

# **Murder Most Stupid**

by

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This is a work of fiction, yada, yada, yada.

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## **Book One**

## Chapter One

It was twenty to five in the afternoon when Mister Pluck waddled into the hotel foyer. He was normally a man who could walk like other men—with long, vigorous, purposeful, manly strides—but our usually famously observant hero had in this instance forgotten to remove his skis. Mifkin, the large and exceedingly correct porter with a moustache envied by all the staff, rushed towards him.

“Ah, my good man,” Pluck addressed him, “be a good chap and see to the radiator in my room, won’t you? It hoots and whistles like a strangled canary with a lisp, and confoundedly forbids my afternoon naps.”

Mifkin, all six and three-quarter feet of him, bowed before the gentleman, then, with his brow lingering pensively over the deep taupe carpet, whispered, with exemplary tact: “Your skis, sir.”

“What?!” demanded Pluck huffily. “What’s that about skis, man?!”

“Sir surely does not wish to wear his skis up to his room, and during his nap, I presume?”

Pluck laughed with contempt. “What in blazes do you mean, you bumbling idiot?! Ha! My skis, my—?!” But though he did not want to, though he fought, with every ounce of his formidable will, against the impulse, some unseen force, outside himself, caused him to tilt his gaze downward, where he was rewarded with an unsparing burst of self-knowledge, grasping at once the embarrassing picture he presented to the three-tier Louis the Sixteenth chandelier, the brocaded bergères housing several members of the noble and bourgeois spheres, the grand staircase, the gaping bellhop, and the Pekingese.

Flushing a beautifully rich mauve, Pluck crouched down and fumbled with the ski locks. “Argh! Those cack-handed ski makers have botched the job once again! I can’t get these blasted things off! Help me, God damn you, help me!”

Thus summoned, Mifkin knelt, first one knee and then the other, and proceeded to offer his best assistance—which, as we shall see, fell disgracefully short of Mister Pluck’s requirements.

“Hurry, you clumsy swine!” hissed the latter.

“Yes, sir,” mumbled the former.

The question which insinuated itself into Pluck’s mind, like an insistent sperm into a coy egg, was this: *Should I strike him? Should I strike him till he wilts, justly humbled, to the floor?* Whilst his antagonist might, judging from appearances, have boasted that which Pluck lacked—a brute, crass physical strength such as that allotted to a dumb beast, which would appear wholly unseemly in a gentleman—he, Pluck, by virtue of his dignity, his richly cultured soul and, yes, he would not deny it, his class (somewhat less than noble, but indisputably more than common), could certainly pride himself on a moral superiority which any objective observer, if such a thing were possible, would acknowledge. Might, then, in response to the world’s last-ditch appeal to Providence to divulge some proof that justice on this earth, which had long since been presumed dead, survived, some presiding deity guide his hand to knock this ingrate down, and thereby re-establish order in a world which wobbled on the precipice of chaos, imbue meaning in a culture fading listlessly into dissolution, and, incidentally, prove to all Pluck’s position as the pre-eminent personage of his age?

Pluck's fingers, in the midst of such apocalyptic musing, shook, which only made the task he and the porter shared between them that much more difficult to complete. "Hurry!" he whispered. "Everybody's looking! Is the sole aim of your puny existence the irrevocable ruin of my reputation?!"

Larry the bellhop, whom everyone on the staff called "Poor Larry", not on account of his salary, which, yes, left much to be desired, but because of a harrowing, self-pitying look about his young features, shuffled over.

"May I help, Mister Mifkin?" asked he.

"No thank you," Mifkin replied.

"Go away!" screamed Pluck, throat choked with rising bile. His shout drew the hotel's manager over in a flash.

"What's the problem here?!" demanded Herr Voot. "Mifkin! What's the matter with you?! Leave monsieur's feet alone!"

Mifkin, hands still at work, raised his face to his superior, self-respect intact: "Herr Voot, Mister Pluck asked me to help him untie his skis. As you know, sir, I do solely what duty compels; no more, and, I vow, by no means less."

"He did what?"

"Asked me to untie his skis, sir. Hence: the scene you witness before you."

"Are you all right, sir?" Herr Voot inquired of Pluck, stooping down to observe him. "Your face is inflamed."

"I?! I am absolutely well! More than well—positively unbetterable, if you must know! All is as right as can be conceived! I might go so far as to say that civilisation, and my life as one modest cog therein, is nothing less than perfection itself!" screamed Pluck, causing patrons to stream in from other rooms to see about the hullabaloo.

At that, the skis unclicked, and Pluck, hands over his face, broke through the scrum and scurried up the staircase.

When he'd finally managed to get the key into his door and shoved it shut behind him, he threw himself onto his bed and cried angrily into his pillow.

"Beasts!" he sobbed. "Those horrid beasts! To place me in that degrading position, to shower such disdain, to begrudge me my respect! Swine, swine, to a man!"

The room, unlit, was dark in the winter afternoon. Two long curtains hung lifelessly, impotently, over the thick window, grudgingly permitting the barest mucous lustre of light to enter and hover, bemusedly, over the trembling form. The unseen-to radiator popped and whistled. Huge oak bureaux and armoires watched the pathetic goings-on with no trace of pity, but more than a hint of contempt.

After a time—it might have been minutes, it might have been an hour—I don't know, and you don't care—Pluck, the put-upon, rolled onto his back, wormed his forefinger into his vest pocket and fished out a key. Sniffing, he bent down to his travelling-chest and unlocked it. From amongst a series of technical implements of which neither you nor I could make head or tail, he extracted a small, handsomely bound album. He rolled up his left trouser leg—revealing a startlingly pale, hairy shin—rolled down his checked sock, and extricated a smaller key, with which he unlocked the tome. He kicked off his shoes, lay on the bed, flipped through several pages of photographs of obese women on the beach with parasols and nothing on, and proceeded to pleasure himself.

## Chapter Two

Somewhat depleted, Pluck descended the stately stairs, buttoning his fly. The lobby was shivering with activity, as families and couples and lonely soloists arrived for the beginnings of their holiday. Casting imperious glances to the left and the right, as nonchalantly as a reaper swishing his scythe from side to side amidst the ingenuous wheat, Pluck waded through them on his way to the calmer environs of the tearoom. There, the final glow the sky would have to offer before evening dribbled, a bit reticently, through the high windows, cascading onto the marble floor, pooling on the glass of the tables, bubbling across the prim brown hairpin of a lady, and coagulating on the shoulders of a stout man in a suit sitting with her.

Entirely unbidden, Pluck sat down on the third seat of their table. "Good afternoon, madame and monsieur."

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon."

"I'm sorry?" he asked, looking to them for an explanation.

The lady looked to the man, who, naturally enough, looked back. The man, then, as the space left by Pluck's question seemed to demand some sort of answer, turned back to him and explained, "We wished you a good afternoon, as well."

"Ah! That's very kind of you both, I must say."

Properly civilised as they were, the lady and the gentleman sought to hide the most obvious exterior signs of their boredom with their new guest, and sipped their tea, as one.

Referring to that beverage—that very one—Pluck inquired, "What are you drinking?"

"Tea," explained the man.

"I was inquiring of the lady," Pluck informed him, a little haughtily.

"I'm drinking tea as well," she answered, this time for herself.

"Charming, charming! A charming choice!" he congratulated her, and turned round to wave to the waiter, who, more out of duty than predilection, came over.

"Yes, monsieur?"

"I'd like to order."

"Yes, monsieur?"

"A drink."

"Which drink, monsieur?"

"Do you have tea?"

"We do, monsieur."

"Fresh?"

"I've just made it, monsieur."

Pluck, who up till now had not bothered to turn the full force of his face toward the waiter, and whose suspicion was now evidently pricked by something the waiter had said, raised his thin visage, with its unblemished, moonlight-bright skin and inkpot eyes, to him and said:

"Boy, you said you just made it."

"That's right, monsieur."

"The tea."

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

There was a moment without dialogue; the narrative—this narrative—skidded to a halt; as the waiter considered how the question could sensibly be answered.

“The tea is fresh,” threw in the lady, as if it were any business of hers.

“I did not ask you—silence, if you please,” Pluck commanded her out of the side of his mouth, and then, still addressing the waiter: “How am I supposed to know what you meant by ‘just’?”

“Mere moments ago, monsieur,” explained the waiter, at which Pluck slowly closed his eyes and shook his head.

“But your perception, small boy, of a ‘mere moment’ would be, I’m guessing, entirely different to *mine*, or to *this lady’s here*, or even to that of *this gentleman*—if it should come to that.”

The waiter—who had to have been at least twenty—blinked. “I’m sorry, monsieur?”

“Do not be crass, cretin—just bring me a cup of your stale tea and be done with it,”

Pluck whined, devastatingly, then turned back to smile at his new friends.

The waiter, whose name, I might as well tell you, was Aloysius, turned with matchless discretion to get the tea. In his thoughts, however, if we were granted the power to peer into them—well, let’s grant ourselves that power, shall we?—his thoughts, I say, ran more along the lines of strangling Pluck’s scrawny, bow-tied neck and smashing his head against the table until such point as both head and table should shatter.

“Now, dear”—Pluck was addressing the lady—“where were we?”

“We were explaining that we were drinking tea in the tearoom,” she reiterated. Her back was straight, her suit ordered, her face round. Pluck’s gaze thus flitted from one part of her to the next, aggravating her and her companion exceedingly.

“I detect that you are a botanist, madame.”

“Not at all.”

“And that your name is ‘Marjorie’.”

“‘Enid’, actually.”

“Hm.” He looked at her, for a long while, even whilst the waiter deposited his tea, inquired if monsieur would like cream or sugar, paused in wait for an answer, and departed when none was forthcoming. Pluck pushed the teacup and saucer away from him without deigning to inspect them, and stared at Enid still. “...No, no, I think ‘Marjorie’ is more likely. With a surname that is slightly—Irish?”

“My family is Polish, monsieur.”

“As I thought—Polish, or some other, similarly barbaric, people from the east. And you, sir!” he suddenly thundered, to the extent that his rather feeble, high-registered voice could thunder, towards the man. “You are retired from the navy, I think?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You are in the navy still, then?”

“You couldn’t be further from the truth.” The man threw back his broad shoulders in an attempt to appear good-humoured; his face, wide and redolent of a just-ripe apricot, with a sharp chin which really didn’t belong to the rest of the squishy, somewhat too-spaced-out components, jiggled about under these unnatural demands for forbearance.

“Might I ask you your business, monsieur?”



Dextrously ignoring that pointless query, and speaking to them both, now, Pluck announced: "I detect that the two of you met in Nice, flirted in Rome, wed in Brussels and finally consummated your disreputable desires in Greece."

"That is not so."

"And although you, sir, reaped satisfaction on your wedding night, madame decidedly did not."

"That remark is as offensive as it is idiotic."

"Strong words, monsieur—strong words." Pluck ended this parry with a knowing smirk. "I always find that when an adversary is forced to lose his temper, he reveals more about himself than he intends. I detect from your accent that you are Canadian—more specifically—no, no, don't tell me, quiet now—more specifically, somewhere Yukonese way, if I'm not mistaken."

"You are mistaken, as I hail from Arkansas."

"Well—I do not wish to be rude, sir, but I might as well come out and tell you to your face that I don't believe you."

"That is your prerogative—as, I'd obviously been under the false impression, my right to enjoy a tea alone with a lady was mine."

Pluck, refusing to surrender the throttle his stare had seized on his foe, reached for his teacup in front of him—failing to find it there, and unwilling to look down, his fingers having floundered upon the table for a few seconds, he calmly rested his palms on the linen.

"The fact is, that you are a Yukonese native who is now, for reasons, reasons of your own but reasons which we shall nevertheless soon uncover for ourselves, assuming the role of an Arkansian."

"'Arkansawyer'."

"Whatever. I vow to tear off your garment of lies and expose the small-phallused person beneath to the appreciative gaze of our fellow guests."

"He clearly has a southern American accent," the lady, much to Pluck's annoyance, put in. "Even I can tell that."

"Are you aware, madame, that the penalty for abetting a spy is death?"

"Are you accusing me of espionage, sir?" asked the gentleman, fists describing wonky circles upon the tablecloth.

Pluck rose, with passion, from his seat and spat: "I accuse you of far worse than that, monsieur! I accuse you of neglecting your wife's most elementary erotic needs, and of pandering her to the highest bidder!"

The gentleman jumped up as well. "I am not married, monsieur!"

Pluck clapped together his hands, the resulting burst drawing the attention of the waiter, in triumph at the vindication of his charge. "Do you not see, madame? He has not even the decency to admit your existence!"

"I am not his wife, monsieur."

"No?"

"No. I am not married."

Pluck stared at her dubiously. "Forgive me, madame, but I hardly think you recapture the moral high ground by admitting that the two of you indulge your licentiousness out of wedlock."

“We never met before this afternoon, you idiot!” the man seethed. “The lady was enjoying her tea, and I merely asked to sit down and join her in conversation.”

“Is this so, madame?”

“It’s so, monsieur.”

Pluck eyed the man with a passionate, almost lecherous, hatred, then slowly lowered himself to his seat. The man did likewise. Pluck blindly, once again, waved his hands before him in a failing endeavour to locate his tea, then folded one upon the other. In a calmer tone, he resumed: “...I must ask myself why two otherwise ordinary-looking persons might wish to cloak their true identities from well-meaning strangers they encounter in a winter resort.”

“No one is cloaking anything, monsieur,” spoke the lady. She looked to the gentleman. “It is quite true that I never met Mister Stoupes before today.”

““Mister Stoupes”?!” Pluck enunciated the name with some repugnance.

“I think we might all pay each other the compliment of recomposing and introducing ourselves like civilised human beings.” She patted Pluck’s hand, visibly unsettling him. “I’ll go first. My name is Enid Trojczakowski. As I’ve said, my family is Polish, although I was born and live in England. I am a schoolmistress. Unmarried, and unattached.”

Pluck shook his head. “Preposterous,” he muttered.

“Nonetheless, true. I’m a spinster, if you want to use the word that was made for it.”

Pluck scoffed. “At your age, madame? I hardly think the word yet applies.”

“Then I can see that you are either too gentlemanly to allude to a lady’s middle-agedness, or too incompetent to gauge one’s age.”

“The former, obviously,” he sniffed.

“And this gentleman,” Miss Trojczakowski went on, “whom you were so quick to take up as an enemy, is, as you’ve heard, Mister Stoupes—I’m sorry, you didn’t tell me your Christian name.”

“Glen,” he said with a smile.

“Mister Glen Stoupes, then, from Arkansas,” she finished.

Pluck’s eyelashes folded down. He played with the end of his unopened napkin on the table—not the most interesting of games, it has to be said. “You two have certainly learnt your stories with a singular dedication,” he mumbled. He pushed back his chair and slowly stood up. “Excuse me—I have some important people to see.” He would not look at them. “Thank you for your conversation.”

“Not at all,” sighed Mister Stoupes.

“Fuck you,” spat back Pluck, and he was gone.

## Chapter Three

The horrendously galling noise had wholly thwarted Pluck's concentration—he had been studying; cerebrally, aesthetically, you understand, as his bodily ardour had dissipated via manual manipulation, as previously indicated, that afternoon; he had been studying the photographs of those anonymous, liberally endowed beauties of the beach, the parlour, the garden, the fairy glade—and, his attention thus burst, he donned eveningwear and descended the stairs once again into the embracing bosom of his fellow humanity. There was a ballroom in the hotel, and it was there that most of the guests had now assembled. Rolling his eyes, Pluck entered, wincing blatantly at the strains of a, to Pluck's ears, cloying Schubertian lied interpreted with a dearth of imagination by Frau Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, opera diva of local renown and, to Pluck's delight, no little girth.

Pluck found a seat at one of the large round tables and sat down. His appreciation was focused so narrowly on the expansiveness of the singer, however, that he'd neglected to first ascertain the vacancy or lack thereof of said chair, and found himself sat astride the unappreciative thighs of Monsieur Marcel Lapin-Défunt, a French diplomat who was wont to reserve his lap for the dandling of his mistresses.

"Oof!" (So spake Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.)

"Pardon me! But whatever are you doing beneath my bottom, monsieur?!" demanded Pluck in a tone of high offence.

"Get off me, you moron!"

"Pardon me, but would you be so kind as to remove your legs from underneath the seat of my trousers before I summon the porter?!"

Having exhausted diplomacy, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt threw Pluck bodily off him. The singing stopped, and the guests looked as one at the little man with the undersized head sprawling face-down on the carpet. His honour impermissibly tainted, Pluck grabbed hold of a chair to support his attempt to stand and confront his antagonist, but in so doing, pulled out the chair from underneath the slight but exquisite derrière of Madame Lapin-Défunt, a cervine beauty who collapsed with Parisian elegance onto the carpet, her wineglass fragmenting across the floor. Pluck returned to the floor, flailing for a handhold, grasping the coattail of Coronel Feosalma, late of the Spanish military, noble in mindset, dignified in deportment and ancient of age, now reduced to a wriggling heap on the carpet.

"I reached out to you for assistance, monsieur, and you failed to help me rise!" shouted Pluck to the coronel. "You have insulted me needlessly!"

"Get away from me before I kill you," the coronel uttered, fumbling to assume a kneeling position and glowering at the interloper.

"I will have you arrested!" cried Pluck from the floor. "The police, manager! Summon the police and have this poltroon removed!"

At that, the coronel seized Pluck in a fearsome lock; the two tumbled about the floor, knocking into patrons' chairs and tripping a passing waiter, the fresh fish from whose sterling silver-plated tray sluiced onto the coiled hair of a duchess.

"What goes on there?!" demanded the redoubtable dame from the stage (i.e., Frau Hühnerbeinstein). "What are you two doing?!"

Pluck sprang up at once. “Nothing, your grace, your majestical paragon of grace in melody and physical build! I pray you accept my limitless pardons on behalf of this ridiculous Italian gentleman who interrupted your performance!”

“I am Spanish, you brainless scum!” hissed the coronel, who drew back his arthritic fist in preparation for delivering a blow. Pluck seized a small dessert knife from the nearest table and announced, “For you, madame, I shall disembowel the stinking entrails of this swine and hurl them at you like flowers to a diva!”

“That will not be necessary, young man! I am perfectly content for my auditors’ viscera to remain within their fleshy confines. Please calm yourself down so that I might resume my song.”

Pluck glared at the coronel; bloodlust bloated his eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, ever, ever so slowly, the hand with the dessert knife went down. He threw the knife behind him; it narrowly missed several patrons and clanked against a wall. That hand, that same hand, so recently prepared to annihilate his enemy, now extended towards him, while Pluck magnanimously proposed: “Friends?”

Growling, looking about him as others willed him to accept, caving, then, entirely to the pressure of his peers against his better judgement, the coronel took Pluck’s hand, recoiling only a little at its flaccidity.

“Best friends?” Pluck upped the ante.

“I shall not kill you today,” promised the coronel.

“But are we best friends?” Pluck persisted.

“No,” answered the coronel, with admirable forthrightness.

“But do you want to dine with me sometime, and go for walks, and, and, and, and come to my room and chat about art and nature and politics?”

“No.” The coronel found his chair, set it back on its legs, and sat down. Pluck followed him.

“But shall we tour the continent together, and you could show me the wonders of Italy and introduce me to your mummy and daddy, and we could hang out in gentlemen’s clubs and laugh over titbits in the papers and play cards, you’d have to teach me first, and read books to each another and—”

“Just, just, shut up, will you?” pleaded the exasperated coronel.

Pluck stood unbendingly beside him; he would not stop. “But we’re best friends! We’re best friends now! Best friends do things together, they go places together, they unburden themselves of their secrets and—”

The coronel bent his neck and covered his face with his palms. “Just go away from me. I beg you. I beg you.”

“Say you’ll go for a walk with me tomorrow! Say it! Say it!”

“Please,” begged the diva from the stage, “I would like to finish my song now.”

Pluck whirled to face her: “A thousand pardons, madame! I must apologise on behalf of my friend, who is going on a refreshing walk with me early tomorrow morning! Isn’t that right, ol’ pal o’ mine?”

“Absolutely not!”

A single tear—a single, lonely tear, lacking as it did even the company of a twin on the other side of Pluck’s pale face—trickled down his cheek. “I don’t want to be your friend anymore!” he screamed, and, for emphasis, turned his back to the coronel, who had

learnt such a mastery of cloaking his feelings in the course of his service that anyone, to look at him, would think that he did not care.

“The poor man!” whispered someone (apropos of Pluck, not the coronel).

“Give him a chance!” said another.

“I hate to see friends quarrel,” opined a third.

“Go on the walk!” demanded a gentleman across the room, openly, to the coronel.

“Yes!” seconded another, who stood. “Go on the walk!”

The cry for clemency, for sympathy, for humanity, rolled contagiously around the ballroom, until by the end, almost all of the patrons who had not been insulted by Pluck since his arrival the day before had taken up the call:

“Go on the walk!” “Give him a chance!” “Stay friends!” “Friends are a precious thing!” etc.

The coronel, gritting his teeth and looking about him, recognised a fight he could not win. “All right,” he mumbled.

“What was that? Speak up, you stupid old fool, we can’t hear you!” laughed Pluck, enormously happy.

“I said ‘all right’.”

“What’s that, you meek old idiot? I can’t hear!” Pluck laughed.

“I said ‘all right’!”

“He said he would!” remarked someone.

“He did!”

“He’ll do it!”

The ballroom belched forth a ringing round of applause. Pluck turned to bask therein, crying openly now.

“I love you all!” he shouted, higher-pitched than ever. “You guys! Let me tell you something: you’re just the best bunch of ladies and gents that has ever been assembled, anytime and anywhere, from the birth of the universe till the day it dies, that I promise you!”

The coronel, arms crossed rigidly across his pigeon chest, mumbled something in sailor’s Spanish.

“That’s the spirit!” Pluck slapped him heartily on the back, knocking the coronel forward, chin cracking onto the table, gut slammed by its edge. “By the way, friend, what’s your name?”

The coronel gasped, holding his stomach.

“What’s that?” To the room: “He can’t remember his name!”

All laughed.

“Eyague,” whispered the coronel.

“His name is ‘Eye-Goo’!” Pluck announced, to general applause.

Frau Hühnerbeinstein, too, clapped. “Very well. I love a happy ending as much as anyone—it restores a satisfying balance after an spell of dramatic discord, reaffirms the hegemony of order over chaos, certifies the centrality of man in the cosmic narrative, and justifies the presumption of meaning underpinning our universe—but now, please, monsieur, be seated, that the concert may resume. I dedicate this next song to the both of you—and to the eternal sacrament of perfect friendship.”

Pluck wiped his eyes and, as the diva launched herself into another song, sat down in the lap of Monsieur Lapin-Défunt. The latter threw off the former and grabbed his stick,

with which he moved to strike Pluck, only to find his arm restrained by the moderating influence of Madame Lapin-Défunt (given name Petunia). From the floor, Pluck screamed: “Eye-Goo! Eye-Goo! Help me! This savage is trying to kill me!”

The coronel remaining in his seat, and the music halted once again, Herr Voot, the hotel manager, desisting from the violin with which he had been accompanying the diva, ordered the waiter to find the unfortunate fellow an empty seat. With an efficient briskness for which that *métier* is renowned, the waiter had Pluck, in seconds, wedged between a dainty Scottish horsebreeder and the spoilt adolescent son of an Iberian burgher. From that constricted vantage, one knee over the other, shoulders scrunched forward till they practically fused, Pluck watched, and, a little, listened to, Frau Hühnerbeinstein. It would not be incorrect to report that he was salivating. As the ennobling tones soared forth from her golden larynx, Frau Hühnerbeinstein’s eyes, surveying the room, alighted, sparrow-like, on the panting Pluck. Her eyes then, naturally, fluttered away in disgust, but not before Pluck had allowed a serviette to sail, for propriety’s sake, down upon his protruding lap. It was delightful here, Pluck ruminated, nestled amongst his many friends, marinating in the warmth of the fireplace that was a head taller than he, the constellation of chandeliers scintillating with trickling rivulets of light reflected from the hearth, then irradiating it back like a many-legged curtain of gold depending softly upon the people. Then the song finished, and everyone clapped, and Pluck, aroused with emotion, threw, he knew not why, his empty wineglass across the room at Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

The latter rose at once to assault him, shouting something insensible about the demands of honour and the necessity of Pluck’s violent death, but his wife and an assortment of tactful members of the audience calmed him down.

The performance finished, more drinks were served, and Pluck took the opportunity to wander about the ballroom. He searched for his friend Eyague, but he had disappeared. “He must be searching for me,” thought Pluck, “and we are, funnily enough, missing each other!” He passed by that cad Stoupes, who was in a seat next to Enid. Why she would tolerate that ridiculous guttersnipe was more than he, even he, with all his powers of fathoming, could fathom. He stopped for a moment and, peering through the vase-shaped space between two gossiping gentlemen, watched them: Stoupes, perspiring offensively down the back of his neck, smirking his smarmy smirk, leaning in towards Enid, easily twice his age, turning away from him her thin, veined, ropey neck. He placed a hand on one of her bare, flabby arms, and she pulled it away. She stood up; Pluck noticed that her breast, evidently unsupported beneath her hanging, toga-like ballgown, sagged irrecoverably. Such a sight spiked Pluck’s sensitive soul, so that for a few seconds he reflected on his own mortality, before a large lady in a pea green dress passed by him and spring blossomed back into his consciousness, life reminded him of its abiding existence, and an infinitude of possibilities stretched out before him like a prairieful of deer stretched out before a cougar.

He swerved through the guests to Herr Voot’s table and crouched down next to a half-slumbering man in a wig who sat to the manager’s left.

“Excuse me, monsieur, but I have important news.”

The man in the wig turned his head. He had an illness, of some sort, Pluck decided, though he couldn’t diagnose it precisely and, in truth, did not care. The man raised his watery, long-suffering eyes to Pluck’s charcoal ones.

“Nothing is important, anymore,” the man opined in muted tones, and with that, lowered his head and closed his eyes once more.

“Buck up, friend, won’t you?” urged Pluck. “This blessed world of ours is simply chock-full of unpredictable wonders round each and every corner! Do you hear me? Chock-full!”

“Leave me be.” And the gentleman was so still that Pluck nearly thought he had died.

“Do you have a grown daughter, sir? Or perhaps a sister? Or friend far away, in such jeopardy that her only saviour in time of lament would be yourself?”

The man said nothing.

“The reason I ask,” Pluck continued, “is because you have a telegram in the lobby of a most urgent nature.”

“Have them bring it here.”

“In normal, civilised circumstances, monsieur, that is exactly what I would have them do, but, I am afraid to inform monsieur, there has been a mix-up of the most scandalous nature—”

“I would just as soon not be disturbed. My sole extant female relative is my sister-in-law—and she can go hang.” This outburst was followed by a snore.

Not to be put off, Pluck shuffled over to the gentleman in the chair to the manager’s right. This man had the build of a champion sportsman and a thick set of whiskers of equally impressive proportions. “Excuse me, monsieur.”

The man was just finishing a joke he was sharing with Voot: “—a bell on her bottom! A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! D’ya get it?”

The manager laughed with a practised chuckle of such diplomacy that one could never hope to discern whether it was indicative of legitimate mirth, a decorous counterfeit thereof crafted to conceal an aloof dearth of amusement, or a semblance of counterfeit mirth designed to cloak the earnest mirth hiding beneath it which would appear untoward to onlookers of a certain bent. Meanwhile, Pluck had crouched down next to the brawny gent and now said to him:

“Excuse me, monsieur, but I have important news.”

The man’s beard turned towards him. “Yes? What is the news, then, I pray you, little man?”

“Sir, you have a telegram in the lobby of a most urgent nature.”

“I do? Well have them bring it in, then. What’s the problem?”

“In normal, civilised circumstances, monsieur, that is exactly what I would have them do, but, I am afraid to inform monsieur, there has been a mix-up of the most scandalous nature—”

“What kind of a mix-up? What are you blathering about, sir?”

“Monsieur—” He whispered, now. “You must pardon the indelicacy of my having to relate this, monsieur, but I found myself in the lobby, myself, just a moment ago, monsieur, and, monsieur, try as I did to interfere, monsieur, I could not prevent it. Monsieur.”

“Prevent what?”

“I simply could not prevent it.”

“Prevent what, for heaven’s sake?!”

“The porter Mifkin from reading it aloud to the guests and colleagues about him.”

“He what?!”

“I must say that he read it with a singular relish, appending humorous observations here and there, with a brazen disregard for the intimate nature of the contents of the note, I might add, monsieur.”

The reader might well imagine the violent stupefaction with which the wronged gentleman received this news. I know I can.

“‘Intimate nature’?!” The man leapt to his feet, as they say, with all the haste we would expect from one so offended.

“I assure you, monsieur, that *I*, following such ignominious revelations, will still endeavour to view your lordship with every respect which is your due; but, the world being what it is, and the contagion of scandal being what *it* is, I need hardly tell you that most of your other acquaintances will not.”

“Thank you, monsieur!” The man’s eyes flashed with outrage and a thirst for vengeance of a most honourable order. “I will not forget this courtesy.”

Pluck bowed—“At your service, monsieur”—and the gentleman stomped off. Pluck sat down in the vacant chair and pulled Herr Voot by his shoulder to attend to him. “Monsieur manager, I must discuss with you a most delicate matter.”

“Is the matter in question your feud with the French gentleman, or your love affair with the Spanish gentleman, monsieur?” retorted Voot.

“Neither, monsieur, though I thank you for remembering me. I am afraid the matter concerns a most disreputable deed perpetrated by one of your patrons upon another.”

The manager crossed his arms and his legs and looked Pluck over. Pluck returned the compliment. Looked at one way, Herr Voot had a most uninteresting face, in that it contained two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and all the rest of which most any other specimen of the species might equally boast. In that respect, there was nothing onto which the inquisitive gaze of a born connoisseur of the endless permutations of humanity like Pluck might latch. Viewed another way, however, the face in question could be said to harbour a few tantalising peculiarities: his eyebrows were straight and black and thin, and looked drawn-on, and mirrored the two strokes of his moustache exactly; his eyes disclosed the almost animal, pre-linguistic sadness of a puppy, loose in the rain outside the shack wherein its owner, unbeknownst to and yet, in some way, divined by the creature, has died; one eye, what’s more, was afforded a sheen from a large, foggy monocle uncomfortably clasped between eyebrow and cheek; his nose, originating at the source between his eyes like an average nose, distinguished itself by tapering in its southward progression to a tip against which, it appeared, one might sharpen one’s penknife; and finally, his lipless dash of a chin betrayed no more width than did his eyebrows. In summary, looking back over this paragraph, I must revert to my initial impression: it was a face not worth describing.

“Indeed?” rejoined Voot.

“Indeed,” affirmed Pluck. “Do you wish to hear it, or shall we remain seated here silently observing each other’s faces?”

“By all means, monsieur,” sighed the manager, now looking to his drink, now drinking it. “I pride myself on my fleet-footedness in undoing such disreputable deeds as the one to which you refer.”

“Then I shall continue,” continued Pluck, appeased. “I regret to inform you that a Mister Glen Stoupes of Canada insulted a lady in the tearoom this afternoon—”



“Indeed?”

“Indeed, then threatened to inflict bodily harm on myself—”

“Your name, sir?”

“Mister Pluck—”

“Mister Pluck.”

“—when I sought to intervene.”

“Might you provide me with some details of the insult, monsieur?”

“With every pleasure, monsieur: it consisted, I am afraid, in an open attack on the lady’s chastity, Herr Manager.”

“I see.”

“He implied,” Pluck continued, far beyond the bounds of necessity, “that the gentlemen who had enjoyed the fragrant delights of her vagina were manifold.”

Voot closed his eyes and nodded with encouraging resolution. “It would sound most serious, monsieur, and I thank you for, in this instance, shrugging off tact and reporting it to me in this gratuitous manner instead.”

Pluck bowed with all the forcefulness honour demanded, while still seated, but, given the close proximity of the interlocutors, his pasty forehead struck and dislodged the manager’s monocle so that it lacerated several sections of skin around the eye. Voot emitted a short exclamation of more air than content, followed by a most unmanful shriek, which understandably drew the attention of the guests in the vicinity. Humans being a naturally curious lot, they turned in the direction of the yelp in order to ascertain the motivation for its utterance; you or I would do the same.

Herr Voot’s poor chair tumbled to the floor while its recent occupant jumped up and danced about, hands to his eye, blood spurting in several directions. Pluck, gentle creature that he was, could not stand the sight of blood, any more than he could any other bodily fluid, very much including his own, and so shielded his (Pluck’s) eye and turned away. A waiter or two—Pluck didn’t note the number—snapped open napkins and rushed to their manager’s aid.

“You disgusting slob,” Pluck maligned Herr Voot, loudly, over his shoulder. “If you had the slightest sense of shame, you would resign your position at once and venture out to drown yourself in the nearest pond.”

Pluck’s exhortation went largely unheard by those around them, preoccupied as they were with the blood-geysering supervisor of the establishment. They sat Voot down, stemmed the gushing-away of his vital life-force and whispered sweet, soothing words in his ear, like an amorous lover pledging a gaudy wedding, with no intent to make good, for the immediate prospect of violating his sweetheart’s armoured maidenhood. Pluck, for his part, was surpassingly irritated by the lack of attention the manager was devoting to the improprieties with which Pluck had so lately acquainted him. “Pardon, pardon, monsieur, monsieur, madame,” Pluck muttered, pushing his way through the throng to Herr Voot. “Herr Manager, I really must insist that you see to my complaint at once! If you could just see to divesting yourself of this rather shameful, solipsistic fixation on your eye, we might get to the bottom of this whole affair!”

A waiter attending to the manager turned round to glare at Pluck. “Shall I eject him from the premises, sir?” he asked Voot. “I would dearly love to do so.”

“Just you try, boy, and I will complain to the manager forthwith!” Pluck shrieked, his lone extended finger from his quavering fist pointing, for some reason, to the ceiling.

Herr Voot waved his attendants aside and, under his own power, rose, shakily, from his seat. He covered his right eye with a scarlet-stained serviette, and fixed his remaining ocular apparatus on Pluck. "Lead the way, then, monsieur. I am anxious to discover the veracity of your report of a crisis the like of which has never engulfed the hotel in all my years of service."

Pluck, never too conversant with sarcasm, felt himself vindicated. With a flourish of reasserted superiority, he shoved aside the waiters, took the manager's hand (small, thin, bony, cold) in his, patted it affectionately, and drew him along as he trotted over to the table where Stoupes and Enid had been sitting. They were gone.

