

THE WATER
THEATRE

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*The Water
Theatre*

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Printed in UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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Remembering
V.M.C. 1914–72
C.C. 1916–95

The author wishes to thank
The Royal Literary Fund
and
The Extension Trust
for their generous assistance
during the writing of this novel

A late-September afternoon, some time before the turn of the century, and all the hills of Umbria were under cloud that day.

I had flown to Italy at short notice on a mission for a friend and was driving a hire car southwards at speed along the shore of Lake Trasimene, when a violent release of lightning flapped out of the sky like a thrown sheet before crashing shut again in a close collapse of thunder. The squall gusted towards me across the lake, erasing the island first, and then the pleasure steamer making for the quay at Passignano. Moments later the reed beds nearer inshore had gone and the tiny Fiat shuddered under the impact of the rain.

I braked to a crawl. Lightning seared the clouds again, its glare prickling across my skin. With the windscreen awash, I could make out only the tail lights of the vehicle ahead, so at the first exit I swung off the *autostrada* to park by the flooded edge of a road overlooking the lake. Rain pummelled the car's thin roof. It sprang in florets from the drenched asphalt. Through a streaming side window I watched a horse prance nervously across its field.

When I checked the map, counting the kilometres past Perugia and Foligno, up a steeply winding road into the hills, I reckoned on at least another hour's drive to Fontanalba. My

plan had been to get to Marina's house quickly, say what I'd come to say, and then hurry back to London before my life unravelled. The whole trip was supposed to take two days if I was lucky, three at the most. Either way it was going to be an emotionally expensive time. Meanwhile this storm showed no sign of abating. So I sat there in the heat, watching the lightning pitch and strike its lurid canopy across the lake.

I remembered how Marina had once told me that lightning bolts, like kisses, are mutual affairs. They strike only when the descending charge is met by a stream of energy rising upwards from an object on the ground – a tree perhaps, or a person, one who might be utterly unconscious of the way his metabolism has been flirting with the idea of an electrical embrace. Yet the flash, when it comes, always happens by assignation.

So I was thinking about thunderstorms. I was thinking how Marina had understood such acts of dalliance instinctively. She had been born in a tempest as a liner rounded the western bulge of Africa in the month before the Second World War began. Lightning heralded her arrival. It imprinted its tiny fern-like sign, the colour of coral, in the cleft of her infant chest. And as long as I had known her, she had always loved thunderstorms. So if this storm reached as far as Fontanalba, and the years had not sobered her beyond recognition, Marina would be out there, watching the thunder roll around the hills, inciting the universe; whereas I...

I knew that lightning strikes about ten million times each day. I knew that at any given moment more than two thousand thunderstorms are crackling across the planet. We can watch them from our satellites and calculate their number. We can estimate the voltage carried by each of the hundred, inch-

thick lightning bolts that leap for many miles through the atmosphere every second. I knew that they sing the air, briefly, at temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun. But what I mostly knew was that in a thunderstorm the inside of a metal vehicle is a safe enough place to be. I'd once been told as much by a US Army medic as we rode out a storm of stupefying violence in a helicopter over Vietnam. That had been a long time ago, yet the memory retained the precise, epileptic clarity that warfare sometimes brings. Picked out of a firefight near the Perfume River only to be tossed about in a helicopter that felt ready to burst its bolts, I had been shaking with fear. But if the chopper got hit by lightning, the medic assured me with a grin, its metal shell would harmlessly soak up all the discharged energy like a Faraday Cage.

Now, I'd never heard of a Faraday Cage before, and I suspected that the medic might be lying to me as he had certainly lied to the black soldier with a throat wound over whose bloody field dressings he held a saline drip, but the theory met the moment's need, and I chose to believe it. Later I exalted it to a kind of principle, a law even – Crowther's Law – which had only a single clause: before entering a tricky situation check out the nearest Faraday Cage. In my work it was stupid to do otherwise. You calculated the risks and then took all precautions that didn't make the job impossible. It was how you survived. It was how you made the risks make sense. Though Marina, I guessed, would scorn such calculation.

As for her brother Adam, who was now living with her here in Italy and had once been my closest friend, I had no idea who he might be these days.

A week earlier I had returned from covering the civil war in Equatoria. The memories that came back with me were fixed in my head like the cutlass blade I'd seen in the skull of a bewildered tribesman who was walking away from his town along a dirt road. The death stench of that town was with me still – so many deaths, the rotting harvest of a labour of killing so immense it must finally have proved tedious. And when, two days after I'd got back to London, a call summoned me urgently to Yorkshire, to visit Hal Brigshaw, I was sure I knew what it was about. Hal must have been following the news from Equatoria, and would be anxious to hear more about the fate of his friends and allies, the men and women with whom he'd helped build that nation more than thirty years earlier.

Knowing that almost everywhere he looked these days Hal was confronted by the failure of his hopes and ambitions, I'd driven north in dread of telling what I had to tell. This wasn't the first time I'd made that journey filled with trepidation, but nothing had prepared me for what was waiting at High Sugden.

Hal sat blanketed in a wheelchair with his housekeeper, Marjorie Cockroft, fussing over the lopsided sag of his body. "Another stroke," she said, "only worse. It happened not long after you'd left last time. I did try to phone, but they said you'd gone abroad again. Anyway, he's mostly being very good." Dabbing a tissue at the corner of Hal's mouth, she spoke about him dotingly, as though he were deaf. "You're not to think we're not coping."

Hal sat desperate-eyed at the indignity of his condition. His right hand lay palm upward across his narrow thigh, while his head tilted to the left in a slack loll, so it looked as if he was

straining to examine something filmy and delicate between the thumb and the forefinger of his defunct hand. Meanwhile, the air of what had once been the dining room of the grange hung motionless around him. At his back, by the mullioned window with its view across the Pennine slopes, a single bed stood on castors. It felt distressingly provisional.

I brushed a kiss across the old man's brow and tried to rally his spirits with a bluff joke, but I was appalled by the wreck of the once burly figure. Then still more so by the slovenly garble of Hal's speech.

Mrs Cockroft took it on herself to act as interpreter. "It's that war in Africa. We always watch the news together, though I'm not sure how much he understands these days."

Hal's eyes made it clear that he understood every intolerable word. Yet that wasn't why he'd summoned me. With scowling jerks of his good hand he dismissed the woman from the room. He wanted us to be left alone. The housekeeper sighed – she was only trying to be helpful. But her parting glance demanded that I appreciate the claims made on her patience.

Once she was gone, Hal tried to speak again. Marina's name emerged, buckled almost beyond recognition by the struggle of his tongue, and then Adam's followed. I should have caught on sooner to what he wanted, but Hal had spoken about neither of them for years. Only when I deciphered the word "Italy" did I grasp that he was asking me to go there and try to bring back his son and daughter.

I said: "It wouldn't work, Hal. They wouldn't come."

"For you," I heard him mumble. "They'll come for you."

"I'm the last person..." I began, but his damaged voice spoke over me.

“Been thinking... You’ve done it before... Got them to come home for me.”

“More than thirty years ago,” I protested. “And that was before...”

Again, even before that moment of hesitation, he raised the hand of his good arm and shook it as though to erase my protests.

“They’ll come,” he repeated stubbornly. “For you they’ll come.”

I did not share his confidence. And there were many reasons why I could have refused and perhaps should have done so. Circumstantial reasons, emotional reasons, reasons clamouring out of the present and even more strongly out of the disastrous past. Nor was there any need to scavenge for excuses. I had promised Gail, my American lover, that we would spend time alone together in the Cascades after the African assignment was complete. That time was now. The flight was already booked. I badly needed that respite. But in these desolate circumstances how to dash the last hopes of a man to whom I owed almost everything that mattered in my life? A man who had always put his trust in me, and who had once been far closer to me than my father had ever been? So I glanced away, casting about, wishing there were some other means to repay that debt of gratitude. But there was no way to say no to what Hal was asking.

And so it is, I was thinking now, as time and space shifted round me and lightning flared again above the lake, that, less in ignorance of our desires than out of fearful knowledge of how they might consume us, we send our streamers up into the storm. I sat in the hot car with thunder rolling round me.

My thoughts drifted. I must have dozed. And thinking of thunderstorms, I fell into a dream.

I dreamt I was back in the old north on a day of bright June sunlight, certain from the idle air and the warm smells drifting from the terraced houses that it was Sunday morning, a little before noon, when all the mills and factories were still. There was no sound of traffic in the valley, no clank and rattle from the shunting yard, though distantly I could hear a peal of bells. Sunday then, and I was with my father and we were stepping out in the quiet morning to try the beer of a few pubs together. Over the next hour or two we would down three or four pints before making our boozy way back to where my mother would be waiting to lift the roast onto the table. And it was a good, warm feeling to be out with him like this, to feel the pleasure he took in showing off his son to his mates from the mill where he worked, for things had not always been so. Even in the dream, part of my mind stood aside, marvelling that things should be this easy between me and the father who, for too much of my early life, had been my most intimate enemy. But here, for once, we were at peace. I’d get in my rounds at The Royal Oak and The Golden Lion and enjoy the easy ritual of bar-room conversation. I’d listen and laugh, trade jokes and opinions about sport, about women, about the always unsatisfactory state of the world. Or that was how it should have been, for that was the feel of the dream at first, but then I saw that my father had fallen silent and was suddenly very weak. His limbs were so flaccid that he was unable to carry his own lax weight and I had to support him now, I had to get him home.

