

a long dark rainbow

A LOVE STORY FOR ALL AGES

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Also by the author

Pegasus to Paradise:

Trauma, survival & the power of love in post-war Britain

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For the unlearned, old age is winter
For the learned, it is the season of harvest

The Talmud

PROLOGUE

His imagination drifted upwards and outwards, through the cold dankness of the November evening and was suddenly floating high above himself, looking down at his lone car, now speeding like a sleek missile, along a technicolour Hollywood freeway, headlights red hot, engine panting, seeking out his warm, soft destination.

Rick and Ilsa. Harry and Sally maybe. Scarlett and er... Oh, what the hell was his name? You know. Big guy. Tash. American. Lots of teeth. Frankly my dear I don't give a... shit! What was it? And Ben and Mrs Robinson of course... No... maybe not Ben.

Reluctantly, he returned to the darkness of the old Volvo; to its drone and musty smell, wipers complaining as they were asked to sweep away spots of threatening rain. He shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. No. Maybe not. Too young and embarrassingly naïve. Like me really. Back then. No, too close for comfort although how lucky was he? With Mrs Robinson. Lucky bastard.

The older woman. He'd always fantasised. Of his pale, young, virgin body being seduced by forgiving fingers and demanding lips. Gently and calmly and confidently instructed. All that overflowing heat, controlled and understood and the chance to explore such mysteries. Like Mrs S. from two doors up. Oh God, Mary. Do whatever you like. May I call you Mary, Mrs S.? You won't tell my mother? But he would have been straining through gritted teeth and she must have known. I blushed every time I met her, not to mention what was happening in my trousers. Fear. Embarrassment. Ignorance. What effective contraception they had been. What a shame.

What a waste. And Mrs S. had never done more than smile knowingly at him.

He glanced mechanically into the rear-view mirror. The motorway was almost empty at this time of night. He looked back again. Nothing much ahead. He yawned. I would have been a different person you know. Calmer. Confident. Reassured. Instead of being imprisoned in that churning body. Instead of making terrible mistakes. Wouldn't that have been better? For everybody? His right leg and shoulder were beginning to ache and he squirmed again in his seat in an attempt to relieve them. Not far now.

He smiled to himself in the darkness. He couldn't really complain. Here he was, at his age, driving through the night, dashing to a liaison, his mind and body hungrily sought by a beautiful woman. She had called him.

'Hallo Alex. How are you? Really looking forward to having you back again. I know it's a lot to ask after a long drive but... can you come tonight? Alex?' Her voice had sounded low and warm but also edged with concern. Had something happened? 'No, I'm fine.' His concern slipped away. 'I'm sorry. Just wanted to be with you. Talk to you. Listen to your stories. You know how I like your stories. Be close... Is that OK? I will understand if...'

He should have switched the television off by now and be contemplating the dark, empty screen, pondering the issues of the day, thinking about tomorrow, what to do. Trying to struggle upright into a sitting position, summoning enough energy to prepare for bed, maybe even considering a hot water bottle. Instead, here he was, gunning his muscle car towards a hot, hungry babe. Yeah. He took his left hand from the bony steering wheel and squeezed it between his thighs, feeling beneath the cold denim, hoping for fire and fullness, eyes straight ahead, although nobody could see him. Before, his energised blood, thick with ambition and excitement, would have surged around his body, beyond his control, filling every vein and artery and capillary with hot wonder, making every cell dance, gushing into his loins, making them quiver, engorging, pulling him inside out. But now, well, nothing much. Oh, come

on and he rubbed harder against the material, hoping for some response. There was a faint spark of interest. It was as if his brain and key parts of his body were no longer talking to each other. Not that that was anything new. In the past they had often ignored each other, preferring instead to go their separate ways, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Maybe now, they were sulking. He returned his hand to the steering wheel.

He had been about ten years old when he had had his first ejaculation. Although the event back then had been classified as ‘top secret, not to be revealed to anyone under any circumstances’, it didn’t come as a great surprise, for his increasing manual dexterity and flushed face had led him to suspect some fruitful conclusion for all his efforts. Intuitively, he knew that the impact – if not the outpouring – was of tsunami proportions and that his life was about to change forever. Having arrived, maybe prematurely, at this pivotal moment in his sexual growth, what he didn’t know, was, that others had already mapped out his future development. From flaccidity to awareness to virility to ignorance to repression to chronic masturbation to lust and fever to permitted access and more ignorance to mutual disappointment to adultery to abstinence and back to flaccidity. That’s how it was destined. That’s what was in store for him. And woe betide you back then if you ever dared to question that journey. And then, after almost seven long decades, he had met Samantha, at one of the occasional crossroads along the way, and they had dared to get off that conveyor belt.

He had to admit, he was older, much older now. Coming up to seventy. Didn’t feel like it though. As long as he kept clear of mirrors and passport booths and didn’t bend to stroke pets. Sometimes he forgot his own age. People would smile knowingly. ‘Of course you do darling.’ But he really did. Had to work it out. This year minus his year of birth – assuming he could remember the present year of course. ‘Oh, is that what I am? Knew it was around there somewhere. So how many years left I wonder?’ Sometimes he would talk to younger friends or relatives, see them laugh and chatter and wonder if they would be at his funeral. Which ones wouldn’t get the time off? Which

ones would have the flu? Which ones would just make excuses? He tried to imagine their faces, but much older. It was difficult and he gave up. Didn't seem macabre though, just inevitable. Weirdly and scarily inevitable.

Life was slipping past now, moving ever faster and faster. It had been like pushing an enormous glass boulder. Uphill to begin with but now, for the first time, it was beginning to slope downwards. Beginning to run away from him.

So, when did it first appear? About the age of ten? Eleven maybe? Something like that. Certainly by my teens.

It was kept in his bedroom to begin with, where he would be alone with it, even when his mother came in to pick up his clothes off the floor. She never saw it of course. Nobody else could see it. Suppose she had one of her own. Never thought about that before.

Somehow, it seemed to understand you, your fears and weaknesses. Outside, you might pretend to be somebody else, another version of you, one you preferred but in your inside world, your real world, it seemed to know everything and sat there, vast and dark and immovable, completely unimpressed, filling every corner, sometimes blotting out the very light. To begin with, it was black and rough, and you could just about see your reflection in it. I suppose there couldn't have been very much to see. Later, it became clearer and smoother, although never totally. You wanted to move it so badly, roll it away, roll it on, but you couldn't. Not then. Later, occasionally, it had rolled easily on a level but then, just when you thought you had it under control, you found yourself toiling uphill, pushing for all you were worth, trying to stop it rolling back on you. Sometimes you thought fuck it, ignore it, but it simply ignored you and waited, mute and impassive. Now, when you had trouble keeping up, it was beginning to run away like a bowl rumbling towards the one remaining tenpin.

He looked into the rear-view mirror again. Nothing. He glanced back at it. A small plastic rainbow hung there, swaying occasionally from a silver-coloured chain. Where did that come from? Maybe a boot fair or a charity shop or even a Christmas cracker. Perhaps it had come second-hand with the car. He

couldn't remember now but he had no thoughts of removing it. No, it felt strangely comforting, although a bit weird in the darkness. Can you have rainbows in the dark? Only in your head I suppose. Anyway, nothing for a long way back. Ahead, just those lorries in the distance.

He imagined her, now, waiting for him. Maybe she would be lying on her stomach, white sheet pulled up, to partly cover those cool smooth mounds that now spread below her still lean back. Needed to be stroked gently, just fingertips and with reverence and delight and surprise. Surprise at their shape and firmness. That had been unexpected. All those years of standing. Serving customers. Ruined her feet of course. And swimming. Funny how your occupation can eventually determine your body. Like gardeners. Bending, lifting, digging. Always brown, fit and nimble. Be a gardener my son and you will fuck forever... and now she was waiting for him. His chest squeezed and he swallowed.