"Fled!" Pluck screamed. "Or, should I say, 'kidnapped'!"

His outburst excited, once again, the attention of everyone in the room, including Mister Stoupes and Miss Trojczakowski, who were standing a few feet away by the wall under a large, lush oil painting depicting the Lord of Coucy uncoupling Owain from his testicles at Fraubrunnen. Their presence (Stoupes and Enid's, not the testicles') was not lost on our Pluck, who wasted no time in dragging the manager over to where they stood. Pluck was surprised to see that Stoupes did not cut and run for it at their approach, but there it was: too stupid to save his own skin, when the horsemen of justice bore down.

"This, Herr Manager, is the blackguard of whom I have reported." Lest there should be any ambiguity, Pluck supplemented his accusation with a finger pointed straight into Stoupes' nose. Stoupes, with inexplicable calmness, batted Pluck's finger away.

"Do you see?!" Pluck fairly danced about over the affront to his honour. "The brute strikes me! The brute seeks to wound me!"

"What's this all about, if you please, manager?" inquired Enid, wholly, to Pluck's mind, without purpose.

"I think it would be best if the four of us went to my office to discuss Mister Pluck's accusations," suggested Herr Voot.

"What do you mean, 'four'?" queried Pluck in outrage.

"He means the four of us," repeated Stoupes.

Pluck looked at him as if he were looking at an idiot.

"You, Mister Stoupes, the manager and myself," Enid explained.

Refusing to take even her word for it, Pluck quickly counted off each of them on his fingers, then, grudgingly, nodded in acquiescence. To Voot: "You may proceed."

The happy group strolled through the ballroom, then out to the lobby, past Mifkin, flattened on the floor, crying up protests of innocence to the muscular, fist-clenched gentleman towering over him, to the right, a sorry scene to which Voot, napkin to eye, was thus oblivious, and into the manager's office.

"Please sit down," he invited, and took a seat. Mister Stoupes sat in an armchair, and Miss Trojczakowski on a settee, while Pluck remained standing, looking about the room, admiring this and that.

"Enchanting baubles you've got here, *mon ami*," Pluck appraised. "Wherever did you find them?"

"Could we get to the business at hand?" asked Stoupes.

Pluck slowly turned on him a contemptuous eye. "The words of a half-brained philistine, or, put more simply, a damned heathen." Then, to the manager: "Note that down, if you please."

"I am not recording our conversation," Herr Voot informed him.

Pluck turned to him in surprise. "Then who is? Surely not one of those witless savages you've got for employees. Perhaps you wish us to call that idiot child from the tearoom? Perhaps he's learning to write—in kindergarten!" He chuckled, and turned to Enid for support. She gave him a polite smirk, in thrall to the dictates of etiquette in this as in all things, then turned back to the manager.

Herr Voot addressed Stoupes: "This gentleman contends that you insulted this lady's innocence."

While Stoupes scoffed, Pluck stole a glimpse at Enid's lolling breast, and was forced to stifle, once more, an intimation of his own inevitable death. He shuddered, and resumed listening.

"The man's an idiot," Stoupes explained. "Pay no attention to him."

"I disagree, vehemently!" shouted Pluck, so loudly, and at so high a pitch, in that little room, that the other three occupants had to cover their ears; in Voot's case, necessitating the relinquishment of his napkin and its subsequent drop from his eye, revealing the ring of crimson gashes in its full horror. "Wait!" continued Pluck, in a more moderate tone, turning to Stoupes—"Which man are you calling an idiot?"

"You, of course," Stoupes elucidated.

"Then I disagree!" Pluck shouted once again. "Vehemently!"

Enid, one hand still over an ear, rose from the sofa, walked over to the manager, who was trembling like a lissom sapling in a gale, and stroked his hair. "Are you well, sir?"

Herr Voot rushed to cover his wound with the napkin, then, with his remaining eye, peered up at her in gratitude. "It's my nerves, you see, madame. They're as fragile as spiders' legs between the thumb and forefinger of a cruel schoolboy at the best of times. May I appeal to your decency to attest, with due decorum, to the events in question in the tearoom?"

"Certainly." She sat on his desk and stroked his hand, whilst indicating each of the men across from her in turn. "Mister Stoupes, a harmless gentleman whom I had never met, endeavoured to keep me company this afternoon. We drank tea and spoke of art and of world events."

"Was your—forgive me, madame, for the indelicacy, but a charge has been made..."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

"Was your—chastity—ever called into question by Mister Stoupes?"

"Certainly not. Why ever should you think such a thing?"

Voot looked to Pluck. Pluck looked to his shoes—not that there was anything so very intriguing to be found there.

Of Stoupes, the manager asked: "And sir, did you threaten to inflict bodily harm on Mister Pluck?"

"No, though he spoke to me in very ungentlemanly language, and as much as accused me of being a spy, so I feel I would have had every right to have."

"That's exactly what a spy would say," muttered Pluck.

"What was that, monsieur?" inquired Voot.

"Nothing." Pluck's eyes squeezed shut and he turned to the wall. He swallowed down his tears, and soon a high whine escaped from him. He stamped his feet, and began slapping his chest. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!" he spluttered. Now he made fists, and started punching his breast, and his stomach, and his thighs. "I hate you! I hate you!" he blubbered, apparently to himself.

The manager rose. "Monsieur..."

Stoupes looked on, with no idea what to say.

Enid went over to Pluck, reached out a hand, caressed his small, doll-like face, and brushed the tears from his eyes with her finger. "It's all right, Mister Pluck. It's all right."

"Call me 'Curtis'," Pluck whimpered.

"It's all right, Curtis. 'Curtis' is a dignified name, by the way."

"Yes, it is," put in Voot.

"I've always liked it. Isn't it a dignified name, Mister Stoupes?" She looked behind her.

"Yes...yes, very dignified," Stoupes allowed.

Pluck took the hem of Enid's dress in his hand, raised it to his nose and sneezed.

"It's not my name," he admitted. "But I've always liked it."

"That's all right," she soothed, taking the hem away and dropping it back to the ground.

"I *wish* it were my name," Pluck went on.

"I know you do. I know you do."

"Perhaps," Herr Voot suggested, "when you return to your native land, you might officially change your name—by deed poll."

"Don't be an ass," Pluck sniffled, gazing into Enid's sympathetic eyes but addressing, of course, the manager. "It's just a fancy I took into my head. You needn't take everything so literally. You'll only cause others to view you as a moron."

Herr Voot cleared his throat, and considered whether to retaliate. Enid turned to him, however, and pleaded silently that he should not, and he obliged her.

To the room, Enid declared: "Well now, now that we're all friends—"

"Friends!" Pluck beamed. "Let's go and celebrate!" He looked straight at Stoupes.

Stoupes bit his lower lip, and looked at Enid. "I really must be getting to bed," he said.

"Nonsense!" laughed Pluck, and shot out a hand and tickled Stoupes' ear. Stoupes instinctively jumped to the side and lightly knocked away Pluck's arm.

"Ow! He hit me!" Pluck screamed.

"Glen!" Enid remonstrated.

"I'm sorry! I thought he was going to strike me! I just reacted!"

Pluck rolled up the sleeves of his dinner jacket and shirt and sucked on the skin of his forearm. "Murder! Murder!" he hissed between sucks. "You tried to kill me! And I thought you were my friend!"

"Hush, please!" beseeched Herr Voot.

Poor Larry rushed in. "Sir?"

"Get out!" screamed Pluck, ear-piercingly. "You're too young, too stupid to understand grownups' problems!"

The bellhop retreated out of the room and threw shut the door.

Enid extended a hand to Pluck. "Let me see your wound," she said gently.

Pluck wouldn't look at her. "No!"

"Come now, Mister Pluck."

"'Curtis'!"

"Come now, Curtis."

Reluctantly, he let her have his arm.

"It's perfectly fine."

"It could get infected, and I could die!"

"There's nothing there, nothing to get infected—"

"I could die!"

"Shush, shush..."

"This is intolerable," Stoupes muttered.

"You're just jealous!" Pluck threw at him over his shoulder, and stuck out his tongue.

"I think you should go to bed, now," Enid suggested softly.

"Yeah, go to bed!" Pluck glared at Stoupes.

"I was speaking to you," Enid told Pluck.

"Me? But, but, we're having the celebration! I thought we were having the celebration!"

"We will—"

"You, me, Herr Manager and Eye-Goo! While that cretin there's in bed!"

"We will have the celebration, but perhaps another day, when we've all calmed down."

"I think that's a sensible idea," added Herr Voot.

"Shut up, killjoy!" said Pluck.

"Come, let's get you to bed," soothed Enid, and began leading him out of the room.

"Are you tucking me in?" Pluck panted, puppyishly.

"If you like."

"Will we have sex?"

"That line of conversation hardly befits a gentleman, Curtis."

"Please? Please? I really want to have sex with you!"

"Stop it at once, or I shall tell your mother."

"Shall I thrash him?" Stoupes asked her.

"Leave Herr Voot alone," Pluck commanded. "He's done nothing to warrant any violence. He's only got one good eye, you know, which makes him about as adroit in a fight as your average mole."

"I was speaking to Miss Trojezakowski," Stoupes explained, "and referring to you."

"I'll be all right," Enid promised. "Curtis here is far too gallant to mean what he says."

"That's right," Pluck was quick to agree. "Just like Enid says—I never mean what I say. Except now. Just then, when I said that. And all the other times I'm not joking, and when I'm meaning what I'm saying, which is never, because, just like Enid says—I am a gentleman."

And they were out of the room. Stoupes and the manager stood, and watched them walk off.

"Intolerable," Stoupes repeated.

"If you don't warn him, Mister Stoupes, then I suppose I will have to," mused Herr Voot.

"Warn him of what?"

"That if he should persist in acting in such an aggressively irritating way, he will surely end his holiday with a good dozen enemies, any one of whom would be content to slit his throat."

## Chapter Four

From the moonless night outside, as empty or teeming as a theatre before the play, came a howling. A wolf? A madman, mimicking a wolf? A wolf, mimicking a madman? Some stupid dog who desperately wanted to be taken for a wolf, finding its own tame life unspectacular enough that it would give anything to be, even for a moment, in the pathetic chimera of its fantasy, somebody else?

Coronel Feosalma thought none of these things, asleep under two counterpanes and a sheet as he was, but it might have inseminated, symbolically, whatever dream he was having. Then again, it might not. We will never know, Reader, you and I; and I don't know about you, but, speaking solely for myself, I consider my life not one whit poorer for it.

The door to the coronel's room creaked open. If that noble Spanish personage had been awake, he would have heard eager footsteps, pieces of furniture being stumbled into, mild oaths being vented from the injuries sustained from said stumbling, and a mumbled resolution to proceed with the task in hand.

But the eye, the eye of a soldier never fully closes. Not literally—of course they do. What I mean is, they have been trained, you see, to maintain alertness even when the siren song of sleep entices their lids to lower. So it was with the coronel: he sensed, half-awake—and even when awake, he could at best call upon perhaps a fifth of the senses of which he might have boasted when a young, virile and non-dotardish man, strutting about the motley streets of Saville, led by his near-permanent erection, like a dowsing rod to water, to the filthier variety of *puta*; plus, now his sensuous capacity must have been reduced by, I'd say, another eighth, given that the heavy black blanket of air suffused by the heat of his fireplace weighed upon his face and spun his senses awry, so, um, you do the maths—but he sensed the tread of an interloper, the counterpane pulled back, the insertion of a bodily presence into his bed, and quick breaths upon his forehead.

"Eye-Goo! Wake up! It's me!"

The coronel grabbed the knife he was in the habit of keeping beneath his pillow and thrust it to just under Pluck's nose.

"I just wanted to remind you of our walk tomorrow! Or—goodness gracious—should I rather say, 'today'!"

"Get out of my bed, you rat, or I'll run you through!"

"I'm cold!"

"Get out this instant!"

The coronel could not see his friend—nor did he want to—but the hurt in Pluck's voice made itself felt through the dark.

"Why are you being so mean to me?"

"A man must be left to his peace in his own bed!"

"But this isn't your bed! This bed belongs to the hotel! And as you're a guest of the hotel, and I'm a guest of the hotel, well, then, don't you see? I have just as much right to be in this bed as you. So, ha!"

"Cretin!"

"And besides—a married man might very well share his bed with his wife. So that so-called truth you attempted to observe falls rather flat on its face, wouldn't you say?"

"I am not a married man! And you are not my wife!"

"But why haven't you married, Eye-Goo? That's what you haven't told me."

There was silence, whilst the coronel considered the likelihood of his persuading the authorities that a homicide was justifiable. A vision of Pluck's corpse, in ribbons, played about his imagination, when it was broken by Pluck's persisting:

"Did you never fall in love?"

"...If you must know, you ape, I did once love a woman."

"And did she love you?"

"Naturally. Her name...was Irina."

"Beautiful name."

"Yes."

"What was it again?"

"'Irina'."

"Oh. I thought you'd said something else. Beg your pardon. 'Irina' isn't that pretty, but I suppose it's all right."

"Yes."

"It's certainly better than some others I could name."

"Yes."

"Like 'Grogda'."

"Yes."

"Or 'Ermengarde'."

"Yes."

"Or—"

"I met her in Callao, on the eve of war. She and all the young had come to the port to welcome us. She smiled at me. I returned the smile. She had flowers in her hair, she pulled one out, and wove it through the buttonhole of my tunic. I was on duty—I was on my way to the first battle I would ever fight—and I thought—in fact, I had a premonition—that I would not return alive, so never see her, or talk with her, or share a thing with her—save that flower and that smile—but, I thought, at least I would have that, that perfectly pure memory, that image embalmed beneath my forehead on which I could meditate, as I lay one day on a field awaiting death, or shipped off to other massacres in other lands, or legless and hushed in a hospital, or what have you. At least I would have that. But I survived the battle, to my surprise, and felt hardened, and finally a man—back when to feel yourself a man was the greatest virtue a youth could pursue, and the way to become a man was to steal the youth from another by the point of your bayonet—and when our platoon returned to town, and we were drinking ourselves into a stupor at the cantina, lo and behold—"

"You're hogging the covers!" Pluck cut him off. He began thrashing about, bouncing the coronel about on the bed in a most undignified manner, while he fought a losing battle with the counterpanes; the coronel slapped at him, very womanishly, it must be said, then, through no intention of Pluck's, the noble old gentleman became so tangled up in the covers that he could barely move his arms.

"You moronic oaf!"

"What's happened?!" Pluck flailed around under the covers, lost. "Eye-Goo! Where are you?! Why have you left me all alone?!"

"Release me at once!"

"I hear your voice! Where are you? I hear your voice!"

"Release me so I might kill you!"

Pluck lashed out in all directions in an attempt to find his way out of the linen's labyrinth and help his friend, unwillingly smacking the coronel a few times in the process. "Hold on! I'm coming for you! I'll save you, my old friend! Never fear!"

When they were both exhausted from the struggle, they were bound together, back to back, tightly in the wrapping like hooks in a ball of yarn.

"I wish we had a knife," Pluck mused.

"I had one," answered the coronel, "but it's lost someplace in this mess."

"I wish we could get hold of it."

"So do I."

"We've got no choice, then, but to call for help," Pluck resolved. "Shall you do the honours, or shall I?"

"It would be of the utmost indignity to be seen in such a state."

"Well, if you hadn't hogged the covers to begin with, none of this would have happened, would it?"

"I'm saving my strength for when we are freed and I can reclaim my knife."

"But you won't need the knife once we are freed, you fool!" Pluck laughed.

The coronel chuckled as well, but for a somewhat different reason.

"Okay, here goes: *Help!*" Pluck's scream sounded like a frightened bird.

"Quiet, you imbecile! You'll wake the whole place!"

"That's the idea, you know."

"No! Let us wait until the cleaner comes in the morning. We can pay her to keep this disgrace to herself, so no one else might know."

"What do you mean, 'we'?! You got us into this mess, my friend—I hardly think it honourable of you to expect me to pay towards the bribery of a public official."

"The hotel cleaner is hardly a public official."

"She might be a spy, for all you know; in which case, *ipso facto*, she would be classed as such. You simply do not know, my dim friend. And that, above all, is what I hope you will take from our friendship: the lesson that you are an ignorant pig, entirely dependent upon my superior brain."

"A brain I would very much love to see—dashed upon the carpet."

"I will ignore that remark, out of respect for our friendship."

The first, reluctant strains of dawn peeked through the shutters.

"Here goes."

"Don't you dare."

"*Help!*"

"Shut up!"

"*Coronel Eye-Goo is stuck in bed with me!*"

"You moronic louse!"

"I'm not a mouse!"

"Idiot!"

"I'm a man!"

"Hardly!"

"*Help! Somebody, we're dying!*"



The door flew open and Monsieur Lapin-Défunt stood there in his robe. He held forward a lantern to view the scene.

The coronel cleared his throat. "Monsieur, I beg you to forgive this idiocy. This moron Pluck, with whom I know you to be all too well acquainted, has—"

"Eye-Goo loves a girl named Leena! Eye-Goo's in love! He's in love!"

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt inched into the room, stunned by the scene with which he found himself presented.

"He's disgusting!" Pluck went on. "Love! What a sissy!" Pluck decided that now was a good a time as any to instigate a learned philosophical disquisition on the subject, and so he asked of the French gentleman: "Monsieur! Answer a well-meaning inquiry, if you'd be so kind. Have you ever experienced love? Tell me, in all truthfulness. I pray you have not."

"What are you babbling about, you nitwit?!" returned Lapin-Défunt.

"Love emasculates, it impurifies, it renders one incapable of enjoying the nobler pursuits!" Pluck explained. "It is a wretched, disreputable, ungentlemanly and altogether demeaning business! Or so I've heard."

"Now that you've been awakened by this half-wit, monsieur," the coronel addressed Lapin-Défunt calmly, "I beg you to disentangle me from him. You can imagine the degradation I feel in being bound to such a creature."

"I can imagine very well. Wait a moment, please."

"We'll stay here!" Pluck promised jovially.

After a few minutes of Pluck expounding his theory of the vulgar repulsiveness of love, Lapin-Défunt returned, bearing a cleaver from the kitchen.

"*Help!*" Pluck squealed. "Monsieur Lapin-Défunt wants to murder the coronel!"

"Will you shut up?! I've come to free you!"

"The coronel and I do not require any assistance, monsieur; certainly not from a barbarian like yourself. Am I not right, coronel?"

"Please free me so that I may kill this clown, monsieur," begged the coronel.

"I entirely concur, coronel," said Pluck, with an appreciable tone of satisfaction.

"The French gentleman is nothing but a clown."

Lapin-Défunt bent close to Pluck and sawed away at the bedcoverings.

"I hope you understand, monsieur, that you will be reimbursing the hotel for the damage you're inflicting on the linen," Pluck told him.

Lapin-Défunt worked in silence for a time.

"*Help!*" Pluck blurted before Monsieur Lapin-Défunt's ear.

"Shut up!" that French gentleman hissed.

"*We're dying!*" Pluck screamed in a panic. "*We're all going to die!*"

The coronel and Lapin-Défunt swore merciless oaths at Pluck to quiet himself, but after a moment, two women appeared at the door: one, a rather stout lady in a man's robe, with silver hair no longer than her earlobes and an aggressively protuberating chin, and the other, a svelte, fragile young lady with willowy hair and infolding features on her face.

Pluck took one look at them and screamed: "Murderesses! Everybody's trying to kill me!"

"This is the gentleman who caused such a stir in the ballroom last night, I take it?" asked the elder of the two.

"The same," answered Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, who rose and bowed to both, though a little more deeply, it must be said, to the younger. "Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, at your service, *madame et mademoiselle*." To the elder: "I beg your pardon if this idiot woke you and your daughter from your slumber."

"This is not my daughter," the elder lady said, in such a way as to suggest she was tired of having to explain it. "I am Genevra Bergamaschi, and this is my good friend Rosella. Genevra Bergamaschi," she repeated, when no one made comment. "You might have heard of me. I am a painter." Pluck, the coronel and Lapin-Défunt looked at each other. "Never mind," she finally said. "Rosella often poses for me. Her face and figure present, I aver, a consummate analogy of our age."

"But she's so *slim*!" Pluck observed, with a certain distaste.

Rosella puckered her lips and said nothing.

"Italian?" asked Lapin-Défunt.

"*Si, signore*," answered Signora Bergamaschi.

"Oh! I just love Italy!" said Pluck from within his ball of yarn. "My best friend Eye-Goo's Italian! Say something to the nice ladies in Italian, Eye-Goo, won't you?"

"I have always found Italy the most ravishing of landscapes," Lapin-Défunt opined, fully conscious of his charm.

Ignoring him, Genevra squinted at the Pluck-coronel-cloth hybrid and stroked her prominent chin. "Fascinating image," she judged. "Unlike anything I've seen before. Gentlemen, would you mind remaining as you are while I run and get my paints? Rosa, just drape yourself upon that monstrosity somehow, will you?"

Rosa stepped up to do as she was bidden: she leant languorously, taking great effort to do so, along the curve of the knot. "Shall I disrobe?"

"Wait till I get back." The painter hurried out.

"Please get us out of here," begged the coronel.

"I think we should wait for the *signora* to return," opined Lapin-Défunt, eyeing Rosella. "She clearly has a certain composition in mind."

"Please! The pressure against my chest—I fear my ribs will snap!"

Rosella shot the coronel a contemptuous look. "Art is of greater consequence than your anatomy."

"She might make lithographs of us!" Pluck fantasised. "We might adorn the walls of people's homes—from the lowliest coalminer's hovel to the poshest Belgravian townhouse!"

"At least loosen it a little!" begged the coronel, hoarsely. "I think I might faint!"

"When she comes back, ask her if I should disrobe too," said Pluck.

Lapin-Défunt went round to the coronel's side, and pushed his hand and the cleaver in through the folds to try to free up space around him.

"Achoo!" Pluck sneezed, causing everything to shudder and the knife to prick against the coronel's chest.

"Ahh!" cried the coronel.

"Be careful!" screamed Pluck to Lapin-Défunt. "You'll kill him!"

"Bless you," said Rosella.

"Achoo!" Pluck sneezed.

"Ahh!" cried the coronel.

"Is that how you say 'Gesundheit' in Italian?" asked Pluck.

“Stop sneezing, you fool!” ordered Lapin-Défun.

“Bless you,” said Rosella.

“Achoo!”

“Ahh!”

“Damn you!”

“Bless you.”

“Wait!” cried Monsieur Lapin-Défun.

“What is it?”

“My hand!”

“What about your blasted hand?!” demanded Pluck.

“It’s stuck!” He grabbed his forearm with his free hand and tried to yank it out, but it was jammed amidst the sheets.

“Disrobe,” Pluck suggested.

“Shut up!”

Signora Bergamaschi reappeared, clutching easel, canvas and paints. Suddenly, Pluck sneezed (“Achoo!”) once more, the force of which displaced the spherical wad, causing it to roll forward, Pluck and the coronel within, Lapin-Défun and Rosella stuck centrifugally without, crushing Signora Bergamaschi and her supplies, squeezing out the door, down the corridor, and down the stately staircase into the lobby, where it rolled over Mister Mifkin, whose poor luck prescribed that it should be his turn on the night shift that night, despite his clumsy attempts to outrun it, and finally smashed into a display case, shattering the glass and some vases and such, unpeeling in the process so that the friends lay scattered about like dead men at Fraubrunnen.

“Who’s in the mood for a walk?” beamed Pluck.

## Chapter Five

Poor Larry the bellhop scanned the sky through the lobby window. "Storm's coming," he reckoned to an older porter, for want of anything original to say.

"Metaphorical, or meteorological?" queried the porter.

Poor Larry shrugged. "Couldn't say." And he went back to work.

After breakfast, when Pluck had tripped into a waiter, causing a plate of sizzling eggs to drop onto the hand of an old woman and a jug of orange juice onto the head of one Mr Drig, much to the amusement of his six children, even if the broken glass did leave an unsightly gash in that innocent gentleman's bald pate, Pluck came down into the lobby, fully coated for a winter morning's walk. The coronel, having been reminded several times during the course of their meal, was ready as well, waiting in an armchair, dreaming of having died with dignity in one of his battles of old.

"Ready for our bracing walk, *amico*?"

The coronel did not deign to reply, but stood up, allowing the other guests to admire his well-worn hiking gear and the walking-stick he'd whittled to perfection himself out of an unprepossessing tree limb.

"But where are the Lapin-Défunts, Herr Voot and your Italian compatriots?" Pluck wondered. "Surely my invitation was clear?"

"I dare say they've forgotten."

"Run up and remind them, will you? There's a good egg."

"Perhaps we might simply strike out on our own. And get this over with."

Pluck shrugged. "Suits me." He extended his hand. "Best friends?"

The coronel sighed, and looked around the lobby in search of a saviour. He found none. All he saw was a young lady in a travelling suit, examining her fingernails and looking for all the world like she expected nothing from life and would hardly be surprised if that were all she got; the Drig brood, fumbling with their skis, the patriarch glancing over spitefully at Pluck; the opera diva, adjusting her outfit in an intimate manner on account of her perception that no one was watching; an Indian gentleman who stared at the wall with an immensely solemn expression; and the establishment's employees, who, the coronel felt, were hardly worth noticing. Curiously, though, some sort of sabre from the Orient hung on the wall, at such a height that it could be easily snatched by anyone of even moderate height, employed in an act of bloodshed and then returned to its place; and, next to that, what looked like a dried fish, perhaps a herring, smoked red in hue, was mounted upon a block of wood.

(What, the reader may well ask, is my purpose in detailing this fish? Is it intended simply as a tedious means of transcribing the visual appearance of the scene into superfluous linguistic detail? Or is it being seeded here because it might spring back into the story at some later point, perhaps, at that time, with actual dramatic relevance, pregnant with added poignancy because of its earlier, submerged implantation into the reader's mind? Or is the fish symbolic of some abstract notion entirely unfathomable to the humble porter who had been tasked with nailing it upon the wall? Or none of these things?)

The air outside was ruthlessly cold and not at all refreshing, invigorating or in the slightest sense enjoyable. The two friends trekked across the lumpy brown ground, taking in the panoramic view of the mountains laurelled with dark cloud.

"Shall we climb a bit?" Pluck suggested. The coronel shrugged, and so they took a path which led, not too steeply, up a grassy crop. Several times they had to wait, much to Pluck's annoyance, for the coronel to rest and regain his wind before proceeding; during such intervals, Pluck paced about, cursing his friend for his poor physical condition, and for his age. The coronel would not reply, but merely shut his eyes and did his best to stamp out his persistent visions of shoving Pluck off the mountain.

When they reached the top of the outcrop, they surveyed the valley which fanned out beneath them, patched with leaf-shorn trees and thin, dry riverbeds, beside, along certain slopes appointed for speeding down with sticks of wood strung to one's feet for no meaningful motive, vast tracts of snow.

"Peaceful, here," smiled the coronel, unmindful for the moment with whom he was conversing.

"*Thaddeus Pluck!*" Pluck suddenly screamed, and bounced up and down giddily at hearing his name rebound all around them.

The coronel sat down on a rock, ignoring Pluck's immediate jeer. The Spanish gentleman saw, down in the valley, two figures slowly walking. He squinted. One appeared to be the Frenchman who had tried to assist them early that morning, Monsieur Lapine-Dayfoon, or something of that ilk, and the other was that rather morose-looking young lady who'd been sitting by herself in the lobby. To the extent that he could see, she looked no more happy now than she had then.

"Come on, come on, you pathetic old milksop!" Pluck laughed. "We have us a mountain to climb—or have you forgotten?"

They walked for ten more minutes, before the coronel begged for a rest. Pluck laid into him: "Of all the craven, disgraceful requests! Have you no shame, sir?! Have you no dignity?!"

The coronel stared up at the man's little head, covered by a wool cap and, on top of that, a hat, and gripped his stick with a force calling to mind his military feats of an earlier epoch. Behind Pluck was a void as big as the universe, from his vantage, a universe that would neither peep nor protest at the sacrifice of so excruciating a man. But the stick lowered; the coronel had not so distinguished himself over his career in order to slaughter a man in cold blood; even so worthless a gnat as this.

But he left himself open to renegotiation.

They walked some more, and Pluck was seized by another inspiration to scream "*Thaddeus Pluck! No, no, Curtis Pluck! Curtis Pluck!*"

"Aiye!" Pluck and the coronel bristled at the sound: it came from a small man just before them, sat on a rock, whom neither of them had noticed; he was a guest at the hotel, in fact, but neither of them had noticed him there either.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, gentlemen!" He rose, and performed a little bow, with a little wave, though it was clear he hadn't much practice. "I was just sitting here, and that sudden bellowing—well! It sort of shook me out of my senses, is all. I beg your pardon." And he sat back down.

Though the rock on which the little man sat was barely wide enough for his own bottom, Pluck rushed right over and sat down on it next to him, impelling the latter to

shift uncomfortably over and almost fall off. "I accept your apology, my friend," said Pluck. "It takes a big man to dishonour himself so much to apologise without so much as a protestation. I respect that. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Thaddeus—er, Curtis—Pluck."

"Yes, I heard."

"And you, sir? Would you be so kind as to cease your tedious evasions and identify yourself?"

"Me? Charles Snede."

"Charles Needs'? A noble name."

"That's 'Snede', actually."

"Charles Deens'—even better."

"Um, 'Snede'."

Pluck looked him up and down. "You seem a decent sort of fellow, Mister Seed."

The little man smiled at him. The chevrons he had for eyebrows rose. "I do?"

Pluck nodded. "Yes. I am Thaddeus—er, Curtis—Pluck."

"Yes, you've said."

"Yes." He leant a little closer, practically onto his lap. "What sort of work are you in, Charles?"

"Oh, I'm a clerk. That is, I *was* a clerk. For a grain exporter—nothing exciting there, ha ha. But I've retired. Just this month. And so I've gone on holiday. It's my first holiday, ever, you know. Isn't that something?"

Mister Snede looked terribly excited about it, in his way. Pluck studied him: his eyelids were so slight as to be non-existent, and for all that, his eyes were so meagre and translucent as to be impossible to pay any attention to, or take at all seriously.

"What about you?" Snede went on.

"Oh. I'm Pluck."

"Yes, I—"

Pluck pointed an indicting finger at the coronel. "And that infirm old weakling there is Eye-Goo—my best friend."

"Oh?"

"Certainly. We fought in the Italian War of Independence together, back in forty-nine."

"Don't be absurd," muttered the coronel, who, assuming the quiet, natural dignity that enveloped him in repose, stood upon a precipice, leaning on his walking-stick, staring out into the aether.

"Do you want to be our friend?" Pluck asked the clerk.

"Oh, well, that is, of course."

"Well—we'll have to talk it over, Eye-Goo and I."

"Oh, very well."

"We can't admit just anybody into our little club, you know."

"I understand."

"It's very exclusive."

"Of course."

"You'll have to submit a written application. I have the form back in my room."

"I see, yes."

"Let's go back to the hotel and get it."

“Well, perhaps I’ll see you when I—”

“No, come on, now, now! Eye-Goo, you old bat, let’s go!”

When the three friends (application pending) arrived back at the hotel, the coronel left the group as soon as he could.

“Well, I’ll be going up to my room now,” said Snede.

“Very well,” agreed Pluck. “I’ll go up and let you know when I’ve found the application.”

“See you later.” The clerk stepped softly up the staircase, Pluck just behind him. He walked down the corridor, Pluck just behind him. He ascended a small flight of stairs at the corridor’s end, Pluck just behind him. He arrived at his room, and turned round to find Pluck beaming behind him.

“Hi there!” Pluck greeted him.

“Uh, hello.”

“I just happened to be in the neighbourhood.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll see you later.”

“Certainly.”

Snede turned back around, unlocked the door, opened it, stepped in, and closed the door—just after Pluck had shot in, under Snede’s arm.

“Won’t you invite me into your room to have a look around?” he asked, casually, whilst already starting to open drawers, pick up objects and move things around into, he felt, more logical arrangements.

“Um, those are just my underthings,” Snede said, observing Pluck tear through the contents of a drawer.

“It’s moronic to place the socks lengthwise like this, alongside your pants,” Pluck explained. “It takes nearly a third more space, looks unsightly, and, when you’re stumbling around blind in the morning with a hangover, you might very well confuse the two. And this?”

“That’s a postcard my aunt sent me from Wales.”

“Perfectly horrid place,” Pluck sniffed. He pulled out a folder from the suitcase he’d found under the bed. He opened it, then stood up straight and fixed his tiny black eye on his new comrade. “What is this?!”

“Prints—they’re prints, of classical deities.”

Pluck’s voice rose to an irritating pitch: “They are devoid of clothes, sir!”

“That’s how artists rendered them, I’m afraid, Mister Pluck.”

“Hmph!” Pluck slapped shut the folder, leaving no doubt about his feelings on the subject of filth. “I have half a mind to report you, Mister Eeps,” he muttered whilst tracing a finger along a high shelf in search of dust, “but I think we can let it slide, this once, as it’s your first offence.”

“Oh, thank you, Mister Pluck.”

Pluck whirled round to look at him. “It *is* your first offence?”

“Of course—sir.”

Pluck nodded, clapped the dust from his hands, withdrew a handkerchief (miniscule grey mucus stain from an earlier adventure tinting one corner) and wiped his fingers, face and the back of his neck. “I’ll bring round that application form.”

“Please do.”

“This evening, perhaps. Or the next day.”

“Whenever you wish.”

Pluck stood in silence, staring at him.

“...Are you planning to open the door for me, or were you thinking I should stand here till doomsday?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The clerk shuffled to the door and opened it. Pluck sailed through without a word, and Snede closed it, and locked it, then retrieved the folder of prints, lay down on his bed and pleased himself, Pluck-like.



## Chapter Six

After lunch, when Pluck had shared, loudly, his criticisms of a waiter's service with the other guests, Herr Voot was called and accusations were made all round, several plates were broken, a baroness was insulted and her husband's trousers shredded; after all of that, I say, Pluck set off skiing.

"I wouldn't go out if I were you, monsieur," Poor Larry warned.

"And by what perversion of the natural order of things would you end up as me, might I ask, you tiny dumb child?!" demanded Pluck.