With one hand round his waist and the other holding his wrist at my shoulder, I was half carrying, half dragging him round the steep rim of the quarry on the hill above the town. We were making for the recreation ground on the brow. I could hear the swings squeaking in their iron chains. Not far now, but I was panting from the effort of it; and when, pausing for breath, I looked down at his face, I saw that the eyes were sightless and opaque, that he had been dead for some time, that his body was still as wasted and naked as I had seen it on the narrow death bed when I'd laid him out. I could feel the bed sores on his back. And the ringing I heard was the inane carillon of the ice-cream van which, on the hot day of my father's dying, had been the only passing bell.

When I woke in Italy to the thunder stroke, I was still carrying my father's dead body from pub to pub round the silent streets of the town, and there was no one near to help or carry him away.

Dusk was falling when I reached Fontanalba. The hillsides teemed with cloud. When I stopped at a crossroads to look for a sign, my headlights picked out a wayside shrine to the Madonna, dressed in her peeling blue robe. Some distance away, a street lamp glimmered through the mist. Having no idea where Marina's house might be, I turned the car in that direction and parked outside a tall stone house.

A small dog ran barking from a barn beside the house to yap at my shoes. Two small boys appeared. They stood on thin legs, their glossy hair cropped short over faces which stared aghast as I cobbled together a question in Italian; then they fled into the house. Somewhere above me clanged a single bell.

Wooded mountains came and went among clouds the colour of burnt tallow.

I was about to turn away when a woman in a black frock came out of the house, wiping her hands on an apron. She called off the dog, then asked something – presumably what business I had frightening her children in the dusk. I tried again. She tipped an ear and lifted a thin, worried hand to her cheek. “*Ah, la signora inglese,*” she exclaimed at last. “*Marina! Sì, sì.*”

“*Sua casa?*” I pressed. “*Dove?*”

Her wrists twisted. Her tongue sped. As best I could I picked my way through the torrent of help and, when I thought I'd got things clear, she added more. Only later, as I braked in the narrow yard outside what I hoped was Marina's cottage, did I realize she'd been trying to warn me that no one was there.

By now the bell had stopped ringing. A wind had got up and was blowing holes in the mist. A single lamp revealed how perilous the track along which I'd just rattled my car was. It was so narrow that the wheels must have passed within an inch of where the edge sheered away in a six-foot drop to an olive grove. Looking up again, I met the dark, refusing silence of the house. The shutters were closed. I tried the handle on the double door, which barely moved. Under a bamboo awning built into a recess at the side of the house four chairs stood at a circular table. The dusk smelt of rain and draughty space.

There was no room to turn the car, and I was considering how best to back out of that dead end when the elder of the two boys appeared through the tatters of mist. He walked past me without a word, making for the low wall under the awning,

where he tipped a plant pot and turned, pointing at me with a straight arm stiff as a duellist's. His small hand clutched an old pistol key.

A smell of dust and dried thyme. Then the frescoes emerging from white plaster in panels no larger than foolscap sheets. They showed turbaned merchants, sailors and cowled monks; a single-masted ship with two tiers of shining oars; an angel standing guard before a sepulchre; a woman praying in the desert, her nakedness covered by silver-white hair hanging like a shawl to her knees; a lion vigilant on a rock in blazing wilderness. It was as though the walls were trying to remember a dream and could recapture no more than these haunting fragments.

I took the paintings for medieval work at first, but a closer look showed them to be more recent, handled in an archaic style that somehow finessed pastiche and found simplicity. The Marina I'd known would have lacked patience with such obvious narrative intent. Yet if she hadn't painted these pictures, who had?

The boy smiled up at me and crossed the room towards the fireplace, where he pointed out a picture unrelated to the rest. A cheap, unframed reproduction, printed on board, it was a head-and-shoulders portrait of a jug-eared monk with hooded eyes and an unsatisfactory beard.

"San Francesco," he announced. I took in the golden nimbus around the tonsured head. The local saint, of course, St Francis of Assisi. Now the boy was pointing at his own chest. "Franco. Franco Gamboni."

I nodded, tapped my own chest. "Martin. Martin Crowther." Neither sound meant much to him, so I tried a variation –

"Martino" – which elicited a nod. I opened a door onto a little kitchen. "Well, Franco Gamboni," I said, "I can't think there's a restaurant in this village of yours, so let's see if we can get some grub together."

Remembering forgotten instructions, the boy drew in his breath, gestured widely across the paved floor. "*Attenzione, ci sono scorpioni!*"

"Ah, grazie, grazie."

"Prego." He stood, smiling, with both hands clasped on top of his head, swaying from side to side. Then he turned and ran back up the track through the gloom.

Generations of olive growers must have scratched a living here before the house fell empty and Marina purchased it for next to nothing. She had intended to use it as a holiday cottage, but once life in England became intolerable to her, she had settled here in Fontanalba, living simply and cheaply, painting outdoors, content to be alone with her child. Then, much later, when he had nowhere else to turn, her brother Adam came to join her there.

The chimney corner of the frescoed living room had become a small study alcove. Beside it, an upright piano stood against one wall, its panels inlaid with fretwork patterns of foliage and masks. The trellised backs of two chairs were painted in peeling gold. A blue throw covered an old couch. On the desk in the alcove stood a paraffin lamp, a portable typewriter, a pencil case with a brass hasp and three books. A *New Pronouncing Dictionary of the English & Italian Languages* had been published in 1908 when, according to the table on page iii, a twenty-lira piece had been a gold coin worth fifteen

shillings and ten pence farthing. Next to it leant a *Rough Guide to Italy*. It occurred to me that an entire civilization had vanished down the gap between those two volumes. Beside them lay the only other reading matter in the room – a skimpily bound book with the title *Umbrian Excursions* stamped on its spine.

The alcove would have been the obvious spot for a telephone if Marina had not refused to have one installed. Thinking of this, I took out my mobile phone and was about to dial Gail. But I was tired and fractious, the conversation would too easily go wrong, so I put the phone away again, knowing the call might now prove all the harder when I came to make it.

In the small kitchen at the back of the house I found the wine rack and enough bits and pieces for a scratch meal. I sat puzzling over those anachronistic frescoes as I ate. Surely monks and angels had no role in Marina's universe? If she had rejected everything else about her father, his atheism had gone unquestioned. Like sex or oxygen, it was a fact of life with which it made no sense to quarrel. So what were these paintings doing here along with an image of St Francis? They reminded me of the illustrations to the copy of Grimm's *Fairy Tales* that my mother had bought for me when I was small. In the stillness of the room I recalled the smell of that book and the way its pictures were like windows on a world utterly different from the grimy industrial landscape in which I grew up.

Then I remembered how I'd lain in bed with Marina once, chaste as a fabled knight, telling her one of those stories

to still the rage of her grief. That state of almost innocence possessed me again in all its adolescent sensuality as, with a catch of the heart, I recalled the gift she'd given me later – a painting she'd made of a boy riding on a fox's back. These frescoes were more expertly done, but the same enchanted imagination was active here.

In the drawer of a bedside table upstairs I found an English translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Propped against a fat pillow, I opened the pages, and an old sky-blue envelope fell out onto the bed. To my astonishment, I saw that it was addressed to Adam in my own handwriting. Its postmark dated from the late '50s, at a time when we were both second-year undergraduates. During the bitter January of that year, Adam had suffered a brief episode of nervous breakdown. He'd been kept under supervision in a local mental hospital for a few days before being sent home to recuperate. I'd written this letter to him there, telling him how much he was missed by all his friends and trying to lift his spirits with a satirical account of our doings. Its tone was light but caring, even studiously so in its preservation of a certain northern reticence. Adam had let me know how much it meant to him at the time, but I was both touched and amazed to discover that he had valued the letter enough to preserve it across all the years between.

My first thought after reading it through was that this mission to Italy might not be quite as hopeless as I'd feared. Then came a second, less optimistic thought. Hailing as it did from a time when things were still good between us, this letter might simply have been tucked between the pages of a book he'd been reading more than forty years ago and then

forgotten. Thinking about it further, I could imagine no other reason why it would have escaped destruction.

I was about to switch out the lamp when a sweep of headlights brightened the bedroom window and a car approached across the valley, pulling to a halt somewhere close by. Unless the night had bounced the sound from elsewhere there must be another house, just below this one, on the side of the hill. A man and a woman got out of the car, laughing together. I caught a shushing sound, and then something muttered in a whispered exchange that ended in a brief contralto giggle. Perhaps they'd been surprised by the light in Marina's cottage? A key turned. There was more suppressed laughter before the door closed again and the lock clicked shut. Not long afterwards came the sounds of exuberant sex.