She had said it didn't matter. She had said that, the very first time. She had smiled that sweet, sweet smile. It doesn't matter. We're both a little nervous. A little tense. It will be alright. I am sure there are other things we can do, but she had sounded uncertain. But there had been. Other things. Far more than he could possibly have imagined. He reached for the denim again and was met with warm indifference. It doesn't matter. And it's late. Yes, but it doesn't matter. You know that.

He realised he was driving too fast. His anxiety had spread to his right foot. He slowed down and switched on the radio. It jangled metallically and insolently. 'Hey we're young. We're cool.' He switched it off. Ahead, a lorry lumbered along the inside lane, its bulk vaguely determined by the glow of four red tail-lights. Funny how vehicles have tails. Like fish. No not fish. Fish glide and wriggle and dart. These are more like... elephants. Slow, steady and powerful... His mind drifted and his eyelids became heavy.

'Jesus!'

A lorry pulled out in front of him; red lights shouting, and his stomach yelped with alarm. Off the accelerator. Brakes on hard. Not too hard! Can't overtake. Can't look behind. Steady

now. That's close. Too close. Steadily the lorry pulled slowly ahead.

'Idiot. You bloody old idiot.'

*

He turned very slowly and deliberately into the tree-lined avenue, as if by doing so he could control the feelings now bubbling in his chest. Slow his pulse. Moisten his mouth. Ahead, he could see her car, waiting patiently for the sun to rise again and clear away the acid streetlight. It looked blacker in the false light.

She sits in that. Her body warms that seat. Her long legs move those pedals. Wonder why it isn't in the garage?

He drove quietly into the space behind, switched off the engine and lights and sat for a moment, feeling the motion of the journey plus the encounter with the lorry coursing through him. Made him feel foolish and he snapped at himself, 'Now for God's sake, concentrate. Have you got everything? Key? Got the key? Rhett.' It was Rhett. Of course it was. It's all in there. He tapped his head. Just a bit reluctant to come out. Slowly he opened the car door, eased his legs out, held onto the door frame and pushed upwards. His knees complained. One vocally. He sighed to himself, pushed the door gently and it clicked shut. He locked it, stood silently and looked up at the bedroom. A soft light flickered through the windows. Around him the street stood stock-still and a cold breeze was the only other visitor. He moved stiffly to open the decorative iron side gate, the hinges yawning and the latch tinkling excitedly, as he dropped it back. This could be a film. Maybe a spy film. Yeah. Gliding like a ghost into a safe house or deftly slipping a lock and silently creeping into danger, senses aching. This is so theatrical. Deliciously so. And exciting. Am I supposed to feel like this? A geriatric James Bond?

He stood in front of the back door illuminated by the outdoor light. She had offered him only that key. He had seen it hanging in the kitchen. Well at least she's taken the tag off. He had thanked her politely. There had been no need for further

words. No querying. He had read the uncertain messages in her eyes, in her body, in the hand that held the key out to him for him to take if he wanted it. Really wanted it. Gently. Gently.

Behind him the garden, normally so bright and calm, appeared as a strange dream in the harsh electric light. No softness, no tones, no graduation. Every leaf and twig in razor-sharp relief. Dark, impenetrable shadows watched him suspiciously. He slid the key in and tried to turn it. Nothing happened. Maybe a little harder? No. Try again... Bloody fingers. No not too hard. It'll snap. Shit. Why won't... Try wiggling it. It won't turn. Why won't it turn? It's the wrong key. Ahh, let's have a look. No. It's the right key it just won't... Oh dear. This was not in the bloody script. Now what do I do. Can't phone her. Knock on the door. That'll spoil everything. Shit. I don't believe this... OK. Calm down and try again. Gently. Carefully. Can't let her hear. Move it out slightly. Feel for it. Click. There... Thank God... Some bloody spy.

The kitchen was very large and modern and lit by a single light. He bent, holding onto the worktop and took off his shoes, immediately feeling the coolness of the slate flagstones. God, it's about the size of my flat. There was the smell of fresh vegetables. Onions and in the background, the taste of some potato field. She's been to the local farm shop. Wonder if earth smells differently in different parts? Must do. A good drop of East Anglian loam or the sharp tang of Kentish clay maybe. In the sink, a large, white cup, a plate and some cutlery waited for the morning's hot soapy water. Nearby, on a black marble top stood a card. He knew immediately it was for him. Forty-five years ago, he may not have noticed. Would only have been aware of the throb growing in his loins, dominating everything. Now, he smiled.

Welcome home sweet sexxxxxy man. Sam.

For some reason the words felt strangely uncertain; her small writing moving across the card, neat and controlled but also slanting... to some conclusion maybe? Looking for something perhaps? And five kisses... all the same height. All the same.

Had they started with five? He couldn't remember. How many would they end with? Would they still be real kisses then or just symbols? Everyday? Automatic? Would they be almost the end of the alphabet? The end of words? The end of the story? The end? He pushed the thoughts away and placed his lips on the card.

Next to him was a cupboard full of drinking glasses. He opened it and even in the semi-darkness, they winked and chattered brightly. Careful, don't drop one. Then she would be alarmed, turn on the lights, call out and the magic would be lost. He stood very still and listened. Nothing. No tick; no tock. Nothing. Only his breathing and the huge unheard sound of his heart thudding and his ears hissing. The fridge suddenly purred and he jumped. Shit! Then... nothing. He filled the glass carefully with water, switched off the light and waited for his eyes to become accustomed. In the darkness, he looked up towards the ceiling. Up there, just up there she was waiting for him. Up there, pleasures that before he had barely imagined, now waited for them both. He took a nervous sip of water, opened the kitchen door and then stood quite still. In the darkness of the long hallway, light flickered before him, around the bottom of the stairway and he felt a pang of alarm. As he watched, the light settled into a warm, steady glow and his concern turned to curiosity. He moved forward.

On the bottom step and every three steps above, a small candle was burning like a runway guiding him home. He smiled broadly, placed his glass onto a small table nearby and on all fours climbed the stairs, blowing out each candle, one at a time, until he reached the landing. There he paused, panting quietly at the exertion. In the darkness, the bedroom door in front of him was ajar and through it played the same trembling light. He stood quite still. There was silence. Not a sound. His senses now sharp and quivering; mouth open. He waited, scarcely daring to breathe, then, slowly, he pushed the door and stepped inside.

The flame of the nearest candle, startled at his appearance, moved abruptly, and then settled, reassured. Apart from their soft glow, the room was in darkness. Samantha was sitting on the bed, her back against large pillows, bare legs drawn up. She

said nothing. Alex realised that his mouth was now quite dry. She was wearing a soft, black top, open to her waist, covered in dark reflective sequins that shimmered in the light. From each ear dangled long silver earrings that she never normally wore. They flashed brightly as she turned her head. Apart from that, she appeared to be naked. She looked towards him, her eyes in shadow, apart from sharp glints as the candlelight caught the movement. With no accompanying sound, Alex felt a sudden stab of irrational fear at this mute creature. Her voice, when it came, was low and remote, as if from a shadow but was loaded with sensuality.

‘Hallo.’ She paused... ‘Good trip?’

Her words, with their strange formality, surprised him, suggesting that nothing else was happening in the room. That the pounding in his head and heart was incidental; that the thick, hot tension building around them was not actually happening. But it was. He nodded, reluctant to trust his voice, and moved slowly towards her. She watched carefully as he gently moved the black material further apart and then stood back to see the gentle light catching the soft contours of her body.