"I just wanted to warn you, monsieur, that a storm has begun—"

"And a very good thing, too, as a mountain bare of snow would make for an awfully difficult time skiing!" He stormed out, muttering obscenities under his breath. Outside, he passed, not twenty steps from the hotel, Signora Bergamaschi, before her easel, painting her companion, who was in, despite the bitter weather, a state of undress, leaning elegantly into the wind as the elements whorled about her. Pluck saluted them and continued up the slope, skis under his arm and smile on his face.

Thirty minutes later, he was hurtling down the slope for dear life, banshee-wailing into the roaring void, an unending wall of white bearing down on him from behind. "*I'm going to die! I'm going to die!*" he screamed, to no one. His wits were suddenly clear, and his powerful mental instrument focussed solely on the subject of his mortality; he had never, except for the odd flashes sparked by the sight of a sagging breast, truly considered the possibility of his own death. There was always so much to do, so many offensive individuals everywhere he turned who needed a good verbal horsewhipping, that the notion it might someday all come crashing to a halt seemed preposterous. But now, with the entirety of the earth and the sky warring against him, that terrifyingly pure whiteness closing in from all quarters, his mind turned to consider any penultimate regrets he might ponder, apologies to issue, reformations of himself to make. And it dawned on him with incontestable clarity: None of it was his fault. None of it. He was the victim; he had always been the victim; and all the pea-brained, ignoble pigs of the world had done their utmost to make his life a wretched, unenjoyable thing. He cursed them. If he were to have but one breath left, he would use it to curse them; to curse them all.

The storm overtook him; he sank, willingly, beneath the onslaught.

The end.

No; my mistake. Rather, an indeterminate stretch of time passed, during which his consciousness was suspended, and his body was thrashed with the ferocity of an infinity of arctic fists.

I wish I could tell you, Reader, that he awoke into paradise. What a stupendous divergence from the plot that would make! But instead, he awoke to a snow-swept field about thirty feet from the hotel. His skis had splintered into matchsticks trailing behind him, and much of his shoes had frayed away, but he appeared to be in one piece. He realised that it could have been worse, and tried to spring up in gratitude, only to find that he was already standing, sort of, leaning against a bank of snow. He tried, then, to spring *forward* in gratitude, excited at the prospect of sharing the anecdote of his good fortune with his fellow guests, who must at that very moment be huddling round the telegraph in

anxiety over his well-being, but he found that he was frozen in a block of ice, everywhere, all of his body, save his right foot.

“Grrgch, grrgch!” he swore, insofar as he could utter sound through his frozen-shut teeth. He looked toward the hotel, willing his friends to rush out and rescue him. When that didn’t happen, he appealed to the heavens to help him, seeing as they had had the mercy to spare him in the first place. When no response was forthcoming from that quarter either, he began to pivot, and sway, and hop on his one foot, with an awkwardness which I have every confidence the reader is capable of picturing, in the general direction of the hotel. “Grrgch! Grrgch!” he repeated, not that it made any difference, and teetered, almost falling forward, then backward, then forward again, then breathed in relief as he righted once more. He sought to pivot on his toes so that his heel might swing a little towards his goal, then plant his heel and swing his toes, and so on, and so on, and so on, and so on, taking care not to shift his weight too impetuously, lest he tumble into the snow. When he was feeling ambitious, he would hop a little, and when he was frightened, he would simply crawl forward worm-like with his toes, pulling his heel behind. Then he would stand, for a moment, wishing he were dead, then start up once more. “Grrgch,” he mused at one point, which translates as, “By Jove, I dare say I’m getting the hang of this.” Then he slipped on a patch of ice and crashed backwards, smashing the ice from his body. He stood up, dusted off the snow, and saw that the hotel’s door was an inch in front of him. He opened it and went in.

## Chapter Seven

A scream, absolutely blood-curdling; enough to make cheese therefrom. A cheese liable to cause bewildered disgust in all to whom it were served, surely, but a cheese nonetheless.

Pluck was alone in the reading room, having nodded off, when it supplicated through the ground floor of the hotel. He awoke with a start (not an end); the perpetually unread Thomas Mannhardback he'd plucked blindly from a shelf tumbled grousingly off his vest and to the carpet, where it found a kind of peace. He (Pluck, not Mann) blinked, which was good, as it indicated the persistence of life. He looked to the window: a square of white, worth millions, had it been an abstract painting from decades hence, but, at the time, merely representational of the snow outside which had imprisoned every guest in the hotel.

The scream—had he dreamt it?

Being the author, and a rather omniscient one at that, and, consequently, in a position to answer that question, I'll tell you:

No.

He rose from a comfort he would not find again for a very long time, and left for the lobby.

Several guests were there, looking about them in curiosity about the scream, and more were piling in. Poor Larry ran in, bearing a face which mixed panic, excitement at an unprecedented event and a personal sense of importance in being the bearer of the news, and announced, quakingly:

"A man is dead!"

Thrust suddenly into his element, Pluck reared up and took charge: "*Murderer!*" he screamed in his inimitably shrill wail, pointing straight at Larry.

"Me, sir?" Poor, Poor Larry was shocked that anyone, even a man like Pluck, whose idiocy was attested to by the majority of guests and staff, could think him a murderer. He was just so...*nice!*

Forward, strode Pluck, forward, his rapier-tipped finger leading the way. "*J'accuse, monsieur! J'accuse!*"

When he reached the boy, he slapped his (Larry's, not his own) cheek with an elegance and lightness of touch that Pluck expected to be roundly admired for its restraint.

The boy, of course, was in tears.

"I didn't do it, monsieur! Honest! I just found the body, is all!"

Hands on hips, Pluck looked about him at the outraged guests, and sniffed, "It is a shame for you that all communication with the outside world has been temporarily ruptured, *garçon*—I expect this rabid mob will lynch you within the minute." It was all too true that the storm had snapped the telegraph cables like a Homeric behemoth the twitching ligaments of its captives, but the guests behind Pluck betrayed no indication of extrajudicial, bloodlusty intent toward the bellhop. Poor Larry, though, taking him seriously, began to cower, and was not visibly solaced by Pluck now massaging his shoulder. "I, of course, being a principled adherent of the letter of the law, will do my utmost to protect you. But," he continued, turning to slap the boy's face once more, "I

fear it will not be enough. Goodbye. I wish you a better afterlife than your pitiful life has turned out to be; common sympathy compels me to say so.”

Herr Voot marched up. “Don’t be absurd, monsieur. Larry was with me for the past hour.”

“Murderer!” Pluck screamed at Voot. “And sodomite!”

Herr Voot had to be forcibly restrained from assaulting poor Pluck. “The truth wounds, sir, does it not?!” Pluck spat at him. “It *wounds*!”

“Would you kindly shut up so that we might get to the bottom of what has passed?” asked Monsieur Lapin-Défunt of Pluck.

Pluck wheeled round to him and screamed in his face, “And what is *your* suspicious interest in the matter, monsieur, might I ask?! *Eh?!?*”

“I think we’d all like to find out what’s going on,” added Mister Stoupes.

“*Murderers!*” Pluck screamed; it looked like his head would explode any second. “These two are in league!”

“Here! Wait a moment!” protested a medium-sized, rather plain man in the back from whom we, by which I mean “Author/Reader”, haven’t yet had the pleasure of hearing. “Let us all try to proceed rationally, what do you say?”

(Note to Reader: That was actually the first and last time we’ll be hearing from him. He is now out of this saga.)

(And as it didn’t really add anything, you may forget all about it. You have my permission.)

To carry on: Pluck, feeling surrounded by a horde of murderers, sprinted to the nearest wall. “You’re all in league! You’re all in it together! You’re all plotting to kill *me*, too, aren’t you? Tell me! Tell me!” He cowered down in a corner, arms over his head. “Leave me alone! Why can’t you all just leave me alone?!”

“Shut up so we can think!” someone loudly requested. (It wasn’t that plain man. It was somebody else.)

“*You* shut up!” Pluck wailed. “*You* shut up!”

“Is there a doctor present?” called Herr Voot.

“I don’t need a doctor!” shouted Pluck. “All of *you* need doctors!”

“I meant for the deceased,” Voot clarified. “A nurse? Anyone of the medical profession?”

Pluck suddenly shot out and sprinted over to Larry and tackled him to the floor. Several gentlemen around grabbed Pluck by his arms and hauled him off, depositing him into an armchair.

“Now stay there and shut up!” commanded Herr Voot.

“*You* stay *there* and *you* shut up!” parroted Pluck in a sing-song voice.

“This is intolerable!” cried Lapin-Défunt. “I cannot think with all his noise!”

“*You’re* intolerable!” screamed Pluck at an ear-splitting, if not altogether skull-cracking, volume. “I cannot think with all *your* noise!”

“Someone shut him up before I lose myself and strangle him!” begged a gentleman with a beautifully groomed silver beard.

“*Murderer!*” screamed Pluck.

Enid pushed her way through the crowd and over to him. “Mister Pluck, I beg you to calm down.”

“Miss...Miss Trojczakowski?” asked Pluck, looking up to her through the drops of condensation round his eyes which the more sentimental among us might refer to as “tears”.

“I’m ashamed of you, Curtis.” She was speaking more softly, now, so that only he might hear. “I thought you were a gentleman; and a dignified one, with his head about him at all times, at that.”

He felt, confusedly, for his head. “My head’s still here,” he protested, inwardly questioning her sanity.

“Won’t you calm down, Curtis? Everyone’s counting on you.”

“They...they are?”

She nodded, and smiled, sweetly (so he thought). “They are. I am. We need you to quiet down, and act civilised, like a big boy, so the grownups can decide what to do.”

“Like a big boy?” he nodded.

“Like a big boy. Can you do that for me, Curtis?”

He took her (delightfully tender) hand and rested his cheek against it, in place of a verbal response.

He then jumped to a stand and announced to the assembled:

“Ladies and gentleman, I am hereby assuming command of this investigation.”

“Shut up!” rang out from various places around the room.

“My name is Inspector Thaddeus Pluck, nickname ‘Curtis Crimebuster’, of the Vatrachonisi Detective Constabulary,” he continued calmly. “My credentials are here for all to see.” And he produced a badge and some papers, which he passed around. “I want those back, by the way, or you’re in big trouble.”

The guests expressed some disbelief.

“Ridiculous!”

“I don’t believe it!”

“How stupid does he think we are?!”

“You’re Greek?!”

“We’re all Greek, monsieur, in that we are all children of her heritage,” Pluck replied. “But personally—I live in Greece, but I’m a citizen, and dutiful son, of all the world.”

“Wonderful!” swooned Frau Hühnerbeinstein.

“But hardly evidence as to the truth of his claims to be a detective,” Herr Voot reasoned aloud.

Pluck whirled to face him: “Exactly the language I would expect a murderer to use when faced with his archfoe!” he retorted.

“Anyone could have forged those papers. Perhaps he’s a comic actor?” suggested a sceptical personage.

“The whinge of the fox when her huntsman is near,” Pluck dismissed.

“If this clown’s an inspector, then I’m a—” began Mr Stoupes.

“‘Murderer’?!” Pluck supplied.

“Don’t be absurd,” begged Monsieur Lapin-Défunct, appealing to Pluck’s better nature. “Of course you’re no inspector! Of course you haven’t the rational mind required for such a profession! I beg you, sir, to curtail your unamusing antics and leave this matter to the adults!”

“It’s true!” came a cry—it was one of the Drig boys (Danny, if you really want to know, though you can take it from me that it doesn’t matter at all), who ran up with a newspaper in his hand. “Look!” The child—I won’t bother to describe him, because, well, who cares?—held up the paper, boasting on page fourteen a rotogravure of our man, deerstalker on his head—I mean the clichéd Holmesian chapeau, not an actual individual pestering a doe in want of a restraining order, of course; that would have crushed Pluck to the floor, and for what?—grinning idiotically, the headline *Inspector Pluck Nabs International Horse Thief and Thereby Saves Europe* screaming modestly beneath him.

Missus Drig snatched the paper out of her son’s hands. “Who told you you could read the news?! It’s got horrible things in it you wouldn’t understand with your mercifully innocent eyes!”

“Daddy did!” cried the lad.

“Is that true, Arthur?!”

The patriarch shrugged. “It’s part of his education; he has to learn about the world as it really is, sometime.” His adoring consort pinched her hips, thrust out her chin, thrust back her behind and tapped an impatient foot to the beat of “Killaloe” as he went on: “I read the paper when I was a lad.”

“The world is infinitely more degenerate today than when you were a snivelling infant,” she contended.

“Aw, Ma, all the other fellas read the papers!” That was the boy (Danny).

“And if the other fellas jumped off a bridge, would you do that too?” queried his marm.

“Cooper Milburn did jump off a bridge, last winter!”

“And what happened to him?”

“He hit the rocks and died instantly.”

“That’s something for you to remember.”

“I hated Cooper!”

“Don’t speak poorly of the dead, son,” enjoined his dad.

“I hated him! I hated him! I hated him! I rejoiced, that day! I thank God each night for wiping that worthless shit off the earth!”

“That’s an heretical prayer to make!” his mum exclaimed, and smacked the side of his head, out of love for her son’s soul. “The Lord doth not condone uncharitable thoughts towards our fellow man!”

“I piss on Cooper Milburn’s grave!” cried the impudent lad, sinking to his knees in a fervour.

“Quite right, too,” opined a fellow in the back who had never met Cooper Milburn but agreed to the sentiment nonetheless, being partial to the discharge of urine on consenting adults on principle.

Danny broke down in a spate of guilty tears, comforted by his parents out of a sense of publicly expected duty more than out of any real concern (a motivation of which they were themselves in no way conscious).

Meanwhile, the paper was passed around, some taking off their glasses to examine it in case it should have been some theatrical facsimile of a real periodical, substituting Pluck’s name and face for those of an actual, competent detective. But no such forgery could be proved.

“This is our man,” concluded the muscular fellow with the beard, whose seat Pluck had pilfered through that neat stratagem, in a rich, exquisitely textured baritone. “I know this gentleman’s ethical evenhandedness from the exposure of my absent wife’s infidelities which he effected last night—yes, yes, you can all save your gasps, it’s true, the missing telegram notwithstanding, and I don’t much care who knows it. His heart is true, and evidently his credentials are too. I’m for you, sir. And as for anybody who opposes him—you’ll have to see to me, first.”

They embraced, Pluck wet around the eyes.

“Thank you,” said Pluck, “thank you, Mister...?”

““Bartoff”,” spoke the man. “But you already knew that, when you told me of the telegram for me.”

“Yes, of course I did.” Pluck chuckled. “I just wanted to see if *you* remembered.”

“Ha ha ha!” Bartoff boomed. “Ever the detective, eh, inspector?”

Everybody else looked appalled at the turn events had taken, but, resignedly, Herr Voot stepped forward and said, “It looks like we are to defer to your expertise and authority, Inspector Pluck.”

“Damned right,” said Bartoff.

“We are all at your disposal. You may proceed with your investigation.”

“About time, too.” Pluck nodded, once, then produced a notepad. “Mifkin, porter,” he wrote and declared aloud. “Annoying an inspector, failure to unbuckle an inspector’s skis in a timely manner, thereby redirecting embarrassment naturally due to himself to his superior, *viz* the inspector, disclosing the private contents of a telegram, mockery of a gentleman’s domestic traumas, rudeness, general stupidity. Aloysius, waiter: professional incompetence, contempt of an inspector’s dignity. Mister Glen Stoupes, alleged gentleman: assault on a lady’s virtue, contempt of honour, lying to an inspector, general indecency. Monsieur Marcel Lapin-Défunct, alleged diplomat: interfering with an inspector’s seating arrangements, physical assault on an inspector, attempted assault on an inspector’s virtue, general want of integrity. Coronel Eye-Goo Feosalma, alleged soldier, retired: failure to assist an inspector in need, abandoning an inspector, dereliction in the duties of friendship. Herr Voot, alleged hotel manager: sodomy, conspiracy to commit murder. Larry, bellhop: murder.”

A chorus of “Look here’s!” and other feeble protests pipped about the room like polite throat-clearings in the midst of a deafening, village-uprooting deluge. Poor Larry cried in a corner. Paying about as much heed as you’d expect, Pluck flipped shut his notepad and turned to his new assistant Bartoff and the suspect Voot: “Gentlemen, shall we view the body?”

Poor Larry led Pluck, Voot and Bartoff out of the lobby and into the reading room Poor Larry indicated. The room had a low ceiling, decorated with amateurishly rendered classical scenes of this and that debauchery, and contained several bookcases, a few tables and chairs, including a card table, and a seat before it, in which slumped the body of the late Charles Snede, in front of a hand of solitaire.

“Did you find him alone?” Voot asked Larry.

“I’ll ask the questions, if you please,” corrected Pluck, adding a line to Voot’s entry in his notepad and looking at him significantly.

“*He*’ll ask the questions!” Bartoff shouted.

Of Larry, Pluck inquired: “Did you—”

“Yes, monsieur, he was alone.”

“Wait till I finish!” Pluck shouted.

“Wait till he finishes his question before you answer!” Bartoff seconded.

“Proceed, then, please, Monsieur Pluck,” begged Voot, stiffly.

Pluck looked at Voot, narrowed his eyes, wrote down something else, looked back up, protractedly cleared his throat, and turned once more to Larry: “Did you find him alone?”

Poor Larry paused, then, once he’d assured himself that Pluck had finished his question, answered: “Yes, monsieur. He was alone.”

“A simple ‘Yes, monsieur’ will suffice!” Pluck shouted. “By answering in the affirmative, I will know he was alone, because that is what I asked!”

“Don’t add redundant information!” Bartoff screamed at Larry.

“I-I’m sorry, messieurs!” Larry cried.

“Don’t apologise, you snivelling cur!” screamed Pluck.

Bartoff moved to strike the boy, but Pluck stopped him with a gentle placement of his fingers on the larger man’s arm, shaking his head. Bartoff, fuming, stood straight, and nodded.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Pluck muttered to Larry, who by this time was curled up, sobbing, on the floor. “You’re pathetic and repulsive.” He turned to Voot. “Herr Manager, kindly lead the way to the body.”

“It’s just here.”

*“Kindly lead the way!”*

“Lead the way!” Bartoff shouted.

Biting his lip, Herr Voot took a step forward, then turned and swept his hand, theatrically, to indicate the corpse. Pluck stepped forward and looked at the body, then immediately swivelled away and ordered, with some disgust: “Put some clothes on this man! What’s wrong with you?!”

“He is wearing his clothes, monsieur,” Herr Voot pointed out.

Pluck pulled his hand down from his eyes and looked again. “Oh. So he is. Must have been my imagination. Anyway, boy,” addressing Larry, “tie his wrists and ankles to the chair so he can’t escape.”

Larry made to protest, but Herr Voot, looking from Pluck to the steaming Bartoff, simply nodded. Larry went off to get some rope. The others examined the deceased:

The clerk’s head had been bludgeoned with a thoroughness and ferocity entirely unsuited to the requirements of a simple, pragmatic murder. The smashed-open forehead, like a cathedral’s crumbled roof following an unsolicited visit from a bomb, exposed the turgid slime of the brain, pink and obscene, still bubbling and dribbling down the front of his eye-popped face. Sizeable chunks of skull lay scattered on the table before him, like shells along a beach, staining the cards with which he’d been wrestling mere minutes ago (he’d had but a spade or club to play and he would have won; beaten, as it were, Fate, rather than the reverse).

“Suicide,” Pluck concluded, turning from the corpse and walking out of the room. “No chance of recovery. No danger of absconding. Our work is done; case closed.”

“Poor chap,” Bartoff shook his head. “What could’ve happened to make him so bloody miserable? He had so much to live for. I mean, he must have. I presume.”



The gathered guests in the lobby quieted their remarks when they saw Pluck, and, more to the point, Bartoff, re-enter the room. “Well?” “What happened?” “What do you think?”, and other tedious queries of that ilk launched at poor Pluck from every end of the room. Coolly, he sat down in an armchair and tied his shoelaces rather than reply. Voot soon arrived. He cleared his throat and addressed the throng:

“Ladies and gentlemen, by now you will have heard from the inspector what he has concluded.”

“We have not!” protested a lady.

“What’s that?”

“The inspector has not deigned to speak to us,” explained a man.

Pluck, staring at the floor, sighed a deep sigh and stood up. “I have paid the audience the compliment of letting them deduce the suicide for themselves,” he explained to the manager.

“Suicide!” most of the guests exclaimed, in various tones and at various pitches.

“Disguised, I suspect, to look like murder,” Pluck detailed. “The evil swine wanted to frame that bellhop, I suppose.”

“Exonerated!” Bartoff shouted, pointing at Larry.

“I’m free!” cried the boy.

“Not so fast!” shouted Pluck suddenly, whirling to Larry. “I ask you *why* Leeds the clerk wished to set you up! I ask you *what* sort of degenerate relationship the two of you enjoyed! I ask you *why* neither of you bothered to invite *me* to partake!” He looked at the others. “Not that I would have, you understand!” he hastily added.

“Not his sort of thing!” shouted Bartoff.

“No!”

Feeling himself a man of principle cast into a desert of toadies, Herr Voot began: “Monsieur Inspector, I beg to differ.”

“What?!” shouted Pluck.

“What?!” screamed Bartoff.

“You allege I would have participated in such a debauch?!”

“No, monsieur,” Voot clarified. “I suggest it was murder.”

Pluck, open-mouthed, presumed the gathered would have inferred his aghastness, but, reminding himself how inferior was their deductive prowess to his, he decided to state explicitly: “I am aghast! Aghast, sir! Do you hear me? Aghast!”

“The inspector is aghast!” boomed Bartoff.

“Nevertheless,” Voot maintained, “I say it was murder.”

Bartoff went to hit him, but Pluck stilled him with a glance, and a nod. He put to Voot: “Do you have some evidence to submit, Herr Manager?!”

“Where’s your evidence?!” demanded Bartoff.

“That of the body itself, sirs.”

“I see,” chuckled Pluck, indulgently. “You’ve seen some melodramas at the theatre in which murders have played a part, haven’t you, good manager? Yes. And you’re fond of reading cheap detective novels, and you glance over the newspapers, and so now you think you’re a bit of an expert, is that it?”

“Armchair detective,” Bartoff sneered.

“But, Inspector,” Voot began, seeking to appeal to our hero’s reason, “Mister Snede’s head—”

“Arrest him!” Pluck shouted. Bartoff took the manager roughly by the arms, throwing in a few quick jabs to the ribs for sport. Sighing, Pluck took out his notepad and, gripping his pen like a hungry farmhand a chicken’s neck, added, aloud, “Interfering with an investigation.” Then he stopped, and thought, chewing on the end of his pen, with a zeal not dissimilar to fellating it. He decided something, something momentous, and agreed to share his conclusion with the assembled: “...I fear things are not just what they seem. This is a more complicated case than first impressions would have one think. In fact, I suspect that Clerk Snood’s death was murder—murder designed to look like suicide, or rather, a murder designed to look like a suicide dressed up as murder but really a suicide—so, that is, let me see here—yes, I’ve got it: the murderer tried to kill himself, but ended up killing Snid, instead, either by accident or design, perhaps confusing Snod for himself, so that when he endeavoured to kill himself, he accidentally killed another fellow instead, confused and frightened as he was. Yes. And at the same time, another fellow, or even two, or more, tried to cover up the first murderer-suicide’s crime by dressing Snad’s body up as a suicide, laying out the cards and so forth, then killing the first fellow, and hiding his body—well, we’ve yet to discover where.”

“Genius!” clapped Bartoff.

“As evidenced by the note, which was not signed ‘Snud’.”

“What note?” asked Herr Voot.

“‘What note’?! The suicide note, you oaf!”

“The suicide note, cretin!” screamed Bartoff, who then stopped, thought, and turned to Pluck: “What suicide note, Inspector?”

Pluck thought, then struck his own head. “No. I was thinking of another case. Never mind.” To the gathered: “There was no suicide note found, which only lays another brick in the fortification of my theory.”

“Genius!” clapped Bartoff again.

Pluck pointed a denunciatory finger at Voot. “And this idiot’s remarks are practically a confession. Take him away.” Bartoff hauled the protesting manager over his shoulder and carried him from the room. Pluck now addressed himself to Mifkin: “Mifkin, my good man—I’m placing you in charge of the hotel.”

“Monsieur?!”

“For the duration of Herr Voot’s incarceration, I will need you to arrange certain practicalities to assist with the investigation. First, I need a bigger room for myself, with a proper table, oak, let’s say, with a diameter no shorter than a yard, and no longer than a cricket pitch. I want a vase of freshly cut flowers, replaced hourly, on my bedside stand: petunias, irises, roses, tulips and jackdaws.”

Mifkin leant in and whispered: “I believe a jackdaw is a bird, monsieur.”

“So it is! And that is what I want!” Flustered, Pluck looked around for Bartoff to support him, then remembered he was off securing Herr Voot, so continued: “I like birds with my flowers! Any other complaints?!”

“No, monsieur.”

“Fine! Make that a double helping of jackdaws, then, nitwit! Where was I?!”

“You were listing the flowers you wanted in hourly instalments on your bedside table, monsieur.”

“Indeed!” Pluck’s face was red, but, ever master of his emotions, he willed himself back into a state of calm. “Then I will require an assortment of periodicals, unfolded and

unread, fanned out on my coffee table each morning at dawn. I will require the personal attentions of the hotel's barber, manicurist, masseur and chef at my beck and call and convenience, any hour of the day or night. I will require a selection of fresh tarts on my window sill each hour. I will require exclusive rights to the garden, if and when the snow-in dissipates. I wish to stalk the corridors and lobby, at my discretion, for the purposes of thinking through the ins and outs of this crime, at all hours of the day, undisturbed by staff or guests; for that reason, I will require all guests to remain in their rooms for the foreseeable future—and by 'foreseeable future', I mean, 'till I say so'. Now, as to my toilet. I will require the softest paper you can source—I recommend a Burmese brand

called Z □□a □ □ □ □ □U □□c □□ □ □ □ □ □ , which I translate as 'Erotic Lily'—sixteen rolls, replenished daily. I will require seven boxes of the soft

Adenese facial soap known as صوان تدليك, or 'Granite Massage'. I will require an attendant, blindfold and discreet, to attend to my evacuation. And, finally, I will require a string quartet to accompany Frau Hühnerbeinstein as she sings me to sleep—I mean in my bed; not on the toilet. Next, for the interviews I will of necessity conduct with the various suspects, by which I mean every man, woman and child in this cesspit, I will require a suite, a long table with a throne for myself in the centre and places on my right for my right-hand man Bartoff and my left for my lifelong comrade Eye-Goo, with a small, uncomfortable chair across from us for the interogatees, and a large table off to the side boasting a plentiful array of fruits, breads, cheeses and crackers. I want the light to be dark and menacing, with lots of scary shadows. I want banners strewn across the ceiling with the Greek flag and my name. And don't forget a small Mexican mole lizard, in appropriately scaled nappy and bonnet, in a cage off in the corner, under a tarp. These demands are neither inclusive nor limited, and I reserve the right to alter and add thereto at any time, by whim and moral right. Are you getting all this, swine?!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You'd better! Why aren't you writing it down?!"

"I pride myself on my excellent memory, monsieur."

"You'd better!" To himself, under his breath, but clearly audible to all, he added: "Fucking piece of shit."

Bartoff stomped back in. "Herr Manager is restrained under lock and key, Inspector!" he saluted.

"Excellent." He yawned. "It's time for my nap. Manager Mifkin, have my room made up for a drowse. Now."

"Er, Inspector?" said Mifkin.

"What is it now, for God's sake?!"

In an undertone, cognisant of all the people about, Mifkin asked him: "What shall we do with it, Monsieur Inspector?"

"What shall we do with what, you imbecile?!" Pluck shouted. "Your penis?!"

"Your penis?!" screamed Bartoff.

"The body, monsieur."

"The body?! Which one?!" Pluck demanded. "Yours?! Mine?! Frau Hühnerbeinstein's?! Out with it, moron!"

"What are you talking about?!" Bartoff screamed at Mifkin.

"I refer to the dead body, monsieur," Mifkin finally clarified. "Mister Snede."

"Oh, that," Pluck shrugged. "Burn it."

*“Pardon, monsieur?”*

Pluck sighed, perfectly bored with such trivial concerns. “I don’t know! Chop it up and perform debased surgical experiments! Dice it for salad topping! Dress it in a gown and queue up for photographic portraits! How am I supposed to know?! I’m an inspector, not an undertaker!”

“Do what the inspector says!” shouted Bartoff, tsunami-like, into Mifkin’s face.

“As to the rest of you,” Pluck addressed the guests with a sweeping monumentality, “I will see you soon enough—one by one—in your interrogation.” And with that, he marched—an actual march, as if on parade—out of the room. Bartoff took up step and followed him.

## Chapter Eight

The guests remained where they were in the lobby, flagrantly flouting Pluck's order to retire to their rooms.

"Well, let's not mince words. Shall we mutiny against this so-called inspector?" suggested Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

"I'm with you," said Stoupes. Several others offered their agreement.

"We can beat him to a pulp, then lock him in his room," Lapin-Défunt mused.

"Case closed', as he would say."

"But he's got that big fellow with him," Mister Drig wavered. "He's clearly gone daft, and I wouldn't want to mess with him."

"What about you, coronel?" asked Frau Hühnerbeinstein of the elderly gentleman who was leaning, eyes closed, against the wall, irradiating a piquant lack of interest in getting involved. "You're his friend. What do you say?"

The coronel sighed. "I am not his friend."

"He says you're his friend," someone pointed out.

"He says a lot of things," Drig admitted.

"But we all saw you, in the ballroom!" Frau Hühnerbeinstein insisted. "Forgive me for contradicting you, coronel, but you most surely are his friend."

"No," the coronel maintained. "He has used me to flesh out the fantasy world he persists in conjuring in his head—a world he has peopled with us all, though without our consent—but the fact remains that it is not true."

"Well." Frau Hühnerbeinstein clearly did not believe the esteemed old soldier.

"Every friendship suffers certain rifts, from time to time. But a true friendship is forever, I always say."

"Say what you like, madame." The coronel's eyes remained closed.

"I don't see him as malicious," Genevra Bergamaschi, the artist, reflected. "Clearly deranged, but not malicious."

"But none the less dangerous for it," reasoned Stoupes.

"Why don't we give him the ol' silent treatment?" Mister Drig threw in as his tuppence's worth. "You know: pretend he's not there. It was just the wind we heard, and the like?"

"I say we blind the swine, with a pen!" proposed his better half. "I say we puncture him with holes! I say we let him bleed to death, for havin' ruined our holiday!"

Frau Hühnerbeinstein considered this. "That way, he'd stay conscious long enough to observe his outflowing of blood and ponder all his sins."

"It's not his fault the clerk's been killed," said Genevra. "Unless he did it."

"A possibility that has not been lost on me, I can tell you," added Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

"Either way, he doesn't deserve a violent death any more than Snede did," said Genevra. "He needs confinement, in a hospital, a madhouse, of course, so he can get treated, and the rest of society can have peace."

"Everyone, please, please," begged Enid Trojczakowski. "May I remind you that Mister Pluck is an authorised inspector, leading a criminal investigation? True, he has his idiosyncrasies—even annoyances. But surely we must respect his authority?"

"I'm not so sure we should trust that newspaper, and that badge," said Stoupes.

"I felt the badge. It seemed real," said Genevra. "And the newspaper looked authentic."

"I'm sure I've seen his face in the papers before, now that I think of it," remembered Mister Drig. "Though in what capacity, exactly, I couldn't say."

"It mighta been in the capacity of a raving impersonator, for all that!" argued Missus Drig.

"If you're really so distrustful of the poor fellow, why not telegraph the authorities?" asked Enid.

"I've just tried again, moments ago, madame," said Mifkin, who'd just come back in. "The wires are still down. And the snow continues."

"I see him as a poor, sweet, innocent boy," said Enid, with some vigour.

"Humph!" humphed Lapin-Défunt.

"He poses no harm—not really. Let's indulge him, give him room to conduct his investigation, and see what he comes up with."

"We might as well," sighed Missus Drig. "I don't see what other choice we legitimately have."

"That's right!" said Enid. "And who knows? Maybe he'll surprise us."

"We'll give him rope," nodded Mifkin. "All the rope he asks for. And at the end of it—well, I wouldn't be surprised if he's hanged himself."

Poor Larry the bellhop came in and walked straight up to Enid. "Miss Troczakowski? The inspector needs to speak to you, in private, about important case-related business. Please follow me."

He led her upstairs to Pluck's room. The door was open: hotel staff were rushing in and out, catering to the good inspector's demands, carrying furniture, bearing trays of delicacies, and so on. Pluck paced back and forth in his sitting room, oblivious to the activity, necessitating everybody else to dodge and weave so as not to knock him down. When he saw Enid, Pluck hurried over, drew her to a corner and whispered: "Miss Troczakowski, you are fortunate enough to find yourself in a position to assist with my inquiries enormously."

"However I may be of service, just name it, Mister Pluck."

"It's something of a delicate matter..."

"Oh?"

"Yes, of course; otherwise, I wouldn't have said that it was, would I?!"

"I understand, I quite understand, Mister Pluck. You may rely on me for discretion."

"I may?"

"Indubitably."

He squinted up into her face, doubtfully. "If you betray me..."

"You can count on me...Curtis."

He looked her up and down, his gaze resting on certain areas of her anatomy. This made her uncomfortable. He began to salivate, openly. With a finger, she raised his chin so that his glance might more strictly conform to social norms by meeting her eyes, and asked: "What do you need for your investigation, Inspector?"

Thus recalled to himself, he cleared his throat and looked away, at, well, nothing. "I simply have need of something from your wardrobe, mademoiselle."

"My...wardrobe?"

“I think you’ve guessed it by now, mademoiselle.”

Enid thought. Then it hit her:

“Oh...I understand.”

“You do?”

“Of course. And there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“There’s not?”

“No, no! I’ve read all about this sort of thing.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now, do you require my used undergarments to sniff, or clean ones to wear yourself?”

He was taken aback—straight into the wall, with a thump, and a wince. “You have insulted me, mademoiselle!”

“So it’s not that?”

“Indeed, it is not! I merely require one of your robes, black, preferably, so as to assume the role of judge and impress on my interviewees the gravity of their situation! No sniffing of undergarments need come into it!”

“Oh! Why didn’t you say so, you silly man? I do have a black robe, as it so happens, quite frilly and quite fetching. I think you’ll look just divine in it, Curtis.”

“You are very kind. I thank you. Now...”

“Yes?”

