

If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.
John Donne

1

“Ugly or what!” Park exclaimed as the stranger passed him.

“She heard you,” his friend Alec whispered. “They heard you.”

Park tried bluff nevertheless, feigning innocence in the presence of her companions’ open hostility as they filtered past on their way to the pub exit, lunch break over. Two members of her party broke away from the group. The younger man addressed Park. “That wasn’t very nice. Season of good will and all.”

“I beg your pardon?” His voice shook.

The other man, older and taller, stepped forward and back-handed Park across the face — hard. He reeled. His legs gave way and he sank to the floor.

His assailant bent close. “Get up, you sick bastard.”

The first speaker cut in. “Take it easy, Eddie.”

“Hold on, Dave. No one talks in front of Chloe like that. Not when I’m around.”

“Leave it. Scum’s not worth it.”

“Just want to give the berk another tap. Help him mind his manners.”

“No need, Eddie. Think he’s got the message.”

Apart from the sound of his blood pounding in his ears, a long moment of silence followed for Park, cowering on the floor, frozen with fear.

“OK, Dave.” Eddie had evidently come to a decision. “Let’s go.”

“Best move. Wait until Chloe hears about this.”

“She better not. I don’t want anyone telling her.”

Chloe. Chloe. Chloe. In what he later recognised as a rite of invocation, Park, sweat running down his back, nausea surging, found himself murmuring the name, over and over. He forced himself to look up.

“They’ve gone,” Alec said, proffering a helping hand as Park struggled off the carpet. “We better get out as well. Don’t think we’re too popular after that remark of yours.”

Park hesitated. “I’ll see you in a minute. Must have a word at the bar first.”

“Have it your way. I’ll be outside.”

“See if you can get a cab for us, Alec.”

“Please yourself.”

He left and Park crossed to the bar counter, away from the immediate scene of his ordeal. The barman, polishing glasses and returning them to the shelf above the counter, regarded him in silence.

“Sorry,” he began. “What’s your name?”

“Chris. Can I help you?”

“That woman, lady – ”

“What the hell happened there?”

“Bit of a misunderstanding.” Park leaned on the counter. “Does she come in here a lot?”

“Off and on. Fridays, generally.”

“Do you know where she works?”

The barman shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Could you find out for me? Please? So I can send her flowers or something.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Cheers. I owe you.”

Park left the premises to join Alec in the cab waiting by the pavement. He confirmed their destination to the driver. “London Bridge, please.”

Ensconced in the living room of his flat in Blackheath’s Montpelier Vale, Park poured Alec a large Scotch and another, even larger, for himself. They sat in armchairs at each end of a stretch coffee table furnished with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a water jug; the whole ensemble set before a long sofa arrayed in front of the fireplace. A fretwork screen adorned the grate. Light filled the high ceilinged room from the large bay windows, in the alcove of which stood a desk, a laptop lying on the surface.

“Thanks for stopping off on the way home, Alec.”

“Don’t mention it.” He took the proffered glass. “Face ache?”

“How do I look?”

“Nasty bruise starting just under the eye.”

Park touched his cheek. “Bastard had a ring.”

“Could have been much worse.” Alec added a dash of water to his drink. “That guy did not want to stop. Built like a tank too.”

“Which is why I stayed down, believe me.”

“Don’t know how things might have turned out if the other bloke hadn’t intervened.”

“You’d have muscled in though, Alec. To the rescue.”

He grinned. "You were lucky to get away with it. What came over you?"

Park sipped his drink. He preferred not to think about how he had cowered on the floor, afraid to look up. Terrified, if he did, of what the man called Eddie might do to him. "I don't know. The words just came out, as if someone else had spoken. Supercilious git."

"I'll second that."

"Truth is, Alec, I blame Julia for what happened in the Horse today. I wasn't in my right mind."

"Don't tell me you're seeing her again."

"It's your fault. I saw her in your shop."

Alec took an immaculate white handkerchief from his jacket pocket and began to polish his glasses. "Buy anything?"

"She looked so sensational I had to ask her out. It's all ended in tears as per usual."

"Now there's a surprise."

Park shrugged. "Anyway, she really is history this time."

Alec returned his hankie to his pocket and his glasses to the bridge of his nose. "Heard that before, you and Julia."

"Come and see for yourself." Park rose and crossed to the desk. He opened the laptop, accessed an e-mail and pointed as Alec joined him.

He read. "But you can't send this," he whispered.

"Too late, it's gone."

"You sad bastard."

"Maybe. But my remark today beat that."

Alec flared. "I don't think so. Not in my bloody book."

They both turned for distraction to the view from the window. Before them, Blackheath's green acres stretched north on a gradual incline, to where trees on the skyline marked the boundary with Greenwich beyond. A view of which both men were enamoured, providing as it did a glimpse of horizon – rare in a city – and illusion of country side, perspective ever changing with season and weather. Alec broke their reverie.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Park? That e-mail's a disgrace."

"I know, but Julia asked for it. My comment about the woman in the pub, on the other hand, was an unprovoked assault." He paused.

"Whatever. Both are unforgivable."

"And part of a pattern I've been aware of for too long." Park ran a finger along a window sash. "But today, the way I reckon, I've been given a chance to start over."

"How come?"

"What kind of a man can ignore what a woman looks like, in your opinion?"

"Haven't given the matter much thought, I have to say."

"Could I be such a man? Who cared about someone, no matter how unattractive, downright ugly she might be?" Park paused. "Hideous, even."

"I doubt it. No way. You're far too bloody vain."

Alec moved away to resume his seat by the coffee table, and after a moment's hesitation, Park did the same. He made to replenish Alec's glass, but he shook his head. "I have to go. Dinner awaits."

“All I know is my future lies in her hands, Alec.”

“Whose hands?”

“The female in the pub. I’ll never forget her stricken eyes.”

“Chloe?”

Park set his glass down. “You know her?”

“Not really. She comes in the shop occasionally that’s all. Hard to forget.”

“She is. But there’s something about her apart from her looks.”

“You only saw her for a second.”

“It was enough.”

“Sarcasm, Park?”

He picked up his glass. “Not at all. Through her I will become a different person, a better man.”

“So when did you figure all this out?”

“I didn’t. It came to me. In an epiphany.”

“Do me a favour.”

“For want of a better word. On my knees in the pub.”

Alec finished his drink. “But you don’t know this woman.”

“That’s about to change. Only she can save me from carrying on as the glib, vicious, individual I’ve become. I intend to seek her out.”

“Lucky lady.”

“If I don’t, the void awaiting me doesn’t bear thinking about. Through her I will recover my self respect.”

“Your self respect, Park?” Alec rose, evidently about to leave for home.

“Correct.” Park returned to the table and closed the laptop. “Vanity purged on the altar of her appearance, I will emerge from the temple redeemed and in my right mind.”

“I can’t see it, frankly.”

“I’ll prove you wrong, Alec. Chloe and I will broker a new me.”

2

The lilies, just delivered and very beautiful, lay on Chloe’s desk. Her friend and work colleague, Hannah, had gone in search of a vase. Monday morning always constituted a difficult time as the office regrouped into a functioning organism once more, but all were finding this particular start to the week — falling as the day did between the Christmas and New Year bank holidays — especially challenging. Hangovers abounded, and the arrival of the flowers cheered everyone up. Those colleagues who had not been in the bar at the time of the incident got to hear about it and she sensed all were rooting for her. With her friends among them even wondering aloud if a series, Chloe and Monster Man, romantic drama, might be scheduled for the summer.

She alternated between gazing at the bouquet and studying the card that had

arrived with it. Attention of this kind had never come her way before, and she could not imagine what the appropriate reaction on her part should be. She had trained herself to accept her appearance; pride, strength of character, and self reliance had driven out self disgust. That emotion no longer laid waste to her persona. Yet she had never gotten used to the slurs, of living with the certainty the next onslaught could materialise at any moment without warning out of a clear blue sky. On a serene day perhaps, one which had dawned, as Friday had, in happy anticipation of a Christmas drink with friends and colleagues. That this latest incident had occurred at the season of good will did not particularly disturb her; no moratorium ever existed on malicious behaviour, as she knew to her cost.