‘Great.’

She wasn’t sure if he meant the trip or the sight of her body. But it didn’t matter.

ONE

In the Beginning

There were five charity shops along the incline of the high street and approaching from the bottom of the slope, Alex normally visited the first he came to, not out of loyalty to that particular cause, but because he couldn't be bothered to carry heavy donations any further. But he had visited every shop at some time. They fascinated him. The windows; dressed like normal retailers but full of other people's plastic fruit and soft toys and cake stands and plates with rabbits painted on and wooden signs telling him where the Heart is. The flotsam of kitsch washed up here. All that brightly designed stuff from the outer periphery of real form and function that people gave to each other for their toilets or kitchen walls and then got bored with. Reminded him of the strange still lives he had tried to paint, years ago and for a brief moment his heart sank.

Back then, in his youth, he had been nervously excited at the thought of entering the art college. He had been drawn to the large Victorian building that stood so solidly near the centre of the town, aware of the very tall windows that looked out from the stone structure, of the idealised caryatids and the columned entrance. He had felt reassured by its architectural confidence, reassured that the mysterious activities that took place within must surely have the same gravitas and status. The status that his parents wanted him to have. When eventually he did enter, wearing the suit and tie prescribed by his father and clutching a shiny, brand new portfolio, it felt strangely comforting and yet at the same time the whole place seemed to spin at a provocative and dizzy tilt outside of the normal and everyday. He had gawped at the huge open studios bathed in northern light, reeking of turpentine and the fat richness of oil paint. He had

stared at the colourful students each dressed in their own non-conformist palette and had felt very ordinary. Some had smiled at him, most ignored him but each he knew was immersed in the strange secret ways of this other culture, secrets that he desperately longed for.

And so, he had started with still lives. Drawing and painting. Drawing, he understood. That exquisite feeling of pencil tip on paper and he drew with a fluency and accuracy that attracted a positive response. At that moment he had felt so happy and accepted but then his flush of success had turned cold and he had sat, rigid-backed, looking around, lost and bewildered as other students found alternative and at times audacious meanings to this simple pile of objects before them. They had breathed life into their concepts with paint and brush and finger and rag, concepts that he simply could not understand. The tutorials that followed had left him lost and angry; angry at his own lack of perception and miserably he had applied to change direction and was readily accepted onto an art history course. Despite his disappointment, he was reassured that the world of art – which he had dared to believe really existed – did so, was all around him and took many forms. He had worked hard, published books, risen to a fairly senior level in design education before retiring but always felt a grudging admiration for fine artists, especially his art school friend Edmund. Now he shook those thoughts away.

Inside the small charity shops, he had often squeezed past the rows of clothes and piles of shoes and inhaled their human mustiness. Felt their sadness. Once they had been bright and crisp and hopeful. Now they were desperate to keep out of the ‘Everything 50p’ box. Maybe he’d pick one shop and go in there today. Have a good look around. It felt like a day for an adventure.

He studied himself in the bathroom mirror and ran his hand over his grey close-cropped hair and sighed inwardly. Once it had been long. Shoulder length. Thick and curly. Like his mother’s but darker. Usually pulled back into a ponytail, plus the occasional facial stubble. Had represented who he had been. Art student? Certainly. Lecturer? Yes. Free thinker? Sometimes.

Revolutionary? Not really. Anti-establishment? Sadly. He had wanted to keep the ponytail into retirement, maybe shorter, as a badge of honour, one you had to earn, but his hair had disappeared. Slowly. Silently. He hadn't really noticed to what extent until that day in the barber's chair.

'Is that alright sir?'

The mirror had moved slowly over the back of his head and there it was, a bald patch like a fresh wound.

'OK sir?'

But there was nothing to be done, nothing to be said. He had begun to shed the vitality of carefree youth. It had slipped away without him noticing, never to return.

'Yes. That's fine thanks.'

Strange thing was, that his hair now grew in abundance everywhere else. It had slid down from the top of his head and now covered his eyebrows, ears, nose and back. Even his back. 'Forget my head. Just trim my eyebrows, burrow into my nose and shave my back please.'

'That'll be seven pounds please. Special rate for senior citizens today.'

Oh God. Is it that obvious? You could have lied. Pretended you couldn't tell. Charged the full amount and hoped my vanity would pay it. Not much to ask.

*

He hadn't shaved today. Hadn't ironed his shirt either which hung limply outside of his jeans. Well, he had nobody to impress and there were far more important things to do. Mind you, perhaps if he undid the shirt, he could show off his Stones T-shirt. Yes, he'd been there. 1976. Les Abattoirs. Heard Jagger sing 'Fool to Cry'. Great. Trouble is, it would also show off his paunch. Not so much of one, but it was there alright. The other problem was that he had no idea where that particular T-shirt was. Not hanging up. Must be in a drawer somewhere. Means it will smell musty. Means washing. No. Not today. Anyway, he'd taken his medication. Or was that yesterday? No, he took them with that cup of tea. Or was that last night? No, he always took

them in the morning... Bloody memory. You spend your life filling your brain. Hour after hour after hour, learning and understanding, feeding its voracious appetite, packing tons and tons of knowledge into the bottomless pit of brain cells and then later, when you want something back... nothing. Maybe his brain was now feeding on all that information piled inside it and would only let you have the scraps it doesn't want, like bacon rind and cherry pips. Maybe it was simply composting. Anyway, no time for that now, he needed to get out into the sunshine. Had already sniffed its warmth through his open window and tasted a sweet tingle on the air like candy floss at a funfair. He pushed his wallet into one pocket and his keys into the other, edged carefully past the piles of books stacked on the floor and closing the door to his small flat with a bang, stepped out into the long corridor that led to the front entrance.

His flat had been rather cool and dark. The sun wouldn't arrive until the afternoon and work its magic. In the corridor, he was struck by the heat coming through the picture windows that looked out onto a large, lawned garden punctuated by flower beds and shrubs. Three large crows were strutting around the grass. Sarf London crows with attitude and yet, occasionally, they fluttered nervously at the unexpected movement of a grey squirrel. Look at him. The squirrel moved so quickly, so positively, with such focus as though there was no time to waste. Must be nice to have that attitude. Squirrels don't drift through life. They know what they want. They get on with it. He tapped on the window. The squirrel stopped, sat up on its haunches and looked directly at him. Don't look at me like that Mr Clever. He tapped again. Harder. The squirrel turned and scampered off and the crows lifted their black bodies into the air and flapped lazily away into the trees. There, all gone. Except for him. Standing there.

In one corner of the garden stood a pale statuette of a Greek figure, peering uncomfortably through the leaves and branches that threatened to envelop him. He knew it was Dionysus or at least a sanitised version, with his plaster robe draped conveniently across his manhood. He had given lectures on Greek art many times. At college. 'This, is Dionysus. Also

known by his Roman name of Bacchus. Son of Zeus and Semele. God of wine and ritual ecstasy. Shown here as a naked androgynous youth.'

'Sir. Sir.'

'Yes.'

'Why is his willy so small?'

Oh, for God's sake.

'No sir. If he was a god, why didn't he give himself a really big one?'

Oh Dionysus. Protector of those who do not belong to conventional society. Guardian of the chaotic and unexpected. Leader of wild female followers. Please come and rescue me.

Alex looked closer. The original pale, smooth skin of the statue had changed. It had turned darker, smudged with the grime of weather and pollution and ageing, and around his noble head, cocked to one side, the summer growth was slowly covering him. Discoloured and disappearing. Alex sighed, turned, walked to the front entrance, opened it, stepped into the car park, walked across the front lawn, through a gap in the hedge and turned left.