“There is one other thing...”

“My undergarments?”

“No! No, might we...” He led her into the toilet, and shut the door. At once, he began weeping.

“Why Curtis! Whatever’s the matter?”

“I don’t think I can do it!” he sobbed. “It’s too much for me! I’m not that good! I came last in my class in detective school! I kept sneaking out to watch the cricket, and never studied!”

“Oh, my dear! There, there. It’s okay. It’s all right.” She rubbed his head, which was now on her shoulder.

“I get confused so easily! Sometimes...sometimes, I’m just guessing! I don’t know what I’m saying, but I say it anyway! And I don’t know who’s getting put in prison, who’s getting hanged, who’s getting thrown in front of the firing squad because of the things I say!”

“Oh, you poor dear!”

“And, it’s a little off the subject, but while I’m confessing things I might as well get this off my chest too, I’m erotically attracted to obese women!”

It was a bit cramped and awkward there in the loo; they were rather wedged between the sink and the bidet. Enid was sort of half-sitting, half-standing, with Pluck’s chin on her shoulder, her bottom pressed painfully against the tap, her head jammed where the overhead toilet tank stuck out from the wall.

“It’s all going to be all right, Curtis. You can trust me. I believe in you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I can tell, about these things. You have great goodness in you.”

“I do?”

“Yes. And great honesty. And great strength. I know you’ll find the man who did this.”

“Or woman—it could just as likely have been a woman!” He was getting that old fire back again.

“Of course! That’s the spirit, Curtis, that’s the spirit!”

He beamed. “I can do this!”

“I know you can!”

“I *will* do this!”

“Of course you will!”

Pluck released her, stood straight, fists clenched, scanning—in this case, the stained plaster in a corner of the ceiling, but, if he’d been where his spirit yearned to be—limitless vistas of fields of golden grain.

“I shall annihilate my enemies,” he vowed in whisper, “and make myself worthy of wearing the mantle of righteousness which has been thrust upon me!”

“That’s the spirit!” she cheered.

“Now please go and get that mantle of righteousness so that I might begin.”

“At once.”



## Chapter Nine

The guests, by now quite weary of waiting, bent their necks to witness the descent down the steps of Pluck, in judge's black robe—clearly a lady's dressing gown, complete with knotted belt—and boots, with an unlit pipe stuck out of his mouth. When he reached the floor, Bartoff came up alongside him, and Mifkin led them both to the room he had arranged for the conduction of the interviews. Two bellhops, stationed for that purpose, swept open the doors, and the worthies went in. They immediately found the youngest of the Drig boys defecating in a corner.

"You bastard!" shouted Mifkin.

"Get out of here, you little guttersnipe!" screamed Pluck.

"Oh!" moaned Bartoff, and fell to the floor.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Mifkin.

Pluck thought. "I've no idea," he finally admitted.

The sound of escaped gas blurred from the corner.

"Call a doctor!" Pluck ordered.

"We've already established that there is no doctor to hand, monsieur."

They knelt down by the recumbent Bartoff. He blinked, and smiled, with a gentleness heretofore unseen in this saga. "My apologies, gentlemen," he said weakly. "I don't often volunteer the confidence that I suffer from an irrational fear of publicly exhibited faeces."

Pluck turned from him to the child. "If anything happens to him..." he warned, staring out of his pitilessly black eyes with a kind of death.

The boy, for his part, hugged his knees to himself. One last plop, then nothing.

Pluck stood, slowly reached out and took a ladle from the soup bowl. To the child, he said softly: "I will kill you if I have to." The boy jumped up and ran for the door. Pluck gave chase. Mifkin, still knelt next to the felled Bartoff, grabbed his leg, but Pluck shook him off with a torrent of obscenity and kept up his pursuit, ladle raised magnificently above his brow. In the lobby, the boy ran straight into his mother's arms (coward that he was).

"Mama! Mama! That mean inspector's tryin' to kill me!"

Suddenly cognisant of witnesses, Pluck broke his sprint, assumed a leisurely pose, sought, with teeth-flashing charm, to lean suavely on the ladle as on a walking stick, but failed to adequately calculate its length, and consequently collapsed to the floor. The ladle clanged off to the side, where it was grabbed by the same soiled Drig boy. He raised it above him, maybe not as magnificently as when Pluck did so, and walked towards him.

"Shall I kill 'im, Mama?"

"No, Bo! Leave him be!"

"I wanna kill 'im, Mama!"

"Let the law take its course, son," counselled his dad.

"He humiliated me! I wanna see him pay for that! I wannim dead!"

Having reached our prostrate hero, he brought down the ladle with all his force—only to find it grabbed and wrenched away, an inch above Pluck's head, by the mighty hand of Bartoff, who had recovered himself sufficiently to effect his friend's salvation. He threw the ladle across the floor and grabbed Bo by the throat.

“No!” screamed Missus Drig, and started running across the floor.

The room was in an uproar. Many guests ran towards them; but, if Bartoff had truly intended to snap the boy’s neck, they would have lacked the time to save him. No, it was Pluck, from his position on the floor, who, sizing up his huge friend’s intentions, simply let loose an, “He’s not worth it, my friend. Let him go,” and Bartoff did just that. Missus Drig, reclaiming her boy to her bosom, screamed furious, unintelligible, Cockney invective at Bartoff, who shrugged it off as wholly beneath his contempt.

So it was that Pluck and Bartoff were left to loiter about the lobby in silence whilst the carpet in the interview room was cleaned. The cleaning lady—let’s call her “Doris”—no, actually, I prefer “Modeste”. What do you think about “Modeste”? Okay, then, “Modeste” it is—Modeste, I say, bent her fifty-year-old back over the stain in the corner, scrubbing, endlessly, pointlessly, at least from her vantage; another shit stain in another corner in another month of her life. She didn’t know who’d made it, and she didn’t care. It was the Lord Who made it, the Lord Who tormented her, day in, day out, as punishment for—what? Some sin? Some sin she’d done, decades ago, when she was a girl? Some sin which was the sole act in the whole of her life she could claim as an authentic expression of her own will?

The others waited in the lobby, wordlessly. Evening had moved in, and the light from the lamps fenced around them on the walls, and overhead, perfumed the air in a golden mist. Larry and some other staff were at the desk, doing, or no doubt pretending to do, some work that needed being done. Some guests looked at each other, with varying degrees of surreptitiousness, some glanced at Pluck, warily, and some merely stared at the floor. Pluck, leaning against a chair, cast his armour-penetrating glare at first this person, then that one, then the iced-over window, the frozen sheen barely holding back the dark.

A few strands of Modeste’s silvery hair escaped her cap and dangled down over her face as she scrubbed. She thought back to when she was seventeen, and had taken a dislike to the lady in the cottage next door, so seduced the woman’s husband out of spite, let it be known throughout the village, and brought down the opprobrium of her family, friends, the church and, so it would seem judging by the subsequent chapters of her life, God. Everything before that act had been boring; everything since had been wretched. But for that one glorious week, when she skipped through town bragging of her misdeed, she basked in the full swelter of life, life, victorious life, a life of crushing those who had wronged you and burning decorum to the ground. She would never forget, nor forget to honour, that week—and the reliving thereof would be the last thought to patter spider-footed across her brow when she would finally, one day, die; with luck, she felt, one day soon.

Bartoff stepped over and patted Pluck on the back. Pluck threw him an appreciative smile, but reserved the better part of his thoughts for the task in hand: Who would want to kill that meek ass Snide? And what would he, or she, have to gain from making it look like a suicide? That cretin Larry was at least part-responsible, that much was clear, and that sodomite Voot was also somehow involved. But the particulars were key—without the particulars, Pluck reasoned, there would be no general; and, he realised in silent triumph, vice-versa!

He’d reached orgasm, with her—the married neighbour, that is. He’d come inside her, and, after her first surge of triumph over her rival, her thoughts turned to fear that

she'd be with baby. That would be just the sort of thing a melodramatist would write for her next, she thought. It never happened, of course; she would never marry, and she would never know the euphoria and agony of motherhood. She would look askance at children staying at the hotel, clean up after them, and curse them, under her breath. But they were strangers to her, one and all.

If he, Pluck, could only dematerialise, somehow, even if only in a dream, and reappear within the confines of one of his precious photographs—he would choose, he decided, the one with the boardwalk, and the dark-haired lady smiling over her shoulder at him, winking in shared acknowledgement of her enormous, naked behind, which rolled down in great folds like the steps of a waterfall, and absorbed most of the space of the composition. Upon miraculously finding himself in such a scene, he would, he told himself, immediately drop to his knees and offer worship to his anonymous muse. He would offer up everything, everything—his worldly possessions, his reputation, his honour, his hazard at an afterlife—for the right to touch that bottom, to devour it, to spend a photographic eternity within that scene, endlessly consuming and thereby possessing that flesh.

She wanted to scream, but she hadn't the vigour. She wanted to smash something, kill someone. She wanted to empty her bowels in a corner and leave it for somebody else to clean up. Actually—why not?

"Monsieur." It was Mifkin, that twat, who snuffed out Pluck's fantasy. "The interview room should by now have been returned to its normal pristine state." The acting manager led Pluck and Bartoff, who followed Pluck after the latter gestured with a flick of his head, back to the room. Mifkin threw open the doors, and they entered to the sight of Modeste the cleaning lady squatting in the corner, voiding her excrement onto the floor.

Bartoff collapsed, his head cracking against the ground.

"Mademoiselle!" shouted Mifkin. "You are discharged!"

Modeste was outraged at her treatment after all her years of loyal service. "How dare you, you twerpy upstart?! Only Herr Voot may discharge me!"

"Herr Voot is currently being held as an accessory to murder, mademoiselle," Pluck explained with his usual coolness. "He will not be resuming his duties for some time."

"Then I shall remain in the hotel's employ until such time!" she hollered, punctuating her triumph with a tongue stuck out in Mifkin's general direction.

"Then you may consider yourself relieved of your duties, until Herr Voot returns," insisted Mifkin.

"With full pay?" demanded Modeste.

Pluck leaned in to Mifkin: "I think it would be only Christian of you," he whispered.

Mifkin sighed. "With full pay. But keep yourself to your room."

"With pleasure!" she sang, and turned to go.

"And next time you need to excrete any substances, use the facilities provided!"

Mifkin called after her, pettily grasping at getting in the last word.

Another victory! After all these years! Modeste rushed past the stupid, torpid statues bearing human marks in the lobby, trailing a banner of stench behind her, through the kitchen and into the larder, where she often came to be alone and curse the heavens. There, in the dark, amidst the shelves and barrels and dust and rats, who peered out dubiously from their cracks, she whipped off her cap and tore it in two, her hair

unlayering itself in mighty sheaves, sank to her knees and praised God for what He had done. She vowed, wild-eyed, tearful, shaky-jawed, to use this triumph for the good of all men, women, children, animals, plants and minerals upon this earth, and to destroy utterly anyone who should oppose her in so doing.

With utter disregard for that miracle, Pluck (arms) and Mifkin (legs) carried the unconscious Bartoff out into the lobby.

“Make way, make way!” shouted Pluck, fully sensible of the dismal silence that followed his words, in place of the deafening parroting Bartoff would have normally supplied. Mifkin directed Pluck to the laundry room, where they dumped the heavy fellow onto a large table that was padded for ironing, but, so fitted to this purpose was it, that a first-time observer of the room might very well think it had been constructed for the sole purpose of gently bearing the weight of a huge man who had fainted at the sight of a cleaning lady’s faeces.

(In reality, this would mark the first and the last time the table would be used for this reason. Following the events of this story, the hotel would prosper for a few more years, before war, that inevitable calamity of man, as someone might have said, and probably, surely did, war, I say, war would level the flower-fields of civilisation, clamping a stranglehold on the humane mix of guests that was wont to stream into this fine establishment, to mix a metaphor or two, though it would struggle on for a while, before its owner cut his losses and boarded the place up; it would then be occupied by soldiers who craved shelter from the elements, smashed up the décor, played football in the ballroom, and treated the dignified history of the hotel with contempt; eventually, following the conflict, the hotel would lie empty, its furnishings looted by cackling thieves, like the hollowed-out skull of an Egyptian nobleman in preparation for his implausible afterlife; then it would be disassembled, beam by beam, and the barest remembrance of its foundation would remain stuck out of the frozen soil, like stone fragments of the Althing, for the enjoyment of no man, and no woman, and no third gender, no asexual, no demisexual, no pansexual, no neutrois, no two-spirit, no transgender person, no gender questioner, no cis-individual, no variorienter, no allosexual, no dyadic, no xumgender, no espigender, no exiccogender, no faegender, no embyfluid, no effreu, no ectogender, no contigender, no cheiragender, no caveagender, no blizzgender, no astergender, no gemelgender, no faunagender, no fascigender, no elissogender, no batgender, no axigender, no gendereaux, no glimragender, no horogender, no spikegender, no glitchgender, no traumatgender, no tachigender, no surgender, no boggender, no brevigender, no canigender, no cavusgender, no cosmicgender, no deaboy, no drakefluid, no hypogender, no stratogender, no sychnogender, no lovegender, no lysigender, no mascugender, no medeigender, no crystagender, no moongender, no neurogender, no musicgender, no digigender, no colourgender, no collgender, no impediogender, no iragender, no juxera, no kingender, no jupitergender, no anxiogender, no cishet, no undesignated social construct, and nobody else whom I’ve failed, through no fault of my own, to indicate here; in the very far future—but not so far that the reader should grow spiritually complacent—the earth itself will be wiped clean, and all souls yanked up from their graves, or reassembled from their ashes, to be judged: and at that trial, Modeste, our Modeste, will be found ultimately victorious, and be sat upon a golden throne, with no physical body and hence no need to

defecate either in a proper toilet or in the corner of a hotel room. And all who had wounded her shall be made to suffer the agonies of conflagratory regret, for all time.)

But I get ahead of myself.

To continue: a cleaning lady given at birth the name “Janice” was roped into mopping the interview room. This fine young woman, narrow of face, slight of figure and proud of her as-yet-untested chastity, moved briskly into the room, mop and pail gripped like ball and sceptre. When she was confronted by the sight, and smell, she vomited onto the middle of the carpet.

After she was helped to her room, a third cleaner was dispatched. All right, what shall we call this one? “Maisie”, you say, “Maisie”? Fine by me.

Maisie, then, it was, who bound her nose with a belt of cloth soaked in spoilt perfume, and mopped the floor from end to end. She had a simple decency to her words and deeds that appeased employer and guest alike; she exuded a sense of utter harmlessness to be contrasted with her later career as a militant suffragette; some of the same noblemen whose rooms she now cleaned would later, unbeknownst to them, find their windows smashed and homes burnt by her vengeful hand. Paintings would be slashed, trains derailed, dogs poisoned and gentlemen’s clubs bombed by a rabid Maisie with her lover by her side. More than one MP would find his manhood sliced off by her blade, figuratively and not-so-figuratively, in the years to come. Even now, as she was being forced by the patriarchal management to mop up human excrement, she closed her eyes and envisioned the savage chopping-off of penises that would prove her life’s sport.

Pluck, meanwhile, still waiting out in the lobby, penis intact, honoured the absent Frau Hühnerbeinstein by making her the subject of his thoughts. He imagined in scientific detail the complete topography of her denuded body, with himself as a curious, miniaturised traveller lost amidst its hills, valleys, bogs, swamps and woodlands. The other guests had more or less wandered off, to pass the time, salvage their holidays and wait to be summoned for interrogation, but those who remained, Enid, Stoupes, a duchess with her attendant, and the Lapin-Défunts among them, found it necessary to shield their eyes from Pluck’s unmistakable, albeit hardly immense, protrusion.

When, finally, good Maisie—kind, sweet, gentle Maisie—emerged from the interview room, Mifkin led our man back in. Pluck knelt down at several questionable places on the carpet, pulled out his magnifying glass and examined the fibres. He sniffed, and was rewarded for his olfactory effort with a whiff of lime-pine melange. He rose, looked Mifkin severely in the eye, then closed his own eyes and nodded—thereby indicating, via an untaught yet well-understood code, his satisfaction. In this one instance of shared, civil, albeit utterly silent, discourse, a newfound respect between these two mighty personalities might have been discerned; how very much they had in common, really, when looked at in that light: undeniably of the same species, boasting the same array of senses, each able to detect and infer in the other his practical, emotional, and, if it should come to that, even erotic, needs. Their resemblance at such a primal level of biological functioning would have been remarked upon, if both had not been such hopelessly stubborn creatures, as something wondrous. Given this unforgiveable obstinacy, as it happens, it falls to us—you, Reader, and I—to note it on their behalf: yes, indeed, something wondrous.

Getting back to the actual narrative, however, it was, they mutely agreed, too late in the evening by now to begin the interviews with any sort of dignity, and so the

unappetising endeavour was put off for the morrow. That night, there would be festivity, song, and wine. Tomorrow: the reckoning would commence.

## Chapter Ten

A soft fire popped flatulently, necessitating repeated, defensive explanations from Pluck that the noise absolutely did not emanate from his posterior. He was a proud man, in many ways, as the reader—I mean you—will have no doubt judged by now, and among his greatest sources of pride was the fist-tight stranglehold he maintained over his emissions of bodily gases, fluids and solids. No shitting in the corner of a room for him, no sir; his sphincter was a thing of beauty, he often told people during lapses in casual conversation, by which he did not mean so much aesthetically—he'd thrown his back out more than once in attempting to ascertain its artistic beauty via a mirror placed just so behind him—but morally, honourably, as indicative of his massive strength of will. His sphincter, he liked to say, whichever word one chose to nominate it—and a certain word was often used both behind his back and to his face with reference, less than charitably, to his character as a whole—his sphincter, I say, acted as metaphor for his iron-strong grasp on the evidence, the situation, and his adversaries' jugulars. If Pluck was an ass, his anus was the eye-window through which this donkey's soul could be viewed—if the viewer had courage enough to get up close and take a peep.

Anyway, Bartoff had recovered from his embarrassing fit and was sat at Pluck's side at the long interrogators' table. When he had been asked how he was feeling—not by Pluck, who had more important things to think about than others' well-being, but by various guests in the hotel—Bartoff mumbled something intended to convey his disinclination to address that topic. These guests, comprehending at once that the poor fellow clearly felt embarrassed about his public display of womanishness, readily refrained from mentioning the disgraceful episode. Pluck, on the other hand, brought it up incessantly, mercilessly, trying even the patience of his chief supporter.

“Now, you're not going to faint again, are you, old boy?” he asked him.

“Ha ha! Hardly, my friend. In fact, I feel sharper than ever!” He beat his chest with his fist in illustration. “Now, who shall be our first fish to grill, eh?” And he winked.

“First tell me more about this embarrassing propensity of yours to fall down like a sack of potatoes—little sissy girl potatoes, I hasten to qualify—at the first sight of common excreta.”

“No no, I assure you, Inspector, that won't happen again. Now, who is to be the first interviewee?”

“Because it would severely shatter the mood of the interrogation, you see, if in the middle of a dramatic disclosure, there was suddenly this thump just at my side because someone happened to have relieved his bowels in the vicinity.”

“Of course. You may rest assured on that score, my friend. Now, to continue—”

“There's a difference, of course, between a woman, *qua* woman, suffering a girlish light-headedness and crumpling with a certain grace, dress concertinaing in neat folds, to the floor—you'll grant me that—and a full-grown, virile, sensual man like yourself—”

“I grant you, but I assure you—”

“Please don't interrupt—I'm not even close to being finished—”

Etcetera.

After a couple hours of this, Bartoff was so worked up that he sat, impassively, a hulk of granite, albeit a hulk of granite that might also be compared to an ocean-going

vessel in whose engine room an observer, nosing his way into places he didn't really belong, might discover a furnace overfed with coal; an observer, therefore, who, having subsequently raised the alarm and saved the lives of every man, woman, child, pet, third gender, asexual, demisexual, pansexual, neutrois, two-spirit, etcetera, on that ship, would be hailed a hero, and all thanks to his having been nose-y where he hadn't really belonged. By this I mean to say that Bartoff was quite angry but, for the moment, to indulge in not just another metaphor but a veritable cliché, keeping a lid on it.

The scene was set, thus, for the inspector and his assistant to receive the first interviewee. It was at this critical moment that Aloysius, the waiter, chose to swan in with a pot of coffee. Pluck watched this man pour him a cup, in silence, before Aloysius turned to place a saucer, then an empty cup, before Bartoff. Just when the waiter was on the verge of pouring, Bartoff shouted: "No coffee for me!"

"I beg your pardon, monsieur." Quivering, Aloysius withdrew the cup and saucer, but Bartoff's lid had been narrowly dislodged—he threw over the table and knocked the waiter to the ground.

"Leave the cup and saucer!" Bartoff screamed, and in an instant had leapt onto the waiter and was on the brink of breaking the man's neck when Mifkin, alerted by the noise, rushed in, and together with Pluck pulled Bartoff off of him. Panting, allowing himself to be restrained, Bartoff admitted, in a much calmer voice: "I've just this moment changed my mind. I will have a cup of coffee, after all."

He was swiftly furnished with a cup.

It was decided, given the unforeseen drama, to postpone the commencement of the interviews till the following morning.

Pluck was back in his room, just opening his album, when a knock transported him out of his wonderland. He cursed his luck, stowed the album back in his travelling-chest, locked the locks and hid the keys, then opened the door. Before him stood a repentant, hangdog Bartoff.

"May I come in, my friend?" he asked.

Pluck sighed, then paused, then sighed again. "If you must." He made way for his friend to enter, then closed the door behind them, as you do.

"May I sit down?" asked the large man.

Pluck covered his face with his palms, but if his body language was meant to communicate that he would rather be alone, it must have been somehow lost on Bartoff, who, receiving no reply, sat down anyway on the bed. Pluck plopped into a wicker chair and stared at his guest, as if to ask, "Well?! What is it?! Why are you bothering me, anyway?!"

After a few moments of silence, in which Bartoff sat there, staring at the carpet, sniffing, Pluck opened his mouth and asked, explicitly, "Well?! What is it?! Why are you bothering me, anyway?!"

"I've come to say I'm sorry."

"Well, you're forgiven, for whatever it is." Pluck rose and walked to the door. "I wish you a good night's sleep, as we'll begin the interviews quite early tomorrow—"

Bartoff burst out in sobs. Pluck made a face of utter agony behind his back and mimed a motion of strangulation, then came round and asked, a mite more sympathetically, "What's the matter? Pray tell. In fact, if you could sum up your concerns



in, say, fifty words or less, it would allow us to discover a solution much more quickly. I suggest leaving out all adjectives, adverbs, unnecessary turns of phrase—”

“I’m a bad man!” Bartoff sobbed, leapt up, grabbed Pluck to him and buried his (Bartoff’s) face in his (Pluck’s) collar. The recipient, Pluck, struggled, naturally, to free himself, to no avail.

“I’m a bad man!” Bartoff repeated, not having heard any soothing words in reply (on account of there not having been any uttered).

“Why are you a bad man?” Pluck sighed.

“Because I’ve done something awful!”

“What have you done that’s so awful?”

“It’s positively awful!”

“Yes, I got that, but if you could be a little more specific—”

“It’s stupefyingly awful!”

“Tell me, is it at all awful?”

“Yes!”

“Would you describe it as ‘awful’?”

“Yes!”

“If someone referred to your transgression as ‘awful’, would you remonstrate with them for their childish exaggeration, or shake them by the hand for their incisiveness and wholeheartedly agree?”

“Yes, yes, ‘awful’ is the word! Yes!”

“I see.” Bartoff was rocking them back and forth in the middle of the room. Pluck found his breathing somewhat impeded by the presence of Bartoff’s mighty chin crushing against his windpipe, and his collar and sideburns moistened by a continuous stream of tears and, it has to be said, mucus. (The reader is invited to imagine the scene in every detail.)

“I insulted a man!” Bartoff suddenly volunteered. “That waiter! What’s-his-name—I can’t remember. But I hurt his feelings, wounded his pride, and probably caused him untold anguish, over so meagre a provocation as coffee!”

“Oh, that. I wouldn’t worry about that,” Pluck consoled, whilst gingerly extricating his torso from Bartoff’s embrace. “The man’s a servant, and thus by definition has no pride, and this particular specimen of that class happens to be, as I discovered to my disgust, an unspeakable boar, boasting, I dare say, no feelings to speak of. He could do with a good many more insults of a good deal more violent nature to haul him into line, I can tell you.”

Bartoff looked to him with pleading eyes; he reached out for him, but Pluck took his hand and shook it, manfully, instead. “Do you think I should apologise to him?” Bartoff asked.

Pluck laughed. “Certainly not. My advice is to pay him another insult, of at least the same degree, the very next time you see him. He’ll soon learn to read your desire or lack thereof for coffee, with enough stripes across his back, you’ll see.”

Bartoff looked to him with rabid hope: “Are you certain?”

“Am I certain? My dear fellow—have you forgotten who I am? Am I not the man who detected the insult to your family perpetrated by that other scoundrel on the staff of this reprehensible establishment, now somehow promoted, insanely, to acting manager—I mean Mifkin?”

“The swine! I’ll kill him!” Bartoff looked ready to do just that, but Pluck shushed him:

“A tadpole like that isn’t worth the effort, my friend. The law, even in this benighted land, has its inexplicable peculiarities in regard to the killing of peons—that is to say, you can actually be punished for it—and as such, must be respected. No, you’ll find that savages of that sort find their own way to the noose, without our need to trouble with building a scaffold or knotting a rope.”

“Thank you! My friend—thank you!” Bartoff hugged him with bearish relish, adopting a grateful meekness before his comrade, and a reinvigorated dedication to a forceful defence of his friend’s interests from that moment on.

## Chapter Eleven

The following morning, in a glorious rebirth of the investigation, the doors were once again thrown open, and Pluck and Bartoff strode magnificently into the interview room. An unbroken table with a fresh cloth and supply of sweetmeats and canapés awaited them, although not exactly with bated breath; it had been managing quite well in dreamless slumber, injuring none, demanding nothing of no one; a sparkling tribute to tasteful personification. The windows, meanwhile, were relieved of their drapes, exposing a blurred white rush of snow compounded with snow. There were a couple of lamps, and a rug rolled up in the corner, and that was it. Pluck sat down, naturally, in the seat at the centre of the table; Bartoff sat to his right. There was a seat on the other side of the table, for the suspect, but another bare chair remained on Pluck's immediate left. Pluck stared at this chair, for some time; for enough time that Bartoff eventually asked him:

"Is all well, my friend?"

"Pardon?"

"Is all well, my friend?"

"Hmm."

"...I trust all is well?"

Pluck had already sounded out his good friend Eyague about the critical contribution to the investigation the coronel's martial shrewdness, in addition to the wisdom Pluck assumed the old fool would have amassed simply by virtue of having grown so old without dying, would provide, but the Spaniard begged mercy, professing a sudden illness, a barefaced lie to which he stuck even when Pluck repeatedly offered to insert a thermometer into the distinguished soldier's hindquarters to ascertain the true extent of his complaint. After many hours of ear-splitting cajolement, bribery and threats, Pluck relented, concluding that, after all, it would be better for the preservation of their friendship not to subject it to the incandescent stress which collaboration, side by side, in a gruelling criminal investigation would necessarily entail.

Bartoff asked once more: "Of course, all's well?"

"We need a third man," Pluck suddenly decided, and jumped up from his seat and strutted out to the lobby. He stood in the doorway, fists on his hips, looking about: there was Poor Larry, there was an old lady with a dog, there were a couple of other characters neither Pluck nor I could be bothered to describe. But there, quietly descending the staircase, with a simple, unarguably graceless step, wrapped with an offensive casualness in an unflattering, ill-fitting cardigan of several seasons' antiquity, came Miss Enid Trojczakowski, who, upon seeing Pluck, issued effortlessly, as a matter of course, a cheerful, all-forgiving beam of a smile.

Pluck plumped for her.

"Mademoiselle," he bowed. "Would you do me, and us all, the honour of assisting with our investigation in the capacity of deputised junior investigator?"

"Forgive me, Mister Pluck—whatever do you mean?"

"If she were only younger," Pluck mused—silently, obviously—"with about triple her weight, and an altogether different face..." But he shook himself back to the business at hand. "I mean, of course"—now aloud—"that you will help me solve this mystery."

She demurred, annoyingly, wasting his valuable time, until she said yes. “Excellent,” judged Pluck. “And now, we will break for lunch.”

“It’s only nine-thirty,” Enid pointed out.

“Snacks, then,” agreed Pluck. “We’ll reconvene at two.”

## Chapter Twelve

Pluck was determined, this time, to move the investigation forward—he wasn't so dumb, or deaf, as many of the guests seemed to think, hearing all too well their contemptuous remarks, made in his hearing, that he either wasn't an inspector at all or was a criminally incompetent one; Pluck absorbed these insults with the learned stoicism on which he prided himself, though he naturally could not restrain the escape of a slight fusillade of slanderous retorts and haphazard threats in corrupt snatches of legalese from his end—and so recalled his co-investigators to the interview room at four-thirty on the dot. Bartoff, as it happened, was in the toilet at that time—number two, if you really want to know—not having been notified of the imminent resumption of his duties, and so was subject to a stream of pitiless insults from Pluck upon his return. He took it in his stride, did the large, affable fellow; he took it in his stride.

Pluck sat in the seat at the centre of the long table; Bartoff to his right, Enid to his left. Arranged before him, per his earlier barked instructions, were several piles of guests' passports and staff members' documents; the hotel register; a map of the premises; a pitcher of water and a group of glasses; a bell for summoning assistance; a fully stocked humidifier; a pad of paper, a rubber, several pencils and a sharpener; and a souvenir operatic programme signed by Frau Hühnerbeinstein.

Gleaning Enid's doings out of the corner of his all-encompassing eye, while he shuffled his paperwork, he noticed her fiddling with some sort of face powder or something equally womanish and inappropriate. He flirted with the idea of shouting at her, but calculated, with his locomotive-like rapidity of thought, that he would need to keep her on his side, so decided to reserve his excoriation for the interviewees.

He stared at the air for several minutes.

"With whom shall we begin?" asked Enid, seeking to break the silence.

Pluck sighed; there were people, he mused, like himself, who had the romantic understanding of life; who could see through the quotidian trifles that make up our daily existence; and then there were people like, alas, her. He sighed again, for effect, then drew the register to him.

"First," he announced—"Snedes, the clerk."

Silence. Pluck noticed this.

"Why is nobody moving?" he asked, his irritation growing. "Bartoff—call to that bellhop. Have them bring in Snede."

"Monsieur—"

He struck Bartoff with the register; neither was injured. "Call that idiot bellhop!" he ordered. "I want to see Snede!"

Enid's hand came onto his arm; he shook it off as he would a tarantula and glared at her.

"I beg to remind you, monsieur," she said in low tones, "that the gentleman in question is dead."

"What?!"

She assumed he'd asked his question rhetorically, and so said nothing. After he glared at her, a black nothingness emitting from his eyes, and demanded again, "What?!", she felt obliged to repeat:

“The gentleman is dead.”

“I heard you the first time!”

“Oh.”

“How did this happen?!”

“That is precisely what we are aiming to find out, monsieur,” put in Bartoff.

“I didn’t ask you!” Pluck snarled at him, then turned back to Enid: “Why didn’t anybody tell me?!”

“Mister Snede is the gentleman who was found murdered,” Enid reminded him.

“Preposterous! Bring him to me!”

“But—”

“Bring him to me, or I shall charge the entirety of the hotel register, and the very building itself, with impeding this investigation! Go!”

Mifkin was sent for, and after much protest from his side and many threats from Pluck’s, two porters were dispatched to bring in Snede from the storeroom, where he’d been placed in a kneeling position in a crate full of ice and straw. This crate was lifted onto a trolley and wheeled into the interview room, then lowered, in accordance with the inspector’s demands, before the table. With a real flair for the dramatic, the lid was removed, disclosing an offensive stench which Pluck immediately blamed on Bartoff, but secretly suspected to have originated from Enid. The porters were then dismissed, so that the interview might proceed in a confidential manner.

“Thank you for attending this interview, Mister Peed,” Pluck began. “In future, if we decide to recall you for any clarification of your remarks, please see to it that you arrive punctually—as any deviation from the stipulated time will only contribute toward a general presumption of guilt. Do we understand each other?”

The corpse said nothing.

“I asked you a question, monsieur; I quite expect an answer.” Pluck eyed him meaningfully.

Snede, in his blood-stained suit, let his head sink.

“Would you kindly have the courtesy to look me in the eye when I speak to you, monsieur!” shouted Pluck.

“Look him in the eye!” repeated Bartoff, getting into the rhythm of the thing, and perhaps beginning to doubt his own understanding of events.

Snede’s head creaked forward, over the rim of the crate; water dripped off his brow, and eyelashes, to plop audibly onto the carpet, then sink into the weave.

“Eh! Look at him perspire,” smiled Pluck, nudging Bartoff. “He knows we’ve got him.”

“We’ve got you!” screamed Bartoff at Snede.

His skin was entirely white, and the shavings of ice that had been stuffed on all sides of him were beginning to melt.

Enid cut in with a suggestion: “Perhaps we should lower the fire, gentlemen.”

“Whatever for?!” Pluck demanded. “It’s cold in this room already! It’s winter—or were you not aware of that fact, mademoiselle?!”

“I am aware—”

“No—in truth, you were not, were you, mademoiselle?!”

“You didn’t know it was winter!” boomed Bartoff. “Ha!”

Enid looked at the table, pursed her lips, waited for silence, then continued. "I assure you, gentlemen, that I am aware it is winter—"

"Then prove it!" demanded Pluck.

"I think—"

"Prove it!" echoed Bartoff, who'd somehow fallen a bit behind.

"I think," persisted Enid, "that what is happening to Mister Snede—"

"Prove it!" screamed Pluck, "Prove it! Prove it!"—now Bartoff took up the chanting—"Prove it! Prove it! Prove it!"

"Well, it's snowing outside, isn't it?!" Enid had lost her self-control, and shouted that last remark. Pluck and Bartoff, momentarily cowed by her uncharacteristic vehemence, shrank from her and looked her up and down.

"A formidable woman!" Bartoff admired, aloud.

"Perhaps," mused Pluck, "perhaps; but in any event, I concede, mademoiselle, that you have proved your point. Shall we break for lunch?"

Building on her victory, Enid went on: "I insist that we abandon this farce and return this poor gentleman to the storeroom whence he came."