The intervals between insults always lasted just long enough for her to forget about folks' cruelty before someone meted out another dose of poison. Friday's remark had caught her in such an interlude of temporary amnesia and had gone deep. She had felt secure with her companions in the Horse, her guard down, to be commented on in the way that had transpired the last outcome she had expected.

Over the weekend, she had hardly slept. Although she had plenty to occupy her in caring for her terminally ill mother, those duties had become routine to the point where they no longer could divert her mind. She tried to read but concentration had proved impossible as she kept reliving those few moments in the pub, hearing the words over and over. Eventually she watched television until the small hours, when exhaustion brought sleep, and ventured out only twice.

First to Tesco's, late on Saturday night when she could be sure of few people shopping. A precaution which confirmed how much the remark had upset her, for she had long ago recognised hiding as no more constructive than tears among the strategies she must employ in order to survive. Then, on Sunday evening, she prevailed on herself go along to the private house, where the literary circle she had joined as part of her game plan to keep herself in social orbit gathered. Due to read one of her own poems, when her turn came she had not felt up to the public moment; as always, no one pressured her when she asked to be excused.

She could not hate or blame all the offenders, aware that, although some people were moved by malice, more often than not their reactions were involuntary, self protective reflexes. She had seen folk crossing themselves as she passed. The larger than usual component, however, of disgust mingled with horror in the speaker's voice on Friday had given extra edge to this latest outrage. Coinciding, she smiled at fate's pointed timing, with one of those silences which sometimes descends in a pub, the words had fallen with piercing clarity upon her ears; she heard them still. The remark had caught her in mid stride, blotting out her immediate surroundings and rendering her conscious only of being guided from the scene — to all appearance the victim of onslaught or accident to safety.

Often in the past, to make the experience complete, an image had etched itself on her retina: pores in the speaker's sweaty nose, a dribble of saliva, decaying teeth, the more to imprint the attack on her psyche and engage the mind's eye as well as ear. No such enhancements, however, had adorned this latest savagery. It's memory would linger for a more disconcerting reason; she had noticed this man as soon as he had entered. What female in her group had not glanced in his direction more than once, or

let her gaze linger on the perfect profile, the heart dissolving smile, the poisoned lips.

Her friend Hannah placed a vase, flower filled, on the filing cabinet beside Chloe but out of her line of sight. She turned to her work for the day, smiling at her friend's tact. Hannah understood her like no other.

3

The Festive Season over, City pubs drifted into a period of hibernation as folk nursed the collective January blues penniless. The habits of regulars, however, were subject to no such seasonal effects and Park, quaking within, found his instinct the group he sought belonged to this category confirmed when — the Friday following his first sight of her — he entered the Horse around 1.30 p.m..

He spotted Chloe at once in the virtually empty interior, seated with her companions round a table between him and the bar. En route to which, although he failed to catch her eye, his own ran into a startled Eddie's. Whose outrage at this affront to the common decencies, this man's gall in turning up at the scene of his offence and humiliation as if nothing had happened, Park perfectly understood. The hostility from that quarter radiated so palpably as to almost stop him in his tracks, but he pushed on and secured a pint of ale before turning to approach the company. Once again he sought Chloe's attention but she appeared too preoccupied, with tracing a pattern on the table top with the base of her glass, to have noticed his arrival in her immediate vicinity. The others surveyed him with quiet speculation; Eddie stirred dangerously.

Park paused. "Do you mind if I join you?" He asked no one in particular.

Eddie rose. "You have got a bloody cheek, mate."

"Eddie!" A bespectacled middle aged lady, greying hair bobbed, intervened. "Sit down. Now then, behave yourself."

Eddie complied. She turned to Park. "Never mind him. Come and join us. Grab a stool from over there."

Park placed his glass on their table and did as commanded. His host made room for him on her right. Once seated, he surveyed the little gathering to find himself positioned opposite Chloe. She did not look up.

Park turned to his benefactor. "Thanks."

"No problems. I'm Hannah, Hannah Hartson."

"Park Delafield," he said and held out his hand. She shook it.

"Meet the gang, Park. Nick on your right, Sharon and Terry beside me." Park returned the greetings of the politely smiling trio.

"Eddie," Hannah continued, Park detecting no trace of irony or badinage, "You have already met."

Park nuanced his nod to convey he deferred to the alpha male, intended no bid for territory, but Eddie remained stony faced.

"And, of course," Hannah concluded her introductions with a flourish and pause

for emphasis, “Chloe too, Chloe Lambert.”

Park stood, suddenly conscious of his bruise. Her ears projected at right angles. Her eyes, a pale, flat blue, were set too close together above a snub nose, nostrils visible from the front; lower jaw over-long, tapering to a pointed chin. Patches of scalp showed through cropped, lack lustre, hair.

“Hi, Chloe.” He considered extending his hand but decided the gesture could wait.

She raised an eyebrow. “Mr Four X, I presume?”

Park cringed. He had mulled over the message to accompany the flowers long and hard: Sorry, my fault? I didn’t mean it? Oops!? He could hardly wish her a Happy New Year. How to sign himself had turned out no less difficult a decision. Mr Crude? Brain dead in the Horse? The wally in the bar? In the end he had settled for: To Chloe, from that XXXX in the pub.

Now he shifted awkwardly, aware of the murmur of appreciation at Chloe’s greeting. The table had an audience, including the bar staff, and all waited for his response.

“Yours in person,” summed up all he could manage, however, by way of wit.

She smiled, showing pointed, grey, uneven teeth through non-existent lips and cocked her head to one side. Pigeon chested, thin and knock kneed, she possessed no redeeming feature to offset her comprehensive lack of allure; even her voice had an irritating quality, brittle and shrill. Her calamities were without end. Yet he sensed that, although alone, marooned on the island of her physical appearance, she was not lonely. She generated reactions of care and tenderness not to mention, witness Eddie, fierce instincts of protection.

“I was extremely rude to you last week, Chloe.”

“You think?”

“I am so sorry,” he said. “I can’t tell you how much.”

She let the silence grow, the tension build, until at last she relented. “You better sit.”

Park did so. “I asked the barman where you worked and he found out from someone. I don’t know who.” He paused, awaiting possible edification on this point but none materialised. “I’ve come to apologise from the bottom of my heart and beg your forgiveness. Ask if I might buy you a drink some time soon, just the two of us.”

“You don’t have to buy me a drink.”

“But I want to. Do you mind if I ring you at work to arrange a meet?”

She bent her head.

“Please, Chloe.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t.” She looked up.

“I really want to.”

“Why?”

As he took time to absorb the repellent face and re-examine yet again his motives in thus abasing himself before the present company, the divination granted him on his knees — that only through this woman salvation lay — returned with redoubled force. He could hardly inform her, however, he wanted to enlist her appearance as an aid in his self-regeneration. He must convince her he sought her for herself. “I need to,” he said. “I have to.”

She straightened, alert, apparently startled at the fervour of his assertion. "I don't understand."

He worried he'd gone too far, but too late now. "I could explain over a drink."

She laced her fingers and flexed them. "Honestly, I'd rather not."

"Please. Give me ten minutes?"

"Thanks, but no. Really."

"Chloe," Park appealed but Eddie had risen to his feet again.

"You on a mission, freak? Does she sound as if she wants your company?"

"None of your business," Park retorted, rising in his turn and toppling his stool in the process.

Eddie moved round the table. "Come again?" The big man got bigger, the surge of menace elemental as his physique stretched his grey suit a size too small.

"Keep out of this, Eddie, nothing to do with you," Park stammered through parched lips, marvelling at his own courage, foolhardiness by another name.

"You got a death wish, prick? You're way out of line, sunshine, barging in here like this. You're not welcome."

"Got as much right here as you."

"I don't think you've got any rights, mummy's boy. Low life like you."

Park looked into Eddie's red rimmed pupils and knew fear. Such fury could only resolve itself through violence. This man had ceased to be human.

"Eddie," Hannah said. "Cut that out. Now."

But Eddie ignored her and took a step closer to Park. He felt the ground move under him, and became still as the atmosphere turned to lead; he had difficulty breathing.

"Down, Eddie!" Hannah's voice, harsh and peremptory this time, cut through the mist.

