mind in the slightest feigning attitudes, if she had seen a man about the place who aroused her senses. When Naomi first had met Adler she had gone immediately into man-eater mode. She had smiled more widely, moved more carefully, avoided looking directly at his effete porkpie hat and modified her intonations. These alterations, and others were all done so fast and so abruptly you could not even tell they had happened unless you actually knew her a long time before. Like Agatha, she daringly placed herself in the path of any seemingly cool monster of a man, as if to say she was ready for him and understood him, but not to say she was frail or fallible or teasing him.

Often Naomi sulked morosely because she thought it so important whenever she was rebuffed. Normally, simple ecstasy took over when her methods did work to her advantage. As the leaves were falling to the ground in autumn so her self-satisfaction, her vaunting pride definitely dropped to base too. In general, he did take these matters to heart, and when personal proceedings hinge upon ineffable and ambiguous signs, those which so many observers try in vain to narrow down and tame, it is only natural that a miss causes boredom or monotony for anyone, anywhere, anytime. Not that himself lost his temper for any reasons to do with the opposite sex even when, like every time with Naomi, the quarry appeared to leprously arrive from the opposite end of the cultural divide.

They were similar in more ways than one would care to enunciate. Naomi was frequently and obviously set apart from the herd even when at a top private establishment that it would be fundamentally erroneous to not have noticed her mien, her carriage and her far from flat conduct with Adler. Her dress mainly was yet further removed from Adler's, or say Bertram's past girlfriends, her thought patterns complicated and grandiose. If you tried to envisage the interior cogitations of this “Lady” you would be struck by how non-straightforward and elaborate they were, not cheap like yours or mine.

To alien persons unlearnt in her ideals, the organization of her thoughts, she was perhaps pretty, perhaps a caricature, but above all aware of her origins in Marlowe place.

Naomi

//Once I had partially remembered the toilets scene, she claimed she had been raped. Pulling on the handle she opened the door to the STD clinic reverberating on its hinges: this is what life was like for a female pensioner. She regretted not telling someone, but Agatha knew him of course and he had said he would kill her, or worse, so she couldn't have backed out. He seemed to understand foreign climes and foreign places almost as if he was a native.

However, not just Naomi's vast experience of the whole gamut of human likes and dislikes but also when lodging a formal apology or when at the airport complaining about her ticket, she displayed an inscrutable wellness or vivacity no enemy could cheapen by copying or by casting to scepticism.

As when a new inventor tries to sell his idea to **a** conglomerate most of whom she met saw her as a curiosity, a pretty trinket, an emblem of breeding and a liar of extraordinary abilities.

Her rich relative the diamond dealer now in London, although he didn’t like to admit to it, heard Naomi’s repetitive words in the story about the billionaire with some amount of cynicism. He often wondered what she meant by this or that phrase and he would mooch over her idiosyncracies or her errors just as much as an illegal impostor investigating her life, **like the dead journalist David**, for insouciant motives would stumble. Whenever he came by the opportunity of treating Naomi to an occasional meal (after she was released they were often meeting in the city in those days once a week for dinner) he took the liberty of saying to her something which would possibly irk her, prevent her from ever allowing him to get any closer to her. One phrase he would prepare for every dinner outing. when they were entering Portia’s bistro one time he said: “Will you permit me to close this door behind you?” Sarcasm was his strongpoint. Also, he enjoyed undermining her by deliberately wearing socks which didn’t match, or by tricking her by arriving much too early and then in saying “I have an important score to settle, a gambling debt.”, he tried to make an exit much earlier than he was supposed to do. It was obvious his prompts to action of this nature were designed to mock, and yet sometimes Naomi just cast a suspicious look in his direction and let it sink beneath her forlorn and steady gaze. And, sadly, when sports he would ensure the bats would be broken before or during their games by a use of excessive force.

Adler at least, this was how Naomi thought, was not accustomed to creating scandal, or at any rate to fanning the flames therein. When someone at the old people’s home bragged about petting another old girl while in a relationship, and only a few weeks after they had pledged some kind of allegiance to each other, he was not only the first to hear of it but also the first to publicize the fact around the halls and corridors of the Abbey, until, when the less than fortunate girl it was mentioned to became hysterical and delirious, apparently he tried to console her, her hurt emotions but could not. Though Adler did try to make amends he said he had already spoiled a romance for the unlucky girl, and perhaps there was no justification. In this case the relationship could not be saved and destruction of an amorous couple’s heart-warming, sweet liaison the only allowable result, and then and there essentially must have thought, “It’s my fault”.

Outside by the pond, he mused languorously on his stage in this life: the lichen and fish were just as trapped in a small circumference as he was since the day he had been sectioned under the mental health act. Had???? possessed a clear template through which he could be less of an irritation he might have made it his mission to clamber out of the hole of being a nuisance: he had all the utensils at his disposal, every chance. He had a tiny irksome template nonetheless. He had honesty, an enviable capacity for it, but was not especially honest. Whilst he could lift the hearts of many more he spread depression to the souls of a sizeable proportion (mainly the weak). Naomi likened him to a new wardrobe which always looked fabulous on some model, but it appears when seen on your own body from your own perspective deficient and other. So when in a jaunty, humorous mood he often caused offence though he himself enjoyed the anguish and sorrow of others which sprouted from his terrible addict’s logic. Someone, standing by the murky pond kicked something with his foot the slight plopping noise inaudible.

By his overuse of insensitive remarks therefore he maintained fewer and fewer friends for more than a few months. He had to go looking everywhere for people to talk to and his mates changed seasonally. Not everyone knew that when he joked it was because he was a man naturally in fine fettle and high spirits. He used to say, “Verily my dear fellow.” Emulating old-fashioned phrases to raise a laugh but after a time the jests wore thin, and they began to seem less and less fun and directed at you yourself out of nothing but malice.