"Don't be absurd," scoffed Pluck.

"Irritating woman!" sneered Bartoff.

"Are you gentlemen quite through?" asked Enid. "I'd been under the impression that this was a serious matter we were investigating."

"Not through, mademoiselle, not through," answered Pluck, rising from his seat, "and I could not agree with you more that it is most certainly a quite serious matter." He extended his finger at the corpse and pronounced, dramatically: "*Charles Snede—I accuse you of the murder of Charles Snede!*"

A hush fell over the room; Pluck stopped, and shook his head. Something wasn't right here—his legendary powers of deduction told him that. He whispered to Enid: "What did I just say?"

"You accused Charles Snede of murdering Charles Snede."

Pluck thought. "Quiet, while I think!" he screamed, although nobody had made a sound. "Two men...one a murderer, and one the victim...with the same name!" he marvelled aloud. "The odds are astronomical—and yet, there is no other explanation."

"Perhaps one Charles Snede has murdered the other in an attempt to steal the latter's identity," suggested Bartoff.

Pluck nodded. "Perhaps, my friend, perhaps. Or—equally likely, speaking statistically—perhaps one Charles Snede caught the other stealing his identity, and so killed him in revenge."

"Revenge!" Bartoff began to salivate, just thinking of it.

"Or as a practical means of retaining his own sense of self; for which I must say I cannot blame him."

"Nor I," Bartoff agreed.

"Or!" Pluck clapped his hands, once, loudly. "I've got it!" He leapt up onto the table, to explain, but slipped and hit his head on the edge, then collapsed onto the floor. Bartoff and Enid helped him up, and dusted him off, then, by Pluck's request, Bartoff gripped one palm in the other to afford the detective a foothold, into which Pluck, obviously, placed his foot, to be heaved up onto the table, Enid acting as spotter in case he might tumble once more. But, with his fabled agility, Pluck alighted on the table-top, as

instinctively as a bird, and proceeded to propound his hypothesis: “Or!” he continued, “Charles Snede number one was framed for the murder of Charles Snede number two by an interloper—an *unforeseen Charles Snede number three!*”

“That’s it!” screamed Bartoff.

“Help me down! Now!” Pluck demanded. When he’d been carried back to the earth by his co-investigators, he pored over the hotel register. “I find no guest who willingly volunteered the name ‘Charles Snede Number Three’,” he sighed, “which admittedly throws a bit of a spanner into my theory...”

“He could have used a false name,” Bartoff shrugged.

“That’s it! My friend, you’re a deductive genius!” Pluck exclaimed, and went to kiss Bartoff on the lips and reach gratefully for his groin, but realised what he was doing and stopped himself before he could make so ineradicable a blunder. Collecting himself, he proceeded: “He could have used any name—any name at all!”

“‘Minette’!” Bartoff read off the register.

“‘Stoupes’!” Pluck read.

“‘Feosalma’!”

“‘Johnson’!”

“‘Bergamaschi’!”

“‘Bruneau’!”

“‘Gridenko’!”

“‘O’Herlihy’!”

“‘Bartoff’!” shouted Bartoff, then froze, seeing what he had done. But it was too late: Pluck stuck his face within an inch of his friend’s and scrutinised him, minutely, relentlessly.

“Yes...yes, yes, it might just be,” he nodded. “Is that a confession you’ve just made, Monsieur Bartoff? Tell me—is it?”

“No, no, of course not!” Bartoff laughed, uneasily.

Pluck stared into his eye—an eye that had seen a gamut of sights, over the course of his life, from the miraculous to the horrific—and whispered: “My old friend—what have you done?”

Bartoff gulped, feeling the fingernails of an immense guilt carving down his back, though a guilt for a crime of which he was utterly unaware.

Pluck stared at him, eye to eye—his eye a hair’s breadth from Bartoff’s—their lashes brushed, somewhat sensually, like a bird’s tail feather brushing against a potential mate’s beak—then, by dint of the sticky, mucous tears Bartoff’s fears had secreted, their lashes stuck; and held. Pluck tried to pull away, but only succeeded in yanking Bartoff’s head along with him, which head proceeded to butt the inspector’s, unintentionally yet painfully, and the two friends collapsed onto the floor, locked eyeball-to-eyeball, thrashing about with an unceasing spouting of *Oof!’s*, *Ow!’s*, *Unhand me!’s*, *Fucking idiot!’s* and the like.

“Help! Help! Snede, help me!” begged Pluck.

“He’s dead, you silly man!” shouted Enid, chasing after them as they rolled about the floor. “Stay still so I can help you!”

“Inspector! I’m sorry!” bawled Bartoff. “This is all my fault!”

“So you admit the murder of Charles Snede, the second?”

“No, no! I meant—”



“Hold still so I can burn your lashes!” yelled Enid, taking in hand a candle.

“Help! Help!” screamed Pluck. “She wants to castrate me!”

“I said nothing of the kind!” shouted Enid, chasing after.

The two great friends, heedless of where they rolled, wheeled into the fireplace.

“Help! Snede!”

The dead man knelt, head hung, his soul a million miles from there. The corpse remained at rest; it made no move to help.

“Why are you just kneeling there?!” screamed Pluck in disbelief. “Why won’t you help me?!”

Aflame, the two men wrenched away from each other, Bartoff’s lashes—being the stronger—deracinating Pluck’s. (If it had been a game of wishbone, Bartoff, decidedly, would have won.)

Pluck emerged from the fireplace, grasping his eyelid (an awkward thing to do), screaming in pain and on fire. Enid made a motion to throw the contents of the water pitcher onto the both of them, but forgot to hold onto the pitcher’s handle, with the result that the glass vessel flew through the air and smashed against the side of Pluck’s head, gifting him an unsightly gash.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” shouted Enid, for that was one infraction she could not very well deny.

Pluck screamed a barrage of unbecoming curses at Enid, Bartoff, Snede, and, essentially, the universe as a whole. Enid, meanwhile, patted the flames off Bartoff with a napkin; that done, Bartoff took the remaining shreds of the napkin, saw it was insufficient for the task of smothering the flames off Pluck, so reached down to pull up a rug with which to save his friend; he did not check, first, alas, to see if any of the party happened to be standing on the rug at the time, so that when he whipped it up, Pluck was hurtled off of his feet and back into the fireplace. This time, when he was tugged out by Enid and Bartoff, his hair was on fire.

“I’ll kill you all!” he screamed, but it was really the intense pain and sense of imminent incineration talking, not he. His two friends smothered out the flames over his hair and body, and Enid took a new napkin to hold to the cut on his face. The debonair inspector had some singed hair, ripped and burnt clothes, an eyelashless eye and blood from his ear down to his shoulder, but he had won the day, and demonstrated as much by rising from the floor and ringing the bell for Poor Larry the bellhop to appear. Larry having appeared, and looking in bewilderment at the scene before him, Pluck ordered:

“Boy, bring in the other two Charles Snedes—numbers two and three—together! So that we might let the three of them confront each other; and all we need do, lady and gentleman,” here turning to Enid and Bartoff, “is sit back, fold our arms and watch, while the riddle of this mystery unravels itself.”

“I’m sorry, monsieur?” asked Larry.

Pluck accorded him a withering gaze and asked, “Shall I repeat myself?”

“If you please, sir.”

Pluck slapped himself on the side of the head, as a gesture intended to indicate his impatience with the congenital stupidity of the serving class, but chose his right side, thereby slapping his gash, resulting in a bestial squeal of pain (his own).

“Are you all right, sir?” asked Larry, secretly pleased.

“Damn you!” Pluck screamed.

“Damn you!” Bartoff seconded.

Shaking his fists, barely restraining himself from assaulting the boy, Pluck repeated, slowly: “Bring in the other two Snedes...numbers two and three...together. So that,” now turning first to Bartoff, then to Enid, “we might let the three of them confront each other —”

“But there are no other Snedes, sir,” Larry interrupted, with unbelievable impertinence.

“Fool!” screamed Pluck.

“Fool!” shouted Bartoff.

“Go and find them!” Pluck commanded.

“Find them!” Bartoff repeated, in case Larry should have missed what Pluck had just said.

Larry duly withdrew, to go and have his tea break. Pluck, meanwhile, took out his magnifying glass and proceeded to examine the dead man, muttering the odd forensic comment here and there while so doing.

“You do realise that he is dead, monsieur?” Enid felt it necessary to say.

“Hush,” muttered Pluck, not in the mood for a woman’s raving.

“Hush!” screamed Bartoff. “The inspector is inspecting!” Bartoff watched, fascinated, as his friend stuck his little finger in the ear of the corpse, pulled it out, sniffed it, and shrugged at the lack of information thus produced. Now Pluck turned to Enid:

“Miss Trojczakowski,” he began.

“Yes?”

“...Enid...” He was looking a mite embarrassed.

“Yes?”

He could not look her in the eye. “I have a request...of a most delicate nature...to make of you.”

“What is it?”

“Pardon?”

“What is it?”

Pluck sighed. “I was afraid you might ask that.” He thought, but, strategically, did not say aloud, that it would be so much easier if she’d simply known her place and acceded to his demands without protest or understanding. He continued—out loud, now —“I have a request...of a most delicate nature.”

“You’ve already—”

“To make of you.”

“Yes. You’ve already said that.”

Pluck looked at her, and sighed. “I suppose you’ll be wanting to know what the request is?”

“That’s right.”

He looked at her, and sighed again. And looked at her. “I thought as much.” He sighed. “I thought you would.” He sighed. Cleared his throat. Looked at her. Sighed. He then proceeded to sigh, look at her, and clear his throat.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m coming to that!” he barked.

“He’s coming to that!” Bartoff shouted.

Pluck looked at her, sighed—slowly—and said, “I require you to remove the suspect’s trousers and undergarments.”

“I will not,” she answered promptly.

“As the investigator in charge, I must needs make a thorough examination of his private areas.”

“You may do it yourself, or ask Mister Bartoff, or, for all I care, ask Mister Snede to undress himself,” she answered, suddenly and inexplicably all moral-like.

He nodded, in surprise at the relatively lucid workings of her mind. “Indeed! An excellent idea, Miss Trojczakowski.”

“Excellent idea!” boomed Bartoff.

Pluck looked at her, as for the first time. “I might have misjudged you, Enid.”

“Thank you, Curtis.”

He smiled, then, reassuming an official tone, turned to Snede and demanded: “Sir—undress yourself, and produce your male member, at once!”

“Show us your cock!” Bartoff shouted.

In a more mild manner, Pluck turned to Enid, who had been looking at Bartoff with some slight distaste, and offered, “You might wish to face the wall during this phase of our investigation, for the preservation of the suspect’s dignity, and of your own innocence.”

“That is very thoughtful of you,” she returned, and, indeed, took hold of a chair, turned it to face the wall, and sat down into it.

At this display of feminine prudery, Pluck gave a quick nod of approval, and turned to face his suspect. “Right. Mister Snede—I see you have yet to begin the process of disrobing. Do you require any assistance?”

Snede declined to reply.

“I say—Mister Snede. Would you like me to help you lower your trousers?”

“Show us your fucking cock!” Bartoff shouted again, eliciting a wince from the back of Enid’s neck.

Snede made no move to comply.

“Right!” said Pluck with a decisive nod. “I’ll have to do this myself. Er, Bartoff.”

“Yes, Inspector?”

Pluck tilted his head to indicate the dead man. “Take down his trousers.”

“...Yes, Inspector.”

Pluck turned away, in order to, as he’d already put it, spare Snede’s blushes and preserve his own, Pluck’s, innocence, and was soon greeted with Bartoff’s exclamation:

“Inspector!”

“Yes?”

“I say, Inspector!”

“What is it?”

“Come and have a look at this!”

Pluck stood stock-still and continued to stare at the wallpaper (white, floral). “I’d rather not, thank you very much,” he sneered. “Why don’t you describe it to Miss Trojczakowski and myself, if you feel the need? Perhaps via a thoughtful appeal to figurative language—you know, sausages and brush-bristles and potato sacks and such.”

“Sir...I’m not sure exactly how I should put it, figuratively or otherwise.”

Pluck sighed, several times, at increasing volumes—his patience with these people really was reaching a limit.

“May I...may I employ the metaphor of a flagpole?” Bartoff essayed.

“You may.”

“Or a swordfish’s snout?”

“If it pleases you.”

“Or perhaps a harpoon?”

“Go on.”

“Or...” The big man was still thinking. “Maybe a penis?”

“That’s not a metaphor,” Pluck explained. “That’s the object in question, which you’re seeking to euphemise. Is it not?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” spoke Bartoff, flustered as he was. Enid’s eyes could be practically heard to roll from behind them.

“I’ve got it!” shouted Bartoff. “The famed Tower of—Pisa!”

“All right.”

“Shall I say it?” asked Bartoff.

“Go on.”

“I’ll tell you!” Bartoff was adorably giddy in his enthusiasm.

“We’re waiting.”

Bartoff raised a finger into the air, and searched the corner of the ceiling for the perfect wording: “...The Leaning Tower of Pisa...continues to lean!”

“Yes?”

“Yes! It has not fallen!”

“No?”

“No! It is hard—stone-hard—and erect!”

“Ah.”

“Do you see?”

“I see.”

“Do you understand?”

“I believe I do.”

“Put another way,” Bartoff went on, conscious he was on a rhetorical roll, and held his audience, consisting of one man and the back of one woman, in his thrall, “if the Tower were a penis, the penis, then, would be erect.”

“I think I’ve understood you. And what you say, is...it is odd,” Pluck admitted, then turned to see for himself. He stared, a lot, and salivated, a little. “Did you...did you, you know...”

“Did I what, Inspector?”

“You know!” Pluck laughed, but, he could see from Bartoff’s face, he did not. “You know—did you, ah, touch it?”

“Not I, Inspector!”

“I don’t necessarily mean with your fingers, you imbecile! I meant, perhaps, accidentally brushing it with your sleeve, or something?”

“I was awfully careful not to, Inspector.”

“Did you take it into your mouth, by any chance?”

“Inspector!”

“Just, try to remember. Think back—it was only moments ago. Is it possible you took it into your mouth, moved it for some minutes, say, in and out, and then forgot that you had?”

“I think I would remember that, monsieur!”

“Try! Think back, and try to remember, carefully.”

“I assure you, Inspector!”

Pluck thought. “Come here,” he commanded. Bartoff came close to him. “Closer.” Bartoff moved closer. “Careful of my remaining eyelashes, for Christ’s sake!” Pluck berated him. Bartoff was careful. Pluck raised his magnifying glass and examined his friend’s face. “...I see no evidence of spermatic contamination,” he finally concluded, possibly with a faint air of disappointment. “If he did, indeed, ejaculate on you, you were certainly careful to wipe away any trace.”

“I assure you, Inspector, that nothing of the sort occurred.”

Pluck moved away. “Well, I can see that I have no choice but to believe you. For the present.” He moved up to Snede and examined him, all over, with his magnifying glass. He advanced from his genitals to his face. “Raise your head up, my good man,” he instructed, and when Snede failed to do so, he sighed and raised it for him. He took in, per his mastery of forensic science, the man’s bone structure, earlobe formation, hairline, and nose slope. “Odd...” he murmured.

“Odd!” parroted Bartoff.

“What is it?” asked Enid, still facing the wall.

“This man looks very much like the corpse we were shown in the reading-room just the other day,” Pluck realised. “Perhaps they were related—perhaps—I’ve got it!”

“He’s got it!”

“Identical twins! Triplets!” Pluck lowered his glass and stared into the white nothingness through the window in wonder at the mysterious workings of the universe. “...Lady and gentleman...I dare say that we have before us an entire hotel full of men, all of whom look exactly like, and answer to the name of—‘Charles Snede’.” He lowered his head and shook it, as if to say, to his victorious Creator: *Touché*.

“Are you gentleman quite through?” This insolent remark came from Enid, who had, apparently, stood up from the chair and turned to face them; in any event, she was now visibly standing and facing them, so the manner in which she had assumed this position is really only a matter of calculated conjecture.

Pluck hastily raised Snede’s trousers, to save from contamination Enid’s blissful innocence of the logistics of procreation, but, while bent down, fumbling with the buttons, accidentally brushed his lips across the dead man’s Tower of Pisa. He vomited, at once, across Snede’s sexual apparatus, then rushed to rebutton the trousers over the mess. He finally, after barking for his friends to assist him, to no avail, succeeded in his mission, with the result that his sick, fused to the dead man’s extremity, was contained in a bulge beneath Snede’s trousers. Pluck knelt, panting, next to him.

“Somebody wipe my mouth!” he ordered.

“There are no more napkins,” Enid replied.

“Then use your hand, damn you!” Pluck shouted. As no hand was forthcoming, he had to make do with Snede’s hair; as Snede did not complain, Pluck felt himself fully justified.

He staggered to his feet. “Inform that moron bellhop that Mister Snede has been sick,” he ordered. “If Manager Mifkin inquiries, explain that Snede, realising that we had succeeded in establishing his guilt, waited until the moment I rose to accuse him of murder, then exposed himself shamelessly, as a classic distraction manoeuvre, then, understandably, became sick at the sight of his own repulsive body, vomited over himself, then attempted to conceal the evidence by stashing it away in his trousers. Have this mess cleaned up, and have Snede confined to his room until further notice. We’ll now break for lunch, and reconvene in three hours. *Adieu.*” And he was gone.

## Chapter Thirteen

Pluck hadn't much liked the looks Poor Larry had cast his way when the inspector had questioned him in detail about how he had gone about the cleaning and disposal of Mister Snede, and so, when it came time to select the second interviewee, he naturally turned the guest list face-down on the table and announced, "Larry the Idiot Bellhop." Larry, who had been standing before the table in the interview room to await the name of the next guest to be summoned, stood still, evidently in some confusion.

"That's you," Pluck explained.

"That's you!" Bartoff shouted.

"So sit down."

"Sit down! Now!"

Larry took the seat across the table from the three investigators. The flickering light from the fireplace shook thin frightened shadows on every side of him.

"Where were you at the time of the murder?"

"I was—"

"Look me in the eye when you answer me, please."

He held himself still and tried to look Pluck in the eye. In fact, he stared at Pluck's eye with curiosity.

"Pardon me, monsieur."

"Yes, what is it?!"

"What do you want?!" screamed Bartoff.

"Has something happened to your eye?"

"This? This is per the latest fashion, you ignoramus," Pluck fobbed him off.

"Don't you know anything about fashion?!" Bartoff screamed.

Addressing Bartoff's inquiry, Larry replied, "No, sir, I guess I don't."

"Quiet!" Bartoff screamed, with a violence that made Larry quake and, indeed, remain quiet, until Pluck saw fit to ask him:

"Without further attempts at distraction, tell us, plainly, in your own words, where you were, and what you were doing, at the time of the murder."

"Well, I was—"

Pluck cut him off: "What is your full name?"

"Tell us your name!" shouted Bartoff.

"Lawrence—"

"Your name!" Pluck repeated.

"Tell us your name, or so help me God—!" Bartoff made to strike him across the table.

Larry leapt down underneath it. Bartoff threw back his chair and readied himself for a fray. Enid deterred him with a soft entreaty: "Mister Bartoff, please. Let the boy speak." She bent down to speak to Larry under the table. "It's all right," Enid sought to soothe him. "The inspector is following the normal line of inquiry. As long as you answer promptly and truthfully, you need have no fear."

"That's right," agreed Pluck, "unless, of course, you're the murderer!"

"Murderer!" screamed Bartoff.

Larry tried to crawl from under the table straight under Enid's dress; she gently pushed him away. With an aw-shucks snap of his fingers, he returned, droop-headed, to his seat, and turned to face them, lower lip eclipsing the upper.

"Now, for the last time," Pluck resumed—"What is your name?"

Larry waited a moment, in case Bartoff should take it into his head to shout something or attack him, but when that didn't happen, he cleared his throat and answered: "'Lawrence Bipp Williams'."

"What was that?" asked Pluck.

"What?!" shouted Bartoff.

"'Lawrence Bipp Williams'," the poor boy quivered.

"'Lawrence Bipp Williams'?" Pluck laughed. "Really? And not, by any chance—'Charles Snede'?"

"Charles Snede!" shouted Bartoff, rising and pointing at Larry.

Pluck rose as well. "Mister Snede, I accuse you assuming the name of Charles Snede the first, then murdering Charles Snede the second, then framing Charles Snede the third, then plotting to change your name legally, by deed poll, at the first opportunity to travel to town, to—'Snede Charles'!"

"Conspirator and scoundrel!" Bartoff spat.

"Please, gentlemen," Enid implored them. "Might I ask the boy a question?"

"I hardly think, now that we've solved the case, there's any need," Pluck demurred.

"Just one, please, for my sake?" Pluck could not refuse that beseeching smile, and gave her a curt nod. She turned to Larry, who was hugging himself in fright: "Larry—"

"Snede'," Pluck corrected her.

"You were the one to find the body, weren't you?" she went on.

"Body?! What body?!" demanded Pluck.

"The body of Mister Snede," Larry explained.

"I wasn't asking you!" Pluck shouted.

"The body of Mister Snede," Enid told him.

"But—but..." Pluck stopped, stroked his chin, as one would a lover's buttock, and thought. "Body...murder...? Yes, of course...but Snede?" He shook his head. "No, no—it was Snede, the third, who murdered Lawrence Bipp Williams, the second! Or was it Lawrence Bipp Williams, the fourth, who murdered Charlie Snede the negative second?"

Larry ignored him and narrated to Enid: "I was moving some of the seltzer bottles to the pantry—"

"Seltzer bottles—likely story," Pluck murmured out of the side of his mouth to Bartoff.

"Lying idiot!" Bartoff screamed, more openly.

"—and another porter asked me to restock the papers in the reading room," Larry went on.

"Which porter?" asked Enid.

"Curtis," Larry answered at once.

Pluck, Enid and Bartoff looked at each other: they had not heard of him. Pluck scoured the register. There it was: "Curtis Vacaresteanu".

"Surely that's not his real name?" asked Pluck.

"Why wouldn't it be?" asked Enid.

"Well..."



Enid turned to Larry: "Why would you need to restock the papers?"

Larry shrugged; a fool question from a woman, after all. "So that the guests might have the pleasure of reading the most recent news, madame."

"You refer to the papers which are delivered every day?" she asked.

"Yes, madame."

"At what time in the day?"

"At four o'clock, madame."

"Four in the afternoon?"

"Naturally, madame."

"Hm. I see."

Pluck yawned. "Now, if you don't mind, Miss Trojczakowski, I would like to continue with the interrogation." Addressing Larry: "Mister Snede—"

"Pardon me, monsieur," Enid interrupted him, "but I just have one further question I'd like to put to Mister Williams, if I may."

"Really, Miss Trojczakowski—must we all of us play inspector, this day?"

"Indulge me, please, Mister Pluck."

Pluck shrugged, and let her play inspector. She turned to Larry:

"Mister Williams—did any new papers arrive that day, given the fact that by the time four o'clock came and went, the hotel had already been snowed in?"

Larry stared at her.

"Yes, yes, very good, we've established that we hadn't any new papers, now let's move on," said Pluck. "If you look at the names 'Lawrence' and 'Snede', as I'm sure you already have, many a time, my dear boy, you'll find that both have two *e*'s and no *z*'s."

"But Mister Pluck, don't you see?" Enid asked.

"Look!" Pluck's patience was wearing thin. He jumped up and strode out of the room. A few moments later, he returned, with a porter in tow who wheeled in a large blackboard. After it was set up in front of the table, Pluck waved the porter away and took up a piece of chalk. He wrote on the blackboard, in large letters:

*LAWRENCE*

and

*SNEDE*

"Now. See these *e*'s?" He circled the *e*'s. "See these *z*'s?" He waved the chalk around in mock-dismay. "No *z*'s! Oh, dear me, dear me—no *z*'s! Whatever shall we do?"

"What shall we do?!" Bartoff thundered, failing to appreciate the irony.

Pluck threw down his chalk to the floor, as a means of emphasis. "My good man, I shall tell you what we shall do—if you would be so kind as to ask Mister Mifkin to come in with two able-bodied porters."

"Surely the boy can do it?" Bartoff suggested softly, not wishing to surrender his pride as a gentleman in assuming the duties, even temporarily, of a hotel clerk whilst any other possibility lay untested.

"For reasons relevant to the investigation, I should like the boy to remain within my sight before my announcement is made."

Bartoff looked to Enid, then sighed, and walked to the door. Opening it, he called out: "Mifkin! Come here at once, and bring two porters!"

“Two *able-bodied* porters,” Pluck reminded him.

“Two *able-bodied* porters!” Bartoff yelled, then held the door open, utterly shamefaced, while those three gentlemen entered.

“You may close the door, now,” Pluck instructed. Bartoff, disgraced, imagining his poor mother being informed of her son’s decline, did so.

Pluck smiled at Manager Mifkin and the two big porters. “Gentlemen—thank you for accepting my invitation.” They waited. “...Welcome to the interview room! And welcome...er...to the investigation.”

“Can we help you with something, sir?” inquired Mifkin.

Pluck stared back, darkly. “Must you debase everything with which you come into contact with professional motives?”

“I’m sorry, monsieur?”

Pluck sighed, and sought to explain. “I have invited you three here to partake in a celebratory...um...celebration.”

“What are we celebrating?” asked Enid.

Pluck stared at the floor, fed up with being interrupted. He twisted his lips back into a smile, raised his face, and continued with what he was saying to Mifkin: “As I was saying, monsieur, I have invited you three here to partake in a...let’s just call it a ‘celebration’.”

“What are we celebrating, monsieur?” Mifkin, face not betraying a molecule of his contempt (which stretched beneath his surface like a vast volcanic landscape beneath the sea), asked.

“Excellent question!” Pluck responded. “Bravo! I congratulate you, monsieur, on an excellent question.”

The porters, well-trained as they were in attending without remark the mindless drivel of the higher classes, waited in silence.

“And may I be privileged with the answer, monsieur?” Mifkin asked.

“Pardon?”

“May I—?”

“Have you any champagne?” Pluck asked.

“Champagne—your finest!” Bartoff shouted, seizing upon a plank of the conversation which he finally understood.

Mifkin bent to instruct one of the porters, when Pluck cut him off:

“No! Not—yet.” He turned, and began pacing, thoughtfully, before them. “Not yet.”

Enid, Bartoff, Larry, Mifkin and the porters waited whilst Pluck paced. A wind shook the window; the snow had not ceased to fall. Pluck suddenly whirled and pointed at Larry. “Take that boy into custody!” he screamed.

“Grab him!” thundered Bartoff.

“Wait!” shouted Enid.

Larry got up and hid behind Mifkin.

“What for?” Mifkin asked.

“What was that?” asked Pluck.

“I asked, ‘What for?’” Mifkin said.

Pluck shrugged. “I can’t say I know what you mean.”

“Of what are you accusing him?” Enid translated.

“Of what am I accusing *whom*?” asked Pluck, turning to her with some irritation.

“Larry,” quoth Enid, Bartoff, Mifkin, and each of the porters; “Me,” squeaked Larry.

Pluck stood, taking his time to breathe in the discordant vibrations in the room; he’d had this sensation before, in cases of this kind: the sensation that a revelation, which would upend his entire outlook on the case, was about to occur.

“And who...is Larry?” he asked quietly, knowing that the answer to this question might very well solve all.

“I’m Larry,” said Larry.

Pluck nodded, then quietly laughed. “Indeed,” he murmured. Then, to the others: “Gentlemen! The case is closed; the investigation is complete.”

“You have solved the mystery?” Mifkin asked.

“Yes; and to that end, I hereby accuse this boy”—finger pointed once again at Larry—“of the murder of Lawrence Bipp Williams!” Then, after a pause: “Hang on—that’s absurd. I meant to say: the murder of Lawrence Wipp Billiams! Take him away!” He beamed in triumph.

“Mister Pluck—” Enid began.

“Of course,” he answered. He tore a page from the notepad on the table, scrawled his autograph and handed it to her—then, seeing that he’d made a slight error, he scribbled it out, wrote it again, and handed it to her once more.

“Thank you,” she said, taking it, “but I beg to remind you that Lawrence Bipp Williams—”

“Ah, you mean ‘Wipp Billiams’!”

“Yes, well, he’s the bellhop here, alive and, more or less, well, while Charles Snede —”

“You mean, ‘Charles Williams’.”

“No, Charles Snede is the dead man.”

“Dead man?!”

“Dead?!” Bartoff shouted.

Pluck seized his magnifying glass and rushed over, pushing the porters to either side, to grab Larry by the back of his neck and shove his implement against his nose. He looked him all over the face, then threw him to the floor, turning and declaring: “This boy is alive!”

“This boy is Larry, Lawrence, Williams!” Enid cried. “Charles Snede is the dead clerk!”

Pluck looked at Larry, aghast. He turned to the others; then to Bartoff, seeking some sympathetic face. Bartoff smiled; Pluck smiled back. He strolled over to that gentleman, grasped his hand, and they shook, to acknowledge the mutual understanding they enjoyed; an understanding at once deep, poignant—and humane. The others in the room delighted in this expression of friendship. Then Pluck turned, walked magnanimously over to Larry, drew him up off the floor, and shook his hand—with the very same hand.

“I congratulate you, my young foe,” Pluck said. “You’ve had wits enough about you to avail yourself of a technicality—and thereby evade the firing squad. Very good. In other words, you’ve bought yourself a few more hours this side of the grave. I advise you seek to enjoy them.” He turned to his co-investigators: “We will reconvene tomorrow at dawn. No, not dawn; let’s say ten AM. Make that eleven—sharp.” And he turned, opened the door, and bore his dignity out of their presence.

## Chapter Fourteen

The evening saw several hands of bridge, baccarat and other games played in the ballroom. Pluck, shirt clean and pressed, jacket dusted, bow tie tight, entered the room, to be met with stares of fear, glares of hatred and squints of curiosity. A few people laughed at an old lady's winnings; she had cleaned them out, it appeared. When he went over to offer his congratulations, she returned him a cold look, got up without a word and went off to the toilet. He couldn't understand it. He followed her, straight into the ladies' room, on principle.

When she was about to enter a cubicle to relieve herself, she turned round and saw him there, alone beside her.

"Get out of here!" she choked.

"Why don't *you* get out of here?" he countered. "After all, I was here first."

"No you were not, you impudent idiot!" she seethed. "You followed me in here!"

He laughed, delightfully. "I beg to differ."

"You do know this is the ladies' room, don't you?"

"Ha! You take me for a fool, madame!"

"What was that?"

"I said that you take me for a fool! Of course this isn't the men's room!"

"I know that it isn't!"

"No, I mean—I meant to say that of course this isn't the ladies' room!"

"The what?!"

"The—are you hard of hearing, madame?"

"I'm rather deaf, it so happens. I've left my ear trumpet at the table."

"So you can play a trumpet with your ear, now, can you, madame? Ha! That's about as likely as this being the ladies' room!"

Two ladies came in.

"Get out of here!" screamed Pluck. "This is an abode for men, and for criminal suspects like this old lady here!"

"This is the ladies' room," countered one of the women, unruffled.

Sighing at the shenanigans he was forced to undergo, Pluck grabbed each of the two women by an arm and escorted them outside, then turned them all round to have a look at the door, which read *Ladies*. He stared at it for several minutes—stories often say "for several minutes", really meaning just a few seconds, especially if in the midst of dialogue, as several minutes of silence in the middle of a conversation would, I'm sure you, Reader, would agree, prove very awkward indeed; but here, I really, truly do mean *several minutes* of staring at the sign in bafflement, during which he held onto the arms of the ladies—before he finally shouted, "What perverted idiot has switched the signs?!"

The old lady, assuming that Pluck would have left the outside of the ladies' room by now, chose that moment to exit; Pluck immediately drew her into the men's room (or, as he would have it, the ladies' room mis-signed) and sat her down on the toilet.

"Get your hands off me! I shall call for help!"

"I only want to ask you a few questions!"

"Let me out of the men's room at once!"

"Ah, but you forget that this is not the men's room, madame."

“What did you say?!”

“Shall I shout it into your ear, in lieu of a trombone?”

“What’s that?”

He sighed, though to no purpose, as she could not hear it. He spoke, at volume: “I said that this is not the men’s room!”

Two men entered the room.

“Get out!” Pluck screamed. “This is the ladies’ room! Read the sign, you brainless oafs!”

The men withdrew. Pluck turned to the lady, still sat on the toilet. “Just tell me, madame—”

“What?”

“Just tell me—what have you got against me?”

“What?”

*“What have you got against me?”*

“What have I got against you?”

“Yes!” He nodded his head in an exaggerated sweep.

“Do you mean, besides ruining everyone’s holiday, throwing the place into irrational fear and mindless intimidation of my fellow guests?”

Pluck thought. “Yes, besides that,” he said.

“And besides destroying half the furnishings, insulting the staff and sowing an atmosphere of violent disgruntlement throughout the building?”

“Yes, yes, besides all that! What have you got against me?”

She raised her hand.

“Yes! Yes, yes, you in the front—what is it?! What have you got to say?! You needn’t raise your hand, you know, to be called on, seeing as we’re the only two people conversing!”

“Will you take a look at my hand?”

“I don’t have my magnifying glass with me. Just sit there until I come back, discharge your dung if you must, it’ll only take a minute...” But his trained, incisive eyes picked out, unenhanced by any deductive tool, a peculiar wrapping of some sort around her hand.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Pardon?”

“On your hand—I noticed some sort of wrapping. Come, now, you needn’t try to deny it. It’s right there.

“What are you babbling about, you brainless worm?!”

“Is that some sort of artificial skin, meant to hide a brand—a tattoo designating membership in a secret, anarchic society, by any chance?!” He seized her hand.

“Let go of me!”

“Give me that!”

She pushed past him and out of the room. He gave chase. Several men interrupted their game of whist in order to hold Pluck as the old woman pointed at him, claiming: “That idiot of an inspector trapped me in the men’s room!”

“Don’t be absurd!” he protested. Appealing to the gentlemen: “Why, ha-ha, she wouldn’t know a men’s room if she stumbled into it and it was full of naked, urinating men, ha-ha!”

"I will call the manager!" she threatened.

"I wouldn't bother," Pluck retorted, "seeing how both the manager and the acting manager are currently suspects in a murder investigation. That sort of puts a damper on their moral authority, wouldn't you say, madame?"

"Pardon?"

"Exactly, 'pardon', 'pardon', she says! And that's about all she says, of worth."