"Not until this creep leaves, I won't." Eddie grabbed the collar of Park's jacket. He just barely resisted the reflex to take a step back.

"Eddie," Chloe intervened, with quiet authority, "You heard Hannah. Don't be such a jerk."

Park watched for long moments as Eddie appeared to come to himself at the sound of Chloe's voice, until eventually he lowered his arms with reluctance, though he remained standing. Park picked up his stool and returned it to its place at an adjacent table, his glass to the counter.

"Thanks, Hannah. See you again," he whispered to his new friend. She winked and raised her glass in ambiguous salute, while Sharon, Nick and Terry marked his leaving with a flutter of hands.

Finally, before heading for the exit, he checked in Chloe's direction one last time, hoping for at least some acknowledgement of his departure, only to find she had resumed patterning on the table. Accordingly, thus ignored, he left without saying goodbye but he refused to be discouraged. After all, his mission had only begun.

Some days after Park's return visit to the Horse, Chloe and Eddie met in the Underwriter pub, sited under the Commercial Union tower in the City of London, for one of their occasional get-togethers. Given the post Christmas lull the pair, food and drink secured, had no difficulty in finding a table for two in a quiet corner. They both sat.

Eddie took a long pull at his lager. He placed the glass on the table. "Thank God that's over. I loathe the festive season more every year."

"Can't say I exactly live for it myself."

"How's Molly?"

"Mum's poorly."

"Thought she'd failed when I saw her before Christmas."

"At this rate, she'll be in a hospice soon."

"I'm so sorry, Chloe. Can't imagine what it must be like being a carer. You must be shattered all the time."

"It's hard, but as long as she goes without too much pain."

He regarded her speculatively. "Haven't seen you since . . ."

"Since?"

"A couple of weeks ago. The day that prick insulted you."

"Oh, that."

"Bit more than 'oh that' I'd say, Chloe," he retorted, irritation barely in check.

Ordinarily, he managed the violence at the core of his being well, even with a rueful charm, but lately she had noticed a growing irascibility. Not with her, of course, more with his personal circumstances and colleagues in general, although as far as his employers were concerned, they valued the edge in Eddie. As premises manager dealing with outside contractors, a 'reputation' did no harm in ensuring jobs got done.

"Life's too short, Eddie."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to snap."

"No worries." She started on her tuna and cress wrap.

"It's him, babes. What I can't get over is his bloody sauce coming down the Horse the other day."

"Quite brave of him. All things considered."

"Don't follow you."

Chloe put her food down and looked at him as, the picture of earnest, puzzled innocence, pastrami and black olive ciabatta poised, he returned her gaze. She smiled. He remained incorrigible. "Come off it, Eddie. You hit him."

She could see him about to deny it, then deciding — what would be the point? He took time to enjoy a portion of his lunch before sitting back. "I didn't want you to hear about that."

"You're kidding." Exultation, and the fervent wish she had witnessed the event, had marked her first reaction on hearing of the attack on Park, but her personal satisfaction was not the issue.

"Hannah told you, I bet," he said.

“No comment.”

“Dave shouldn’t have blabbed to her.”

“The point is, Eddie, I’m not sure how I feel about what happened down there.”

“The bastard insulted you. He deserved a tap. Should have got a few more.”

She patterned with her glass. “Only Dave stopped you.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Just as well. You might have crippled the guy.”

“Bloody hell, Chloe. Bit strong.”

Part of her gloried in her champion, part cringed in embarrassment, but most worried. If Eddie continued on this path, he headed for serious trouble. Besides, she could not let him think she condoned his behaviour. “You nearly did before with that poor guy in the Railway, remember? And not so long ago.”

He had put a man in hospital the previous year for looking at her in, according to Eddie, the wrong way. The individual attacked had not pressed charges, but sooner or later Eddie’s luck had to run out. Sooner, she feared, considering the recent deterioration in his temper.

“Only looking out for you, sweetheart,” he said.

“I can take care of myself.”

“OK, OK.”

“Sorry.” She apologised in her turn. He was an old and loyal friend, after all. “Didn’t mean to sound ungrateful, but you could end up in court, or worse. I don’t want that to happen because you think you have to look after me.”

Eddie tapped his knife on his plate. “Anyway, a slap didn’t stop this Park arsehole asking you out in front of us all.”

“I don’t know if that was so bad.”

“Couldn’t believe it. Has he asked since?”

“A few times, if you must know.” Park called every other day but she did not feel inclined to share this right now, nor the fact he had rung this morning just before Eddie. Which no doubt explained why she had snapped at him, displacing her irritation at Park’s unwelcome diligence.

“Do you want me to have a word, Chloe, next time the slimebag’s on?”

“I don’t think so.”

Although, in her book, Park’s sheer doggedness had already gone some way to make up for the insult, she knew enough to suspect, given the difference between his looks and hers, the manipulative intent of his overtures. On the other hand, life happened to be dull, dull, dull. Whatever Park had up his sleeve, she considered herself more than able to deal with it. No one had ever asked her out, on a real date anyway, although she did fancy someone, might even be in love for all she knew. Despair gnawed less these days, channelled to more constructive purposes but exist it did, and took physical form now, sweat forming on her upper lip.

“What I can’t get is why,” he said.

“Why?”

“You know.”

“Tell me, Eddie.”

“He should be taking such an interest in you.”

She raised an eyebrow and waited, as she watched realisation of the implications of what he had said turn his face scarlet. “Babes.”

Chloe shook her head, picked up a napkin and started folding it into squares.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said.

She let him swing. He tried bravado. “I don’t want you to have anything to do with him.”

Pushing the napkin aside, she considered him carefully. They had met on the very first day she had come to work for the bank, ten years before. Shy and reluctant about setting foot in the place, she had hesitated at the entrance to the revolving door. Eddie, arriving behind her and late for a meeting, as he had explained after, had hustled her to get a move on. She had burst into tears. He had apologised, and made himself even later by escorting Chloe to her future work place. From then on he had taken her under his wing, and a month seldom passed without them meeting for a private lunchtime drink.

Although she had granted him from the onset of their acquaintance permission to cajole, flatter, even bully if need be, she felt a little resentful toward him this lunch time. Immaculate, shark eyed and restive, a dangerous man whom other men treated with respect, Eddie exuded menace. Her self-appointed knight protector, in his presence the nudges and winks stopped. She owed him a lot, and he held a special place in her affections, but not to the extent of permitting him lordship over her life.

“Not sure this is really any of your business, Eddie.”

His face fell. “He’s not right for you, pet.”

“Perhaps I should be the judge of that though, don’t you think?” she queried gently, to ease his chagrin.

The bafflement and hurt simmered, but not for long. “I suppose.” He lit a cheroot. He inhaled. He exhaled. “To hell with him, sweetheart.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll wander off.”

But she expected to hear more from Park. Puzzling over his tenacity, she had concluded, with a level of conviction which puzzled yet intrigued her, that he was not so much unwilling as unable to relinquish his pursuit. In the end, intuition, the mood of the moment, her stars, or a combination of these elements would no doubt precipitate her final response but, for the moment, her suitor could squirm.

5

Thursday lunchtime customers trickled into The Mitre as Park and his companion found a corner to stand in, beside the shelf which ran at elbow hight along the wall. They both set their glasses down.

“Thanks for coming, Chloe.”

“Anything to get you off my back.”

“I appreciate that, but all the same.”

“I’ve only got a few minutes, we’re short staffed in the office.”

He viewed her announcement with relief. For a fortnight, he had pursued her with phone calls and bombarded her with notes until she agreed to meet him. Doubts had begun to form soon after, however, and over the weekend dread in anticipation of the coming encounter had set in. His quest now seemed born of desperation and their imminent meet a self imposed, mistaken, assignment best negotiated quickly, and with as little mutual embarrassment as possible.

“Where do you live, Chloe?”

“Eltham.”

“Trains good from there?”

Her eyes narrowed. The muscles of her jaw tightened. “I didn’t come here for a discussion about train timetables. I’m puzzled, frankly. You said you had to see me.”

“Had to. Yes.”

“What is it exactly you want from me, Park?”