The high street was comfortable and slightly old fashioned. At intervals, small silver birch and beech trees grew, their delicacy contrasting with the concrete slabs and stone around them. The street also offered a bakery, a butcher and a greengrocery stall. The stall intrigued Alex. Unlike the smooth segregated sections seen in the local supermarket, here the fruit and veg seemed to have been specially selected, polished, piled and presented. It sat full and luscious, a bright ensemble of colour and form against the green baize, almost defying you to disturb it by buying any. Reminded him of a painting... Dutch... seventeenth century. Saw it in the Rijksmuseum that time... girl selling something from a large table laden with fruit and veg... Floris... come on you should know this.... Floris van thingy... van Schooten. Yes, Floris van Schooten. That's it. Yeah. Now, apart from old Floris, it might even become a Cezanne or maybe a Matisse. If he stepped back into the road, held up his hands in front of his eyes to contain just the stall and then squinted... Yes. There. Look. OK, cars might drive

slowly around you, drivers too curious to sound their horns.

‘See that old guy. What on earth is he doing? Is he alright? Silly old fart. Careful you don’t run him over.’

Alex crossed the road and stood in front of the stall containing parts of it within his hands. The stallholder looked at him curiously.

‘You alright mate?’

‘Oh yes I’m fine, thank you.’

‘Got some nice bananas today.’

‘Yes, I can see but I was really just imagining your stall as a Matisse.’

‘Oh really.’

‘Have you never done that?’

‘No mate. Just imagined selling this lot and getting off early.’

Alex smiled at him. There was a time when he would probably have been too embarrassed to have done that. No, not embarrassed exactly. More conditioned. Concerned about others and how they saw him. But now, at this age, he had learnt not to worry so much. Not only that, but he realised, it was almost expected. ‘Look at that silly old fool.’ Isn’t that how they see me? It had been something of a revelation. The realisation that maybe all those white-haired ladies and balding men, shuffling along, already knew this? All this time they’d simply been playing the part. Wallowing in this wonderful freedom and not letting on. Playing the youthful and the confident for the callow beings they are. So, what else did they know? What else went on behind closed curtains? Geriatric threesomes in quiet suburban bungalows? Maybe. But it did mean that the great observer of life had got it wrong or maybe it was different in Will’s time. He stood on the pavement and mouthed the lines to himself as best as he could remember.

‘The sixth age shifts into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon, with spectacles on nose (well that’s true) and pouch on side. His youthful hose (something, something) too wide for his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, turning again towards childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound.’

The stallholder shuffled.

Alex looked at him.

'You have a wonderful time coming to you.'

'Oh good. I'll tell the missus. Now what about these bananas?'

*

At intervals along the high street, the council had placed large baskets of plants above head height. The packed flowers spilled over and trumpeted purple and red in the bright sunshine and waited patiently for the late afternoon to arrive, to turn them up to an even deeper glow. Alex stopped to admire one. So beautiful. As he did so, a single bloom fell from the basket and landed before him. It was yellow. Yellow? Thought they were all red or purple. Didn't see any yellow. That's strange. Hey, maybe it's a sign. My God, it's Dionysus. Must be. From this morning. He slowly stooped to pick up the flower and placed it in the palm of his hand. It felt soft and limp and vulnerable. It's an omen. He looked around, seeking some meaning. There was nothing obvious. He placed the flower carefully into his shirt breast pocket and walked on.

Outside the charity shop, he stopped and peered between three headless dummies wearing women's clothing, placed next to a stand of charity cards. The shop was long and narrow and the door to the rear room was open. Inside, a fluorescent tube threw an uncomfortable light over some black plastic bags and a mass of objects piled near the doorway. In front of the room, to one side, a woman was placing clothes onto wire hangers and then hanging them for display. She appeared to be alone and was wearing a yellow tabard. Alex watched her curiously and then something began to tickle in the back of his mind. Do you know? I think I know her. He turned away and studied the pavement. Sure I know her. Suddenly, in his mind, swam waves of dark, lustrous red against milky flesh dissolving into a painting, a large painting within an over-ornate frame. He glanced back. No, it can't be. Is it? But her hair's so different. What's happened? It's changed. He looked again, out of sight behind the shop window dummies. He inhaled sharply. Yes.

Reagan. He waggled a finger at that thought. His name was Reagan. He placed the finger against his lips. Fancy remembering that. After all this time. Well well. Looked back. She must be about my age now. Don't want her to see me... I'm sure it's her. Smaller than I remember. Maybe... maybe just slimmer. Hard to tell beneath that terrible tabard thing. Maybe she's dyed it? Must have... Doesn't want to show the grey. But to lose that glorious copper colour... What a shame... Ain't life cruel. Reagan... She married that business bloke. What an arsehole. Very rich though. Made his money in... oh what was it? Something ridiculous. Like... toilet rolls or plastic ducks. Hardly earth shattering... It was at that private view. Yeah, they were both there. Terrible artist. Don't remember his name. Awful work. Crap. Real crap... She seemed so lost... I went to their dinner party. That's right. Why was that? God it was awful. Think I got drunk. Probably. Usually did. God knows what I said. Don't suppose it was very complimentary. Oh no, perhaps I upset her... No, no it would have been him. Pompous prick. And it was such a long time ago... Well, well... Reagan. He spoke the word in his mind again so as not to lose it. Reagan. Now what was her name? Began with a...? God, she was beautiful. Mmm. Long time ago. He went to turn away, find a coffee, ruminate on those days but something made him stop and push the door open.

Immediately to his right were several rows of second-hand books. He picked one up at random, looking furtively in her direction and back again. She hadn't looked up when he had entered the shop. Guess lots of people simply wander in and out, just to see what is in that day. Get out of the rain. Pass the time. He glanced in her direction, took the book, moved closer and waited quietly to one side of her. This feels like stalking. Why am I so nervous?

She placed the last item on the rail and turned. Those eyes. So pale. So big. Eyes don't change. Never do.

'Hallo.'

A slight look of alarm crossed her face like the shadow of an unexpected cloud crossing your hot body on a summer beach and she raised one hand to her throat. Her fingernails were the

colour of a shiny cherry. Oh dear, am I smiling too much. Probably look like Mad Jack in *The Shining*. Don't seem to be able to control my features anymore. He tried to switch his face off. How's that?

'You made me jump.' Her voice was soft and cultured.

'Sorry.'

She smiled politely and looked down at the book he was carrying.

'Would you like to buy that?'

Alex continued to gaze at her. Yes, of course it was her.

'The book?'

She smiled again. Teeth so white and straight and expensive. She seemed slightly amused now and the wrinkles around her eyes joined in.

'Shall I take it? Check the price? She tried to take the book from him, gently as if he was a recalcitrant infant. He noticed she was wearing a wedding ring. He swallowed hard.

'You don't remember me, do you?' Waited. Tried again. 'No, well, must be nearly... what, forty years ago now. Huh. Forty years. Mind you I did look very different then. You know. Long hair.' He waggled a finger in a circle next to his head.

Her hand moved nervously to her own hair.

God wish I'd shaved today. Ironed my shirt. He felt himself begin to panic. Words slipped free from him. 'Dionysus. Yes. Of course. Dionysus. The god. You know. Yes. He sent me. Told me to give you this.'

He fumbled in his shirt pocket, gently retrieved the flower, took her hand and placed it in her palm. It felt soft and warm. She looked up at him. Her eyes had widened in surprise. He let go abruptly, smiled awkwardly, stepped back, raised one hand in a form of wave, turned and moved hastily towards the door. She watched his figure move outside across the shop front, between other pedestrians and not look back.

Alex bounced unsteadily down the high street almost colliding with another shopper.