"Here, here, Inspector," protested one of the men. "Don't you think an old lady like this—"

"Gentlemen, I submit that this old lady is neither old, nor a lady."

"Then what is she?" asked the gentleman, whose ears spread outwards rather comically, Pluck thought (though he kept that to himself, so as to make easier avail of the man's sympathy).

"What's that?" asked the lady.

"I said, 'What are you?'" said the man more loudly.

"What do you mean?!" she asked, ostensibly offended.

"Ask her about the anarchists," Pluck prompted.

"What's that?" asked the lady.

"What's that?" asked the man.

"She's a member of a secret anarchist society," Pluck explained.

The man with the broad ears turned to the old lady and asked, "Are you a member of a secret anarchist society?"

"What's that?"

More loudly: "Do you want to destroy the world?"

"No! Do you?"

"No!"

"Well, all right then." She nodded with approval. Then, pointing at Pluck: "But *he* does."

"You are a villain, madame!" Pluck exclaimed. "And if you weren't a lady, I would demand satisfaction from you."

"You just said she wasn't a lady," said the second man, whose ears were normal-sized but whose Adam's Apple protruded peculiarly.

"Well, but she's dressed like a lady," Pluck explained. "Could you imagine me on the field of valour combatting a young man dressed like an old lady? Even after I'd vanquished her, we would be forced to disrobe her in public, exposing the dead man's genitals to the elements and the vultures, in a thoroughly undignified proceeding. How embarrassing would that be, gentlemen, I ask you?"

The two men laughed, and agreed that it would be preferable not to go down that route. The old lady had no idea what they were talking about.

"So, what's this about her being an anarchist, eh?" asked the man with the ears.

Pluck nodded to her hand. "Just pull off that wrapping, and I'll show you."

The man went to take the lady's hand, but she pulled it away (very unsporting of her, really). Then, as if her disinclination to allow her bandage to be unwrapped hadn't been competently communicated by that gesture, she appended an oral reiteration: "Leave my hand alone!"

According her protest all the respect it deserved, Pluck grabbed her hand and tore off the bandage; she screamed, annoyingly, and drew, inevitably, the attention of the entire

room. Pluck was used to being in the limelight, on account of his celebrated cases, and so revelled in displaying to the assembled guests the burn mark on the old lady's hand.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, loudly enough for everyone, including the old lady, to hear. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the sign of the secret society of anarchists—a society bent on the destruction of government, private property, family, and all species of plants. Behold—the sign, on the hand of one of its villainous matriarchs; a sign cloaked to appear as—a scald mark!"

"It *is* a scald mark, you cretin!" the old lady shouted. "It's from the eggs that fell on me!"

"And why would eggs fall on you, madame—perhaps they fell from the sky?" He smiled to the room, but his little joke failed to garner a laugh.

"No, they fell from a plate held by a waiter who was tripped!"

"What idiot did that?!" Pluck looked out into the furthest reaches of the room in his impromptu search for the scoundrel.

"You did, moron!"

He snarled at her, and grabbed her by the wrist: "If I did, madame, I can only thank myself, in retrospect, for having the forethought, at the time, to look ahead into the future and recognise the leader of a secret cell plotting the destruction of the earth!"

A little (obviously) Pekingese scurried across the ballroom floor, cutting between ankles and shortcutting under tables, from somewhere, having telepathically ascertained that her mistress was in danger. It reached her and, seeing the brute who held her by the wrist, leapt up and yapped at him; Pluck dropped the wrist and ran through the room in a panic. Upon reaching the door out of the ballroom, Pluck turned back to his opponent and shouted:

"You might have been saved by that feral beast this time, madame; but when next we meet, I promise you that *I* will be the dog!"

## Chapter Fifteen

Pluck was up early the next morning, having divorced Poor Larry from his slumber and tugged him over to the ballroom's bathrooms. The two friends stared at the opposing doors, lost in thought.

"All humankind, cleft in two," Pluck mused.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Quiet. I'm thinking. . . . Yes. A great toss of the coin is made, by God, when each child is born—or, I suppose, some months preceding—and all of its life, it must live with the consequences. Unsought, and unquestioned. And he, or she, is taught early on through which of these two doors he or she must take refuge, when the bladder or the bowel screams for relief. One door, and one door only; never the other. Are you listening, you worthless spud?!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then say something, now and again, so I know you're awake!"

"Yes, monsieur."

Pluck sighed. The early wintry sunlight made little inroad through the windows of the ballroom. The lights unlit, a grey silence extended to each corner of the room, lending each of Pluck's sighs an expansive poignancy. The chairs were upside-down on the tables, a broom had been left against a wall, and Pluck and Larry might have been the last two people in the universe, following an inconceivable catastrophe, chatting away about the genetic division of their species when there was no longer any referent to which their words could point.

"Well," sighed Pluck, "better get to it. Go on."

Larry went up to the ladies' room door and examined the sign. "Tell me again, monsieur, what you require?"

Larry was expecting the sigh, and it duly came. "Let me try to render it into words you can understand," Pluck said. "Some prankster, perhaps an anarchist, has switched the signs: put the 'Men's' sign on the ladies' toilet, and the 'Ladies'' sign on the men's. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Good. Then what do you think you need to do?"

"Um...swi—?"

"Switch the signs, that's right. I'll just sit over here and watch and make sure you don't bugger it up." Pluck went and took a chair from a table, dropped it to the floor, and—not having properly predicted its likely weight—was knocked back as it bounced into him, his arms flailing in the air, falling onto the side of his face and reopening his wound.

"Ah!"

"Sir, can I help you?"

"No, damn you! Just do your job and switch the signs!"

"Yes, monsieur, though I've looked at the doors and can tell you that the words have been engraved into the wood."

"What?!"

"Engraved into the wood, monsieur."

"And?!"



“And, it is impossible to switch the signs.”

Pluck’s instinct was to call down all the curses from Olympus onto the boy’s head, as would anyone’s; but, ever the philosophical type, he stopped himself and wondered aloud: “But what would be the point?”

“Monsieur?”

“I’m talking to the gods, you idiot!”

Larry took a deep breath. “Pardon me, monsieur, but I would appreciate it if you could refrain from insulting me with such language.”

In an instant the back of the chair was in Pluck’s hands and the seat had swung through the air and collided with Larry’s face. The boy—remember, he’s at least an adolescent, though we (Pluck and I) might use the word “boy”—collapsed, you won’t be surprised to learn, to the floor. Pluck stood above him, chair in hand.

“I arrest you for the double murder-suicide of Lawrence Sipp Silliams and Charles Snede the Eighth.” (That was Pluck speaking; not Larry.) “You will accompany me to your room, where I will divest you of your clothes and chain you to the toilet. You will remain incarcerated in your chamber until the weather permits the arrival of the authorities. You will then receive a fair trial, per the law of the land, in which your innocence will be presumed until your guilt is proved, then you will be dead till you are hanged by the neck.” He stopped, and checked himself. “No—that last bit wasn’t quite right. I meant to say: you will be hanged by the dead till you are neck. Any questions?”

“I will switch the signs, monsieur!”

“Excellent. Chop-chop, and all that.”

As Larry, cursing under his breath, set to trying to remove one of the doors from its hinges, Pluck went to sit down in his chair—completely forgetting it lay on the floor on its side. He fell onto it, cracking the wood, receiving a splinter in his rib, and tumbling off, where the side of his face struck the floor and opened his gash even wider.

“What are you doing, you cretin?!” Pluck screamed from the floor.

“Are you all right, monsieur? I’ll run for help!”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Larry had rushed over, and now tenderly helped his friend to stand. “Get me a chair!” Larry let Pluck fall back to the ground, where he lay screaming while Larry grabbed another chair off the table, righted it, and lovingly helped Pluck up into it. Pluck held one corner of the tablecloth to his cheek, and another to the side of his torso; both ends were stained magenta, a sight which nearly made him swoon, and the remainder of the cloth was bunched up around Pluck’s face, presenting him as a noble, Buddha-shaped cloud.

Through gritted teeth: “Just...get back to work!”

“Yes, monsieur.”

Larry went back to his toolbox and tried another spanner on the bolt.

“What nonsense are you committing, anyway?!”

“I thought I would remove the doors and switch them, monsieur; but I can’t seem to budge these hinges.”

“You needn’t waste your time with that. Have you got a chisel in there?”

“A small one, yes, monsieur.”

Pluck forced himself to stand. “Give it here.” He stumbled over to the door. Larry handed him the chisel. Pluck looked at it with disgust, wiped it a little on the tablecloth, barked to Larry “Hold my shawl!”, which the boy did, like an ancient Egyptian attendant,

and Pluck began to hack away at the word *Men's*. "If you just knock a bit of the wood away," he explained, "the letters will be erased, and the door will look whole." After two, or maybe three—definitely no more than four—such hacks, a large hole had been made in the door, through which an observer, by necessity a dishonourable one, could now stand outside the door and look in to satisfy her unnatural curiosity by watching a gentleman wash his hands at the basin following the expulsion of his waste matter. "Weak wood," Pluck critiqued, while viewing his handiwork. "I'm not surprised."

"What shall we do now, monsieur?"

"Well, my boy, we have two possibilities: hack a similar-sized hole in the other door, or simply smash down both doors altogether, and let whoever will, go where they may."

"But—"

"Or a third option: we all hold our urine and faeces within us, until this matter is sorted out by the proper authorities."

"Or—"

"Or—I've got it! Run and get me some paper and pen and adhesive!"

The boy did so. In his absence, Pluck pondered his mortality, but engendered no new conclusions on that subject, so let us pass it over and take up the story again a couple of minutes later when Larry got back.

"Don't you want to ask me what I was doing in your absence, boy?"

"Er—what were you doing in my absence, monsieur?"

Pluck proceeded to relate all of those hackneyed convictions to which I referred a moment ago. Larry was as impressed as you or I would be.

"That's enough chit-chat! Hand me that paper!"

Pluck scrawled crude (in both senses of the word) renderings of a phallus and a vulva on separate sheets, then looked over his work, to his dissatisfaction. "I am something of a perfectionist," he explained over his shoulder to the boy. "Tighten up my shawl a bit." There was something about the phallus that was not quite lifelike. "Boy, go wheel in Mister Lipp Lilliams."

"Monsieur?"

"The dead man, you imbecile. Wheel him in here. I want to have a look at his genitals."

"Very good, sir." He moved to go off.

"Hang on!" Pluck stopped him. "Don't let go of my shawl."

"Are you coming with me, monsieur?"

"Certainly not! I'll do the disrobing and the artistry; you can supply the model on your own, I expect."

"Then I must let go of the tablecloth, sir."

Pluck considered, then, fairly, conceded the lad had a point. "Never mind Gipp Gilliams." He nodded at Larry's groin. "Take them down."

"Pardon, monsieur?"

"I want to look at your penis. You have got one, haven't you?"

"I do, monsieur, but it is not for public exhibition."

Pluck laughed. "Such overweening scruples, for one of your class! 'Public exhibition', indeed! I haven't proposed parading you trouserless across the ballroom stage, have I, now?" He stopped to think. "Hang on a minute...now there's an idea..."

"Perhaps monsieur would deign to deploy his own organ for this purpose."

“Don’t be daft! I’m not trying to draw a musical instrument—I’m trying to draw a cock!”

“That is what I meant, monsieur.”

“Ah, I see. Yes. But, you see...” He had to think about this. “...It would of necessity be a bird’s-eye view. And I think the portrait would benefit from being rendered in profile, for this purpose.”

“If you like, monsieur, I would be happy to sever it, then place it on a plate on the table, with a bit of garnish and a candle for throwing the necessary light.”

Pluck thought. “...No, no, I fear the operation of removal would prove too painful, and the reattachment likely to be botched. But you’ve got a better head on your shoulders than I would have put you down for, Snede, I can tell you that.” Angry at himself for this rare failure at a task, Pluck screwed up his drawings and tossed them to the floor. “Pick those up.” As Larry went to do so—“But don’t let go of my shawl.”

“Would you please rise, then, sir?”

Pluck did so, and was pulled along, gently, as Larry stepped over to retrieve the papers. It was rather fun, Pluck mused; like a sleigh pulled by sprightly reindeer.

“Why is there blood all over the floor?!” he demanded.

“I fear you are bleeding, monsieur.”

“Don’t bother me with facts I already know, boy—bother me with facts I don’t know, if you please!”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“I hardly see how this blood is going to help us with the matter of the signs, anyway.”

“True, monsieur.”

“I don’t suppose you’re any good at drawing genitals?”

“I’ve never tried it, monsieur.”

Pluck scoffed. “Likely story. No, I suppose we’ll have to do it simply, but right.”

He wrote *Ladies* and *Mens* (he never employed apostrophes, on principle) on a sheet of paper each, handed them to Larry and ordered him, “Stick them up.”

“Monsieur—”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, I’m not an American bank robber! I meant, ‘stick up the signs’!”

“Monsieur...”

“What is it now?”

“I forget which door was which.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? Just pick one.”

“Which one, monsieur?”

“For God’s sake, let me do it! Hold my shawl.” Pluck took the *Ladies* sign and stuck it over the hole in one door, then stuck the *Mens* sign directly beneath it. “There! Job done. Now accompany me to the trauma ward, where I can have these wounds seen to and get given a new shawl.”

“We haven’t a trauma ward, monsieur.”

“‘Sickbay’, then, or whatever you call it.”

“I’m afraid not, monsieur.”

“Of course not. Then take me to Manager Mifkin, so that I may see to your discharge.”

“Monsieur?”

“I don’t mean urine or anything like that! I mean the termination of your employ.”

“Have I done wrong, monsieur?”

“Not at all! Not at all, my boy!” Pluck laughed good-naturedly. “You’re coming to work for me now. I’ll admit I can’t pay you—all right, I’ll tell the truth, I *don’t want* to pay you—but you’ll see the world, lead an exciting life, eat table scraps from the finest restaurants in Europe—”

“I’m afraid that I’m bound by contract to this hotel, monsieur.”

“Well break it! Break it, my boy! I’ll have a word with Mifkin and straighten everything out.”

“I really don’t want to, monsieur.”

“Nonsense! We’ll draw up an informal contract and shake on it once this blasted snow clears off, and we satisfy the authorities as to your murder. In the meantime, I have two pairs of dress shoes that could use a shine. Let’s stop by a linen closet and get you a cot so you can sleep in my room—”

“But I really don’t like you, monsieur.”

Pluck laughed. “Don’t be absurd! You obviously don’t know what you’re saying. I’ll tutor you in English, so that you might more agreeably make yourself understood. Now, repeat after me: ‘There was an old slag from Doncaster’—”

“But monsieur, the door.”

“Eh?”

“The other door has no sign. Just a hole.”

“By God, Snede, you’re right! We’ll just have to right that wrong, won’t we?”

As good as his word, Pluck scrawled *Mens* and *Ladies* on two more pieces of paper and stuck them both up on the other door. Then off the two friends marched together, Larry with his arm around the bunches of Pluck’s shawl, Pluck with his arm around Larry, a world full of boundless possibilities awaiting them.

## Chapter Sixteen

Pluck's mid-morning nap bled into the afternoon, and after an argument with the waiting staff that necessitated several re-orderings of his meal, the intrepid investigators—Miss Trojczakowski, Mister Bartoff and our hero himself—reassembled in the interview room. Enid handed Pluck the register of guests, as if to say, "Whom shall we summon next?" But Pluck looked at the paper, held it away from himself and asked, in distaste: "What am I expected to do with this?!"

"I thought you might like to choose the next guest to summon," Enid explained.

"Ah! Very good idea." He took her hand, which had been minding its own business on the table, gave it a friendly squeeze, then returned to the business to which they were so eminently suited. "There is an old lady—" he began.

"From Doncaster?" Bartoff cut in. "I think I know this one!"

"No, there is an old lady, in this hotel, wily and bearing about her body an odour which is extremely offensive to the cultivated nostril, abetted by a vicious clump of fleas she calls a dog, an anarchist, in fact—the lady, I mean, not the dog, though it's only to be presumed that it's in on it too—"

"Do you mean the lady who embarrassed you last night in the ballroom?" Enid asked.

"I hardly think *she* embarrassed *me*!" Pluck begged to differ. "Although I'm not too proud to admit that she has, for the moment, escaped my clutches. That will end now. What is her name, please?"

"I believe she is Madame Tautphoeus," said Bartoff.

"Highly unlikely, given that she's really a young lad of, say, twelve, but it does not surprise me that she'd be bold enough to go by such a tasteless alias. Ring for my mate Larry, and have her shown in."

The lady in question shortly arrived, sweeping into the room with a dramatic show of dignity. Her face was long, and frankly boring. She boasted an improbable mane of soot-black hair. A network of fat-folds drooped from her cheeks, jowls and underarms like hammocks sagging with the weight of obese sheikhs belching forth the gaseous spirits of semi-digested chickens. She wore an intimidating business suit, with the barest hint of fringe suggesting a feminine tenant. Her hand had been re-bandaged; the other held an ear-trumpet to her distinguished ear. She held herself erect, like a swollen penis, as if prepared for battle.

"Kindly do not take that tone with me, madame," said Pluck in a most refined fashion.

"I have not said a word," she protested with practised calm.

"Still. I beg you to preserve the proprieties of civilised discourse."

"I do not believe I have violated those proprieties," she insisted on contradicting him.

"All the same. I trust you will take care not to do so in the future—or else, and this I promise you: it will go very, very, very, very, badly. For you. Very." After a pause of some seconds, he concluded: "Very."

"Are we through, then, monsieur?" inquired the formidable lady, eyes ablaze.

"Yes. Have a good day," said Pluck; the lady exited, and he returned to his papers.

Enid whispered to him: "Are you sure you don't wish to question her?"

Pluck considered. "Perhaps that would be for the best." To Bartoff: "Bring her back."

Bartoff leapt up, bounded to the door, tore it open and returned in a trice with Madame Tautphoeus by the arm.

"Unhand me!" she requested.

"Please shut up," said Pluck.

"Shut up!" shouted Bartoff.

She shrugged him off and resumed her dignified posture before them, raising the trumpet to her ear. Bartoff wiped the sweat off his face with the collar of his jacket and sat down again next to Pluck.

"You may sit," said Pluck.

"Pardon, monsieur?"

Pluck sighed.

"Sit down!" Bartoff thundered.

The lady sat.

"Now—" Pluck began, but was interrupted by a scratching from the door. "Is that a ghost?" he wondered aloud; an unease crept visibly over his features.

"I suspect that is this lady's dog," suggested Enid.

Pluck nodded to Bartoff: "Kill the dog."

"No!" screamed Madame Tautphoeus, rising at once, after she'd just settled herself so comfortably in that nice chair. Bartoff stormed past her, knocking her to the floor, reached the door, pulled it open, picked up the Pekingese, took one look at it, and—fell in love.

"Little sweetie!" he beamed, and buried his face in its fur. The dog, forming an equally immediate infatuation, requited his love unconditionally. The sight of the big bearded man and the tiny fluffy creature mutually nuzzling each other infused delight into the hearts of Enid and Madame Tautphoeus, but a black dagger into Pluck's.

He rose. "I said 'kill it'!" he commanded.

"No!" shouted Bartoff, and the whole room fell silent at this unprecedented breach of discipline.

"Did you say 'No'?!" asked Pluck in disbelief.

"No," growled Bartoff, licking the dog's face.

"Yip!" yipped the dog, as if in firm support of the ethical stance adopted by his new best friend.

"Very well." Pluck lowered himself, with precision and control, back into his seat. "We shall revisit this issue one day, my friend. And of the three of us, only two shall remain this side of the Styx."

Pluck, Enid and Madame Tautphoeus watched Bartoff chase the little dog around the room, giggling hysterically, then switching round so that the dog chased him. An hour passed while the big man taught the little dog to sit up and shake his hand. Bartoff laughed, delightedly, each time this was achieved, no matter how often. The others grew bored, Madame Tautphoeus included. She, Pluck and Enid ended up playing several rounds of whist before Bartoff and the dog, both exhausted, lay on their backs on the floor, side-by-side, panting and smiling at each other.

"Are you quite through?" asked Pluck.

Bartoff did not answer.

“Mister Bartoff?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon—I thought you were speaking to Sam.”

“Who is Sam?”

Bartoff laughed. “Why, Sam is my friend—the dog!”

“Her name is Millicent,” Madame Tautphoeus corrected.

“I say ‘Sam’,” Bartoff growled at her. He turned to the dog. “Are we through, then, Sam? Hm? Are we quite through?” He nuzzled its nose with his own.

The three others sighed, to no avail. Bartoff hugged his friend; a tear trickled down the man’s cheek. He muttered words of love.

“Whatever happened to your eyelashes?” Madame Tautphoeus suddenly asked of Pluck.

“It’s no business of yours!” Pluck retorted, and dramatically swept the cards off the table (he’d been losing). “Mister Bartoff, will you please resume your seat, and your duty.” Bartoff reluctantly went back to his chair, carrying the dog and placing it in his lap. He stroked it lovingly throughout the following.

Pluck cleared his throat, twice. “Madame.” He stared at her. She held the trumpet to her ear, so there could be no question of her not having heard. He saw he had no choice but to clear his throat a third time, and repeat: “Madame.”

“Yes?”

“Have you no answer to my question?”

“I was not aware you had posed a question, monsieur.”

He shrugged, and looked to the others with a sly smile. “I presumed my question was implicit, madame.”

“I’m afraid your nuances are too subtle for my understanding, monsieur.”

“By that you mean to imply that you are an idiot, madame?”

“If you wish to believe that, monsieur, I cannot stop you.”

“You certainly cannot stop me from thinking you an idiot by babbling such incoherent stupidity as that, madame; you are perfectly correct.”

“So will you do me the honour of stating your question explicitly, monsieur?”

“Eh? What’s that—what did you say?”

Madame Tautphoeus pursed her lips, then repeated: “I asked if you would state your question explicitly.”

“And what question was that, madame? Pray hold your tuba tighter to your ear so that you might glean at least a modicum of our conversation, and thereby strive to waste a little less of my time than you already have, if you please.”

“You implied that you had a question to ask me, monsieur.”

Pluck shrugged and looked to the others with a laugh; but Enid was shaking her head and looking at the table, while Bartoff was tickling the mutt under its chin. “I implied no such thing, you old bat,” Pluck replied with perfect politeness. “Are you sure you have that saxophone facing the right way?”

“To what do you wish me to respond, then, monsieur?”

“What’s that?”

“What do you want to know?!”

Pluck smiled at the old woman. “Losing our temper, are we, Madame Towfeese?” To Enid, he leant and whispered: “We’ve got her now.” He then addressed the old

woman again, saying, looking down at his shirt cuffs, which he pulled out a bit from his jacket while speaking, "Since you mention it, I do have but one question for you."

"And what is that, monsieur?"

"Why did you murder Lawrence Ipp Illiams?"

"Murderer!" Bartoff screamed, and threw the dog at her; it hit her in the face, then tumbled, unhurt and rather amused, to the floor, where it dashed right back over to Bartoff and back onto his lap.

"Who is Lawrence Ipp Illiams?" she asked.

"Not 'Ipp Illiams', you cretin!" Pluck sneered. "I said 'Gipp Gilliams'!"

"Well then who is Lawrence Gipp Gilliams?"

"Don't you mean 'Charles Snede'?" Enid gently intervened.

"Ha! Don't be absurd!" laughed Pluck.

"Absurd!" shouted Bartoff.

"Charles Snede is my friend the bellhop," Pluck continued, "and, when all this nonsense is over, my apprentice, and, I hope, I dare to hope, one day, my adopted son."

"I fear you have it backwards," Enid smiled kindly at him.

"He's going to adopt me?"

"No—I meant you have the names backwards."

Pluck looked at her in some dismay. "You mean...?"

"That's right."

"His name is really...?"

"I'm afraid so."

"'Snede Charles'?"

"May I be excused?" asked Madame Tautphoeus.

Pluck sighed, and turned to her with a great show of impatience. "If you need to relieve yourself, madame—as it seems you endlessly, tirelessly need to do—I suggest you use the carpet in that corner of the room. Practically everybody else does."

"I meant that as I clearly have nothing worthwhile to offer this investigation—"

"Madame," Pluck began in an oft-assumed tone of patronising explanation to those untrained in the criminological sciences, "the legal name of the victim of a murder makes no substantive difference to the case. I am still waiting—we are all waiting—" Here the dog yapped, as if to include itself in Pluck's statement. "—Thank you, yes—we are all waiting for you to confess to the murder and explain your sordid motives, which presumably involve, because it seems to be a continuous motif running through your life, the toilet."

The light from the fireplace sank her face into a series of shadows underpinning her various folds of flesh, and yet, whilst wilting under Pluck's imperial gaze, she returned him glare for glare with a repugnant impudence. "Monsieur, I have not understood a word you've said."

Bartoff took that as his cue to hurl the dog to the floor, jump up, knock over the table, seize the end of Madame Tautphoeus's trumpet and shout therein: "You're always in the toilet and you've killed a bellhop! Now 'fess up!"

The pop that resulted first caused Enid and Pluck to recoil, assuming it to have been Madame Tautphoeus's flatulent reaction to her precious ear-instrument having been thus molested, until the lady's screams, and the blood which proceeded to pour from her ear, down the tube of the trumpet and onto Bartoff's just-polished shoes (black, dandy,



bought one grey afternoon in Minsk's answer to Saville Row), convinced them that the pop had in fact been the explosion of her ear drum. Enid, anyway, explained this to him.

"A drum and a trombone—half a band, that," Pluck smiled to Enid, upon turning to her chair, but she had already hopped up and was tending to the weeping old woman.

"Pathetic!" Bartoff was screaming down at the rumpled heap that she now was on the floor.

"You beast!" Enid cried to him.

"She's never deserved the likes of Sam!" he shot back. "Sam's mine! He's my boy!"

"He's a girl!" the good lady Tautphoeus wept, huddled ignobly on the floor, blood ejaculating out of her ear.

Enid stroked her hair—on the side of her head whence blood was not flowing, of course—and looked from Bartoff to Pluck. "You're cruel, both of you!" she cried. "How could you be so horrible?"

"She insulted me first!" Pluck protested, now standing on the table for some reason. "She called me a Snede!"

"She did not! Snede is the dead man!"

Pluck looked thunderstruck—he fell from the table and struck the floor on the side of his head, reopening his gash; the blood spurted into the pool of Madame Tautphoeus's ear's blood, two streams ferrying genetic material from two very different people into the one, collective ocean of humanity.

"Larry is dead?! My apprentice—my child?!" He ran to the snacks table to find a knife with which to avenge himself on the dastardly Madame Tautphoeus, could find none, so grabbed a loaf of bread and hurled it with all his might at the foul creature on the floor; it missed, and hit Enid in the face.

"Miss Trojczakowski—I beg your pardon." Pluck bowed. The dog, Millicent/Sam, had found where the bread had bounced and nibbled it. Ever loyal, it dragged the loaf to Bartoff, who received it gratefully and took a bite.

"Lovely," Bartoff opined. He broke off a hunk and proffered it around. "Inspector? Miss Trojczakowski? Murderess? Anyone?"

Pluck marched over to Madame Tautphoeus and yanked her up off the floor. "You did this as revenge, didn't you?" he snarled. "To punish me for exposing your disgraceful sojourn in the men's room! You figured you'd hurt me where I'd feel it most, my sole point of weakness—my child!" He was foaming at the mouth.

"Leave her alone, you brute!" Enid pushed him away. Paying her no mind, he reached down, grabbed a handful of half-chewed bread and shoved it into the dignified old woman's mouth; she spat it back onto his face; he felt unexpectedly aroused.

"Again!" he ordered, shoving more bread in her mouth; she complied, and when this second lot of saliva-soaked gluten adorned his face, he smiled with glee at the discovery of a new fetish. His mind reeled with visions of fat ladies rolling around in the nude in the friendly company of our dashing hero, all of them covered in soggy bread. "The world truly is a wondrous thing," he mused aloud. He turned to Enid: "Don't you think?" He turned to Madame Tautphoeus: "Don't you agree?"

She returned him a glare of resentful (for some reason) determination: "When we are free from this farce, I shall have the police on you!"

Pluck stood up and dusted himself off with his palms (though he left the wet bread on his face just where it was). "You shall have every opportunity of finding yourself in

the company of the police, madame. For I shall see you under arrest for the murder of Larry Bipp Snede." To Bartoff: "Take her away."

Bartoff handed Enid the dog. "Here, watch Sam." And he hauled the dignified gentlewoman over his shoulder and out the door.

## Chapter Seventeen

The hotel had a glass patio, which stretched the length of the dining room. A few guests mingled there now, looking out at the snow fields which rolled off into the distance, like long, unbroken brushstrokes across a vast unspoiled canvas, where they hit a line of trees. The snow was piled up to the height of a normal man's shoulder, though this would reach over the head of a certified dwarf and only up to, say, the knee of some gangly alien from a planet where giraffes had slaughtered all the primates and assumed in their absence the honour and the ignominy of becoming the matrix for evolution. Overhead, as well, beautiful masses of white had accumulated; a beauty threatening to turn violently against its admirers, as is so often the case, as evidenced by the cracks in the ceiling's glass and its occasional creaky straining under the weight of such aesthetic purity.

Into this cage of white, then, dazzling in the afternoon sun, walked Pluck and Enid.

"Did you ask me here to inquire as to how I feel the investigation is proceeding?" Pluck asked.

"I want to try to calm you down," she replied. "It's so horrible, all the antagonism. Everyone seems to end up on the floor, in a rage or in tears!"

"The nerves of a murder suspect are bound to come under strain. I've seen it hundreds of times. And it is through the cracks that the guilt will out." As if in sympathy with his semantics, a creak was heard overhead.

"I can't see that we're any closer to discovering the murderer, for all that," Enid protested.

"Ah, but Miss Trojczakowski, we've already discovered a glut of them! And scores more yet to be proved! Whether in league or as lone assassins, half the guests and three-quarters of the staff of this establishment, I'd hazard, had something to do with Williams' death."

"It's 'Snedé'—now try to remember."

He looked at her dubiously. "Whatever you're pleased to call him," he went on, "I can promise you one thing, if nothing else."

"And what's that?"

He looked at her meaningfully (to be distinguished from his usual looks, which were, in truth, rather meaningless): "That Larry Sipp Silliams' death shall not have been in vain."

Enid turned and eyed him with what might have been a newfound sense of respect. Then again, it might have been bemused tolerance of someone she deemed to be a moron. Pluck, naturally, looked right back at her. The sun peeped through the thinner tufts of snow melting in streaks down the glass, the crystals in the droplets massaging its rays so that what emanated was a half-light, half-shadowy fluctuation dribbling over her shoulders, arm and fingers. Her hair—done up in some clumsy fashion, the details of which hardly interested him—seemed to shudder in the fluttering shadows that danced upon it. She was surely unaware of this play of forces over her figure, but Pluck was entranced, as are infants at the inexhaustible wonders of light, colour and line all around them.

If only she were prettier, younger and overweight, he thought again. (Concerning Miss Trojczakowski, now, not the hypothetical infant.) And didn't try to constantly out-

think me. Yes: If she could only take as gospel every syllable I said, we might very well have made a great romance. He squinted at her, trying to imagine her free of wrinkle, with a different face, bunches of fat lining her limbs and stomach, and with a look of dumb agreement ever-present over her features. Yes, he thought at the image; yes, that is something I could install in my kitchen with a stove and a washtub and wheel out once a month for forceful erotic relief.

“Have you heard a word I’ve said?” he realised she was asking.

“Ah—yes, of course.”

“So do you agree?”

“That...depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you just said.”

“I thought you heard what I just said.”

“I did.”

“So, then.”

“Yes?”

“Do you agree?”

“Look, this conversation clearly isn’t leading anywhere—”

*“Do you agree?”*

“We...we weren’t talking about marriage, were we?”

“What?”

“I accept, with several provisos.”

“What are you talking about?”

“One: a regimen of systematic weight increase, under the supervision of a medical professional—”

“What are you talking about?”

“...What you were talking about. Of course.”

“I was talking about being nicer to the interviewees!”

“Oh, that. Yes, I knew that was what you said. I was just testing you, you see; and, you’ll be delighted to learn, you passed. With flying, um...”

“Colours?”

“That’s right.”

“So you’re going to?”

“Um...marry?”

“Be gentler with the interviewees!”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Say it.”

“I will be gentler with the interviewees.”

“In your own words.”

He sighed. He tugged at his neck collar with a finger. Was it getting hot in here?

“Say it!”

“I...will try to treat the suspects as sovereign human beings in possession of an innate dignity, naturally deserving of a fair chance,” he promised.

“The Golden Rule?” she prompted him.

He shrugged with distaste. "I've never had much time for that sort of thing," he admitted, then gestured for her to lead the way out, and followed behind her out of the patio, eyeing her arse and sighing at its inadequacy for his purposes.

## Chapter Eighteen

Enid and Pluck returned to the interview room to find Bartoff rolling around on the floor with his dog, laughing in the pure rapture of having found someone who loved him.

Ignoring them, Enid said to Pluck: "I suggest we interview this Curtis person next."

Pluck, taking his seat, laughed at her ignorance. "But my dear Miss Trojczakowski, surely you realise—I am Curtis."

"I mean the member of staff at this hotel who shares your, assumed, name. The porter who instructed Poor Larry to restock the papers in the reading room—on the afternoon when no new papers had arrived."

"Ah."

"I feel he may be the key to the whole mystery," she went on.

Pluck arranged the papers before him and smiled indulgently. "And what whole mystery is that, Miss Trojczakowski?"

"I mean the murder, Mister Pluck."

"Ah. That. Yes, well, the murder's as good as solved, you know."

"I feel like there are a few little holes that still require tidying up."

"And how does one tidy up holes, exactly, Miss Trojczakowski? Hmm?"

She smiled. "You have detected my mixed metaphor, Mister Pluck. You are something of a detective at that."

He made a little bow from his seat; she moved back at once, in case he should headbutt her. He then struck the bell with authority, summoning Poor Larry the Bellhop into the room. On seeing him, Pluck leapt to his feet (a leap of no great length) with an exclamation of joy—his tiny black eyes danced, his fingers fluttered, he ran over and embraced him manfully (causing Larry to drop the vase of mineral water he'd been carrying; I won't bother to describe its inevitable telos). "Returned from the land of the shades—a miracle!" Pluck exclaimed. He pushed Larry out into the lobby, which was sparsely peopled with now thoroughly bored guests, and declared: "A boy has been brought back from the dead, in answer to my prayers! Behold a prophet, a seer—my son!" Pluck dropped to his knees. "I praise thee, Tawaret, thou hippopotamus of the aether, for your selfless intervention!"