As he had expected, he found himself embarrassed in her company, and sensed she both knew this and at the same time intuited what he sought from her. Her curiosity would be his ally. For now, however, in her actual presence he lacked the courage to take the initiative and let her know of his instinct about her — that in a manner he could not at present comprehend, she could heal him because she was ugly. He fudged instead. “I need for you to get to know me first. Then I’ll tell you.”

“Why do you think I’d be interested?”

“I’m depending on it. In the meantime I want to say sorry properly, just to you.”

She shrugged. “These things happen. You’re nothing special.”

“It must be hell, being on the receiving end.”

“I can’t afford the luxury of thinking like that.”

He detected no self pity in the statement, but did register her amusement at his growing awareness of how much attention they were drawing.

“We are turning heads, Park. Don’t know what fascinates them more, your looks or mine. Or the difference between them.”

He laughed aloud at the insight.

“They’re checking us out,” she continued. “Like to know why?”

“Tell me.”

“Wondering, could we be lovers?”

He reddened. Although the logic of his mission intimated that one day he should sleep with this woman, for the present the inclination lay far from his mind. “How do you stand it, Chloe? The endless scrutiny.”

“Varies from day to day.”

“I can imagine.”

She smiled. “No. You can’t.”

Park could only nod, aware of her astute appraisal. He, too, suffered under the gaze of the mob, but there the resemblance between her and his circumstances ended. Although no mockery or sympathy attended scan of him, however, in one significant circumstance he sensed she had the advantage: a hinterland in which to take refuge when the conspicuousness of it all got too much. This woman, he suspected, enjoyed a background which included the esteem and respect of others, love of family and home, devoted friends. In stark contrast to his own personal landscape of anxiety,

solitude, unhappiness and vainglory.

“Women stare too,” he commented, after a pause.

“Yes. To thank their lucky stars they’re not like me.”

“No one is quite like you, Chloe. That I’ve known from the start.”

“Bound to be a virgin,” she continued, apparently ignoring his bid to invest their brief acquaintance with history, “but how dead drunk desperate would a guy have to be to find out.” She sipped her drink. “A few men do regard me otherwise, though. Sober and poised when they speculate.”

Though not for a moment imagining she had presented him with a cue he recognised the opportunity to make a declaration of some sort had come. “What about me, Chloe? I’m sober.”

“You?”

The scorn in her voice withered him. He saw contempt incarnate and flinched, but least he had made a pass of a sort, he consoled himself, stumbling on. “The kind of man to appraise a woman in her own right?”

“Are you a romantic, Park?” She asked, after a pause.

“I may be. Most men are.”

She smiled. “Is that a fact?”

“It’s well known.”

“You may be right.” She checked her watch. “What I do know is, I must go.”

“Already?”

“I did say a few minutes.” She finished her drink.

“When can I see you again?”

“You are persistent.”

“For a real chat?”

“Don’t see the point, frankly.”

“It’s not only the remark, Chloe. There’s more. You know there is.”

In silence, she gathered up her handbag and mobile phone.

“I have to see you again.” He hoped he didn’t sound too desperate.

“Bye, Park. Don’t see me out.”

He took her at her word and watched her depart, head held high.

She was strong, complex and compelling, that much he had confirmed from those moments in her company. Although her chariot had moved on, the flame of her scorn lingered about his heart and with the pain, hope. For he had sensed challenge mixed with her derision and challenge implied interest, however hostile. All sense his mission might be ill conceived, any thoughts of abandoning his quest vanished as reservations gave way to final conviction their futures were linked. Their first glimpse of each other, not the remark, had precipitated both assault and epiphany.

Yet, although the belief his salvation lay through her had become an article of faith with him while on his knees in the pub the mechanics of his renewal remained unclear. These he must discover for himself. For now he only understood that, as one would frequent a place of worship, the means of grace, in order healing might take place, he must ‘attend’ Chloe, wait upon her.

Miriam finished loading the dish washer and moved to the living room, where her husband, Alec, reclined in his favourite armchair, a newspaper over his face. With his sock clad feet on a leather pouffe, hands clasped across a stomach grown ample of late, he presented the picture of postprandial domestic bliss. The television in the corner murmured the evening news. She sat in an armchair at right angles to his before securing his attention by tapping his knee. He stirred, and brought the paper down, letting it slide to the floor. When he looked up she caught a flash of resentment in his sleepy gaze.

She ignored the moodies. "I need to talk about Julia. How are you finding her these days?"

As he stretched, she caught a whiff of underarm and barely managed to hide the frisson of distaste.

"Not too great, I'm afraid."

"What's wrong?"

"She's been off colour lately. I found her crying yesterday in the shop."

"Doesn't sound too good."

"Then later," he continued, "someone, Arnold Gordon, as it happened, dropped in looking for a copy of Symptom. She asked him to wait while she checked upstairs in the stock room, but as time passed we wondered if she had any intention of coming back."

"The disappearing shop girl."

"Arnold wanted to go and see if she was alright. But no way could I risk Julia a close encounter in the attic with that old goat. So I went myself."

"Wow, Alec. Risky."

He ignored the quip. "She was slumped on some steps, staring into space, the book trailing in her hand. I startled her."

"Poor Julia."

"For a moment I wondered if she knew where she was. 'Better get the book to Arnold,' I suggested. When he'd gone, I fetched her coat from the closet and sent her home."

"Good. Glad you did that."

"I told her to take today off as well." He rose and turned his back to the grate, for all the world as if warming himself at a fire burning there. "I don't know what to think. She's such an asset in the shop. Customers flock in just to look at her."

"Sounds as if she deserves a rise."

"Business has doubled since she came," he said. "The opposition must be feeling it."

Miriam smiled. "I did wonder how quiet Bain's Books was last week when I popped in. Now I know. Julia, retail wizard."

"She makes people feel good about themselves, joyful even," Alec continued. "Their faces, a new spring in their step as they leave the shop."

“Julia Chalmers, everyone’s personal trainer.”

Alec nodded. “She’s asked out at least three times a week, for a meal, coffee or whatever. Someone offered her a trip on the Orient Express, Paris to Rome, the other day, believe it or not.”

Miriam made a silent whistle. “I am impressed.”

“Julia’s seriously life enhancing to have around. Or was.” He stopped. Lucy, the stray tabby they had adopted, or had adopted them, entered the room and sprang onto Alec’s vacated chair.

“Until Park messed with her again.” Miriam stood. “I hate that bastard. I’ll never forgive him for what he’s done to my sister, prig though she is.”

“Don’t talk about her like that.”

To Miriam’s irritation he chose this moment to pick Lucy up from the chair. Why not leave the animal alone? Did he have to pester it all the time?

“I wish she and Park had never met,” Miriam continued, breath in short bursts. “I blame myself. I encouraged it.” She took an envelope from where it leaned against the clock on the mantel above the fireplace. “I don’t see much of her, now she has her own place, but she came round the other day.”

He started at the news. The cat leapt from his grasp. “The other day? So you have seen her yourself quite recently? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Sure.”

“Then why are you cross-examining me about her?”

“Hardly that, Alec, don’t be so jumpy. Just wanted your impressions. See if you’d noticed anything.”

He shook his head, frowning, apparently about to protest but she pressed on.

“The point is, Alec, Julia brought this to show me.” She proffered him the envelope. He took it, removed the contents, and glanced at them but stayed silent. “Well?”

He refolded the three sheets of A4 and replaced them. “I’ve already seen this,” he whispered, handing the envelope back.

Miriam held it with numb fingers, all of a sudden at a loss, paralysed, as if under a spell while she tried to regroup. “Can you say that again, Alec?” She could not believe her ears, although she understood why only prompting had eventually elicited this information from him. Alec’s devotion to all matters Julia lay in plain sight, and he no longer voluntarily brought her name up in conversation for fear of embarrassing himself and his wife.

All the same, that he had already seen the e-mail, but had not raised the subject, filled her with consternation. She doubted if Julia would have ever been exposed to pornography before and could only conjecture about how she had responded on first reading Park’s message. Through the bewilderment and disbelief, she must have wondered if it had been intended for her, despite the opening salutation, Hi Julia! Perhaps she had read and re-read as Miriam had, in search of hidden meaning — surely the whole rigmarole could not merely be an exercise in gratuitous offence and violence. She had expected her news of the e-mail to come as both revelation and shock to Alec. Instead, he knew all about the sordid contents but had evidently found raising the subject with her beyond his powers. She tried to make sense of his silence.