There are few more isolating experiences than that of lying alone in earshot of loudly rutting strangers. My mind illustrated the event, mingling fantasy and memory, and when at last all three of us were done, I lay in the silence thinking about the previous night in the Camden flat with Gail – how after the row over my decision to go to Italy we had struck an unsatisfactory truce and adjusted our plans to allow for time alone together. But that assignment in Africa had sickened my desire. Our lovemaking had been incomplete. It felt as wistful as a fall of snow.

Later, her eyes grave among the mass of her dishevelled hair, Gail had asked me again not to go.

"I've made promises," I said.

"You made promises to me."

"I *will* keep them."

"They're broken already."

"But mendable. I'll make them good."

"It's the way you talk about them," she said after a time. "The people there, I mean. As if you were still in thrall to them somehow. Particularly Marina."

"It's more years than I can remember since I even saw her!"

"But you were in love with her once? She was the first, wasn't she?"

I said, "Marina left my life a long time ago. You have to understand: these are old loyalties. I'm doing it for Hal."

"No," she said, "I don't think so."

"If you had any idea how much I'm dreading this trip..."

"Then don't go."

"I have to, Gail. For Hal."

She shook her disbelieving head again. "No, Martin. Like always you're doing this for you."

And as if in ironic fulfilment of her declaration, here I was, alone in Marina's house under the Umbrian night, regretting that I'd come, knowing there were many reasons why I'd allowed myself no choice, and aching with memories of Hal Brigshaw's children who, together or apart, had long been capable of opening up a war zone in my heart.

I remembered the pain of my last encounter with Marina. I remembered the bleak hour in which Adam's friendship had turned to hostility. I thought about Hal stricken in his wheelchair and about the piled bodies of the dead in Equatoria. Again I shrank beneath the burden of my father's corpse, a limp, decaying load that I could not put down.

Knowing these things must keep me from sleep, I reached for the copy of Virgil. It fell open at the page where the letter had lain, and I saw at once that someone – Adam presumably; the book was his – had underscored three lines:

*Your ghost, Father,
Your sad ghost, often present in my mind,
Has brought me to the threshold of this place.*

The night swung like lock gates around me, letting more darkness in.

I woke in a rose-madder room already steeped in warm mid-morning light. Pushing back the curtains, I saw a plump hill of olive groves topped by a cluster of houses, impasto pink and white, with terracotta roofing tiles. Sunlight flashed from a chimney cowl. In the hazier distance two thickly wooded hills saddled the horizon. Nothing moved. Even the swallows were silent on the wires, though somewhere a solitary cowbell clanked every now and then, jolting dry air that smelt of rosemary and thyme. Beyond the bamboo awning, a closer olive grove sloped steeply away down the hillside. The shadows of stone terraces tumbled in soft cataracts between the rows.

I was showering when I heard a sound beyond the clatter of water at my feet. When I called out to see if someone was there, a woman's voice lifted from the foot of the stairs. "I think maybe I have come at a bad time. Forgive me." I knew at once that it was not Marina. So whose was it then, this cloudy foreign voice that added, "I shall return again when you are dressed?"

I reached for a towel, calling, "Hang on, I'll be with you in just a minute. Don't go away." But the sitting room and kitchen were empty when I went down, though a newly filled bowl of fruit stood on the table in the dining area. Towelling

my hair, I stepped outside and saw the woman sitting in the shade at the circular blue table. Sunglasses masked her eyes. A wide-brimmed straw hat with a silk ribbon hid most of her dark curls.

"Good morning," she said, "I had not meant to discompose you," and rose, offering a firm hand. Slim, in her late forties, she wore a shirt of lavender-grey silk hanging loose over ivory-coloured linen trousers. "I heard only this morning that you are arrived. If I knew last night..." Her ringed hands made a deprecating flourish. "There was no food in the house, I know. I have put milk and butter in the refrigerator and there is now bread in the box." With a hint of reproach she added, "We were not expecting you."

I took note of that familiar "we".

"There's no phone here," I explained. "I had to come at short notice and couldn't let Adam and Marina know. I thought I'd find at least one of them here."

"I see. You wished to jump a surprise on them!"

"Spring."

"Excuse me?"

"Spring, not jump."

"Ah yes. Forgive me... my English... I am Gabriella. And you?"

I told her my name, there was a brief beat of hesitation before she opened her mouth and said simply, "Ah!"

"They've spoken of me?"

"Of course." Her eyes, which had been briefly averted, returned now, bright with renewed affability.

"Do you know where Adam and Marina are?" I asked. "Is there any way to contact them?"

She gazed brightly up at me. “For the moment I don’t think so.”

“It’s rather urgent. I don’t have much time.”

Somewhere higher up the hill a bell counted eleven in tinny chimes. We stood by the blue table in the fragrant day while she considered her response. A white sports car gleamed beside the shrine at the junction, where she had parked it. The morning basked in dry light.

She said, “I think you must wait for them.”

This woman was no peasant, but the statement had a peasant’s obstinacy. It assumed that waiting was the usual condition here. Things might once have happened; one day something might happen again; in the meantime, waiting was the thing.

But the prospect of kicking my heels in this uneventful place held no appeal. I said, “Perhaps the neighbours know where they are? I heard them last night. Down here.” Crossing to the wall beyond the table, I looked over onto the salmon-coloured pantiles of a low-pitched roof. Another cottage was stacked on the side of the hill below Marina’s, neater, in better repair.

“Ah,” Gabriella smiled, “so Capitano Mezzanotte is back! But I doubt he can help us.” I was about to suggest that it might at least be worth a try when I heard her chuckling softly at my back. “Of course that is not his true name,” she said. “It is our joke, yes? He makes use of the place only occasionally. Adam called him by that name because he comes by night and always leaves early.”

“They,” I corrected.

“Yes,” she smiled.

“Captain Midnight. I see.”

“He is a very private man.”

“Public enough to keep me awake.”

She nodded, her lips pursed, but smiling still. It occurred to me that she and Adam must be on intimate terms to share such a joke. Were they perhaps lovers? If so, this woman might be just as resolute to protect him from the past as he had been to sever all ties with it. She wouldn’t want me “jumping” any surprises on him.

I said, “You really don’t know when they’ll be back?”

Frustration must have shown in my face, but with a wry tilt of her head she evaded my question. “Things don’t always work out as we expect. You must not be dismayed.” Abruptly she brought her ringed fingers together at her lips. “I have some small business to perform this morning. It will take me perhaps one hour or so. After then I will give you lunch at the Villa, yes? If you are agreeable, I will pick you up at, say, twelve thirty.” The smile was warm.

Lacking options, I decided to be “agreeable”, thanked her and asked whether it would be too far for me to walk.

She opened her hands and brought them together lightly at her chest as though catching a moth. “No, not far. But the road is steep,” she said. “It will be a hot walk.”

“I’m used to heat. I was in Africa a week ago.”

The smile broadened, the narrow shoulders wriggled a little beneath the silk. “I am forgetting. You are famous for your *ardimento*. Very well, go round the hill and take the road to the left, past the *convento*. You will see. Cross a bridge and in perhaps three kilometres there comes a gate with birds. Mythological birds. *Grifoni*?”

“Griffins, yes.”

“The driver will bring you. The door is open. Come through. I will expect you.” Again she offered her hand and quickly slipped it free.

From the dappled light of the awning I watched the sports car accelerate away around that steep, heat-stunned theatre of olive groves.

I breakfasted on coffee and fruit with the *Rough Guide* open on the blue table. Fontanalba was of too little consequence to feature in its pages, so I picked up the slim volume called *Umbrian Excursions* and was about to open it when I decided I'd better call Gail. Only the machine answered me. I left a message telling her what had happened, gave a satirical account of the conversation with Gabriella and insisted that I had no intention of hanging about in Umbria for more than another night.

“You were right,” I conceded, “I shouldn't have come. I'll make it up to you.”

Then I sat, staring at the olive groves, gravelled on the silence.

For want of anything better to do, I picked up the book again. The title was embossed on the cover, though neither the author's name nor the publisher's colophon appeared there. Only when I turned to the title page did I discover that it had been written and privately published by Laurence Stromberg.

That extravagant man had been my contemporary at Cambridge, but I'd seen nothing of him since we bumped into one another in the crush bar of a West End theatre at some point in the mid-'60s. “But you're looking so well,” he'd

crooned. “Quite the figure of the rugged hack, all tanned and rangy and doubtless badged with scars!” Then, with a wicked nudge he'd added: “Or has journalistic pribble-prabble merely deformed you into a cliché of your trade?” But Larry's style had already begun to feel anachronistic, and his own career as a theatre director was faltering. The last I'd heard of him was a rumour that he'd been initiated into a secret order practising sex magic in South Kensington. It was the sort of gossip he might have started himself, which did not necessarily make it untrue. And the pages of his book revealed a familiar quiriness now, for its various excursions were as much through the painted chambers of the author's mind as through the landscape of Umbria.

I skimmed through his account of the ancient augurs of Gubbio who'd read signs in the flight of birds, and then dipped into another on the oracular springs of Clitumnus. But I soon lost patience and put the book down. After a time I set out for Gabriella's villa.