"Please, monsieur, I beg you to leave me alone."

"Hush, child, hush!" Pluck held him to his chest, and stroked his hair. "Everything's going to be all right, now. You'll see. You'll see."

The protestations and soothing went on for some time, before Manager Mifkin succeeded in persuading the good inspector that Larry was required for some important hotel business, and did Pluck the honour of personally escorting Missus Charlotte Drig to the interview room for questioning.

"'Drig'. English, no?" Pluck began with a smile.

"That's right, sir," the lady glowered at him. There she sat, short and stout and hugging herself in her shawl. She must have been forty, but looked ages older, thanks no doubt, thought Pluck, to having had to tear herself open—speaking with regard to both her vagina and her heart—for the benefit of six rotten children. Regrets? Pluck imagined she was stuffed full of them like a pepper overflowing with beef, rice and all sorts of offal that would have otherwise been consigned to the bin or the dogs. Yes, motherhood: a

ghastly invention that Pluck, fortunately, given his coin-toss triumph at being born a man, would never have to undergo, or even to witness—now that he'd found himself a ready-made adolescent he was shortly to adopt, train up as a fellow inspector, grow old with, and finally bequeath his album of naked fat ladies to.

After several minutes' (again, literally) pondering, Pluck cleared his throat and asked his second question: "Why—"

"Excuse me, Inspector, but whatever happened to your eyelashes?"

"I pluck them, Missus Drig, if you must know. Yes, I pluck them, yes, per my name, according to an esoteric ethical principle I wouldn't expect you to understand. Now, if I might proceed?"

"Carry on."

"Where were you the night of October the third, three years ago?"

"Why, at home, I should imagine. Whatever could that have to do with anything?"

"Probably nothing, probably nothing." He fiddled with his bow tie. "But riddle me this: Where were you *not* the night of October the third, three years ago?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Where were you *not* the night of October the third, three years ago?"

"Where were you?!" screamed Bartoff, not bothering to remove his eyes from his beloved pet in his lap (I mean the dog).

"You've repeated the question, all right, but I can't say I can make head or tails of it," Missus Drig protested. She had rather thick eyebrows, Pluck noticed. He marked that down on his notepad, and proceeded:

"I will endeavour to explain. You say—you *claim*—you were at home on the evening in question."

"So far as I can remember."

"Please be silent while I speak; I find your interruptions scarcely less rude than they are imbecilic. You say you were at home on the evening in question; very well. Let us suppose that you are telling the truth, and you are not a complete moron. Fine. Good. So now I am forced to ask: Where were you *not*, at the same time?"

"What—do you want me to list where I wasn't?"

"Yes."

"All the places I wasn't at?"

"That's right."

"All the places in the world?"

"I see you've understood."

She laughed, rudely. "I think that would take a bit of time, don't you?"

He shrugged, with limitless equanimity. "We have all the time you need."

Enid leaned in: "Do you really think this is going to help, Curtis?" she asked.

"Why would I want to help Curtis?"

"I meant you. Thaddeus. Curtis." He looked about him, bewildered. "Mister Pluck." He turned back to her.

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes," Enid confirmed. "Surely there's an easier way to go about this."

"I bloody well think so!" Missus Drig exclaimed.

Pluck whirled in her direction. "Eavesdropping, are we, Missus Drig?!"

"I'd hardly call it that! I can hear you both just fine where I'm sat."

"I disagree," countered Pluck.

"You disagree with what?"

"With your statement."

"What statement was that—that I heard you from here?"

"That's right."

"Well, then: if I couldn't have heard you, I could hardly have been eavesdropping, could I?"

Pluck stiffened. Foolishly, he'd let her lead him through this pernicious logical labyrinth and straight into a trap. He marshalled his rhetorical forces, realising that his antagonist was far more deadly than he'd assumed. "Missus Drig, have you ever been in love?" he asked, to throw her off the track and, to feed more oxygen to the metaphor, raise her onto a ground he deemed safer for himself.

"Aye," she answered, without batting an eye. "I love me husband, and me kids."

"Missus Drig, I asked you a serious question, and I'll have you know I therefore expect a serious answer."

"I gave you a serious answer, but *I'll* have *you* know that I'll expect some less stupid questions in future!"

Reflections of the fireplace's flames curled along her frame. She had a large mouth, which boasted, Pluck realised, a formal beauty out of proportion with the rest of her face or person.

"And furthermore," she went on, "I find the way you lot have treated me kids to be nothing short of outrageous! Outrageous! The way you've conducted this inquiry on the whole has been inhuman an' ungodly! I know you'll burn where you're goin', sir, believe you me—maybe not today, maybe not this year, but the day will come when you will *burn* for what you've done to us in this hotel this holiday!"

"Missus Drig...forgive the unprofessionalism of what I'm about to submit, but...I cannot help but notice that you are really a quite extraordinarily beautiful woman."

She laughed, and waved him away. "Aw, tosh!"

"No, I mean it. Your face—your mouth, in particular. Enid, have a look. Don't you agree?"

"Of course." Enid really had nothing to say on the matter.

"Would you—Miss Drig—"

"'Missus', of course, you naughty boy!" she laughed.

"Oh, surely not so many years from when you were a miss, now is it? Heh-heh—Missus Drig, would you terribly mind smiling even a little more broadly—that's it—mouth open...yes! Yes! Enid, don't you see? Bartoff?"

But Bartoff was gazing adoringly into his little pooch's mouth, while Enid was hugging herself with an inexplicable testiness that had all of a sudden come over her.

Missus Drig was chuckling, beaming, despite herself. Pluck got out of his chair and walked around the table to her. He knelt down and held her cheeks between his palms, gazing at the beauty, like a perfectly shaped pond as seen by a bronze-winged pionus in flight overhead, of her mouth.

He then stood up, and, taking her hand, raised her from her seat.

"Miss Drig—"

She shook her finger at him, teasingly: "Ah-ah!"



“That is,” he chuckled, “*Missus* Drig: I take the greatest pleasure in informing you that you are no longer of interest to this investigation. The white purity of lamb’s wool should not be denied; it should be celebrated. You are excused, with the manifest regret that I’ll no longer be able to gaze upon you from across that table, like the inexorable grief of a mayfly who’s just bid adieu to his sole setting sun. But would you be so kind as to invite your dear husband to our merry gathering? For it just might be possible that he knows some little tufts of information which will lead us to the man who murdered a clerk.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Sure enough, Mister Drig came in, about the height of his wife, somewhat stout, and accompanied by an unwarranted grudge. Pluck immediately noticed that this man's mouth was not the sort about which a poem would ever threaten to be composed. Hence, Pluck reasoned, the grudge. Here was a man, he nodded sagaciously to himself, who truly felt his inadequacy when compared to his wife, whether in the realm of ethics, strength of will, or oral beauty.

Pluck decided to ask him outright: "Will you seriously have us believe, sir, that a poet has ever scribbled the barest verse on the pitiable subject of your mouth?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did any bloke ever write a poem about your mouth?!" Bartoff shouted.

"Er...no. Why do you ask?"

"What was that?" asked Pluck, already weary of this man's incessant questions.

"Why do you ask?" Drig repeated.

Pluck struck the table with the flat of his hand, as if to say: *What did I tell you?!* "A meaningless question," he judged, "with no grammatical or semantic sense whatever."

"But, didn't you say something about a poem?"

"Enough!" Pluck shouted. "Kindly sit down."

Drig did so, to Pluck's annoyance. This annoyance spread over his face, perfectly visible to Drig, and so, as Pluck declined to say any more for some moments—let's say, half a minute to forty-five seconds—Drig felt himself justified in asking, "Is something the matter, Inspector?"

"Eh? What's that—what did you say, man?"

"You seem a mite perturbed, sir."

Pluck stared at him, hard—as he had once done, when a lad, in a concentrated, but ultimately failed, attempt to move the urn containing his grandfather's ashes, by thought alone, from one end of the parlour to the other—then shook his head, and admitted, with some nostalgia: "Grandad will never budge without two hands to move him. Stubborn as a constipated mule in death, as in life."

"I'm sorry?"

"What did you say?"

"I said that you seem a mite perturbed."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, sir. Just what are you trying to get at?"

Drig leant forward—he was intent on seeing this thing through, no matter how unpalatable to all. "An annoyance, sir—you look like you're exceedingly annoyed, and I just wonder if it's on account of something I've done."

"Well, since you mention it, mmmmbmbmbmm"—the rest of what Pluck had to say was mumbled so low that no one could catch it.

"Come again?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I didn't hear what you said," Drig explained.

"What who said?"

"You. Inspector."

"Ah. Me. I see." Pluck leant back in his chair and sized this fellow up. "...I see..."

Drig crossed his legs and looked back. “What do you see?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“What do you see?”

Pluck looked a little put out by the question. “...I’m not going to tell you,” he finally said. “And I can’t say that I know why I’m even putting up with this line of questioning from you—after all, I’m not the one under investigation for murder here.”

“Who’s under investigation for murder?” asked the impudent man.

“Ah—wouldn’t you like to know!” cried Pluck, looking with significance at Enid, whose face was buried in her hands, then at Bartoff, whose face was buried in his dog. With nobody left to face but Drig, Pluck duly looked in that direction, and said to him, “You said a moment or two ago that you thought you saw a pall of annoyance cross my face—is that right?”

“It is.”

“Could you please answer the question.”

“Yes.”

“Please answer the question.”

“Haven’t I?”

“Haven’t you what?!” Pluck was growing exasperated.

“Haven’t I answered your question?”

“What question was that?!”

“Whether I said that you looked annoyed?”

“Well what about it?!”

“I said that I had.”

Pluck balled his teeth and gritted his fists—sorry, I got that wrong-way round. Enid placed a hand on his arm to steady him, wholly without, I can tell you plainly, erotic intent. With magnificent self-control, Pluck took a deep breath, relaxed his hands, and held up his unfisted fingers, palms-out, then palms-in, for all who wanted to see, to see. “I was annoyed,” he finally confided, “because you saw fit to sit yourself down without having been invited to.”

“But you did invite me to,” Drig protested, pointlessly. “I distinctly remember you asking me to sit down.”

“Well, you may have thought that’s what you heard, but did it ever cross that thick Cro-Magnon skull of yours that I might have been speaking to somebody else?”

“No, as a matter of fact, it didn’t, seeing how all the other people in the room were already seated.”

That was about as much as Pluck could stand. He stared at the man, hard; he gave him a good, hard stare; good and hard, I say, like a sock in the jaw, only instead of a fist, he used his eye, and instead of contact, there was no contact, and instead of damage being done, no damage was done, and instead of something being accomplished, nothing was accomplished, etcetera, etcetera. He even stood up, a little, from his seat, so as to be able to crank up the ferocity of his stare all the harder.

“Do I look like I’m sitting?” he finally asked.

“Not now,” returned Drig, “but we were talking about earlier on.”

Drig sat in a glow of ostensible calm. The light from the fire tickled his rather imposing moustache, amplified the natural ruddiness of his bulbous cheeks, and jabbed,

in rhythm to the crackling of the logs during the interminable pauses between Pluck's outbursts, at his expansive hips.

"And so time is a simple, linear thing to you, is it, you muck-headed dolt?!" Pluck shouted. The inspector's small head was shaking with indignation; Enid, looking on, feared it would get swallowed up by his neck.

Drig squinted at Pluck, and asked, "See here, my good inspector—what's going on with that eye o' yours?"

"What do you mean?" asked Pluck in a sudden panic. He blinked, first one eye, then the other, then both in tandem, and then neither, to ensure that both of the vessels for the miracle of sight with which he'd been blessed at birth remained in the sockets for which they were intended.

"Where'd your eyelashes go? You've got 'em on the other side—why haven't you got 'em here?"

Pluck sat back down. "In Greece," he patiently explained, "all children are required by ancient law to sacrifice the lashes of one of their eyes, through the first half of their life, and then, at the exact midway point of their allotted span, sacrifice the other. I am pleased to inform you that I am not yet at the crest of my hill."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"I don't believe you, but it's an amusing tale, anyway."

"Have you any proof of your marriage?! No?! Why not?! Why not?!" Pluck hurled these interrogative bombs at his opponent with merciless precision.

"I have our marriage certificate, of course."

"That's no proof! Where's the proof?! The proof?!"

"Where's your proof?!" Bartoff finally shouted, having looked up for the first time in a while when he heard raised voices.

"Curtis, remember your promise," Enid whispered.

"This blackguard is masquerading as a married man!" Pluck explained to her eagerly. "It's all a lie! He hasn't even met Miss Drig, let alone usurped her at the altar and committed conjugal intercourse with her!"

"I have a marriage certificate," Drig repeated, "but not with me, of course."

This was a detail upon which Pluck seized. "And why not?! Why not?!"

"Why not?!" thundered Bartoff.

"I wasn't aware it was necessary to take on holiday."

"Liar!" screamed Pluck.

"Curse you!" screamed Bartoff.

"Well, if you really want proof, just take a look at my children," offered Drig.

"I'll require proof of the paternity of each of your alleged children," Pluck spat with distaste.

"I'm afraid I carry no such proof in my wallet."

"All the worse for you, then, my friend."

"All the worse for you!" echoed Bartoff.

"Tell me about your wife's mouth." Pluck thrust that question at him like a kick at one's opponent's legs to sweep him to the floor before proceeding to crush him.

"Pardon?"

"Her mouth: its uses: respiratory, cibarious and amatory."

“Look here, sir!”

“Where else would I look, my good man?”

“I don’t like the tone of your questions!”

“And I don’t like the tone of your murder. I charge you with the unlawful killing of Lawrence Dripp Drig, a crime of revenge you committed, as you’ve just now managed to prove, when you discovered he had enjoyed the sensual discharge of his procreative fluid down the gullet of your so-called wife.”

“Heathen!” boomed Bartoff, who, by Pluck’s order, took Mister Drig away.

## Chapter Twenty

After a short tea break of an hour and a half, during which Enid remonstrated with Pluck over his handling of the suspects, eliciting protestations followed by grudging promises to henceforth exhibit the kindest facet of his many-faceted persona, the interviews were resumed. Danny Drig, eldest of the Drig children, walked in and sat in the chair. He stared, openly, at Pluck, with no sign of respect for the inspector's authority anywhere visible on his orange little face.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Pluck moaned, and turned away. He rang the bell. Larry appeared. "Bring them all in," Pluck ordered him, with reference to the Drig children, "the whole snotty brood." Soon, the five remaining Drigs—in decreasing order of age, Charlie, Doobie, Eric, Betsy and Bo—marched in. They stood before the table; their shadows fanned out across the floor like a row of Russian dolls.

"We don't have chairs for all of you," said Pluck, "so remain standing and answer my questions quickly and honestly and you can go. Do you understand?"

They nodded, a little.

"Good. Now, then—who's the oldest one? You, I suppose," he pointed at Danny.

"That's right."

"Call me 'sir', you little shit."

"Call him 'sir' or I'll kill you!" screamed—who else?

"Now, where were you on October the third, three years ago?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Shut it, you little freak, if you want to leave this room alive. Where were you on October the third, three years ago?"

"I don't know, sir."

"I advise you to change your answer, and quick, too." Pluck sighed, stood up and went around to the other side of the table. He sat down in the boy's lap; the boy protested, audibly, and wriggled, and tried to throw him off; Pluck continued: "I want you to think, and think hard. Where were you, and your ragamuffin, idiot siblings, on that night three years ago? Think, blast you, think! That little one, the youngest—what's his name?"

"Bo," Danny squirmed.

"All right, Bo, the stupid ingrate who shits in corners—where was Bo three years ago?"

"He hadn't yet been born"—it came from Betsy, the sole girl of the Drig horde, from her place in the line. Appalled, Pluck got up from Danny's lap and walked over to her.

"What did you say?" he asked her.

"I said he hadn't yet been born."

"Go fuck yourself. Where was Bo on October the third, three years ago?"

"I tell you he hadn't been born."

"That doesn't answer my question. Where was he?"

"He's just turned two, so he wouldn't have even been in my mummy's belly."

"Fuck you. Answer the question. Where was he?"

She considered...the light from the fire coated her thoughtful face with a sheen of activity, playful flashes flickering...and finally shrugged, and answered: "A holding-pen

in the Mind of God for unincorporated souls yet to be assigned a realisable existence on Earth?”

“Yes!” Pluck gasped. “Yes, you may have got it—we’re finally getting someplace! Yes!” He knelt down to her level, patted her head, and stared into the fire. “Yes...now, child, you bright young thing you, can you tell me where he *wasn’t* on that very same day?”

“You mean—” She looked at him, scrunching up her nose. “Earth?”

“Yes, yes, good, but where—where on Earth—specifically?”

She shrugged again. “Anywhere. Everywhere.”

“That’s right, that’s right—but where, specifically?”

“I can name lots of places—hundreds.”

“That’s right, my child. Wonderful. Ask at the front desk for paper—as much as you need—tell them Inspector Pluck sent you—and drown them in ink until you’ve listed them all.”

“All the places Bo wasn’t?”

“That’s right. Any other questions?”

She squinted at him. “What happened to your eyelashes?”

“Excellent question, dear, excellent question,” he chuckled. “It so happens that they froze when I went skiing out there in that rotten cold weather. Then, when I came inside and fancied an hors d’oeuvre, I broke them off, one by one, to use for spearing my olives. Isn’t that funny?”

She giggled. “It is.”

He hugged her. “I knew you’d understand. You, and you alone, my darling. Any other questions?”

“May we play with that dog?”

He laughed. “I’m afraid that’s up to Sam’s owner, Monsieur Bartoff. Bartoff, what do you say?”

“Of course!” he laughed, and threw the dog at the child; she caught it, barely, and managed not to fall down. The children played on the floor with the dog for a long time, while Pluck and Bartoff, sitting on the carpet themselves, watched them and exchanged pleasant observations about the innocence of children and animals, and Enid kept babbling about the need to acquire evidence for the investigation, but was ignored. When the bell sounded for supper, Pluck decided, within his gut, that hunger was a more pressing concern than further appreciation of childhood innocence, and so stood to see the little ones out.

“Now hurry off to the front desk and get that paper. And take your idiot brothers with you. Bye-bye, now. Bye-bye!”

“You may play with Sam anytime you like!” promised Bartoff.

“Thank you, Inspector!” called Betsy as she left.

“Goodbye, precious child. Goodbye.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Chaos notwithstanding, the evening entertainment carried on unabated. The number of partaking guests had considerably thinned, owing to the increasing number of suspects incarcerated in their rooms, plus those in fear of bumping into the dutiful inspector and suffering the volatile brunt of his lust for justice. As in times of war, there could be felt in the air of the ballroom a maniacal casting-off from the pier of the known, a bonfire of inhibition; to confuse the metaphors a little more, we might say that the guests' only recourse in finding themselves coughing blindly in this smoke of unbearable tension was to lash out a grasping hand, into the murk, in the hope of coming into contact with another sufferer and thereby effecting a sort of fellowship—if they were to be lost forever in the fog, at least they could draw some comfort from the reflected horror in each other's eyes, whilst they drift off into the cackling jaws of oblivion.

*Nota bene* that we *might* say that; in fact, we do not.

In any event, Pluck, to the strains of a small quartet, entered the ballroom in top hat and black evening dress, twirling a cane which took no time at all in smashing several glasses full of champagne on several waiters' trays, the shards from which glasses streaking across the room, puncturing various body parts, drawing screams in tandem with blood, with the result that only a few seconds after Pluck's elegant entrance, most of the guests were huddling on the floor as if in the aftermath of a bomb blast. A pool of communal blood mixed with champagne expanded across the dance floor. Profane invective was shot back at Pluck, in lieu of glass shards, as guests and staff saw to the wounded. Pluck, still standing in the doorway, viewing this writhing, bubbling bloodbath before him, turned around and headed back to his room, his cane having missed not a twirl.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Having gotten lost in an unfamiliar corridor on his way to the lobby the next morning, Pluck happened upon Modeste, the former cleaning lady who, it will be remembered, I trust, had revenged herself upon her social superiors by shitting in the interview room, and who was now slumped, sobbing, against the door of a linen closet.

“Girl!” Pluck shouted to the fifty-year-old. “What in Heaven’s name is the matter?! You’re making a disgusting display of yourself! No gentleman of any self-regard would ever demean himself to wed and procreate with such a slob! If you’ve no concern for your own future, I implore you to at least consider the bleak prospects for your as-yet-unconceived offspring.”

Modeste wrung her hands, just like they used to do, in old books. “I can’t do it, monsieur! I just don’t have it in me!”

“You can’t do what, my dear?”

“Take on the whole world! Defeat all prejudice! Vanquish all evil! It’s just too much, sir, for li’l ol’ me—can’t you see?”

The ugliness of her face was not, Pluck observed, improved by the addition of a film of mucous tears spread thereupon. The gentleman in him, however—the gentleman, I say—would not let himself be told to lie down like a dead racehorse that had been shot and would soon be turned, if not to glue, then to ground-up meat for cows or something (because it would be both silly and counterproductive to feed glue to cows—can you imagine?). Meaning, that Pluck proceeded to inquire, with an inexpressibly tasteful simplicity:

“What’s wrong?”

Pluck having reconfigured his diction in order to allow himself to be understood by an underling, that underling, having duly understood, now returned:

“I was humiliated, sir! Humiliated!”

“How so?”

“I was the one who shat in your room, sir!”

Pluck thought. Was she referring to that night, last week, when, in the middle of a bad dream, he sleepjumped out of bed and sleepwalked over to the corner of his room and sleepshat on a rug before sleepwiping himself with the drape then sleepreturning to bed and finally sleepsleeping till midday? But he had—when awake, now—paid off that other cleaning lady, that kind, sweet, gentle one, the one you, Reader, deigned, a little arbitrarily, it must be said, to designate “Maisie”—he had paid her off to clean it up and tell not a soul. (In reality, she toyed with the notion of publishing a pamphlet, to sell for a modest sum to guests and staff from a kiosk in the lunchroom, relating every detail of that misadventure, but lacked the printing facilities and soon let her mind roam off to other matters.)

“I...don’t think that was you, girl,” Pluck said to Modeste. “You may put your vacuous thoughts to rest on that score.”

“Yes, sir, it was, it definitely was. Remember? The meeting room, just off the lobby, which you use for your torture room?”

“I think you mean ‘interview room’, and, yes, now that you’ve specified it, I do remember. That eldest Drig boy, wasn’t it? Little bastard. I ought to have smacked him

across the face with the poker immediately afterward, so that the lesson might have been branded on his psyche more effectively.”

“Yes, sir, but after I cleaned that up, I went and shat there myself—in the next corner over. Don’t you remember?” She was panicking, now, clutching her witch’s claws at figments in the air, in the dawning belief that the one towering, ethical act by which she’d hoped to be defined had left such a transitory imprint on the wet sand of mankind’s memory.

“Dimly,” Pluck lied, to calm her down. “But what of it?”

“I was discharged, sir. Discharged! Discharged, from a job I’d come to love, and prosper at, and be respected for! Discharged!”

Pluck made a show of checking his watch. “Yes, yes, I heard you the first time. So what’s any of this got to do with me?”

She looked down at the dirty carpet and wrung her hands some more, to Pluck’s audible (he sighed) irritation. “I’d felt a kind of...rebirth...sir. When I done it. Took the shit, I mean. As if...all the tuppence’s worth o’ life I’d sloshed through up till then had been swept away, and I could finally...say something.”

“With your shit?”

“Aye, with my shit. Sir.”

Despite the woman’s physical repugnance, offensive breath and annoying croaky voice, Pluck was moved. He raised his chin and, in the half-lit corridor, pondered in silence what she’d said. Once or twice, she’d started to say something more, but he hushed her, angrily and with a plethora of profanity, and thought some more. He finally took her hand—bony, slimy from where she’d wiped her nose, and soiled from things you don’t want to know—patted it, and promised: “I will be your champion.”

He dragged her through the corridors until he was even more lost. He was forced to ask her for navigational assistance, and she led him to the lobby; from there, he resumed command, and led her the few steps to the interview room. He strode inside, yanking her after him. Enid and Bartoff were in their seats, the former engaged in idiotic smalltalk with Mifkin, the latter engaged in idiotic pleasantries with his dog. Pluck rushed to the snacks table, grabbed a cheese knife and stood in magnificent profile against the hearth: the firelight gilded his brow, nose and chin with an outline of liquid flame, whilst he waved the knife about and vowed to disembowel any man or woman, or, if it came to that, child or animal or plant, who dared to stop this old hag from expressing her innermost angel. “Go on, dear,” he continued in direct speech, “to whichever corner you fancy. And, by all that’s most holy, show the world what it is you’re made of!” She did; Bartoff swooned and crashed to the floor; the mutt sniffed its fallen master and licked his ears, increasingly disturbed. This done, Pluck flung the knife to the carpet and walked out, straightening his bow-tie and smirking with a sense of duty done.

The other, younger, cleverer and more attractive cleaning lady—“Maisie”, if that’s what we’re still calling her—was meanwhile sat at a low bench in the scullery, consuming today’s gourmet slop to the accompaniment of pan-banging, plate-dropping and cook-cursing. The room was hot and dress-dewy with humidity. She stared into the swill in the bowl before her. She pondered her lot as a woman and a servant, and concluded that it was not for this purpose that the Lord above had endowed her with a soul. It was at this moment that the inspiration for a life in the battle for woman’s suffrage and the depenisification of the handlers of the levers of power struck her. She

was tired of being nice, and compliant, but she knew she couldn't just grab hold of the nearest cleaver and start chopping off cocks left and right without having first perfected a plan. She would be wily, and cagey, and strong-willed, and she would hide her pride in a corner of her soul until the day would come when that cleaver would meet its first cock, and she would hear a bell peel between her ears, and the first move towards a rebalancing of the universe would be made.

A bell summoned her. She was told to go clean up another pile of faeces in the meeting room. Modeste had been expressing herself again, it would seem.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

When the room had been cleaned, the air freshened and smelling salts shoved against Mister Bartoff's discerning nostrils, Pluck was sent for. He hadn't wanted to be disturbed from his meditation on large, naked ladies, but his devotion to his profession was consummate, as anyone lucky enough to have known him would tell you—if you found them, and asked them, and they weren't busy with something else, and could be bothered, I mean—and so he trudged through the hotel, through the lobby, where various guests, scratching at their bandages, shied away, and into the interview room.

"I trust you've recovered from this latest public excretion, Bartoff, eh?" he queried whilst taking his seat.

"Yes, thank you, Inspector."

"Hm. Perhaps you might like to apologise, to Miss Trojczakowski and myself, for impeding the progress of this investigation through your womanish aversion to what is, after all, a natural bodily function?"

"I apologise."

"Mm. One might even call it 'the *most* natural bodily function'—were one so inclined."

"Indeed."

"How one is expected to rank the naturalness of one bodily function *vis-à-vis* another, exactly, I wouldn't know. But the fact remains that your cowardly propensity to swoon at the sight of—"

"You are absolutely right, and I apologise."

"I was not finished, you oaf. The very idea that—"

"Shall we move on, now, Inspector?" wondered Enid.

"No, no, I think I've hit on something here, as evidenced by my colleague's visible discomfort in addressing this issue. Tell me, Bartoff, my good man..."

"Yes, Inspector?"

"Curtis, please," Enid attempted to intervene, though she might as well have saved her breath.

"Do you regularly swoon whilst on your own toilet? After committing the act of expulsion, and rising, and looking down to confirm that, indeed, your own faeces have successfully exited your anus? Tell me, man, tell me!"

"Curtis, please!" begged Enid, but he waved her away behind him, maintaining his bellicose glare at his friend.

Bartoff, scrutinising the polish of the table, beard trembling as his teeth gritted, admitted in a low voice: "I don't look down."

"You what?!"

"I never look down."

Pluck enjoyed a deep sigh of satisfaction, then nodded. "Then it is as I have thought." He rose from his chair. "Charles Bartoff, *I accuse you of the murder of Pierre Emile L'Angelier!*"

"Of whom, sir?!" Bartoff wondered.

Pluck whirled to Enid: "Whom did I say?"

"You said 'Pierre Emile L'Angelier'."

“Strike that!” he shouted to the non-entity who wasn’t making a non-record. “I meant to say: *I accuse you of the murder of Eliza Grimwood!*”

“Of whom, sir?”

“Whom did I say?”

“‘Eliza Grimwood’,” Enid answered.

“Arrgh!” Pluck’s fingernails tore into his scalp, scraping off flakes of dandruff which puffed into the air about them. “All right! All right!” He dropped, exhausted, into his chair. “Let’s just forget it. You’re cleared, damn you—you’re cleared.” He picked up the register and, without looking at it, dropped it in front of Enid. “Whom shall we interrogate next? You decide. I don’t care.”

“If it’s up to me, I say we interview Curtis. The porter.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“Give me the register!” Enid handed it back, and Pluck let fall his finger onto the name of *Aloysius Delphi, waiter*.

In seconds, the suspect was before them. The young man stood with professional composure, hands clasped behind his back, his uniform’s buttons straight and shining, his blond, curly hair floating uneasily atop his head, with only an undetectable, sliver’s increase in the latitude of one eyebrow to suggest insubordination (undetectable, but I’m telling you here, so you’ll know).

“What’s your real name?” Pluck began.

“Begging the inspector’s pardon, but ‘Aloysius Delphi’ is my real name.”

“Perhaps you didn’t hear the question. I’ll ask it again: What is your real name?”

“Begging the inspector’s pardon, but perhaps he didn’t hear the answer: It is my real name.”

Pluck nodded. “I see. I see that we’ve chosen not to understand each other. Very good.” He nodded again. “Very good.” Another nod, then: “Well, reasonably good, at any rate.” He nudged Enid. “Hand him a pad of paper.” She did so. “And a pen.” She did so. “And a pencil, in case he prefers pencils to pens.” She did as she was asked. Pluck then commanded the waiter: “Kindly write down on that paper a list of all the people you’ve murdered over the past thirty-six months.” He winked at Enid: “If any of the names on his list match any of the names on this hotel register—we’ve got our man.”

“Pardon me, Inspector,” begged Aloysius.

“Yes?! What is it?!”

“Whatever happened to your eye?”

“I was born eyelash-less, then, a month ago, I rubbed an experimental miracle cream on one lid, and hence, the miraculous results! Now get on with your list!”

“I have completed my list, sir.”

“Eh? Already? Very good—give it here!”

Aloysius handed over his paper, as asked. Seizing it from his hand, Pluck slapped it on the table before him and scuttled his eyes over it eagerly. “What’s this?! There’s nothing written on this paper—it’s blank, man!”

“Yes, Inspector.”

In order to make a display of the extent of his rage, and his contempt for his interrogatee, Pluck swept the paper off the table: it hung for an instant in the air—all watched it with a shared sense of the tragic ephemerality of life—before floating

peacefully to the carpet, where it landed without so much as a whisper. In order to now render that rage and contempt into words, so that Aloysius would have no excuse for failing to understand him, Pluck enunciated: "You didn't write anyone's name on that paper!"

"That is correct, Inspector."

"But—why?!?"

"Because I have never murdered anyone, Inspector."

"Don't be preposterous!"

"Nevertheless, it is true."

"But—but—what about Pipp Snede, for one?!"

"Alas, Inspector, that was not I."

Pluck rose, magnificently. "Do you mean to tell me that you've never murdered anyone?!" And, to make perfectly clear, he added: "Anyone at all?!"

"That is correct, Inspector."

"And why not—if it's not too intimate a question, that is!"

"Certainly not. Put simply, I have never murdered anyone because to do so, even when compelled by one's primitive urges, which might or might not correspond to diabolical instigation, would be contrary to the law of the land, to millennia-old civil covenant, and to the commandment of our Lord. At least, that is how I was raised to think. I cannot answer for how any other man was raised—Inspector." It took some effort to keep up such a formal demeanour, when what he really wanted to do was to bugger off and flirt with the female guests; in particular, a suicidal beauty he'd noticed moping around in want of, he presumed, a good helping of the male member. But he tried to imagine what some tiresome ass like Voot would say, and how he'd say it, and affected that he really cared.

Pluck snorted. "I don't wish to wound your evidently delicate, if not positively effeminate, sensibilities, monsieur, but if I'm going to be honest, I'm forced to inform you that I simply don't believe you."

Aloysius nodded his head, once, with a certain briskness, as if acknowledging an expertly articulated order of bloated ortolan stuffed with pickled goose foetus whilst in his day employ as waiter, rather than in his amateur capacity of moralist, then replied: "That is your prerogative."

Pluck came back with: "I don't agree that it is."

"No, Inspector?"

"No. I do not." Pluck found himself incessantly scratching a space on his neck, although it did not itch, and he could not have told you, had you asked him, why he did so.

"Well, then," Aloysius reasoned, in a tone quite distinct from that employed when gossiping with his colleagues behind, say, Herr Voot's back, "if you don't agree that you have the right to disbelieve me, it would seem to follow that you're obliged, by whatever rhetorical force to which you pay obeisance, to believe me, after all."

"If you insist on speaking gibberish, I might as well pair you with Sam and set the two of you the task of talking through the political issues of the day!"

"Pardon me, Inspector, but who is Sam?"

"What?! What's that?!"

"Who is Sam?"

“Monsieur Bartoff’s dog—obviously!”

“Oh.” Aloysius turned to Bartoff. “Pardon, monsieur.”

“Think nothing of it,” Bartoff muttered, went as he was to devote his attentions wholly to his aforementioned playfellow, extending a finger with the loving intent of smoothing Sam’s ear. But he looked down: his lap was bare.

Aloysius let his eyelids droop and pictured Bartoff stroking his mutt, then found himself unable to stifle a boyish smile; he wished he could have a dog of his own—someone to love him for who he was, without questions, without conditions, without expectations. Didn’t he deserve that? Would he ever deserve that? What would he have to do? Through how many more hoops would he—Aloysius—have to jump before he’d be rewarded with a tiny crumb from the overstuffed buffet of happiness attended by so many others in the world of a less punctilious mindset than he?

Pluck turned away and gestured unclearly with his hand in Aloysius’s general direction, informing Bartoff in disgust: “The content of his speech indicates without equivocation a toxic degree of criminal insanity. As well, the imprecision of his language suggests a warped and corrupted mind. Plus, I find his manners vulgar. Have him taken away and confined to his room until he sees fit to produce a proper list of his victims.” Then, to the waiter: “That will be all, cretin. Go burn in Hell, and leave me in peace.”