'Careful Grandad.'

'Sorry. So sorry. Didn't see you.' He waved an apology and as he moved on, suddenly caught sight of himself in a shop

window. He stopped in surprise, for there looking back at him was not a gauche lad of seventeen, blood pumping, but an elderly man whom he barely recognised; balding, slightly stooped, wearing glasses, face lined. It wasn't until he returned to his flat that he looked down at the book still in his hand and realised he hadn't paid for it.

He couldn't go back the next day. Knew he should, but spent the morning cleaning his flat and washing and ironing every shirt he owned. He had rummaged through a number of drawers and amongst the odd empty glass case, blank thank-you cards, pens, pencils, chinks, rubbers, small scissors, old book markers and piles of white plastic curtain hooks, he found a small pair of secateurs which he then used to cut back the fringe of leaves and ivy around the statue.

'That's better. Now I can see you.'

He found himself a plastic garden chair and brushed off the dirt, old webs and dead leaves.

'I think you've got me into a load of trouble. No, OK, I know that. I know you didn't tell me to do anything, but you were in my head. You must admit that. Well... anyway. The thing is... now what do I do? Yes, I must take the book back or pay for it. I know that. And soon. You haven't seen all the notices in the shop about people stealing things, have you? Oh, you have. Well, I certainly don't want to be thought of as a thief, now do I. So, right, I have to go back. Pay for the book. Apologise to her? Do I apologise or should I just be mysterious or something? Isn't that what you are supposed to do? And then what? Wish you wouldn't look at me like that. It's alright for you. You're used to the unexpected and chaotic and placing women under ecstatic spells. It's harder for me. Right, so I go back, pay for the book, say nothing about why I ran off? Oh, I don't know... Anyway, why am I so concerned? She's only a woman I once met, and do I really want to get involved again? Once was enough and anyway, she might not even like me. And not only that, I don't really want the book. It's about spiritual growth. I can just talk to you. Oh yes. One more thing. Do you happen to know what her first name is?'

The sun, having heard it all before, moved slowly across

the garden, behind a cloud and left Alex pondering in a cool shadow.

*

Dionysus was wearing a red wig, which together with his pale androgynous appearance, was disconcertingly attractive. His manhood, now revealed from beneath the plaster cloak, hung to just above his knee and the floor of the studio, in which they were all gathered, was deep in yellow flowers. He said nothing, but stood, posing, with a strange, superior smile on his face. Nearby, Alex hovered nervously before a large, blank white canvas and attempted to paint the scene before him. Every brush stroke however, although laden with colour, failed to register a single mark, no matter how hard he tried to apply it. A large clock standing in one corner chimed irregularly, and as it did so, the dimensions of the canvas became smaller and smaller and smaller.

He awoke sluggishly, sweaty and with the tendrils of the dream reluctant to release him. He looked up at the plaster swirls on the ceiling and rubbed his fingers over the dampness of his face and neck. This is ridiculous. Quite ridiculous. Today, I'll go back to the shop, pay for the book and say hallo. No more than that.

He showered and prepared to shave, rubbing the steam from the bathroom mirror. His eyes still looked the same although they seemed to have shrunk. Maybe it was the eyebrows, still dark but with silver grey now entwined within them, growing bushier and pressing down upon them. If he combed them upwards, he could trim them like you would a hedge although it was difficult to do whilst wearing spectacles. I need one of those magnifying glasses. He dabbed his nose with shaving cream. There were two or three small dark hairs growing there. Would have to be dark wouldn't they. Couldn't be grey and almost invisible. He shaved them away and studied himself in the mirror again. They'll be back. Not too many lines around the eyes but two deep ones either side of the nose, pointing downwards. Like a sad clown's face. And that jaw –

once it had the clean, sweeping lines of a racing yacht. Now look at it, bumbling around the coast, lumpy with barnacles. He looked at the back of his left hand, free from holding the razor. It was gnarled and veined and brown-mark blemished. Some days, his fingers ached when the rain fell, and cold fogs rolled in.

He turned it over. His palm was covered in lines running in all directions, like cracks in an uncared-for pavement. He turned it back again and flexed his fingers. My God, look at that. Looks like... The back of his hand was covered in a myriad of creases. Looks like old basket work. He released the tension, fearful that the skin might tear like old parchment and put the razor down. And the scars. The backs of his hands were covered in old scars. He turned them slowly, left to right and back again, counting the small, white marks that sat upon his skin. He couldn't remember how they had happened and briefly imagined the sharp pain of each but had no memory. They were the hands of someone who had pushed out blindly, who had felt uncertainly into an unknown and jagged world. He looked up again at his face, reached and pulled the skin and flesh back to his ears. Ten years dropped away. There that's better. I just need to pin it all back. It's like a balloon the day after a party. Taut and smooth and shiny and bouncy when you arrive and then limp and rather sad when you leave. Let's hope you had a great time. He began to cover his lower face with thick, white shaving foam.

He had laid some clothes onto his crumpled bed. Normally they were piled over the back of a chair, socks lying limply where they had fallen across a pair of old shoes or draped over the large, battered art portfolio that was propped up against the wall. He looked at the portfolio. It was secured by a single drawstring – the other had long disappeared, and a name written on one side had been crossed through with vigorous black slashes. Must go through that one day. Sort it out. Not now. Turning away, he looked down at the socks and realised the colours didn't match. Do you know, I've never noticed? Been walking around like that for ages. Still, it doesn't matter, does it? I am an artist after all. Well... almost. Expected, isn't it? A bit

of eccentricity that's all. It's allowed and he smiled at the thought of the greengrocery stall. But then a tremor of uncertainty rippled through him. Reagan. What's-her-name Reagan. She's very posh and cultured and brimming with etiquette and social graces. Not like you mate. He felt uncertain. Then annoyed.

'Oh, fuck Mrs thingy Reagan.' Oh my God. I do hope so. The intensity of that thought shook him.

He had pondered for quite a while over whether to wear a tie and had finally decided not to. He didn't normally, and it was summer and anyway he wasn't quite sure if he actually owned one. If he did, it was probably at the bottom of that long drawer, with his Stones shirt maybe, waiting for winter or a funeral or something, along with that long Merino multi-striped scarf that reminded him of the work of Sean Scully, together with his thermals and that woollen hat, which reminded him of a refugee.

The high street was quite busy. Usually was on a Saturday, but soon enough, Alex found himself outside the same charity shop, once more peering through the rack full of greetings cards. Beyond the splashes of unfocussed colour and words, he could see people moving slowly but he couldn't see her. Maybe she's in the back room, sorting. Must be really smelly in there. There was one other woman serving and two or three older ladies browsing through the clothes. Now what do I do? Must go in. Must pay. Find out. He took the book, lifted his shirt and stuffed it down his waistband. Maybe nobody will notice.

The woman serving was standing behind a small beech-coloured counter, eyes down, checking something in a catalogue. Alex waited for a moment.

'Er... hallo.'

The woman looked up and then smiled, openly. Alex's eye was drawn to a gold-coloured chain that descended towards the fold between impressive breasts. For a second, he imagined drawing them.

'Ah, is Mrs Reagan here?'

The woman didn't answer directly but scanned Alex's face curiously.

'No, she doesn't work Saturdays. But she is going to call in later.' She looked towards one of the two clocks on the wall opposite. Both showed slightly different times. 'After lunch I expect.'

Alex hovered, hoping the woman might tell him more but she just looked at him with an amused smile. The book was pressing into his stomach.

'Lunch. OK. Thank you.'

'Angela.'

'Sorry?'

'My name's Angela.'

'Well thank you Angela. I'll er... I'll call back later.'