Because Marina's cottage was perched halfway down the hill, some distance outside the medieval walls, I got my first real sight of the town when I looked up from the roadside shrine. Hunkered down behind its defences, Fontanalba was curled on its summit like a snail. Only a single belltower and the crowns of two plane trees rose above the pinkish ramparts. The lane to the villa curved on round the hill, past the gate and a complex of buildings under a square tower topped by a Turk's cap dome.

The armorial carvings on the bastions of the town gate were hidden behind rough scaffolding, though I could see

no sign of anyone at work. The dark archway opened onto a small piazza where the crown of the hill had been cobbled over. Houses sloped away along two narrow alleys, their roofs held down by top-heavy chimneys and flat stones. As far as I could see, there were no shops or bars, but midway down the wider alley an ornate niche had been built around the basin of a fountain. At the edge of the piazza, under the white glare of the Romanesque church, six plastic chairs waited for the shade.

Unaware of my arrival, a woman berated an old man from her vine-slung balcony. He brandished a bottle, stammered something back at her, and then slumped in the shade beside the fountain. Not wanting to get caught up in a neighbourhood wrangle that might have been going on for a decade or two, I backed away, out of the gate, wondering what else people could do in such beleaguered proximity but bicker in the heat.

I followed the lane past the *convento* down to where an ancient bridge spanned a river that tumbled among stones through a green glen. On the far side, a steep climb brought me to a wooded ridge, and from there I looked back down on Fontanalba. The air was heady and resinous, the noon light a somnolent blue shimmer punctuated by the shrilling of cicadas. I saw no one as I walked.

The griffin-guarded gates stood open. The last turn of the long, winding drive through trees revealed the palatial scale of the house. At the centre of a wide court with a parterre garden, water plashed from an elaborate fountain. Beyond it, a loggia shaded a number of doors at ground level. All of them were locked, so I climbed a sweep of stairs to the terrace above.

From there, with its ochre stucco peeling in the sunlight, rose the main body of the villa.

I stood for a while beside a stone urn, taking in a view that reached beyond the statuary and pinewoods to the hazy plain far below. Turning back to the house, I saw that a door stood open in the portico beneath a second – and grander – upper loggia. I stepped through into the cool entrance hall.

The house was as silent as a painting of itself. Along the length of the hall's airy tunnel three chandeliers floated like tasselled marine creatures. Mellow light from a glazed door at the far end fell along walls painted with *trompe l'œil* prospects of trees and bowers and hills. I coughed to make my presence heard and, when nothing happened, walked along the hall to a central atrium, where a transverse corridor offered access to rooms on both sides. I was standing by a statue which had a missing hand, wondering whether to shock the place out of its trance by shouting, when a man wearing a white jacket appeared down the corridor. Startled to see me there, he advanced quickly across the tiles and listened, unconvinced, as I explained I was there at Gabriella's invitation. His chin was unshaven, his mouth tight, his blue eyes menacing. He growled something that might have accused me of breaking off the statue's hand and hiding it. His own hands – which were matted with black hair – gestured extravagantly. “No, no,” he decided and, in the ensuing torrent of Italian words, two were uttered with emphatic force: “*La Contessa*”.

When I failed to utter any intelligible response, he grimaced, indicated that I should wait a moment and turned away into the first room down the corridor. Leaving the door ajar so he could keep an eye on me, he picked up a phone from the desk and

dialled a number. I could hear only his side of the conversation and understood little, so I looked at the bookcases. Many finely bound volumes were ranked there along with other books that looked dumpy and probably dated from the early days of printing.

With a twitch of his finger the man summoned me to the phone.

“Forgive me” – I recognized Gabriella’s voice above the crackle – “I am delayed longer than I thought. But I have asked Orazio to take care of you.”

I said, “I think he’d rather throw me out.”

“Oh dear, he can be fierce, I know, but I have told him that the fault is mine. I will come soon. Please, make yourself at home. Enjoy the pool. There are towels and robes in the pool house.”

I hesitated a moment before saying, “You didn’t tell me you were a *contessa*.”

“Ah! You do not care to have surprises sprung on you?”

“Sprung.”

Laughing, she said, “English has no pity.”

On impulse I asked, “Is Adam there with you?”

“Adam? Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know. I get the feeling you’re keeping something from me.”

“And you feel you should have everything at once?”

“You think I deserve less? Besides, I told you, I don’t have much time.”

“Today is too hot to hurry,” she decided. “Enjoy your swim.”

I would have said more, but she was gone.

Orazio indicated that I should follow him out into a courtyard, where he opened a door concealed in the wall by a screen of boxwood. Immediately I heard the sound of water somewhere below. Descending a stone stairway, we came out into a secret garden. I caught the gleam of water issuing out of a lion’s mouth to cascade down a channel cut into the steps of a small neoclassical temple which overlooked the pool. White parasols shaded two sun loungers in an arbour of bougainvillea. A long marble table flanked by marble benches stood nearby.

Orazio beckoned me inside the temple, where a stone nymph poured water down into a basin shaped like a scallop shell. It wasn’t hard to imagine someone bathing there, naked as foam-born Venus, but the steward was impatient to show me how a modern shower had been fitted into one side chamber, while a refrigerator, well stocked with drink, hummed in another. He poured me a beer. I thanked him for his trouble. Mollified, he brought olives and pistachios to the table outside, then he left me alone.

I swam several lengths, took a shower, dressed and lay down on the lounge. The beer was strong, the heat of the day soporific. A line of cypresses beyond the pool stood motionless. I might have been lying in a world where sunlight spellbound all things to stillness except water. Pouring from the lion’s mouth, down the stairs into a shallow slipper bath and thence into the pool, it flowed out again unseen. It was as if this green and secret garden existed solely as a thoroughfare for water. Nature and art had consorted here to serve its purposes. The spirit of the place breathed in its sound, and now that sound was passing through me till I was left with only a diminishing sense of separate existence.

Gazing across the ornamental hedges at the mountains beyond, I thought – as so often on the chancy expedition of my life – *What the hell am I doing here?*

The pool panted in its net of lights. The sun stood still. I was recalling another arrival, in another place, as I fell backwards into sleep.

2

High Sugden

*Grey goose and gander,
Waft your wings together,
Carry the good king's daughter
Over the one-strand river.*

The push of cold wind at his cheeks had brought those lines to mind. It plucked them from somewhere deep in his memory as he freewheeled swiftly down the banking swerve of the hill. Then, with the bike coasting on its own momentum up the lane out of Sugden Foot, the rhyme repeated itself in his head like flight instructions, until both slope and wind turned against him. Lifting himself from the saddle, he stood on the pedals to meet the gradient. His eyes were watering now. On either side of the lane silver tussocks of cotton grass glinted in winter light. He took the wind between his teeth, yet it buffeted about his ears so loudly he could hear nothing else and was unaware of the car climbing the hill behind him.

The car – a pale-blue Austin 7 – rounded a bend in the narrow lane as he tacked towards the next brow. Perhaps the driver had no time to see him. Certainly no attempt was made to brake or swerve, so it was merely a matter of luck that the side of the vehicle hustled past not quite close enough to touch but near enough to unbalance him. Panting in the stink

of exhaust, he propped himself against the capstones of the roadside wall, looked up, and saw the car crest the rise and drop out of sight.

Alone on the side of the hill, Martin Crowther, eighteen years old, sweating inside his duffel coat, pushed back a lock of dark hair and shouted a pointless insult. But when he turned his head, the view down the valley was too elating to let him feel annoyed for long. On this last Saturday of the year the distant factories stood smokeless under dense cloud. Pale shafts of sunlight slanted down over the moor towards Crimmonden, while northwards there was already a pink glare to the sky though it was still only mid-morning. He saw that snow might fall before the day was out.

Martin let go of the cold handlebars and blew into his fist. Above him on the slope, a blackened slab jutted from a stack of outcrop rock. The light tipped and shifted again. He could hear the hum of the power lines, and everywhere around the gaunt horizon he sensed the depleted, psalm-like lamentation uttered by places where, for too long, industry and wilderness had been at war. Again and again he had tried to catch that note in poetry. He had brought some of his efforts with him in the folder in his saddlebag, and was looking forward to trying them out on Adam Brigshaw's educated ear, but that brisk, inexpressible alteration of the light robbed him of confidence. He ran some lines through his mind, thought he saw how they might be improved, then began to worry that they were no good. It might be wiser to keep them to himself.

Having been brought to a halt, he would have to walk his bike up to the next rise, so he swung his leg across the saddle and began to push. *Grey goose and gander*, he found himself

muttering the old nursery rhyme again, *waft your wings together, carry the good king's daughter over the one-strand river.*

Over the centuries the slate roof of High Sugden Grange had buckled to a wave, so that the blackened Elizabethan house sheltered in the lea of its high stone barn with a head-down, introverted air. A lower range of outbuildings enclosed the yard where the Austin was parked beside a shooting brake. A skimpy figure wearing a red scarf reached into the back seat and took out two baskets before crossing to the porched door of the house.

Minutes later Martin's tyres whirred through the open gate into the yard. He propped his bike against a shed wall, removed his bicycle clips and put them in the pocket of his duffel coat. Under the noise of the wind he heard the clatter of beck water pouring into a stone trough, but so chill was the air that he thought it couldn't be long before even that sound was stilled to ice.