“You mean you’ve known about this stuff all along?”

“Park showed it to me.” Alec wearily resumed his seat, lifting Lucy once more as he did so and installing her on his lap.

She replaced the envelope on the mantel before turning to him. “I don’t understand how you can be so serene about it. We are talking pornography here, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

She tried to maintain calm. “In what way don’t you know?”

“Depends on one’s point of view. To the pure . . .” He trailed off.

“Are you suggesting it’s all in my dirty mind?”

He stirred in that infuriating internal wriggle he had developed. “Of course not.”

“So there you were,” she said, after a pause. “Pretending to wonder what had happened to Julia, why she wasn’t her usual bright and cheerful self.”

He bowed his head in silence.

“Poetry or porn, how can you be so casual about this? It’s Julia we’re talking about. Your beloved.” Miriam could not comprehend why he did not show more anger, that he seemed so defeatist. He should be upset, furious with Park, at how he had treated Julia, and sick with worry about her, yet Alec seemed to be none of these. Miriam had hoped involvement in the bookshop might rescue him from the malaise he floundered in but the novelty seemed to be wearing off. Julia’s energising rays apparently left him unaffected. The new career had stalled. “Aren’t you cross with Park? Didn’t you protest when you saw it, him sending porn to your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend and I did protest, but it seemed such a done deal. And, besides, we got off the subject. He was so full of patter about this Chloe I told you about.”

“You disgust me, Alec. Keeping quiet about this.”

He passed a hand through hair which needed cutting. “Sorry. the whole thing threw me. I still don’t know what it means, the e-mail.”

“It’s perfectly simple.” She folded her arms. “It means your friend Park is even more of a tosser than I imagined. That’s what it means.”

“I wonder if he’s ill.”

“Don’t make me laugh.” She remained standing, waiting for some kind of response not abject.

“What does Julia say about the e-mail?” he asked.

“She claims it’s all invented. Doesn’t stop her being devastated.”

He looked up. “What do you think?”

Miriam shrugged.

“You must have an opinion,” he urged.

“I’m not so sure the e-mail is a fantasy. Knowing Park, she’s probably real.”

“Who’s real?”

“The woman in the e-mail of course! The sexual athlete. Though Julia doesn’t believe an actual person is involved.”

He fidgeted with a shirt button. “So why does she think Park sent it?”

“She’s as clueless as we are.”

He moved Lucy again, this time to the floor and leaned forward to reassemble his

newspaper. Miriam doubted, as she watched him fumble for the pages, if she had ever pitied him as much as at that moment.

“The question is, Alec, what are you going to do about Park?”

“Me?”

“He is a friend of yours, isn’t he?”

Alec retrieved his shoes from the rug and put them on. “To be honest, I can hardly bear to be in the same room as him any more.”

“OK, if you’re not prepared to do damn all, I’ll sort him myself,” she said, under her breath. Determined on resolution as, brimming with self-loathing, she floundered to define her present state of mind toward Park.

Obsession, illness, delusion, lust, all these words characterised her condition, but folly and farce seemed the most appropriate. Love and joy figured not at all. She had heard of how people could fall for someone they had known as a friend for a long time, but had never for a moment dreamt a fate as mortifying, given the character of the individual involved, could happen to her.

7

Park never tired of Greenwich and Blackheath’s green spaces, their endless variety. He roamed the area on Sundays, whatever the weather, and knew by sight many of the personalities who haunted the Heath, although beyond nodding acquaintance with a few he preferred not to go. Today, walk over, he elected — the sunny January day just warm enough — to sit on a bench under the horse-chestnut trees surrounding the Hare and Billet pub. He placed the pint glass of Young’s ale he had bought on the seat beside him.

This afternoon, he had Julia on his mind. He wished he had never laid eyes on her.

‘I want you to take my sister out,’ Miriam had said, eighteen months before. ‘Julia’s recovering from a nervous breakdown and needs pampering. She’s moved from Edinburgh to stay with Alec and me for a change of scene. Maybe find a place of her own and settle in London for good. Come for dinner tonight and meet her.’

Park had found a fairly tall, overweight young woman, mousy hair enveloping blurred features tending to plainness. Her eyes were blue and her lashes long, however, and he had detected sexual possibilities at once, even potential for depravity. She only had to shed physical and psychic shrouds for a very desirable creature indeed to emerge.

Julia, however, as he soon discovered, belonged to the devout. She seldom watched TV, never frequented the cinema or theatre. Chess and scrabble, drives in the country, picnics, ideal home exhibitions, meals in sober establishments were allowed. As were visits to art galleries and exhibitions, though these with reluctance and after careful vetting regarding subject matter. Though never on a Sunday, on that day she kept incommunicado, immersed in the worship rituals of the sect to which she belonged.

On their first date, she had asked a blessing aloud on their food prior to starting on

her espresso and Danish in the Blackheath café where they met.

‘Did I embarrass you?’ She asked a few moments later.

‘Miriam’s never mentioned how religious you are.’

‘She’s used to it.’

‘You and she certainly differ on that score,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say grace.’

‘We shouldn’t be embarrassed to say thank you.’

The remark had set his teeth on edge and he should have backed off then. Gotten out of her life before she transformed – by some magic to do with hormones, rest and recuperation – from dim incognito into considerable beauty as he had foreseen.

Chemistry took a hand between them but to his chagrin, responsive as any female to physical affection though she proved, an obstacle to progress in that department existed. As she had to explain to him early on: ‘Sex belongs in marriage, Park,’ she insisted, and her line continued to remain non-negotiable. She lived by her faith in every department of her existence.

Unable to handle her refusal to sleep with him he, not once, but twice had to stop seeing her. As he explained to Julia: he could not bear not to have her, knowing all the time how much she wanted him. She understood, she told him, could not deny she desired him, but her principles came first. ‘You’re thirty,’ he had protested on the occasion of their second parting. Not caring to elaborate or really knowing how or what he meant, merely that the comment seemed loaded with sufficient spite to be appropriate in the circumstances.

She proved, however, too irresistible a lure. Each time he broke with her, he had sought her company again within two months; approaches which she had not refused. He asked himself why and concluded she liked him, might not be averse to marrying him. After all, together with perfect looks, he owned a house in a sought after area and earned an excellent income as a tax specialist. While she, a primary school teacher refugee from the classroom, found her income precarious and the chances of a mortgage slim. Moreover, he sensed, she needed to keep him in her vicinity; she wanted to recruit him for Christ and expected to be the one victorious in this battle of wills.

Together again for the third time, before long they resumed sexual jousting, Park convinced that this time his charm and sheer animality would prevail. Only to be rebuffed once again on the threshold of conquest and driven to his third, he swore final, retirement from the scene. He determined to see Julia no more and thus the situation between them had continued, Park avoiding any place where he might run into her. Until one morning, six weeks earlier, when he had popped into Alec’s book shop to find her serving there.

Yet once more, Park had had to ask her out, her beauty compelled his request, and the familiar scenario unfolded. The old routines, Julia’s initial instinctive responses – this time around more unguarded than ever – crushed by taboo and his inevitable retreat, seemed set to continue. Until three weeks ago when, having seen her home one evening, after a meal, to the cottage she had rented in Greenwich, events had taken a different course. One which, of all the doubtful deeds he had committed, haunted his dreams and weighed the most on his mind.

On the sofa in her living room, Julia, head thrown back, throat exposed to his kisses, seemed his at last, her yielding willing body responding as never before under his searching hands. Moaning, she sought his mouth. He reached between her legs, but too soon.

Spell broken, she struggled to sit up. 'Park. Stop. We can't.'

He cursed his impatience; she was so damned hot. Assuming her resistance to be provocation, however, that she merely looked for more persuasion in order to let herself succumb, he tried again.

'No, Park. No.' She fought him off, her struggling, kicking, body in revolt as well as voice.