Alex hastened towards the exit, stopped and turned. 'What is Mrs Reagan's first name? Been a long...'. His voice tailed off.

Angela laughed. 'It's Samantha. Samantha Reagan.' The laughter stopped. 'And, she's a good friend.'

Outside, Alex looked in both directions in the hope he might spot her. In films, the undercover police officer did the same but always seemed to know which way his quarry had gone. Never spent half the film heading uselessly in the wrong direction. If only it were that simple. Shit. Wonder where she might be? He turned left and headed for the nearest coffee shop.

Alex entered the dark interior and looked around. Well, of course, she's not here. He felt his anticipation deflate. He looked around again. But no. Maybe she'll come in later. I really do need to sort this book out.

He hated queuing. Not the need to form an orderly queue, to wait your turn, not even the boredom of it all, but the strange debilitating effect it had on him. How was it that queuing made him feel increasingly powerless and anxious as he inched forward, tray in hand; heading for that gap in the counter; now half on, now fully on, his mind swaying on a tightrope? Sometimes his anxiety forced him to practise his order over and over in his head, each time more uncertain than the last, until when it came to his turn, he blurted out the now jumbled words in a gush of gibberish. Surely the epitome of success was to be whisked to the front, past the sullen queue, by burly silent men in sunglasses and with suspicious bulges.

‘Are you being served sir?’

‘Pardon? Being served? Oh yes. Err. Small... err cappuccino please. To have in please. Yes. No. Not being served. Well, wasn’t. Anyway, thank you. Hah.’

With some relief, he found an empty table at the back of the room and tore open the small bags of brown sugar without looking at them... Damn. Where is she?

Around him, the walls were covered with images of coffee. Plump beans in rough hessian sacks gathered from exotic places. Photographs of attractive people made even more attractive simply by drinking coffee. Long, manicured fingers, slightly out of focus, caressing white cups with a lover’s touch.

The images were in colour and black and white and also sepia. All were mounted and framed, as if he was in a gallery, or a shrine, or a church. Now there’s a thought. Church... Saint Barista. Patron saint of skinny latte or should that be skinny patron saint of... where? Mocha? Is there such a place? Before him, a speckled pattern floated on top of his cup. Looks like a bird’s egg. He poured on a small pile of light brown sugar, which hung in the thick cushion of froth and then poured another bagful on top of that. Both reluctantly sank to the depths, leaving a sort of entry wound and giving him a strange satisfaction. He stirred his coffee, sat back and looked around. Didn’t they used to call these places penny universities back in the... what... seventeenth century? About then? Penny for a coffee and the chance for some vigorous debate on the issues of the day. Who dunnit then, set poor old London alight? Was them Dutchmen without doubt. Bigger than their britches. Wonder if that still happens? The debate? Behind him a young female voice cut through the general hum. She spoke so quickly into a mobile phone that there was hardly a space between each word and sentence. ‘Welldone. Goodforyougirl. Youtakingthefreezerwithyer. Good. Serveshimright. Wanker,’ but apart from her, there were no raised voices. No fierce argument. No heated debate. He took a sip of his coffee. Now, it was too sweet.

In the background, Ella Fitzgerald competed with the chatter of voices, the hectic clatter of cups and plates, the

constant thud of metal pots and the gurgling hiss and steam of machinery. God, why is it so noisy in here? They're only making bloody coffee after all. It's positively industrial. Like being in the... Pyjama Game. He whistled softly and heard the words in his head at the same time. 'Whu wu whu whu whu whu whu whu. Whu wu whu whu whu whu whu whu whu.' He stopped, sat up, realising how taut his shoulders had become. In front of him, figures were silhouetted against the bright world slanting in through the windows and doors. A snatch of Ella briefly evaded the clamour like the moon slipping past on a wild cloudy night and then disappearing again.

Now knowing Samantha's name made him a little more relaxed although he wondered what the formidable Angela would tell her. Oh shit. Forgot to ask when she's next in. Oh, so stupid. Nearby, two elderly women held hands across the brown tables. They did so in a way that seemed natural and normal. The one nearest to him wore a simple black and grey striped top, blue jeans to just below her knees and coral pink trainers. Her hair, white and grey, was restrained in a small ponytail but it still roamed waywardly over her face and pale glasses. Were they just good friends or maybe lovers? Hard to tell. Anyway, what the hell did it matter? At their age, they'd earned the right to behave how they wished, without embarrassment, doing no harm to anybody. Not like back then. He looked around again. Hey. Look. This place is full of middle-aged women. Perhaps they have secret trysts? No... look, seven of them grouped around that table. Agenda today. Husbands. Boyfriends. Children... Same as last week.

"Allo 'ow are you? You OK? What can I get you?"

The staff continued to smile and chatter and clatter around at high speed. Alex watched them for a while. They were part of the act, part of why you come here. Hey, me Enrico. I have dark consuming eyes and a sweet bum inside these tight black trousers. You just wanna coffee signora? Alex wondered if this was included in their training. Today, we are going to look at your role in the customer experience. Divide into two teams. Team A, bang on those saucepans in a jolly way. Team B, run around in circles whilst grinning broadly.

Through the background noise, Alex heard the empty plastic click of a keyboard. Just to his left, a young woman sat, a look of concentration on her face, one finger of one hand pecking wildly at a laptop. The sound of the keys was strangely audible. Every now and again she paused, took a locket on a chain around her neck and placed it between her lips as if the feeling or taste would inspire or even console her. Alex looked directly at her. She was far too busy to feel his gaze. He took in her low-cut top and polished skin and thought about her breasts. When you think about it, it's not fair really. She doesn't know much about life, too young. And there ain't no shortcuts. You just have to experience it, don't you? And look at them. Perfect. Perfect ivory globes. Sitting there. Trying to escape. Surfing her top.

He looked around. The Committee of Seven had reached boyfriends on their agenda. He knew that, by the way they now leaned intently towards each other, each with a curious little smile. See, they're all covered up. Baggy clothing, jackets, coats, no tight sweaters. Certainly, no low-cut tops. Alex looked at them individually and tried to imagine them topless. The surfing changed to diving. It really isn't fair. He picked up his cup and took a sip but by now it was lukewarm. Young women's breasts should be small and insignificant, maybe droop a bit. Then, as they mature, become more experienced, are nurtured and admired and caressed and loved, they would grow into perfectly shaped firm spheres, like... like... melons. Sounds a bit music hall. Bit seaside postcard. But no, it's right. Fruit and veg grow from small seeds into fully firmed ripe whatever. Don't they? So why do humans do it back to front? He put his cup down and smiled to himself, his gaze drifting through the chair opposite him. Maybe I'm becoming a dirty old man. Could be worse. So, what about Samantha Reagan? He had no idea. He'd seen her at that dinner party of course and was sure she had worn a low-cut dress; everybody did; but he'd been transfixed by her tumbling copper hair and smooth, pale skin. So pale. It was as if somebody had painted her features onto an alabaster doll's head. Pale grey eyes. Red lips. Painted onto translucent whiteness... wow. But remember, alabaster is deceptively hard,

extremely brittle and easily bruised. Oh dear, do I really want to do this?