On the pediment over the porch, a mason had carved two free-floating cherubs in relief holding a shield on which a name – JNO. CRAGG – had been chiselled inside the angle of an open pair of compasses over the date 1596. Beneath it ran the inscription:

THIS PLACE
HATES LOVES PUNISHES OBSERVES HONOURS
WICKEDNESS PEACE CRIMES LAWS THE VIRTUOUS

The floor of the porch was flagged, and stone benches had been built into the recess at either side. A ribboned sprig of mistletoe

hung above the door. As Martin stepped into the porch, the noise of the wind stopped, as though a switch had been thrown. Struck by the abrupt alteration, he took a single step back into the yard, and there was the wind instantly barracking at his ears. When he stepped forward into the porch, the switch was tripped again. It cut the world in two. It made things feel provisional and strange.

Martin lifted his hand to the knocker, and the studded oak door moved at his touch. He heard the sound of a woman's voice inside. "Don't be tiresome, darling," she was saying, "the day's quite complicated enough as it is."

"Then wouldn't it be simpler if I wasn't around?" The answering voice was also female, but younger, tetchier.

"Now you're just being captious," came the reproof.

"But I pulled my weight over Christmas, didn't I? I really don't see why I should waste half my weekend entertaining Adam's boring friends."

"There's only one of them."

Somewhere in the house a phone rang just once and was immediately answered. "Anyway it's not just him," the woman's voice went on after a moment. "You know Emmanuel's leaving tomorrow. I really think you have to be at dinner tonight. You can spend all day tomorrow with Graham."

"That's not the point. You know I..."

"There's a terrible draught in here. Did you leave the front door open?"

"I don't know, I had my hands full. I really think we should discuss this."

"Marina, I don't have time. The point is, Emmanuel's hardly seen you..."

"Well that's not my fault. I've been here kicking my heels, waiting for him and Daddy to show their faces."

"They do have more important things on their minds!"

"My point exactly."

Martin stood between the wind and the door, preventing the knocker's fall, admiring and fearing the suave way these voices performed their disagreement. What to do, in such company, with the thudding flats and twangs of his own rough vowels? Gentrify them? Speak as little as possible?

"Anyway," Marina pressed, "I can't think why you want me storming about the place in a bad mood before he goes."

"Oh do stop it, darling. What I want is for you to see if that door's shut. It's like the Russian front in here."

Martin let the knocker drop. It banged in his chest.

"Oh surely that's not him already! It's barely twelve. Go and see, will you?"

"Why can't Adam go? It's *his* friend."

"He's out on the tops with the dogs. He should have been back ages ago."

Martin heard footsteps on flagstones, and then the door was pulled open. Light from the yard fell across the girl's face, sharpening her frown. She said, "You must be Adam's friend." His gaze dipped to the denim jeans rolled at ankle length over her loafers. "Well, you'd better come in," she offered, as though leaving him outside was a preferable, and perhaps feasible, option.

Martin stepped through into the hall and took in the sombre panelling, the tinted engravings and a newel post topped by a lugubrious owl at the foot of an oak staircase that rose to a banistered gallery. A smell of roasting meat warmed the air. He said, "I'm a bit early, I think."

“Yes. We’re in the kitchen.”

Would he have known this girl for Adam’s sister in the street? Probably not. She lacked his sidelong air of reticence that might be either diffident or vain. The glance of her slate-blue eyes was franker. She was fairer of skin and hair, the latter drawn back into a ponytail at her neck, neither blonde nor mouse but glistening somewhere between. Martin found her frosty, snobbish, spoilt.

He followed her through into the kitchen, where a woman in her mid-forties closed the top oven of a cream Aga and smiled. She put a hand to the dark mass of her hair, in which millings of grey were threaded. Her eyes were a searching, rueful blue. “You must be Martin,” she said, and before he could answer, “Oh for goodness’ sake, Marina, do take his coat. We’re in a bit of a muddle, I’m afraid. Adam should be back any minute. I’ve no idea where he’s got to.” She paused to take in the scale of additional difficulty presented by this young man. “You look pinched with cold. It must be horrid out there.”

“It’s not so bad,” he mumbled as water drummed into the kettle that Mrs Brigshaw held to the spout of a fat brass tap.

“Not bad?” Marina echoed, incredulous. “It’s going to bloody snow that’s all. And we’ll all be stuck out here for days and drive each other mad.” She took his coat through to the hall. Almost eighteen years old, she was as tall as her mother, but lacked her comeliness and poise.

“As you can tell,” said Mrs Brigshaw, “Marina’s in a beastly mood. Earl Grey or Transport Caf? Or would you prefer something stronger?”

“Tea’s fine. Whatever.”

“So... did you have a good Christmas?”

“It was okay.”

“Only okay? I should have expected a good-looking young man like you to have had a lively time. Do you have a girlfriend?”

Conscious of Marina listening at the doorjamb, he said, “No one serious.”

“I should think not. There’s plenty of time for ‘serious’ later. Right now you should be having fun. God knows, serious comes soon enough.” Settling the kettle to boil on the hotplate, Grace Brigshaw wished that Adam would come back and take his friend out of the kitchen, where he was ill at ease and she had complicated things to do. None of this showed on her attentive face, but Martin sensed it as he sat in a stick-back chair, glad of the Aga’s heat, wondering at this kitchen’s airy space.

“You’re from the grammar school in Calderbridge, aren’t you?” Marina demanded. “I hear they don’t rate women very highly there. On the evolutionary scale, I mean.” She picked up a carrot and crunched it between her teeth, while her intent, grey-blue eyes traversed the kitchen, looking for some advantage with the matter that pressed more closely on her mind.

And this was unjust. He felt the heat of it. “Actually I have a rather high regard for Emily Brontë,” he retorted, and thought he had established an ascendancy, until he saw the two women glance at each other. He heard his words as they must have heard them and flushed to his ears.

“She *was* quite exceptional,” agreed Grace Brigshaw, and bit her lip. For a moment, sensing his misery, she wanted to pull him up from where he sat with his thick, flannelled thighs

spread over large, cheaply shod feet, and hug him into relaxed laughter. But the boy would probably just stiffen like a hare on a poulterer's hook. So where to take things now? Oh dear, with Marina already cross and tiresome, and the sky crowding with snow, this could quickly veer into a difficult day.

At that moment the front door banged open and two big dogs bounded into the kitchen with lolling tongues, their haunches shivering in an ecstasy of return. "Ah," said Mrs Brigshaw, "here's Adam at last," and Martin reached out with relief to the two dappled English setters that slobbered at his thighs.

"I didn't think you'd bother to come," Adam said, "not with snow threatening."

The absence of warmth in his voice left Martin wondering whether this friend he had met by chance was now regretting the invitation impulsively offered after they'd talked for an hour or so amid the steam and chatter of a coffee bar just before Christmas. They were of an age, both sixth-formers, though at different schools, working as temporary postmen during the Christmas rush, and both soon to go up to university. Conversation had revealed their shared enthusiasm for modern poetry, cinema and jazz. Each had been curious about the other's background, yet Adam's manner now suggested that what had seemed a discovery in the Pagoda Coffee Bar might prove an embarrassment among his family.

Martin said, "It didn't look too bad when I set out."

Grace Brigshaw glanced at where Martin kept his face dipped towards the warm, writhing smell of the dogs. "Well, at least Hengist and Horsa haven't forgotten how to welcome guests," she sighed, and glowered at her son, who said, "We'd better go up to my room."

Wondering what had possessed him to come here rather than joining Frank Jagger and the others at the Black Horse before bussing out to the rugby match at Crow Hall, Martin got to his feet. He stood awkwardly between the approaching mug and his departing host as Marina asked, "Don't you want this tea then?"

Leaving the room, Adam said, "Bring it if you want."

"Lunch will be at one," Adam's mother called after him. "Or thereabouts."

Holding the mug that had been thrust at him, Martin went out to where Adam waited on the stairs, frowning back at his visitor. "Marina's been a bitch all morning," he said. "It's because they won't let her spend the night with the tedious rigger-bugger she thinks she's in love with."

From somewhere along the gallery above, they heard the abortive clunk and gurgle of a lavatory chain pulled four times before the water flushed. As Martin reached the head of the stairs a door opened and he was astonished to see the tall but slightly built figure of a black man come out. He was dressed in heavy corduroy trousers and a thick roll-neck Guernsey over which he wore a knitted cardigan with leather arm patches. Even so the smile on his broad-browed, heart-shaped face amounted to little more than a gallant shiver as Adam said, "Emmanuel, this is Martin – the new friend I was telling you about."

Martin shifted the mug to his left hand and took the slender hand that was held out to him. The grip was strong. Adam turned to Martin. "This is Emmanuel Adjouna. You can talk at lunch. He's working with my father right now."

The African's smile widened. "You have fallen among good friends, Martin. In this place only the rooms are cold. Adam

my dear, I think I would have died by now if not for these excellent trousers and sweaters you lent me.” And he burst into a hoarse laugh. Martin found it impossible to say how old this man was. He wanted to laugh with him. Aware of the mug steaming in his hand, he said, “This tea might warm you up. I don’t really want it.”