Rage overtook him as he realised she intended no tease. The odour of her sweat and welling sex, filtering through the honeysuckle of the perfume she wore, threw a switch. Brain and manhood fused in a frenzy of lust as he bore down to tear at her pants, ripping the flimsy fabric, and force her thighs apart with a knee. She thrashed silently, lashing out in tigerish fury, raking his cheek with her nails. He grabbed her hand to restrain her; she sank her teeth in his wrist. Screaming, he flung her off, swearing at her, insanely embarrassed at cursing in her company. He avoided her eyes as her sobbing, pleading words reached him, 'Sorry, Park. My fault. Please, I'm so sorry.'

He fled the house; he had almost taken her by force. If she had not used her teeth . . . He wondered if she had any idea of how close she had come to being raped.

The next day, a letter arrived, tear and mucus stained. Julia blamed herself for leading Park on, and assured him she would mention the incident to no one. She thanked him for his restraint in sparing her, although in that regard, of course, true praise must rest with God for preventing a crime. She hankered after men, could not deny it, but pitied them too for their confusion, subjugation to women and bondage to sin. Finally, she urged Park, whom she loved, she claimed, to accept Christ as his saviour.

He cursed the Internet. If he had had to queue in the Post Office for a stamp his savage response, shaped by malice, would never have left his flat. Looking back, he could only view the dispatch to Julia of a graphic yarn detailing sexual acts between consenting adults, himself one, as the inexplicable conduct of a stranger – behaviour of a compromised personality, perhaps even psychotic.

He reviewed the steps which had brought him to his present state of turmoil: his pursuit of Julia and inability to accept her refusals to his advances, followed by his molestation of her; the resultant letter and his further attack in the form of grotesque response by e-mail. Remorse over the sending of which had seeded the unguarded moment when he had let slip his comment about Chloe in the Horse, and triggered the humiliation meted out by Eddie. An event followed, in its turn, by the providence of the epiphany and its revelation that solely through her could personal redemption be found.

A deliverance which, however, Park had recently arrived at the conclusion, he would never attain whilst he remained estranged from Julia. Against whom, despite her care for his welfare — her letter had sprung from the best of intentions — he had perpetrated double felony. He clearly saw his mission involving Chloe stood no

chance of success against a background so toxic, fraught with pain and ill will. The promise of the epiphany could only be realised once he had made good his destructive conduct toward Julia and become reconciled with her. After all, had he never so sinned against Julia with his e-mail, the chances were Chloe and he might never have met. He owed Julia his gratitude and repentance.

The glass stood, untouched, where he had placed it. He raised the drink to his lips, suddenly conscious of a chill in the air.

8

Several days after her talk with Alec about the e-mail, Miriam left the Cator Estate, the Blackheath gated enclave in which she lived, and drove the mile north to Park's flat. She knew his habits sufficiently well to be confident of finding him in on a Saturday morning, and so the Cajun music seeping through the door of his flat confirmed.

She took mental inventory of her appearance. Although she needed to lose a stone, the surplus weight was evenly distributed and the russet dress she had chosen clung at all the right places. The rest of her too at forty three — heavy breasted, her upright stance at slightly over over medium height — contributed to a striking whole. Her hair, today in a chignon, had received a fresh copper rinse the night before to help with the grey, and she had gone for lip gloss only with the minimum of shading about her green eyes. She pressed her tongue against the gap in her upper teeth and rang the bell.

He opened the door after a few seconds. As always when they met his beauty, despite the familiarity of long acquaintance, momentarily took her breath away. Her gaze travelled over the flawless skin, aquiline nose, cheek bones to die for and lingered on the haunted hazel eyes. He seemed to have not long emerged from the shower. Male fragrances charged the air around him. He wore a pale blue, light wool sweater and cream chinos, his feet bare and unshod. She imagined rearranging his hair, thick dark and curly, tracing the jaw line, lean and clean. Before she knew it she had reached to wipe away a particle of shaving cream lodged below the lobe of his left ear.

He smiled a 'Thank you.' The lines etched in the corner of his eyes deepened; the shadows left them. The cave of her heart yearned for invasion by him, and she hoped the fact that if he touched her he could have her did not register too obviously, as he ushered her into the living room. In a bid to give herself time to regain composure, she made for the window bay and the view of St Leonard's Church a hundred yards away, with the Heath beyond.

The sash of each window had been raised an inch so that the sound of traffic in Montpelier Vale and children at play on the Heath seeped in. As she laid her handbag on the desk placed in the window area, she noticed a slim vase containing six white lilies resting on a pedestal and bent, hoping for perfume, only to find none. Turning,

she looked up, to find him standing before the fireplace. He seemed to sympathize with her disappointment.

“From an admirer?” She could not help asking, but he remained unfazed.

“You know how it is.” He indicated the sofa adjacent to where he stood but she declined, choosing instead a straight backed chair by the wall, where the room turned into the window alcove.

“Can I offer you coffee or anything?”

“I won’t. This is not a social call, Park. I’m here about Julia.”

“How is she? Haven’t seen her for ages.”

“Oh, please. Don’t give me the coy innocent. This is about that e-mail.”

“Bit private, isn’t it?”

“Park, Julia is my sister.”

He made no response but crossed to the window and closed the sashes. The room stilled.

“Why can’t you leave her alone?” She asked. “I know she won’t let you sleep with her.” Miriam could not be positive the sharp intake of breath had not been her own. “Christ, Park. I don’t believe I said that. Even if it is the truth.”

“No harm.” He made to lay a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” She half rose.

He raised his palms. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have startled you.”

“No. My fault. Feeling kind of edgy.”

“Are you sure I can’t get you anything?”

“Some water, please.”

“On its way.” He left the room briefly before returning with the drink, complete with ice cubes.

“Thank you.” As she drank, she noticed his attention lingering on her wedding ring and blushed. Her scalp tingled, while his expression revealed just how much he relished her discomfort. “Sorry I got so worked up there.”

“My fault entirely.”

“Give me a minute.”

“How’s the club?” he asked, after a pause as she sipped her drink. “I haven’t been lately.”

“Look, Park — ”

“What are they working on now?”

“A model of an American Civil War Dreadnought,” she heard herself responding, annoyance rising at the introduction of this irrelevance.

“You’re joking! From scratch?”

“I believe so.”

“Major stuff. Who’s in charge?”

“Sammy.”

“Alec won’t be happy about that.”

She shrugged, struggling with a sense of the surreal at the turn the conversation had taken.

“Who did the drawings?”

Miriam straightened, furious, and put her glass down. “How the hell should I

know? I didn't come here to talk about the bloody club." She had expected him, calm once restored, to address her concerns about the e-mail without further prompting from her. Instead, he seemed determined to change the subject.

"Just curious." He pointed to the glass, ice melting. "Can I freshen that up for you?"

"Not right now," she responded, taking time to calm herself, remember the reason she had come — to have it out over the e-mail.

"Well, say when." He took a seat in one of the armchairs by the fireplace.

She followed after a few moments but remained standing. "Park."

He looked up. "Miriam, seriously. I'm all ears."

"I can't tell you how upset Julia is. She was convinced this time you two were going to make it. You owe us an explanation."

"I'll try."

"Julia thinks you were fantasising in the e-mail. Making it all up. Were you?"

He sighed. "OK, here's what happened. Julia wrote to me waxing lyrical about various religious beliefs she is convinced we both hold."

"So?"

"I deeply resented her faith assumptions about me and absolutely could not let them go unchallenged."

Miriam shook her head. "But you shared similar backgrounds. Surely you must have figured where she was coming from."

"I did. I replied in kind."

"You amaze me. I didn't take your squalid little ego trip for a theological dissertation."

"All the same, Miriam, the e-mail's origins are of a religious nature."

"I don't buy that. You and I know what this is really all about."

He made himself more comfortable in the chair, resting his head on the back. "Didn't Julia see the humour in it?" He paused. "Didn't you?"

"Duh?" She had always wanted to say that but had never come across the opportunity until now.

"I was trying to help Julia lighten up," he continued, apparently impervious to sarcasm. "Persuade her to take her mores less seriously, realize there's as much a laughable aspect to religious rituals as to sexual ones."

"Nice try. But I don't see how she could possibly be expected to gather that. Or fall for it, frankly."

"Perhaps I should explain?"

"And quickly. To her. She's very upset."

"The sex act, because of its essentially comic nature, standing in for life. Life as cosmic joke. We're all accidents bound for the old folks' home."