A woman stood up to his front and moved away from her table, her back to him. He hadn't noticed her before, being partly obscured by other customers and furniture as well as the dazzling light, but as she stepped backwards from her chair, she revealed a shapely and well-proportioned rear, wrapped in tight jeans atop brown suede ankle boots. He watched, appreciatively. What is it that makes that combination so attractive? And look at those jeans. Not skin tight, that would be too obvious but tight enough to accentuate those curves, those delicious proportions. It's almost as though she isn't aware. That what I am enjoying is by accident. Not true of course. She knows exactly what she's doing. That's lovely. Wonder how old she is? Could be a young woman of course – certainly has a young shape – or maybe an older woman with the luck or better still the determination to preserve her body. The latter thought excited him; always had done. The older woman. Seducing his young, inexperienced, out of control, exploding body when he should have been doing his homework. Too late now. Wonder if she'll turn? She bent to pick up a soft leather bag, stretching the denim tighter. Then he saw them quite clearly. Her forearms and hands. Slim, veined hands and fingers, tipped with dark-red polish, and there, the glint of silver and gold rings. He thought how the rings would have worn and tarnished over the years into a smooth inevitability, their original sparkle and excited chatter now reduced to an accepted calmness. On her thin wrists however dangled two silver bangles. Maybe they were different. Maybe when she slid them on, they began to flash energetically against her mature flesh, singing away like a pop song in a retirement home.

The woman slipped on a short jacket and turned for a moment and faced him. It was Samantha Reagan. Shit! Alex gave a small intake of breath and realised he had no idea what to do next, except for the impulse to duck beneath the table. Don't be so bloody daft. He watched helplessly. She had taken the ugly tabard off, and now the light pouring in from the street caught the pale glow of her face and red lips. Full red lips.

Lempicka lips. Yes, Lempicka lips. Those same soft lips would have left an imprint on her cup. What am I thinking? What the hell do I do now? Cappuccino dregs came into his mouth and he swallowed hastily and wiped his face with the back of his hand. Samantha, still standing, looked around. Is she looking for me? No, she's meeting someone. She must be. A man. Must be a man. Oh, how embarrassing. What am I doing here? No look... she's looking for a table. No, can't be, she's been sat at a table you idiot. Oh God why do I feel so bloody hopeless?

Samantha's gaze moved past him, stopped and then returned. Her eyes locked onto his, gave a flash of recognition and she smiled. Is she smiling at me or someone else? Someone behind me? She picked up her bag and walked directly towards him. What do I do? In a panic, Alex stood up and waved the book. She stopped suddenly, surprised at this strange apparition. Then recovered.

'Hallo again. May I join you?'

'Oh yes.' Alex swept the empty sugar bags, spilled sugar, a napkin and a spoon across the table towards him. The spoon fell to the floor. He bent awkwardly and tried to pick it up, failed and surfaced, face slightly flushed. Oh shit, did I shave this morning? I can't remember. He resisted the temptation to touch his face.

'Thank you.'

She placed the leather bag onto the table and sat opposite him, hands in her lap, legs crossed. She looked up at him, curiously.

'Aren't you going to sit down?'

'Oh yes.' He sat down abruptly. His chair screeched and he looked directly at her hair. My, it's so different. Had tumbled down her back like a wild copper waterfall – and now? Well, cut shorter but exquisitely. What is that style called? A bob? Certainly shiny, healthy, different. Different red but suits her. This older, wiser version of her. Oh dear she'll see straight through me.

'Is everything alright?'

'Oh yes. It's just... it's nothing.'

She looked concerned and touched her hair.

‘Nothing?’

‘It’s... just been a long time.’

‘Oh that.’ She looked away for a second and shuffled in her seat. ‘Yes, it has.’ She looked back at him and placed the tips of the fingers of her right hand on the table. The other out of sight. ‘So, are you still painting? Alec. It is Alec, isn’t it?’

Alex sat back. He grinned. ‘You almost remembered my name. It’s actually Al-ex.’ He pronounced it as two syllables, then normally. ‘Alex.’

‘Oh sorry... Yes, Alex.’ She paused. ‘I’m Samantha.’ He heard the query in her voice.

‘Yes, I know.’ He wanted to tell her that he had remembered quite easily, even though he couldn’t remember what he had had for breakfast but then he thought of Angela in the charity shop. She nodded lightly.

She sat back in her chair and appraised him coolly. ‘Yes... I do remember you. And your antics.’ She smiled. The fingertips tapped lightly.

‘Antics. What antics?’ For the first time, he felt relaxed. Oh, thank you. Now he could hide, be the clown. ‘I don’t remember any antics.’ She placed both hands on the tabletop, fingers laced together, and her eyes widened slightly. He could see that her hands were slim, maybe thin and no amount of cosmetics could hide the lines and veins and dark blemishes. Alex suddenly wanted to hold them and reassure her.

‘Really? Well, I can remember you having... well, some very forthright views at a dinner party.’ She raised her slim eyebrows slightly, inviting his memory.

‘I was probably pissed.’

She resisted the temptation to laugh aloud. He pulled the book towards him, looked down and ran a finger absently over it. ‘Was I rude?’ He looked up. ‘Not to you.’ His voice raised slightly. ‘I wouldn’t be rude to you.’

She paused, realising his concern, not expecting this vulnerability.

‘No, not me... But I can remember you advising my ex-husband to buy some awful paintings for an enormous amount of money.’

'I did...? Oh yes, so I did.' The grin returned. He couldn't really remember too clearly, but liked the idea. He also liked the idea of an ex-husband. 'Oh yes. That's right. Served him right. He only invited me because he thought I could be his pet art dealer. Show me off.'

She looked at him wistfully.

'Yes, I guess you're probably right.'

'So... what happened?'

'To the paintings?'

Alex nodded, but it wasn't just the paintings.

'Oh, he sold them on but at a big loss. He was furious, he...'

'He what?'

'Oh nothing. It was a long time ago.'

Alex leant back in his chair and looked at her. Took in the perfect make-up, the exquisite hair, the short, fitted chestnut jacket and the silky top with one button undone at the neck. Her well-groomed, smart sophistication was obvious even to him. Here was a woman used to having money, probably lots of it. Why should she be interested in him? Suddenly he felt nervous and inadequate again.

'So... do you remember where we first met?'

The words slipped out before he could stop them.

She looked up, surprised.

'First met?'

'Um. Yes. Err. Sort of first met.'

'No, I don't really remember. Do you?'

'Think so. It was at that gallery on Dean Street. I was there from the university. It was a vernissage. Ex-student. Successful but hopeless work. No content. You were both there.'

'The gallery was actually on Frobisher Street.'

'Was it? Thought you couldn't remember?'

'I remember that gallery. I never visited very many.'

'I remember you.'

'Do you?' She laughed and looked away.

There was a long pause. Samantha twisted the silver bracelets on her wrist, then suddenly looked up.

'So... what's all this nonsense about Roman gods offering

flowers to strange women in charity shops?’

‘No, Greek. Dionysus. He’s Greek. The Roman equivalent would have been Bacchus and of course you’re not strange and it’s not nonsense. In fact, he instructed me.’

‘He instructed you?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I’m not sure I should ask this but... where did you meet him? It is a him?’

‘In my garden.’

‘Now you’re beginning to worry me.’

‘Well, technically it’s not my garden. I do share it.’

‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, he’s only there in statue form although we do talk a lot.’

‘You talk a lot.’

‘Yes, why not? I bet you talk to the radio and the telly and the dog.’

‘Don’t have a dog.’

‘Cat then.’ He paused. ‘So, what did you do with it? Did you throw it away?’

‘The flower?’

Samantha laughed and looked at the slim silver watch on her left wrist.

‘Of course not. Look I’m sorry, I really have to go.’

‘Oh no, do you? Really? What’s the time?’

She turned her wrist towards her, gave another look.

‘It’s late and I have an appointment. I really only came in to do some shopping.’

‘Oh. Well. Um. Will... will you take the book?’

‘Book?’

‘Yes.’ He held it aloft. ‘It’s from your shop. I forgot to pay for it.’ He grinned at her.

She shook her head in mock disbelief. ‘Why don’t you bring it in yourself. Save me carrying it.’