“Thank you, but I have this.” Grinning, the African took a flask from his back pocket. “From Russia, where they know how to banish cold. You like to try some vodka?”

At that moment a door further along the landing opened. A bluff voice called, “What’s going on out here?” and a burly man with a strong, romanesque head and a broken nose stared out at the gathering on the gallery. “That for me?” he asked, and took the mug of tea. “Good, I’m gasping.” He sipped at the mug, held it away from his pugilist’s jaw, studied Martin for a moment, and said, “I’m Hal. This is my house. You’re very welcome.” Before the visitor could respond, the big man – he was taller than Adam, more vigorously built – turned to the African, muttering, “We’d better push on, old son, or we’ll never have you in Government house.” Then he went back into his study.

With a wry grimace Emmanuel Adjouna winked at the two young men and followed his friend. As the door closed behind him, the telephone in the study rang once and was again immediately answered.

Adam’s was an attic room, up a further winding stair. Under the eaves by the dormer window, he bent to plug in a two-barred electric heater, pointed Martin towards a steamer-chair that had seen better days and threw himself onto the plump

eiderdown of the single bed. Above his head was pinned a Cubist poster from Le Musée d’Art Moderne. Martin took in the shelves stacked with books, the many Penguins in their orange livery with the white stripe; the leaning rank of records, many LPs among them; the slimline desk with its swivel chair; the air of inviolable privacy. He tried to clear his mind of envy.

“What are they doing?” he asked. “Your dad and his friend, I mean.”

“Overthrowing the British Empire.”

When Martin snorted and glanced away, Adam said, “You don’t believe me?”

“Sure!” Martin got up and crossed to the dormer window, where he gazed out at the swollen sky over Sugden Clough.

“You haven’t heard of my father?” Adam said.

“Should I have?” Martin turned and saw him balancing something on the thumbnail of his right hand. Light glinted briefly off an old silver coin as Adam flicked his thumb, sent the coin spinning into the air, and caught it in the same hand when it fell.

“He’d like to think so. H.A.L. Brigshaw? Author of *Inglorious Empire* and *The Practice of Freedom*?”

“Doesn’t sound like the sort of stuff I read.”

“But you read the papers, don’t you? *The Express* thinks he should be thrown in the Tower pending execution at Traitor’s Gate. Mind you, he’d be pissed off if it didn’t.”

“Politics isn’t my thing.”

Adam laughed, aghast. “Better not let Hal hear you say that – not unless you fancy being beaten into submission. We’re all passionate about politics here, except Marina of course, though

even she gets worked up about Africa. We lived there for years till Hal got the sack. Emmanuel's going back next week." Adam tossed the coin again. "Keep an eye on the news."

"Why, what's going to happen?"

"His people have already got the students organized, and the Trades Unions in Port Rokesby are with him. He's working with Hal on a strategy to get the miners on board, and once that happens the colony will be ungovernable." Again the coin span on the air between them.

"Which colony is that?" Martin asked, flustered by his own ignorance. But Adam seemed untroubled by it. "British Equatorial West Africa," he answered. "The Tories know they'll have to get out of course, and there's a puppet of their own they'd prefer to leave in charge, but Emmanuel's the only man who can keep the tribal factions together. He should be Prime Minister within the year, and then it'll be a clear run to independence." Adam shrugged airily at Martin, who stared at him as though listening to a signal from a distant star. "But then you're not interested in politics. I suppose you've got more important things on your mind." With studied casualness, he tossed the coin over and over again.

Martin frowned across at him, baffled by the shifting moods of this house. He felt he had stumbled into a culture of baseless discontent where, for all the authority and precision with which they were used, words had a slippery existence of their own. They seemed to correspond to nothing actually present in this privileged world – except perhaps for the anomalous African shivering in borrowed trousers.

"It's not that I'm not interested," he said. "Or that I don't care. It's just that I don't know much about it." He bit back the

complaint that he had not shared the opportunities enjoyed by Hal Brigshaw's family. The coin sprang into the air again. With a swift movement Martin reached out, grabbed it, and turned back into the window alcove to examine his catch. Embossed with the garlanded head of a young man, the coin lay thin and mysterious in his palm.

"Give it back," Adam demanded.

"Hey, this is Roman, isn't it? Where d'you find it?"

"I was given it for Christmas. My mother had it from an uncle when she was a girl. I've always wanted it. Now it's mine. Give it here."

Martin was examining the coin by winter light. "I can make out an *R*, an *I* and an *A*..." He was reluctant to let this ancient thing go, could feel himself possessed by the desire to have it for himself.

"It's Hadrianic," Adam said. "There's a portrait of Antinous on the reverse. He was Hadrian's lover. Some legionary probably brought it here from Alexandria or Asia Minor." His voice stiffened: there was a peevish edge to it now. "It's quite rare and I'd like it back please."

"All right, all right, keep your hair on." Martin handed back the coin, but already Adam was ruing his failure to trust the possibilities of friendship: "I'm sorry." He tightened his fist round the coin. "I don't know what's got into me. It's being back home again – after school, I mean. Being stuck in this place."

Martin sat down across from his friend again. "You don't know how lucky you are. I'd give anything to live out here."

Adam slipped the coin back in his pocket. "It can get pretty boring."

Martin shook his head. “Not for me. I feel great when I’m out here, in the wilds.” He glanced across at Adam, ready to withdraw at the first scoff, but encountered only an interested, affirming nod. “Which is weird really,” he went on, “given that I’ve lived near the centre of town all my life.”

“Not so weird.”

“I suppose not, but...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Every time I come out onto the tops it feels a bit like coming home. As if the country where I belong is just over the horizon, and I know it’s there, but I can only remember a few words of the language...”

“What kind of language would that be?”

The word “poetry” was at Martin’s lips, but it would not pass. He saw it would render him too vulnerable to this new friend. So he merely snorted in demurrals and looked away. In the meantime, Adam had felt it necessary to make amends. “Go on,” he urged, “it’s interesting.”

“It mostly has to do with the wind,” Martin offered uneasily, “and the way the sky reflects in water, and the sound of water, too. The feel of stone.” He hesitated there, amazed that he had risked this much, then saw a way through. “I’d have thought you’d have sensed it. Living so close, I mean. You must have felt it trying to get through to us?”

Now it was Adam who frowned.

“You talk as though it were alive,” he said. “Aren’t you being a touch anthropomorphic – muddling it all up with human stuff? What interests me most about these moors and crags is precisely the fact that they’re inanimate. Not the foxes and the harebells, I know, but the rocks and becks, the things that

aren’t alive, that aren’t messed up with life and living.” Adam lay in the pallid shaft of light cast through the dormer window, staring, it seemed, into a close, countervailing darkness. “Sometimes I go out there and it feels utterly indifferent to everything – whether I’m there or not, whether I live or die even. It’s just numb, unconscious of itself, as though it had been dragged into existence and was left lying there, sticking it out, enduring whatever comes because there’s nothing else to be done.” He glanced back Martin’s way. “And you know what? I’m grateful for it. It clears my head. It reminds me that I’m human and, because of that, I’m not just trapped in the way things are. I’m free to act, to alter things, to make a difference.”

Martin considered this, then said, “I know what you mean, but it’s not the whole story.” He was thinking about the days when he went out onto the moors or followed a beck down a crag, and it felt as though everything around him was breathless with a kind of expectation. “Perhaps it wants change as well?”

“What on earth does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. But it feels as if it might.” Martin looked up to glance, cautiously askance, at Adam. “Change, I mean. As if at any given moment something new and marvellous is about to happen... if only someone said the right word.”

Adam ran his fingers through his dark hair. He decided that Martin had taken Wordsworth too seriously, but there was something formidable in his earnestness, a feeling of weight and substance, and Adam was in no mood for that kind of argument. He got up off the bed and crossed the room to put a record on his portable gramophone. Carefully he placed the

needle on the disk and, as music swung into the silence, he stood restlessly by the dormer window, fingertips tapping out the rhythm at his thigh. He had chosen King Oliver blowing free and easy out of the Dreamland Café forty years earlier, with Jimmie Noone's clarinet syncopating at his side and Lottie Taylor at the piano.

Watching him, Martin thought about the ancient coin in his friend's pocket, the centuries impressed on it, the strangeness of time. He glanced away and saw the hollow place left by the weight of Adam's body on the bed. The music was filling him with longings so indefinable and obscure that he couldn't tell whether they were for something long since lost and gone or for a future that would always lie just beyond his reach.

Then Adam turned, frowning still. "Looks like you must have said the right word," he murmured. "It's started to snow."

But only a light smattering of flakes blew about the moorland sky, and none of it was sticking, so there was no sense of urgency in the air when Grace beat the gong that summoned the men down to lunch

Hal decided that he wanted a photograph of what was, for him, an important historical moment. As he instructed Martin in the use of his German camera, the big man's voice rang resolutely local in an accent pitched just east of the Pennine ridge. It contrasted so bluntly with the rest of the family's polished vowels that for a moment Martin wondered whether it was exaggerated for his own comfort. But this was not, he saw, a man likely to make adjustments to those around him.