"Bull and you know it. I see no comedy in the e-mail."

"I wanted her to view her hang-ups in the same way, through humour, all human, all transient. To relax. For her own sake. Take life as it comes."

Miriam took her time. "Spread her legs for you, you mean."

He rose in a temper, preening, even in his bare feet and crossed to the windows, where he stood for a moment looking out before turning. "I resent the way you keep

harping on that. It's uncalled for."

"Excuse me. Can't see the funny side?"

"Touché."

Gracious wording, pity about the manner. "Very ingenious, Park, but let's face it, trying to pass the e-mail off as act of altruism doesn't work. Sending it was an act of revenge because she wouldn't put out for you. Except you dare not admit that, even to yourself. Makes you too pathetic."

"Julia needs to be shocked out of the parallel universe she's stranded in and dragged into the real world."

"So you were teaching her a lesson."

"I merely used sex as metaphor, proxy for reality. Parody of it, if you like."

Miriam saw he had no intention of further elaboration. At no stage had he shown contrition, his self regard knew no bounds. She dared not trust herself to ask if the female in the e-mail was a real person or a figment of his imagination, and thereby risk betraying any clue about her own dilemma. Nor, by the same token, could she raise the subject of Chloe. The woman he had apparently insulted, but who he now seemed determined to engage with in a mission to promote his own self-aggrandisement.

A rivulet of sweat formed between her shoulder blades. Her legs felt about to give way and she sat in the armchair opposite the one he had vacated. "Are you alright, Miriam?"

She saw him smirk. "You arrogant bastard."

"You do have every right to be cross."

"Cross? I'm effing mad. You sadistic creep, you don't know what you've done," she whispered, labouring to breathe as her reaction on first encountering the e-mail came surging back to her. Cringing as she recalled how, on reading it, dread had warped her gut as she turned away in denial, to shield herself from the confirmation Park had taken up residence in her system. Her blind jealousy of the woman in the e-mail had been all too revealing about her feelings for this man.

"Are you sure I can't get you a real drink, Miriam? Might do you good."

"Stick it, Park."

She rose and, struggling with an overpowering sense of vertigo, retrieved her handbag from beside the lilies. Outside, she sat in the car for a long time, unable to engage with the vehicle, too paralysed by her glimpse into the soul of Park and the abyss beneath her feet.

Figures for the Bank of England monthly statistical returns, Chloe's area of responsibility at Crillon Bank, were due to be filed by 3 p.m.. Her phone had not ceased to ring all morning and her head ached. The curse had descended the evening before, the computer had crashed, the air conditioning had failed. Everything that

could go wrong had. There went the phone again.

“A Dave on the line,” the operator said. Chloe’s heart raced, goose pimples stippled, she crumpled within. She had been more than attracted to the paper salesman at first sight but only ever saw him down the Horse, where he sometimes accompanied his friend and business client, Eddie. Meanwhile, she kept hearing rumours about Dave from Hannah, what a reputation he had with the ladies. Certainly, the way he looked at Chloe made her go all of a tiz-woz, although that just had to be him being Dave, compulsive womaniser, she concluded — with her looks how could it be otherwise. His arrival in the Horse to see Eddie at Christmas had come as an unlooked for bonus. He had flirted with her and made her laugh.

All at once she realized how much she had been longing for this call, perhaps a delayed reaction to the incident in the pub. Unable for some reason to get in touch until now, he must have decided to ring this morning and ask if she was OK, tell her how much the remark had disgusted him. Certain he wanted to commiserate, even take her out to lunch, she leaned into the receiver, her greeting all glad confident morning. “Hi, Dave.”

“Chloe, hi. Park here.”

Her mind blanked, paralysis seized as her body struggled with disappointment, shock, and rage.

“Park?” She managed at last. For a fortnight, ever since their meeting in The Mitre, she had refused his daily calls at work, asking the operator to say she was not available. Now this. “I thought she said Dave North.”

“I wondered about his surname?”

“You bastard.” For a second she wondered if this could be a prank. If Park knew of her feelings about Dave, but that had to be impossible. No one knew of these but Hannah. “Are you taking the piss? Scamming me like this.”

“You gave me no choice. It was the only way I could get to you.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed? And I hear you’ve been trying to get my home number from the switchboard. You’ve got a nerve.”

Someone placed a paper cup of coffee on her desk. A few minutes earlier, desperate for a shot of caffeine, she had signalled a passing colleague for one, but now it might as well be a thousand miles away. Her hand shook too much to think about chancing even a sip.

“You never take my calls,” he said.

“Don’t see why I should.”

“You’re not being fair to me, Chloe. Avoiding me the way you are.”

“What do you want? You may not have anything better to do but I haven’t got the time for this.”

“I’m ringing to ask you to dinner.”

“After the stunt you’ve just pulled? You must be joking.”

“You gave me no choice.”

“Why did you think I’d be interested anyway, Park?”

“Let me take you to dinner and I’ll tell you. We only had a few minutes in the Mitre. No time to talk. You didn’t give me a chance.”

“I’d have thought you’d have taken the hint by now.”

“You could at least give me one more try, Chloe.”

Calming, she picked up a Biro and started doodling on her blotter, wondering why she allowed the conversation to continue yet strangely reluctant to terminate it. “To do what, exactly?”

“Persuade you my intentions are honourable, Chloe. I really need to see you.”

“Why?”

“I have a problem.”

She laughed, more of a bark, truth said. “Don’t we all.”

“You can help with mine.”

“What bit don’t you get, Park. The no, or the en o.” Feeling more in control now, she chanced the cup and found she could safely raise it to her lips.

“Why are you being so harsh, Chloe?”

She froze. “Excuse me?”

“Cruel.”

She managed to replace the cup on her desk without spilling a drop. “What?”

“And callous. You could be more civil.”

“I am being perfectly civil, thank you very much.”

“Is there anybody else?”

She gasped. Park had taken her unaware. Colleagues wishing to consult waited for her to get off the phone, printouts clattered. Suddenly fury boiled at Dave for the caller not being him, and at herself for thinking it ever could be. “None of your bloody business, Park.”

He took his time to respond. “I asked for that. I do apologize.”

Chloe considered her options. Either slam the phone down now, or accept his apology. An assent which he would treat, however, in a manner implying she had been the one who — through her intransigence — had provoked him to invade her privacy with deceitful phone call and subsequent prying questions. He had lured her into a trap. She let the silence lengthen in her turn until, sighing inwardly, she cracked. “OK. Accepted.”

“Thank you. I didn’t mean to be intrusive there.”

“Sure you didn’t. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got work to do.”

“I only want to talk.”

“I can’t imagine what about.”

“I’m hurting, Chloe.”

“Tough.”

“Don’t you care at all?”

“Take an aspirin.”

“Dinner? Just once?”

“Bye, Park.”

“Chloe.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Sorry to have pestered you.”

“So am I.” She replaced the receiver at last.

Later, after the day had calmed somewhat, she became aware of how much he had got under her skin. His machinations, transparent as they were, however, were not the

only considerations operative in the change of mind she might perhaps be sensing toward Park. Although present when she had been insulted, Dave had never inquired, even through Eddie, about how she coped with the aftermath of the affront. In contrast to Park, who had pursued her down the Horse, apologized, and continued to show an interest, kept ringing, seeking an opportunity to explain. The truth stared her in the face — that while she entertained her abject fantasies about Dave, someone else knocked, with persistence, at her door.

10

Miriam, vodka spritzer to hand, sat in the Horse Friday lunchtime at a small circular table not far from the bar. She had taken a stiff drink before leaving the house but her hands still trembled as she opened her Evening Standard, bought so as not appear too conspicuously alone. She settled to wait, dividing her time between casual perusal of the paper, fleeting assessment of arriving customers, and fitful review of what had brought her to this place today.

Her feelings about Julia as rival for Park's affections bordered on the ambivalent. The couple's on-off-on relationship had provided background noise in Miriam's life for so long, she sometimes believed she could become reconciled to sharing him with her sister. Park would not be sleeping with Julia, however, any time soon. Her inflexible code ruled out such an outcome, while marriage, the price of her body, presented so unlikely a choice for him as to be discounted entirely.