‘OK. Tomorrow?’

‘Shop’s closed tomorrow.’

‘Oh yes. Silly me.’

‘Monday then?’

‘Yes. If you like. I won’t be there but...’

‘When are you there then?’

‘Tuesdays and Thursdays.’

‘OK. Tuesday then.’

She stood, picked up her bag, and looked directly at him.

‘Thank you for the flower. Good to see you again.’

Alex stood abruptly. The chair screeched again. She waited. Do I shake her hand? Maybe kiss her on the cheek? He did neither.

‘You too. Bye Samantha.’

‘Bye.’

Samantha made her way towards the entrance, through the bustling interior, around customers, and for some reason, felt slightly annoyed. She squeezed around a table and as she did so, swung her hips, provocatively and deliberately, side to side. Oh my God, why did I do that? How embarrassing. She felt an urge to turn, look back, see if he had noticed, was grinning or even worse looked shocked, but she dared’t – that would just make things worse. She felt the heat rise in her face and she headed purposefully for the coolness and sanctuary of the street. Outside, out of sight, she stopped for a moment, to gather herself. That movement of her body had been so spontaneous and so surprising, like bumping into an old friend you hadn’t seen or even thought of in decades but had never truly forgotten. But at her age?

She began to walk, more slowly than usual, ignoring the pace of the busy high street, looking at other women passing her. The young, crisp, brisk and confident, paraded before her. She admired their fashions, had imagined herself wearing them but felt afraid of clothes that were too young for her. She was also aware that they simply ignored her eyes completely and she felt, not for the first time invisible. Ahead, a woman was pushing a pram up the slight incline. Inside the pram, a young baby sat. The weather was warm and so the heavy clothes of winter and autumn had been universally discarded and Samantha could see the young mother’s full figure straining in a tight skirt and how her heels and the need to bend slightly forward to push against the slope emphasised the rhythmic sway of her body. The

mother suddenly found a space, stopped and half turned. Their eyes met and a smile spread from one to the other.

‘Little girl?’

‘Yes. My second.’

‘Oh really. I have two. Two girls. Grown up now of course but no grandchildren... sadly.’

The mother smiled. Samantha rubbed her fingers lightly over the baby’s cheek.

‘So pretty.’

‘Thank you. I want another. I would like three. Maybe a boy this time.’

‘I wish you luck.’

The mother smiled again and nodded. A man brushed past them, his eyes resting appreciatively on the mother. On her body. They both noticed.

‘An admirer.’ It was Samantha who spoke.

‘That?’ The mother laughed, then spoke softly, like a conspirator. ‘Some mums give up. Look dowdy and I certainly don’t do it to have admirers. I just want to be me. The me I want to be. Want to feel... you know? And forever. Actually, sometimes it scares them, the fellers. They look but would run a mile. Sometimes it’s nice. Mostly I don’t care.’

‘I wish...’ Samantha stopped. ‘I wish you good luck again.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Samantha walked on, full of thoughts. So, when did she stop being a woman? A real woman? When did she give up? After the divorce maybe? She stood more upright and lengthened her stride up the high street, all thoughts of the encounter with Alex pushed away.

*

He felt crestfallen. Not only had he behaved like a clown, but by the time he had finally picked up the spoon from the floor, she had disappeared. Not even a cheery ‘see you again’ wave as she left.

Why did he do that? Play the buffoon. Why couldn't he just be himself? Except he didn't really know who he was anymore or how he was expected to be. This elderly man. He sank his forehead onto his folded arms, stared at the tabletop and inhaled the dankness of carelessly wiped plastic. He looked up and around. Nobody seemed to have noticed. Nobody seemed to care. He was invisible now and he slumped back into his chair. What had happened to him? He had felt like a naïve little boy again. Shy, hapless, tongue-tied, hiding his ineptitude behind silly behaviour. He bounced his fist angrily onto the plastic. His coffee cup rattled, and the spoon fell onto the floor again.

'Shit. Shit. Shit.'

You would have thought that by now, he would feel comfortable enough to have a reasonable conversation with an attractive woman, if no longer able to sweep her into his wicked grasp. He had in the past – swept them up. Oh yes. They had been enticed by the long curly locks that flopped enticingly over his eyes and which drew female fingers to tidy them away. Fascinated by his audacity and disregard for convention and of course, that easy association and knowledge that the artist had of the naked female form. This plus an appetite for booze, drugs, sex and rock and roll proved irresistible to many, and many had drunk from that multi-coloured well.

They had been kind. Drinks, speeches, farewell gifts. Then they had shoved him out into retirement, waved, closed the doors, found a replacement and forgotten him. He was no longer dashing, he knew that – with his balding head, lines and wrinkles, a spine that was slowly collapsing, an unreliable bladder and a cock that seemed now to have developed an unreliable mind of its own. No longer riding with the renegade gang who had fought the dark forces of conformity, who had stiffened his spine, bolstered his behaviour, fed his resolve and given him strength. Now he had been forced to hand in his coat of many colours and in return found himself almost alone in grey polyester.

'Oh, come on. Don't be so bloody pathetic.'

Meanwhile, Samantha glanced anxiously at her watch.

‘Damn.’

She had to call back briefly at the charity shop with some shopping for Angela and now also felt the need to talk to her. But Angela would be leaving soon. If only she hadn’t stayed to talk. She quickened her pace.

‘Sorry Angie.’

‘That’s alright love. No worries. Got caught up shopping?’

‘No. Very strange. Met someone I haven’t seen in forty years. Rather unsettling.’

‘Not the guy who was in here? Looking for you? Tall. Bit posh. Bit of a looker.’

Angela was a large lady who wore bright red lips and dark outlined eyes and for some reason a small seahorse tattoo on a wide ocean of pink upper arm. When asked, she simply laughed and talked about the dangers of getting pissed. Around her neck she wore a gold chain from which dangled the letter ‘A’. At times it almost disappeared between her considerable breasts. ‘Stands for available. A for available,’ she would explain and then laugh very loudly. But with her, Samantha always felt comfortable.

‘Was he? In here? Sounds like Alex.’

‘Alex eh? So where does Alex fit in?’

‘Oh, he was an artist. From a long time ago. Might still be. They don’t really retire, do they?’

‘An artist. Really? You’ll have to watch him then. Have you stripped off and posing before you can say Harry Picasso?’

Samantha smiled. ‘Don’t think so.’

‘So, do you fancy him then, this Alex?’

‘Oh no. It’s all a bit confusing. Bit of a shock really. He’s changed so much. You know, physically. Bit like going back to a school reunion and not recognising people you once knew. And something awful happened.’ She looked around.

‘Awful. Go on then. Tell.’

‘Well, it’s a bit embarrassing really.’

‘Go on.’ Angela stopped hanging clothes. ‘Go on. Spill.’

‘Well,’ she whispered, ‘as I left, I actually wiggled my bottom at him.’

‘Aah... Wiggled yer bum? Good for you girl. Wiggle mine all the time. Doesn’t do me much good though.’

‘No, I didn’t mean to. Not sure why I did. So embarrassing. What must he have thought?’

‘Who cares. You fancy him. That’s why.’

‘I don’t know. Think it might be that the attention made me feel like a woman again. Been a long time. Or maybe the woman I once was?’

‘And still are darling.’ Angela did not tell her that Alex couldn’t remember her name.

‘Really? It’s all a bit confusing.’

‘So, will you see him again?’

‘Don’t think so. Don’t think I want all that relationship bother again. Not now.’

‘Oh, I do. Love it.’

It wasn’t until that evening that Samantha remembered that Alex was bringing the book in on the following Tuesday.