Never having used anything more sophisticated than a Box Brownie before, Martin peered through the viewfinder of this snouted monster, fidgeting after the right focal length while Hal marshalled his family in front of the Christmas tree. Emmanuel Adjouna stood at the centre, a blue-striped tribal smock worn over two sweaters, with one arm at Hal's shoulder, the other round Grace's waist. Adam and Marina were at either side. The dogs lay panting at their feet. Conscious of Adam's discomfiture, and of Marina staring back at him with a haughty glare, Martin pressed the shutter switch. The bulb flashed – history arrested there, moment frozen for ever – then it was time for lunch at the round table in the spacious dining room at High Sugden.

Hal had been an amateur boxer once, and a swaggering contender's air still governed even his friendliest approaches. His hand lay big on Martin's shoulder now as he said, "Come and sit down, lad. You must be half starved after that bike ride." The others were already laughing at a joke Emmanuel had made, and Martin listened in fascination as they began recollecting anecdotes about past times in Africa.

From his readings in the *Empire Youth* annual, he knew something about that hot, forested world of Paramount Chiefs and painted mammy wagons and nomadic cattle drovers. But these people had lived in the colony, and it was more intimately *home* to them than England ever would be. Adam and Marina told him stories about Wilhelmina Song, who had been their nanny, and about the family's solemn steward, Joshua. Recalling close friends, Marina teased Adam about pretty Efwa Nkansa and spoke warmly of Ruth Asibu, who dreamt of becoming a lawyer. Emmanuel

brought news of these and other people, whose exploits triggered long, amusing tales from Hal, until Grace put a stop to his flow with orders to carve second helpings off the roast.

Then she turned to the silent young man across from her. “So tell us something about yourself, Martin. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“No,” he said, “there’s only me.”

“Singled out for a special destiny!” Adam darted a wry glance at Marina, “As I sometimes wish I’d been.”

“So what does your dad do, lad?” asked Hal.

“He works at Bamforth Brothers.”

“Does he now? I know Eric Bamforth. Not a bad sort, though some of his opinions are outrageous. Have you met him?”

“He came along to a works’ cricket match once.”

“Your dad’s a cricketer, eh?” Hal beamed his approval. “Batsman or bowler?”

“Both really. He loves all sports.”

“But you don’t?”

Martin frowned at his plate, confused to find himself so transparent. “Not really my thing.”

“Because he wishes it were?”

Unused to such close pursuit, Martin mumbled a dull confession that he’d never thought of it that way.

“At least you were supporting your dad,” Hal said. “At the match I mean.”

“I was scorer.”

“I see,” Hal pressed. “So what’s your dad’s job at the mill?”

“He’s the boiler-firer.”

“What’s that?” Marina asked.

“The stoker,” Adam answered her.

“Shovelling coal you mean?” She was looking only for clarity, intending no judgement or affront, but her frank gaze pushed Martin into deeper retreat.

“Then he is the powerhouse of the place,” Emmanuel said. “Everything there depends on him. Isn’t that so, Hal?”

“Absolutely right – except it won’t be long before they’re forced to electrify.” Hal frowned his concern across at Martin. “I suppose your father knows that?”

“He hasn’t said anything.”

“Well, it’s going to happen. And soon. It has to. While we can all still breathe.”

“You mean they’ll just sack him?” Marina put in.

“It depends,” Hal said. “If he’s a good cricketer, Eric Bamforth’ll find some way to keep him on if he can.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Grace, who was seated on Martin’s right and sensed his discomfort. She tried to move things through onto safer ground. “So where do you live, Martin?”

“In town.”

“Yes, I’ve gathered that,” she smiled, “but whereabouts exactly?”

“Cripplegate.”

“Really? I thought they were all commercial properties. I hadn’t realized that anyone actually lived there.” After a moment in which Martin failed to respond, she added: “It must be very convenient for the town centre.”

Something in the young man’s flushed silence had reached Emmanuel, who smiled across at Martin now. “I myself was born in what you would call a mud hut, my friend,” he said, “and my father could not read or write at all.”

Hal gave a little, chuckling laugh. “And now look at him – about to lead a whole new nation through to a time when none of them need say the same.”

“God willing,” the African murmured.

“It’s in *your* hands now,” Hal declared, then shifted his gaze back to Martin. “Believe it or not, lad, *my* old man shovelled some coal in his time as well. He worked as a fireman on the railways. *And* the old bugger voted Tory all his life!” Martin had sustained Hal’s appraising gaze with some difficulty; now he saw it melt into an amiable grin as the man said: “So as for your own stoker dad – be angry with him if you like. Fight him tooth and nail if you have to. But never be ashamed of him. It only weakens your own spirit.”

“Don’t lecture the boy, Hal,” said Grace.

“I was just letting the lad know there’s no call to be embarrassed on our account. Quite the reverse, in fact. You understand that, don’t you, Martin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hal, lad. The name’s Hal.”

“Harold actually,” put in Marina, “as in Anglo-Saxon. It means ‘army rule’, though he doesn’t like to be reminded of it.”

Briefly, father and daughter stuck their tongues out at one another in affectionate scorn, before Hal grinned at Martin again: “Hal to my friends, all right?” There was an eager, masculine warmth in Hal’s gesture, a desire to be liked, to be approved, that took Martin by surprise. “My daughter likes to pretend I’m a tyrant,” he said.

“Your daughter *knows* you’re a tyrant,” said Marina, “even if you have convinced everybody else you’re a champion of liberty.”

Martin swallowed and said, “Adam tells me that you and Emmanuel are planning to overthrow the British Empire.”

After a quick glance between father and son, Hal grinned. “That moth-eaten old lion’s already weak at the knees. What interests us is what comes after it.”

“The difference between freedom *from* and freedom *for*,” said Emmanuel.

“That’s right. We’re talking about people being free to make their own future through choice and action. We’re talking about how the world gets changed.”

Adam pushed his plate away and leant back on his chair. “If you’re trying to get him excited about politics,” he said dryly, “you’ve got an uphill struggle. Martin is a bit of a mystic.”

“Is he now?” Hal cocked a wry eyebrow, more amused than surprised. “Not many of those in Calderbridge.”

Amazed that his friend should expose him like this, Martin sat excruciated, until Adam prompted him with an inciting smile. “What was it you said about the clouds talking to you? Or was it that they’re waiting for a word from you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what?”

Martin glowered at the tablecloth. To hear his thoughts distorted this way left him mortified. He could hear the blood in his ears. He thought about the many times he had come out onto the tops alone, relishing the sharp stink of a fox’s den in some abandoned quarry, listening for the curlew’s cry above the cotton grass. Yearning for that kind of freedom now, he looked up with a hot glare in his eyes. “I was talking about the landscape round here and the way it makes me feel.” They were looking at him, waiting for more, and he saw he could not leave

it at that. “I mean, politics isn’t the only important thing. Our life goes deeper than that, doesn’t it? Politics always seems to be about what divides us. It sets us against one another. But at root we’re all the same. That’s how I see it, anyway – we’re all part of the natural world, and it’s part of us... maybe the most important, the sanest part.”

“If only it was that easy,” Adam said without any edge of sarcasm now, “but either it’s too obvious to be worth saying or you really are a mystic, you know. Not so much a God-botherer by the sound of it, but a sort of nature mystic, right?”

Watching Martin suffer in his chair, Grace Brigshaw was moved by an intuition. “My guess is that Martin might be a poet,” she said, beginning to collect the plates, “which is a noble and difficult thing to be.”

“Indeed it is,” Emmanuel smiled, reaching to help her, “and a true poet is even as much the enemy of oppression as some of us poor politicians are.”

“Do you write?” Marina asked with new interest.

“I’ve done a few things,” Martin admitted.

“Good for you,” said Hal. “Grace is usually right about people. And there’s nothing wrong with nature for a theme – so long as you hold on to what Emmanuel said. All the Romantic poets knew that. What was that thing Wordsworth wrote for Toussaint? ‘Thou hast left behind powers that will work for thee...’ He faltered there, frowning after memory. “‘Powers that will work for thee...’ How’s it go?”

When he saw no one else about to help, Martin quietly picked up the verse:

“...air, earth and skies;
There’s not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man’s unconquerable mind.”

Hal remembered the last two lines, and they declaimed them together, ending in a sudden alliance of laughter as Emmanuel and Grace applauded. Then, “Look,” said Emmanuel, wide-eyed in wonder, pointing to the window as he got up to help clear the plates, “look at the snow.”

While they had been eating and talking, a blizzard had set in. Swift gusts of snow were blowing and twisting beyond the window.

“It’s been doing it for ages,” stated Marina, pointedly.

“I’d better go,” Martin offered, “while I still can.”

“I can’t possibly let you go cycling out there,” Grace protested. “Not in this weather.”

“Then you’re stuck here for the night.” Marina shrugged her narrow shoulders at Martin. “Like the rest of us.”

Nobody had quite been prepared for this, least of all the young man who stood awkwardly by the table, gazing out at the thickening snowfall.