Miriam could not decide which of Park's other preoccupations tormented her more: his interest in Chloe or his sexual involvement with the anonymous lady flaunted in the e-mail. If indeed, and for Miriam the uncertainty twisted like a knife, such a person existed outside his imagination. While she accepted that for now she had no choice but to live with this conundrum, the arrival of the very real Chloe on the scene presented a different challenge. Unable to imagine anyone as vain as Park electing to be seen in public with a female less than glamorous, Miriam had decided she must lose no time in checking out for herself this other enigma. The ugly oracle who apparently now pointed Park toward self examination and reform.

Aims at least claimed to be so by Alec. Miriam, personally, doubted Park's sincerity. His 'project' struck her as more charade smacking of egotism and instinct to grandstand, but whatever the truth, the depth of her infatuation dictated her course. From Alec's account of the fracas involving Park in the Horse, given City workers tended to be creatures of routine, figuring out when Chloe could be found in the tavern presented Miriam with no problem.

Twelve fifty, her quarry should be here in around ten minutes, time for a quick one before she arrived. Having parked her paper to reserve her seat Miriam ordered at the bar, and had not long taken her place again when a laughing little throng of new arrivals gathered not far from her table. One of the party, a tall, powerfully built, energetic man in his late fifties proceeded to take orders. She heard him summarise:

"OK. For Hannah, gin and tonic. Shel, vodka. Nick and Terry, pints. Tomato juice,

Chloe.”

So that was her. From the moment of the group’s entrance, one woman, erect, vivacious and talkative, had stood out. Thin, almost anorexic, she wore a fitted pale grey shirt, dark trousers and boots, a pink sweater loose across her shoulders. The short, sparse, hair above the gargoyle face grew dull and patchy, scalp showing here and there. She folded and unfolded her arms over non-existent breasts as she moved from one foot to another.

A crowd at a nearby table rose to leave. Chloe’s party colonised the area immediately and Miriam allowed her attention to linger, until shortly she sensed herself an object of scrutiny in turn. Glancing in the direction instinct led, she caught the big man appraising her as he waited at the bar. Their eyes locked. The warning and protectiveness mixed with challenge in his gaze became qualified, in less than a bewildering instant, by open appreciation. She had not been assessed so frankly in a long time, the sexual charge, to her not unwelcome alarm, instant and mutual before she managed to look away. He had to make two journeys to secure his colleagues’ drinks, Miriam aware of his glance each time as he passed.

Naughty, the surge of adrenaline as, on returning to her table, she found herself covertly unfastening another button on her white tunic leaving a good two inches of cleavage exposed. He kept scouting her way, she kept looking up from her Standard, until on his next return trip from the bar, when he smiled her way, she smiled back. He delivered the drinks to his companions’ table before ambling across. Poised, regular featured, his grey hair close cropped, he looked as if he could be intimidating if occasion required. He did not loom, however, but kept a respectful distance, his manner courteous, not familiar.

“Sure I know you from somewhere,” he said.

“Really?”

“Positive.”

“If you say so.”

“I seldom forget a face.”

She tilted hers toward him. “Is that so?”

“Fact. Do you mind if I join you briefly?”

Feeling light-headed, she indicated yes by removing the Standard from where she had laid it on the vacant chair. “You’ve left your drink.”

“Be a sec.” He crossed and excused himself to his lunch companions before picking up his glass and returning to her. “Sorry about earlier. Must be the oldest chat-up line in the world.”

She laughed. “None the worse for that.”

“Eddie.” He proffered his hand.

She took it. “Miriam.”

He sat. “Nice name.”

She smiled and took a sip of vodka, reassured by the steadiness of her hand. “I don’t come here often, by the way.”

He laughed delightedly. “But you work in the City?”

“Used to. What about you?”

“Crillon Bank, over the road.”

“What do you do there?” she asked.

“Premises manager.”

“Have you long still to go?”

“A few years.” He blew through puffed cheeks. “Done thirty. Probably shows.”

“As it happens, no,” she said and she meant it. Although he might appear a shade world weary, she had the sense he continued very much a going concern.

He laughed. “You’re too kind.”

“Not at all.”

“Should have made your acquaintance earlier, Miriam.”

“Think so?”

“You say all the right things.”

She grimaced. “I better be careful then.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Not that careful.”

This was fun. “Wouldn’t want to be misunderstood,” she said.

“Only in the best possible way.” He took time out to sip more beer. “So what brings you to the City today? If I’m not being too nosy.”

“Been to the dentist for a check up.”

“Long way to come.”

“The one I used when I worked here,” she said. “He’s so good I stayed on his list.” She felt bad about lying to Eddie, he seemed a decent sort, but on the other hand, she but partly fabricated. She had worked in the City, her dentist did practice here and she continued to employed his services, though not today. Although to state she had drifted up town on a whim would have sufficed, she preferred to introduce an element of fantasy as she sought to bring the whole Park, Chloe, Julia, and now Eddie, scenario closer to daydream, less to nightmare.

“Dentists make me nervous. Let’s change the subject.”

“Certainly.”

“I expect, since you’ve worked in the City, you’ll know this pub already.”

“This wasn’t our local. I worked at the Cheapside end, nearer Saint Paul’s. But I have been a couple of times, leaving parties and such.”

“So, I might have seen you before after all, Miriam. Across a crowded room.”

“Maybe.” She laughed, aware of his regard. “Sure it’ll come back to you,” she added, looking at him and marking the moment. The certainty they would be seeing each other again, and the conviction he felt the same way, already in place.

“Wouldn’t be surprised.” He checked his watch before nodding toward the exit. “Sorry, now I seem to be have brought our chat full circle, ’fraid it’s time I went. Very strict in the City nowadays lunch hour wise.”

She mimed sympathy and regret.

“Look, Miriam, can I get you a drink before I toddle off? Sort of leave it with you?”

Why not? “Vodka spritzer would be nice. Small one, thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

And, yes, when he returned he placed a single before her; she blinked away a tear. The courtesy displayed in this simple fulfilment of her request, the respect implied in not presenting her with presumptuous double, filled her with regard for him and a

feeling akin to gratitude. He seemed, however, unaware of her emotional state as he took a step back from the table, before leaning toward her in a posture of invitation, palms outspread. She gave way to the delicious feeling she was about to be propositioned.

“Can I see you again?” He paused. “You must think me terribly forward but I’ve enjoyed our brief encounter so much.”

She acknowledged the compliment with a smile.

“Any chance I can ring you?” he asked.

Miriam hesitated. Not again, alchie nympho. Booze and the boys, how many times had her heedless, needy, hormones led her astray. But she found this one so fanciable, with his self-assured grey eyes, gravel voice, lovely hands, nice nails too. Oh, the hell with it. She gave him her mobile number, smiling through the rush.

“You remember yours,” he said, as he entered the digits on his mobile. “I’m impressed. I always have to look mine up.”

“My birthday’s woven in there somewhere.”

“Have to see if I can work it out,” he said, winked at her and pocketing the phone, before taking his leave to rejoin his colleagues with a ‘Come on folks, let’s be having you.’ Soon the whole party had gone.

Miriam lingered, letting her mind absorb the events of the morning and trying to get her head around the fact she had just given her telephone number to a stranger. Yet someone not entirely unknown for she had, from Alec’s description, recognised Eddie at first sight as the big guy who had hit Park. She wondered how her Park fixation and the undeniable chemistry between her and Eddie could coexist, and concluded that, far from being mutually exclusive, the syndromes fitted, locked in a pattern. That Eddie and she found each other attractive was a complication, but not an unwelcome one. A role for him had already formed in her mind; for her, the emergence of this potential adventure had a logic all its own.

As for the object of her mission, to put a face to Chloe, Alec had not exaggerated. Miriam had never in her life come across an uglier freak. Even the creature’s voice sounded horrible. Miriam resented with implacable grudge this interloper, her disruptive arrival on the scene and could not imagine what Park saw in such a troll. It could not be love, must not be love.

Yet romance lurked here. Miriam smelt it as, cross and fearful, her feelings veered from weary tolerance of Park’s whim to loathing of its object. A state of mind which today flirting and alcohol alone made bearable.

She had another vodka, and by the end of the day a few more.