“I think you’d better ring your parents and tell them what’s happening,” said Mrs Brigshaw.

“We don’t have a phone.”

“Ah, I see. Well, is there someone who could get a message to them?”

“My dad might call in at The Golden Lion. I could leave word there. But, look,” – Martin glanced at Adam – “I think I might just make it back before...”

“You’d better stay,” Adam said decisively.

“Of course you must,” Hal insisted.

“After all,” said Marina, “he can always sleep in the haunted bedroom.”

Grace sighed at her daughter in exasperation. “Oh don’t be silly, darling!” Then she turned back to Martin: “But you must try to get a message through,” she said. “We can’t have your mother worrying.”

“The phone’s in here.” Marina smiled at Martin with a kind of rueful sympathy as she opened the door onto a spacious sitting room.

Only rarely had Martin used a telephone before, and he was amazed to have the privacy of a whole room for the purpose. He saw more crowded bookshelves – so many books in this house, there had been stacks of them along the landing and elsewhere. Now here were hundreds more, along with piles of pamphlets, newspapers and magazines. An African mask studded with cowrie shells glowered down at him with steady malevolence from over the stone arch of the fireplace. Its eye sockets were slotted like a goat’s.

A pile of three new books lay near the telephone. On top was a translation of a work by Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*. Opening it at random, Martin read how Communist Man would improve on nature’s work, removing mountains and redirecting the course of rivers until he had rebuilt the earth. Man would become “immeasurably stronger, subtler”, he claimed. The average human type would rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx, and “above this ridge new peaks will rise”.

In that moment Martin felt, by contrast, subterranean. He was worrying that he had come unprepared for an overnight stay – no pyjamas, no toothbrush, nothing but what he stood up in. But then he had been prepared for nothing here. In this ancient place anything might happen. There might well be ghosts – for the house did feel haunted, but as much by the future as the past, and the shades of both agitated him. And to talk with these people left him straddling a gulf between what was said and what was thought. Nor did he see how their hospitality could ever be repaid. When he tried to imagine taking Adam into his own home, his imagination shuddered and balked.

Martin thumbed through the pages of the local directory, thinking that it was all very well for Hal to pontificate about not being ashamed – he did so from the accomplished heights of a civilized life in this Elizabethan grange; he had a good-looking upper-class wife; he sent his children to expensive schools. If he had ever known the humiliations of circumstance, they were far behind him.

Martin found the number and dialled it. He waited through many rings, imagining the crowded Saturday lunchtime bar of the Golden Lion, and Ted Ledbetter, the lame publican, swearing as the phone called him away from the pumps. He dreaded that his father would be in the pub, that he would have to speak to him. He stared out of a narrow window where there was now nothing to be seen but driving snow. When at last the phone was answered, he stumbled into speech.

As he came back into the dining room they turned to look at him. “My dad wasn’t there,” he said. “He’ll probably drop in later. Someone will tell him.”

“That’s all right then,” Hal said, and tapped Emmanuel on his shoulder. “We’d better think what this snow does to *our* plans.” The two men got up, but Hal stopped at the door and turned to look at Martin again. “About you and your father – things are difficult between you, right?” When Martin nodded uncertainly, Hal went on: “Well, for what it’s worth, I bloodied my nose against my own dad time and again before I worked out something that proved vital for me.” He paused for a moment, perhaps for effect, perhaps deliberating, then drew in his breath. “The thing is, if a man wants to widen his horizons and make something new for life, he’ll do well to make sure he has at least two fathers – the one he’s born with, and the one he chooses for himself.”

For a moment Martin seemed to be standing at the centre of a huge silence in the room. It was as if he and the big man with the knocked-askew nose were alone together. But it was Adam who spoke: “Are you volunteering?”

Hal studied his son a moment, sounding out that louche, elusive smile for jealousy and rancour. “Don’t think it doesn’t apply to you too,” he said quietly, and winked at Martin. “In fact,” Hal added, “I might just be daring you both to start making your own big choices.”

“What about me?” Marina said as she began gathering the plates. “Or don’t girls count?”

“You, my darling, don’t need daring,” Hal said. “You’ve never done anything else. I don’t suppose you ever will.” And he planted a kiss on her head. For the moment at least she seemed acquiescent in the philosophical silence of snow that was settling across the house.

“One day,” said Emmanuel, “I think Marina will have something to teach us all about freedom.”

“God help us when that day comes,” her father laughed, shaking his head. “As for you, Emmanuel my friend, I’m afraid that history will have to wait a while longer. We’d better make some calls.”

“It’s been a century since Sir Elgin Rokesby deprived us of our liberty,” Emmanuel smiled. “I dare say we can endure a few more hours of servitude.”

“In the meantime,” Grace frowned out into the gusting white whirl, “it looks like we’re all in jail.”

Once Hal was gone, Adam seemed to relax back into friendship with his guest. When they returned to the attic, he became more talkative, less barbed with sarcasm. Their conversation moved onto the safe ground of their common interests – music, films, books – and this led to the question of whether or not writers should be politically engaged, and whether their writing could ever amount to more than bourgeois self-indulgence if they were not. Which brought them back to Hal and the question at the back of Martin’s mind.

“So is your father a communist?” he asked.

Adam raised his brows at him. “Why do you ask?”

“Some of the books I noticed downstairs. And didn’t Emmanuel say something about having been to Russia?”

“He’s been to many places. Washington is as interested in him as Moscow.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Now you sound like that grubby little demagogue Joe McCarthy: *Answer the question, answer the question. Is Hal, or has he ever been, a member of the Communist Party?*

Would it bother you very much if he were? I mean, if you don't care about politics, what's it matter either way?"

"It's just that I'd like to know what I'm dealing with here."

"In case Hal might try to brainwash you? What kind of people do you think Hal and Emmanuel are? If you want to know about their politics, you should ask them. But ask seriously. They're serious men. The issues they care about are serious. Probably the most serious issues in the world right now"

Until this moment the wider context of Hal's endeavours had seemed too far removed from this house perched on the Pennine edge for serious consideration, and too distant from Martin's own preoccupations to excite more than puzzled interest. But now, even as the snow shut them in, he sensed horizons sweeping open round him.

"I can see that," he said. "It's why I want to know more."

"All right, then forget your prejudices, forget the propagandist labels. Hal's thinking owes a lot to Marx, but he's not in the Party, not any more. He's his own man, a thinker in his own right, a political theorist. Emmanuel has the chance to put his theories into practice. It really is about changing things... and not just in Equatoria. In fact, independence for Equatoria is only the start. They're working on a development plan that will transform the country in ten years and set an example for the whole continent. Africa has vast resources – which is why it's been carved up and plundered by the imperial powers to no one's advantage but their own. Imagine what it could be like as a continental union – a federation of independent countries, each running its own affairs, resisting exploitation by international capital on the one hand and the crude

oppression of state control on the other. In fact, absolutely refusing to take sides in the paranoid madness of the Cold War. Its influence would be unstoppable. It would be like accelerating history."

Here was a dream on a scale unfamiliar to Martin's thinking. Caught up in Adam's enthusiasm for Hal's plans, he was told how the long collaboration with Emmanuel had given Hal a rare chance to realize a philosopher's dream that was at least as old as Aristotle: to shape world events through the proper education of a man of action. To most people Equatoria might be no more than a minor page out of a stamp album, a sweltering stretch of rainforest and savannah, populated by half-naked savages. But it had an ancient tribal culture of its own – in the sixteenth century the Portuguese had been sufficiently impressed by its wealth to send ambassadors to the court of the Olun of Bamutu, the region's most powerful king. And the country was rich in minerals – diamonds, copper, zinc, and possibly uranium. If properly administered on behalf of the people by the new radical intelligentsia, the country could quickly be transformed. A hydroelectric dam in the Kra River Gorge would power new industries. The profits would finance a national programme of education for all. Ancient tribal rivalries would be dissolved by a growing sense of a national commonwealth. As a place to make a stand for the future, Equatoria had much to commend it.

With growing wonder Martin realized that the telephone in Hal's study really did reach, operator by operator, and often with difficulty, from this remote Yorkshire house to secret rooms in Africa, where brave men were conspiring to end a century of imperial oppression. And once you were

put through, the whole mysterious continent might have lain steaming just the other side of the Pennines. His heart beat high in his chest when he considered how he had cycled out to High Sugden and stumbled on these new horizons. He was a privileged insider, close to the start of what might be world-shaking events.

Yet his images of Africa were coloured by Hollywood and Rider Haggard and the comic books of his childhood. Emmanuel was the first actual African he had met. In no way did that engaging man resemble the cinema's leopard-skinned warriors and witch doctors, but surely no one could call him typical? And what about that mask over the sitting-room fireplace? Its barbarous grimace had left him wondering whether Africa might not still be more preoccupied with superstition and magic than with politics.

Yet Martin was too hungry for a larger sense of life to dismiss everything Adam said as fantasy. And too canny to swallow it whole. So he drew in his breath and marshalled the first arguments he could find against his friend's overwhelming ardour. Then he applied himself to learning, fast.



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