“Where’s my dog?!” Bartoff suddenly screamed.

“Eh?” asked Pluck. “What’s that?”

“What have they done with my dog?!”

“Larry’s taking care of him,” Enid explained.

“But Larry’s dead!” Pluck protested, in sudden alarm.

“They buried Sam with a bellhop?!” screamed Bartoff in disbelief. As a means of expressing his displeasure, he leapt up and punched Aloysius in the face.

“Take him away,” Pluck commanded with the coolest casualness, referring, of course, to the waiter. “And ask that cleaning lady to sweep up the boy’s teeth. The one who doesn’t take shits in corners.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

During an interval in the proceedings, Manager Mifkin came in and begged a word of Pluck. Pluck, true to his nature, sighed heavily in the man's face. "What is it now, for the love of God?!"

"May I speak to you in my office for just a moment, Inspector?"

"Oh, for—! Ugh! All right, if you must."

The manager led the inspector to his office (Pluck became distracted along the way and ended up getting lost somewhere in the hotel, but after twenty minutes, he was discovered and brought to his destination). Once Pluck had entered, Mifkin closed the door.

"Inspector, I hate to disturb you with problems regarding the hotel's staffing situation—"

"Then don't." Pluck opened the door, and started to exit. "Pleasure talking to you, Manager, and keep up the good work."

"Please, Inspector, just one word more."

Pluck sighed. "Make it a short word, if you please, you buffoon. A word like *a*, or *I*, at the longest."

"It is just that with the increasing number of suspects you have charged with crimes, and the increasing number of members of staff I must allocate to guarding their rooms—"

"Yes, yes, well?! What about it?!"

"And even members of staff whom you've charged with the murder of this person or that, being themselves confined to their rooms—"

"And?!"

"We will fairly soon have no more members of staff."

"...Ah. Yes. I see."

"And so, naturally, I wished to ask—"

"By all means!"

"Yes?"

"Yes! By all means, source some more staff from nearby hotels. Have them come at once. Offer them whatever salary you choose, and don't be stingy."

"But the roads are still impassable, Inspector."

"Then offer them double."

"We cannot even communicate with the world outside."

"Then, as manager of this semi-reputable establishment, it is up to you to invent a solution to this problem you've created."

"I was hoping that you would—"

"You do like being manager here, don't you, Mifkin?"

"Why, sir, I am only temporarily in this position, until such time as Herr Voot is cleared from suspicion."

"Mm...yes..." Pluck looked at his shoe, then turned and looked at a portrait of some hunters on the wall. "What if I were to tell you that Herr Voot is almost certainly guilty of conspiracy to commit murder?"

"I would not believe it, Inspector."



“Mm. Quite. Then what if I were to tell you that Herr Voot is almost certainly an anarchist bent on the annihilation of every man, woman and child on this earth?”

“I would also find that very hard to believe, sir.”

“I see. And what if I were to tell you that if you can help me catch the killers, I would make you owner of this hotel?”

Mifkin laughed. “But Inspector—”

“Or, if that won’t satisfy your unquenchable ambition: czar of the state?”

“I’d think that unrealistic, sir.”

“What do you mean? You do realise that I’m an inspector, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“I absolutely have it within my power to have you declared czar of the state, should you fulfil your obligations to me in conducting this investigation.”

“You are too kind, Inspector, but really—”

“Tut tut—we’ll say no more about it.” He started to leave, but turned back, thinking of one more thing to add, as you do: “I only hope that when you attain such a pinnacle of political power, you will remember the man who put you there. A dukedom, and a modest chateau, and a handpicked harem sourced from the best families of Europe, will be all I require. Now good day, and don’t bother me again.”

The inspector went out, and Mifkin closed the door. The manager stared at the closed door and thought. He knew the idea was nothing short of ridiculous. And yet...the towering man—towering in both physical height and hidden ambition—could not help daydreaming. He was a dreamer, was Mifkin, though neither his peers nor his betters ever knew. His dreaming had heretofore been confined to this or that bent-over maid or well-polished carriage, but now, as he gazed upon an antique map of the state that hung framed upon the wall, his dream dilated to encompass a brutal yet ultimately just reign of terror upon his fellow countrymen and -women; he envisaged fields scorched of all flora, with the slain, anatomically disgraced corpses of his enemies—Voot, bellhops, Curtis the porter, Herr von Distill the hotel owner, stupendously patronising guests, and all the other nemeses he’d amassed through his life—heaped over the land like leaves off an oak, their faces still bearing their terminal expression of incredulity at the identity of their vanquisher; and two lines of perspective shooting outward from his palace to the horizon, the tract between them utterly jammed with those subjects he’d spared, on their knees, heads bowed to him, as one.

At the end of his vision, Mifkin’s lips curled into a snarl that would have terrified anyone who happened to be present; fortunate was he that no orderlies from a local asylum, butterfly net to hand, could see him. The shutters of reality began to close a little of their own accord, he sensed peripherally, but he willed his vision to endure but a few moments longer, savouring the taste of a soup he knew could never be cooked.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

“After that pointless conversation with the manager, I’m afraid we’ll only have time for one more interrogation before this evening’s festivities,” Pluck informed Enid and Bartoff once he’d returned to the interview room. Bartoff, who had reclaimed his mutt, licked the dog’s fur and whispered sweet notions in its ear, while Enid related to Pluck a disturbing event:

“Inspector, I was loitering in the lobby just now, and I came upon a most unsavoury character.”

“By ‘character’, Miss Trojczakowski—”

“He was in the uniform of the hotel. A porter, I think, though I had not seen him before.”

“Can you describe him to me, please, Miss Trojczakowski? Spare me no details, and take as long as you need.”

Enid launched into a forensically precise visual chronicle of the man’s face, figure, mannerisms and expression. In her excitement, her mouth destabilised into a lopsided *O*, Pluck noticed, revealing disturbingly wonky teeth. It was these details—the awkward shape of her mouth, and the off-putting alignment of her teeth—which captured Pluck’s complete attention.

When she finished, she closed her mouth, in order to signal to her interlocutor that it was his turn to respond, and this clamping-shut of the object of his meditation reminded Pluck that, indeed, she would be awaiting a reply.

“Pardon, Miss Trojczakowski. Could you repeat what you just said, please?”

Enid looked at him for a moment, then repeated her remarks in their entirety, with the addition that, now that she’d rehearsed them, some minor, less salient details which had escaped her conscious attention upon viewing the individual she sought to portray peeped out like bubbles of mortar from between heavy bricks, as it were, in the description she was eagerly erecting, and made themselves known; she duly related these too. But this time, Pluck could not keep his eyes off a certain patch of fuzziness he discerned on the surface of her tongue, as it flapped within her open mouth. It must have been some effect of the firelight, he reasoned, which hit a pasty coating over that organ and rendered it rather woolly.

“What do you think?” she concluded. “Should we try to determine who this man might be? So that we could interview him, as soon as we can?”

“I must apologise, Miss Trojczakowski, but I haven’t heard a word you’ve said, preoccupied as I have been with the shape of your mouth, the disarray of your teeth and a certain fuzziness that appears to be covering your tongue.”

Her mouth shut on the instant, with a rapidity to rival the instantaneous closing of a bear trap—only, in this case, to be absolutely precise with my metaphor (or is it rather a simile? With “rival”, as with “appear”, “resemble” and the like? It appears to me to stumble somewhere in the no-man’s-land between the two, perhaps; you’re no doubt expecting me to know, and I can feel your scolding, contemptuous judgement from all this way away, fictitious narrator or not, but I’m a writer, not a university professor, for God’s sake, having plumped for the politically incorrect kayak foundering forgot in tempest-toss’d seas over the alumni-endowed luxury liner cruising smoothly ’twixt

triggers through safe-spaced straits. So I'll duly pass the ball—which is it? Qualified readers, please write care of the publisher and confirm); that is, to be absolutely precise with my instance of figurative language, I was saying, make it a bear trap closing with no bear in it; perhaps tricked by the wind, or tripped by an invisible fairy, or some such; in this, as in most things, I simply do not know.

“Ahh!” realised Pluck, who, applying his masterful deductive faculties, perceived at once his colloquist's embarrassment. “You are uneasy with the perspicacity of my remarks! I see. But fear not, my dear: there's no need for you to apologise. As a woman, you naturally aren't used to hearing plain truths, perennially absorbed as your sex is in face powder, stupidly frilly undergarments and other solipsistic means of cloaking reality.”

“You, sir, are a swine!”

Pluck stepped back, as if he'd been struck. “I feel duty-bound to inform you, mademoiselle, that in Greece, it is considered an insult to compare a gentleman to a pig. If I weren't certain you hadn't understood that—”

“A swine and an idiot!”

Pluck stepped back again. “You might also be intrigued to learn, mademoiselle, that in most countries that employ ‘idiot’, its cognates or some term of similar meaning, it, too —”

“And a bastard!”

Pluck stepped back again, this time tripping over the dog, who'd been scampering about with Bartoff; Pluck collapsed to the floor, earning an angry yip from Sam and a reopened gash on the side of his face. Blood burst onto the floor and the dog.

“Forgive me,” said Enid from above him, “but I realised I'd forgotten to add ‘scoundrel’!”

“There is no need to apologise, mademoiselle,” Pluck insisted, clambering to a stand and attempting to stem the streams of blood, “as we've already established that you certainly have no idea what it is you are saying.”

Enid stormed out of the room, with a couple of thunderbolts hurled over her shoulder, and slammed the door. Pluck sighed, and looked over to Bartoff, who was feverishly licking the blood off his beautiful boy. “Sam! Sammy! Are you all right?” the big man asked. The mutt yipped playfully, having a grand old time.

Pluck had his wound seen to by several members of staff, then, bearing a new bandage, he resumed his duties in the interview room, explaining to Bartoff, who was half-listening whilst stroking Sam, that he, Bartoff, would have to redouble his vigour in assisting with the case, for the duration of Miss Trojczakowski's indisposition.

Pluck had Benjamin MacBitty, a small Scotsman with a patchy beard and a suspicious frown, brought in.

“Mister MacBitty,” Pluck began.

“What happened to your eye?” queried the gentleman.

“You refer to the absence of lashes on one side, I presume?”

“Aye! How did it happen, I'm wondering. Were you born that way, did Fate deal you an accident, or is it just a trick of the light?”

“To tell you the unvarnished truth, Mister MacBitty, I burned off all my eyelashes some years ago whilst flying too close to the sun, and have only, on my modest

inspector's salary, managed to save enough for one side's worth of false lashes for the time being. Now please, take a seat."

"But why didn't you wait till you'd saved for the lot? It looks pretty queer the way you've got it now, I've got to tell you."

"I've always operated on the principle that some eyelashes are better than no eyelashes. If you devote some thought to it, monsieur, I've no doubt that you, as a man of the world, will reach the same conclusion." As if it had needed to be proved that Pluck was a master of subterfuge, here was the proof. "Please, sir, won't you sit down?"

But MacBitty remained standing, leaning this way and that, peering with undisguised curiosity at Pluck's eyes—first the left, then the right, then, naturally, the left again. It went on that way for some time.

"Please sit," repeated Pluck.

"Sit down!" Bartoff finally interpreted, at his usual volume, necessitating the interviewee's immediate occupation of the seat.

Pluck looked through his papers, moving his eyes over the words without reading any of them, before raising his face and asking: "Did you kill Charles MacWilliams?"

"No, sir, I did not." The flickering light of the fire enhanced the dignity of his small frame, investing his arms with a round solidity, and his torso with a taut toughness. His jaw was set in an uncompromising rigidity, indicative of a man who knew himself, knew his past, and could not have forgotten if he had of late taken another man's life.

"Are you certain?" Pluck persisted, in order to strain every last possibility.

"I am," MacBitty confirmed.

Pluck nodded. "Then I am satisfied." He rose. "You may go—and I hope you will enjoy the remainder of your holiday."

MacBitty stood, bowed to Pluck, bowed to Bartoff, and left the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Let us take a moment, now, to moralise: Millions of years before the cosmic forces that needed to coalesce in order for Pluck to be born, coalesced, one of his cave-dwelling ancestors stood in a savannah, watched the springboks gambol, enjoyed the red sun's palms press upon his scalp through his frankly filthy mass of hair, and crinkled his face, canalised as it was by the ploughing fingernails of the elements, into a smile. Time had as yet remained unspooled into a line, and the man—let's call him "Ur-Pluck" (which almost rhymes with "kerplunk"), or, for short, simply "Ur" (as in "Midge", with no *e*, but not really; more like "your" or "you're" as rendered in text-speak, although now we've really spun along that thread into today; so perhaps it would be just as well to dispense with these parenthetical tangents, agreed?)—Ur, I say, to continue, Ur, was all the happier for it ("it" referring, in this instance, to his simple, as in "uncomplicated" (not stupid), yet dense, as in "packed together" (not stupid), perception of time).

Then along came another of the tribe, a man we might as well call "Billy", who was the progenitor of no such line of people, the ancestor of none, for a simple reason we're about to relate. This Billy was in the habit of strutting around under the impression he was something of a genius, before that term, obviously, had even been invented. His latest invention he called a "wheel"—in their tongue, it sounded more like *Grrruhnnnn!*—and it didn't do much but roll. Still, Billy maintained that it would change everything they knew, and pave the way (a phrase he didn't actually use) for the future (a concept which, again, had little meaning for them as it stood).

And here he came now, rolling it along, with the help of something he'd pulled off a tree and dubbed a "stick" (*Grrrrurg!*), making, it has to be said, a right arse of himself. The springboks, with an elegance which never ceased to evoke Ur's awe, scattered at Billy's approach. Ur stared at this dirty, foul-smelling, hunchbacked blowhard and decided that if there was such a thing as "change", and if that change in their pleasantly solid state was going to come by way of Billy with his clumsy "wheel", then Ur wanted no part of it. Ur grabbed his club (one of, ironically enough, Billy's earliest triumphs) and smashed Billy's head right in, then wheeled the wheel off the nearest cliff and wiped his hands in satisfaction. (He didn't really know why he'd wiped his hands, for he was hardly concerned about dirt or dust, and, for that matter, he hadn't watched any films of people making that motion, and so hadn't internalised its semiotic connotation of "Job done!" or "Well, that's taken care of!", but I swear to you, he did it nonetheless.)

There would be other Billys, of course, but not enough Ur-Plucks to club them before their wheels could roll, and so we have arrived at our snowed-in hotel and a dastardly murder, the investigation of which will recommence in the next chapter.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The dance that had begun the previous evening, but which had been interrupted at an early stage by the accidental bloodbath occasioned by Pluck's cane, resumed that night. Into the glittering ballroom, serenaded as if personally for him by a violinist and a violist (Herr Voot and a couple other instrumentalists were confined to their chambers, accounting for the clipped composition of the ensemble), strode our lionheart (I mean Pluck), top-hatted, tailed and this time having left his cane behind.

The room unfolded into great waves of movement, as the beautiful and not impecunious people swept, with the nonchalance and sense of fated purpose of a flood over a shantytown, from one end to the other, chins pointed to the chandeliers, brushing of soles on polished wood and swishing of gowns expanding rhythmically upon the song.

Pluck watched from the side for some time, bored, in all honesty, out of his mind. He craved a canapé he spied on a tray held level by Aloysius across the room, and, without my indulging in unnecessary detail, by the time he'd gone over to grab it and returned to his position by the door, the choreography of the dance had been completely corrupted, a third (I'm estimating here) of the dancers were on the floor—by which I mean, face-down or on their bottoms (yes, “bottoms”)—and Pluck had enjoyed his last morsel of picked crab and was busily licking his fingers. The dance was called off, for the present, and the guests took to milling about, trying to drift away from Pluck, glaring at him and willing him to leave.

But he did not leave. He would not deprive his fellow guests of his conversation and so mingled about, nodding at a gentleman here, bowing to a lady there, shooting an enemy an evil lour or eyeing an acquaintance with renewed suspicion. He chatted, about the weather (more snow), politics (he was years out of date and referred to long-deceased ministers as if they were alive and vigorously conducting foreign affairs) or aesthetics (mispronouncing terms he in any event did not understand, and exhibiting an utter misinterpretation of writers' and artists' intent). He dispensed his conversation like bird shit amongst statuary. The statues, it need hardly be said, gained nothing.

Pluck approached Mifkin and interrupted a conversation the manager was having with a septic-mawed old lady. “I wonder, Monsieur Mifkin, why the number of guests seems to have dwindled. Please don't tell me the divine art of dance is in decline amongst these, the most cultured of the cultured?”

“As I explained earlier, Inspector, many of the guests are confined to their rooms. On your orders.”

“Oh, but I don't see why they should miss out on the festivity, just because of the case. Why don't you let them out—just this once?”

“Are you in earnest, monsieur?”

“Well—no, on second thought, we'd better not. We're talking about vicious murderers, conspirators and assassins here, not your local market pickpocket, after all, ha ha! No, my first instinct, as always, was correct: let them rot.”

Pluck moved on to Bartoff, who had taken his dog as his date, and was now, even in the absence of music, stooped over, holding Sam upright, its hind paws on the large man's shoes, waltzing him about and loudly humming.

“Bartoff, my good man—enjoying the dance?”

“That I am, Inspector! You see me instructing my son in the ways of the waltz. I came on holiday in search of escape from stifling domesticity, and will return a devoted father! Ha!”

The string players were doodling with some melodies again, and a few couples renewed their dance. Mister and Missus Digby were practising a simple step, counting in tandem under their breaths; a short man with a pointy beard in mis-tailored trousers danced with Frau Hühnerbeinstein, to Pluck’s visible irritation; Rosella, her hand oozed into a long pale glove over the shoulder of Genevra Bergamaschi, who wore a suit, glared at Pluck defiantly. Pluck stared, flabbergasted—there were more than enough unpartnered gentlemen about. Two women... When they swivelled, Pluck noted the position of Genevra’s left hand on Rosella’s back, further down than etiquette prescribes, well onto the curvature of her partner’s lower anatomy. A certain vigour amassed in the vicinity of the inspector’s thighs; Genevra, spotting this over Rosella’s shoulder, smirked.

Flush-faced, Pluck turned about to find himself confronting Enid Trojczakowski conversing with Glen Stoupes. Enid glowered at him, while Glen seemed to gain amusement from looking in the direction of the inspector’s groin.

“Good evening, Inspector,” Stoupes said. “Is anything the matter?”

“Why do you ask that, monsieur?”

“It’s just that your tailor seems to have let out your trousers a bit too much. Or are you concealing a rather miniscule policeman’s baton, with which to beat confessions out of your suspects?”

Casually covering his crotch with a plate he whisked from a nearby table, in the process dumping its turkey, potatoes and carrots to the floor, Pluck replied, “I’m afraid that, as usual, I have not a wisp of an idea as to what you are referring, monsieur; but if I may infer from your remarks that you are anxious for your own chance in the suspect’s seat—well, I will see you tomorrow morning.”

“I look forward to it, monsieur.”

“Wait a moment. Did I say ‘tomorrow morning’?”

“You did.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I meant in the afternoon. Or about midday. No, after lunch, whenever that is. When is lunch usually served?”

“Lunch is served promptly at one, monsieur.”

“One in the morning, or in the afternoon? Be clear when you speak to me, cretin!”

“It goes without saying that I mean one in the afternoon, monsieur.”

“It might go without saying to one who shares the same haphazard fund of references as yourself, monsieur, but if the fund of references in question is in fact one affiliated with morons and scoundrels—in a word, with you—then it is a fund of references of which I, for one, wish to have no part,” Pluck spat.

“I understand your feelings entirely, Inspector. But the question remains...”

“Yes?! What question is that?! Come—out with it!”

“Well, simply this: At what time do you wish to interrogate me tomorrow?”

“I will see you, promptly, at two!”

“Very good. Is that two in the morning, or afternoon?”

“Argh!” Pluck seriously considered ripping his (Pluck’s) hat from his (Pluck’s) head and starting to chew on it, but recalled at once that it was the only formal hat he’d brought, and its mangled disfigurement would render it truly ridiculous at the next festive engagement—he could imagine his adversaries’ insolent chortling at the bite marks, and his own clumsy fabrication about a mythical bird which crashed through his bedroom window and attacked his eveningwear—while the paperwork which would attend his commandeering of a fellow guest’s top hat, for official police business as it would no doubt be, filled him with greater dread than a hundred Glen Stoupeses could marshal. No, on second thought, he would simply leave his hat where it was—on top of his head.

“Two in the afternoon,” Pluck chose, randomly, then watched his foe’s reaction, on tenterhooks, in case he should have guessed wrong.

“Very good, monsieur,” Stoupes approved, gifting Pluck an enormous sense of relief.

“Very good, indeed. I will bring my baton—and my handcuffs.” Pluck turned to go, placing the plate now over his behind, in case some accident of which he was unaware should have occurred, meaning that his undergarments, or even a portion of his buttocks, was exposed. (They were not.)

He walked away, but Enid came up to him.

“Inspector Pluck,” she began with a formality which injured him.

“I thought you were through with him,” he muttered.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean,” Pluck hissed, keeping his eyes scanning the room, smiling as if nothing were the matter, “your infidelity.”

“There is nothing of that sort between us, and besides, neither of us is married.”

Pluck shrugged. “You invoke the letter of the law, while I, as always, its spirit.”

“I want to beg you to call off your investigation.”

“And let a kidnapping go unpunished? Ha. I can see that you, like many here, hold justice in contempt.”

“Do you mean the killing?”

“Yes, of course I meant the killing. Why wouldn’t I?”

“But you said ‘kidnapping’.”

“I know what I said, and I know what I mean, which is more than I can say of you, Miss Trojczakowski.”

“I think it would be best if we wait for the snow to clear, and the proper authorities to arrive.”

“But I am the proper authorities, mademoiselle.”

“I think the case might be too much for you to handle on your own.”

“But I have Monsieur Bartoff to assist me. And…”

“Yes?”

“Well—I had you.”

Enid peered deep into his little dead-ant eyes, and could not be sure what it was she saw. “If I could have some mediating input… I would very much like to rejoin your investigation.”

Pluck’s lip curled. “Is that your version of an apology, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“Call it what you will, Curtis. But I expect my opinions and objections to be taken seriously, and into account. We need to keep the rest of the hotel on our side, you know.”

“I disagree. Villains must be destroyed, and their accomplices whipped.”



“You know it’s not as simple as that. We might very well have but a single criminal amongst us, and the rest are as baffled as we are.”

Pluck laughed. “You have no idea of what you speak. I’ve got the entire case wrapped, saving one or two minor details. It is to the resolution of those details that I turn, and I freely admit that the softer, more emotional and perhaps more subtle, because more devious, approach of a woman might be just the trick to clear it all up.”

Enid broke down her language into chunks, and spoke slowly and clearly, as she did with her students. “I do not want you to need my help because I am a woman, Curtis. I don’t want you to see me as a dress and hair ribbons, floating about without an inhabitant. I want you to recognise me as a human being with a mind, and an ability to speak respectfully and productively with people, an ability which you yourself quite possibly might lack.”

“Er, yes, yes, all that too, of course,” Pluck grumbled, analysing a spot on his shoe that hadn’t been there when Bartoff had shined them yesterday. He’d have to give that man a talking to.

She squeezed his arm, causing his whole body to tense up and freeze into a plank, and whispered: “Then I’ll see you tomorrow at two—partner.”

She went off, and Pluck could relax. He moved on, in a cheerful mood, now, and stopped suddenly before an aged old Spaniard in his military uniform sitting at his table, mouth agape, staring at nothing.

“Eye-Goo, my old friend!” Pluck exclaimed. “Where have you been hiding yourself? I haven’t seen you for ages!”

The inspector, in his excitement at seeing his comrade once again, rushed to extend his hand for hand-shaking purposes, but evidently misjudged the distance and miscalculated the trajectory his hand would take, and thus our hero’s forefinger and middle finger thrust into the coronel’s open mouth; the coronel, alarmed at this unsolicited introduction of a part of Pluck’s anatomy into his orifice, protested, albeit unintelligibly, due to the aforementioned impediment.

“Gldagudaadfgh!”

“What’s that, you batty, illiterate old fool?” Pluck laughed, and, with his left hand, slapped the coronel amiably on the back, thereby jamming the fingers of his right hand down the pensioner’s throat, where they stuck; the distinguished old gentleman rose, stumbling out of his chair and gagging, retching, exclaiming insensible, semantically implausible scattershots of phonemes, drawing further laughs from his intimate companion. The coronel staggered in an anticlockwise arc, whilst Pluck, playing along, danced in the same direction; round and round they wheeled, like a cog in an intricately designed Swiss watch exploited by theologians for purposes of proving the actuality of the Almighty, the coronel slapping feebly, pathetically, at Pluck’s arm, whilst the strings took up Strauss’s *Where the Lemon Trees Bloom*, and guests, clapping in festive rhythm, drew near to admire the footwork. But it was over all too soon—too, too soon—as the esteemed old soldier collapsed to the floor, face a dramatic, sublime shade of purple, like that of an autumn dusk slowly shrouding a gathering of mountains, obscuring the lone traveller’s path, clouding the penetration of stars, and distantly hinting at the forthcoming ruthless wrath of the Lord upon His wayward progeny; that, then, was the colour of the coronel’s face as he slipped into unconsciousness and his teeth bit instinctively down upon Pluck’s poor knuckles.

“Ow!” screamed Pluck. “Ow! What the fuck are you doing?!” He appealed to the growing crowd of witnesses: “He’s biting my fingers! He’s trying to sever them from my hand, the villain!”

Pluck kicked impulsively at the heap of unconscious man that was the coronel; he pushed the sole of his shoe against the Spanish gentleman’s reposed face and in that manner tried to leverage his hand out of the coronel’s locked jaws. “Cut off his head!” Pluck screamed. “Cut off his head! It’s the only way!” The inspector wriggled and writhed in pain, tears sprinkling the bystanders, spewing forth a ceaseless stream of profanity at the dastardly coronel whom he’d thought was his friend.

Monsieur Lapin-Défun, Mifkin, Mister Digby and a few other kind-hearted friends of Pluck stepped in to assist. After huddling for a few moments, they arrived at a plan: a couple held down the coronel to the floor, while the others grabbed Pluck by the waist and shoulders and heaved him back, with force. The jaws held; the fingers remained down the coronel’s throat; the coronel, while still unconscious, vomited, but only thin streaks of his supper (devilled wether lamb’s kidneys) made it past Pluck’s fingers, out of his mouth and onto the floor, Pluck and the gentlemen who were helping; most of it backed up in his throat and caused him to choke and shake violently.

“He’ll die!” a lady screamed.

“I won’t die,” admitted Pluck, “but it’s awfully embarrassing, all the same.”

“He’ll choke to death!” shouted another.

“I’m not choking!” corrected Pluck, a little exasperated, by now, at his fellow guests’ inability to correctly diagnose his concerns. “It’s my fingers that are stuck in this barbarian’s throat! Look closely!”

Despite the valiant exertions of all, the coronel’s head sank limply to the floor.

At once, Bartoff came running up, shoving bystanders aside, and dealt the recumbent head of Coronel Eyague Feosalma such an explosive kick that Pluck’s fingers burst out, the remaining vomit projected onto everybody, the coronel’s teeth fractured into tiny shrapnel which likewise scattered onto everybody, and the aged gentleman was restored to the land of the living.

Amidst general cheers of self-congratulation among the guests, the coronel, head cradled in the exquisite lap of Madame Lapin-Défun, opened his eyes upon the indignant face of Pluck, and promptly closed them again, begging Death to hurry on its inexorable course to his door.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Pluck slept in the following morning, and roused himself for lunch. The lunchroom was full of activity, but Pluck, resplendent in smoking jacket and slippers, noticed none of it. Aloysius, having drawn the shortest stick a few moments before, came over to inquire as to the inspector's wishes. Pluck ordered orange juice, eggs, toast, sausages, crepes, fruit, fish and cheese, and proceeded to leave it untouched, save for the toast. He'd brought with him a children's magazine, with amusing drawings, silly witticisms and the odd sanitised limerick. He chuckled in whimsy, munched his toast and bothered not a soul.

In the corner of the room, Betsy Drig leant over her table, pen in hand, mouth screwed up in concentration, as she added to her scroll. She shouted to her brothers, now and again, who were playing a few feet away, for help, but they ignored her.

Aloysius and two other waiters served customers, steering clear of Pluck's table.

The Lapin-Défunts dined in silence. Madame had perfected the art of lowering her teacup to its saucer without the slightest clank, and was practising this talent. Monsieur pretended to study some official documents, but was really lamenting his conjugal state and lusting after Rosella, the back of whose head at the next table over was visible to him each time he shifted his papers.

Rosella nibbled on a thin wafer, shifting her other hand further along the table each time Genevra, across from her, sought to brush her own fingers against it. The model stared at the window, which was nigh-filled with snow, and thought on death, and how a death that came with one's frozen carcass in the snow might prove one of the pleasanter paths to oblivion.

Bartoff, baby-cooing enthusiastically, was trying to feed Sam a grapefruit, but the dog was having none of it.

Four businessmen who had finished their dining now played a hand of cards. Each devoted the greatest concentration to his task. Nearby, their wives gossiped euphemistically about how feeble was each of their husbands in bed.

At the other end of the room, a middle-aged Portuguese flipped casually through a Bible, his droopy-lidded eyes threatening sleep at every turn.

Frau Hühnerbeinstein consumed a whole loaf of bread, two plates of meats and half an orange, and yet, satisfaction made no inroads into her soul.

The coronel had got up when Pluck had entered, then hid behind a pillar and exited without being seen.

It was a peaceful, civilised lunch for all concerned. No one was tripped, or injured, or threatened, or confined to one's room. It would have constituted a holiday bordering on normality, at some other hotel in some other land, where the guests did not include a Mister Thaddeus Pluck, who had been kept in Greece on police business, or even had not been born at all; it was a scene indicative of a world turning round with nary a bump, and thus not a suitable subject for this book.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The old soldier, Eyague Feosalma, had fought for tyrants and against tyrants. So it was that when, in the morning, that overmuscled gentleman Bartoff practically smashed down the door to his room, wrenched him from his sickbed and manhandled him all the way to Pluck's suite, where he threw him onto the inspector's bed, still in his nightclothes, it felt, not unreasonably, like old times.

"Oh, good morning, my old friend!" Pluck, in a natty white bathrobe and bare feet, greeted him. "Thank you for coming."

"Did you send that brute for me?" the coronel inquired, forgetting any friendly salutation.

"I asked Mister Bartoff to escort you to my room, in case you should get lost, yes. I'm well aware of your advanced age, *mon ami*, and for that reason—"

"I will leave you to your ravings," spat the coronel, and rose to leave.

"Your voice is somewhat hoarse, my friend," Pluck, ever the observer, observed. "Might I inquire as to why?"

The coronel stopped where he was and turned back to Pluck in disgust. "Do you think it could have something to do with the damage your fingers inflicted on my throat?"

Pluck stared at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember sticking your fingers down my throat? Last night?"

"Do you mean...our handshake? I presumed that was some strange, ancient Italian gesture of goodwill."

"I'm Spanish. And you're an idiot."

"Well, that isn't very nice, I must say—the way you seek to deny your own provenance, and culture. Believe me, I was thinking at the time that it was a rather awkward way to express greetings, but I kept it to myself, out of fear of offending your race."

"You're a moron."

"Tsk, ts—if we weren't such good friends, I'd almost be tempted to take your remarks amiss. Anyway, I forgive you." And to illustrate the extent of his forgiveness, he thrust into the coronel's hands a small, battered kit made of wood.

"What's this?" The coronel turned it over, and pressed his hand against the grain. "A gift?"

Pluck was looking in a mirror on the wall, pressing up his nose with one thumb and wresting out a nose hair with two fingers, then followed this operation with a wince and a little cry of pain, before casting the discarded fellow into the coronel's face, where a providential draught caused it to lodge up his friend's own nostril. "Ha! No. I thought you might use this opportunity to make good on your apology. Since you're here."

"What apology?" wheezed the coronel, exhaling embarrassingly like a sneezing, hay fever-afflicted yak and jabbing his (the coronel's) finger up his (again, the coronel's) nose with an impetuous viciousness, like a bayonet driven remorselessly into an effigy of his greatest, lifelong foe (in his case, Pluck), a violence which revealed more about the coronel's true character than perhaps he might have wished, prancing about in a stupid, blind panic owing to the harmless introduction of a tiny foreign element into the xenophobic fatherland of the venerable warrior's precious proboscis.

“For the damage you did to my nails, my good man. Look.” He shoved his fingertips straight into the coronel’s aged eyes, cutting them and blinding him.

The coronel screamed in extreme disappointment at the progress of their morning conversation thus far.

“What the hell’s the matter?! Shut up, will you?!”

The coronel had collapsed to the floor, pressing his palms against his lids and rolling about like a fucking baby.

Pluck laughed, genially. “You poor old jackass! Whatever are you playing at now?”

“You’ve blinded me!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I barely brushed your cornea. I was just trying to show you my nails, after all.”

“I’m bleeding!”

“You are not bleeding, you weepy old fool,” Pluck laughed. “Those are tears, you pathetic crybaby!”

But they were red tears, of the thickness and composition normally associated with blood.

“If I ever see again, I will use my eyes to find a knife with which to cut out your heart!”

“But that’s just the point, don’t you see? If you hadn’t mangled my nails so despicably, they wouldn’t be so jagged and you wouldn’t be blind! Perhaps you should have thought of these likely consequences when you insisted on that stupid old Italian greeting last night, don’t you think?”

The coronel merely wept and shouted the same tired old insults at his friend (although, as unconscious consolation to his agony, the nose hair had achieved an unwished-for liberation, floating down and sailing straight out of this narrative, in an escape of which the coronel himself would have been, had he even noticed, inordinately envious). Pluck, by far the bigger man (I mean emotionally, not with reference to penis size or anything), ignored him, keeping in mind a widely acknowledged truth: that the true course of friendship rarely does run smooth, but often involves the unintentional violation of orifices and, with it, profound, blinding pain.

“There there, my old friend, I forgive you once again,” Pluck consoled him, bending down to pry one of the coronel’s palms from his eye and pressing a nail file from the kit into his fingers. “If you could still see, you’d be aghast at the damage the inside of your throat did to my poor fingernails last night. So try to hold this file straight, and smooth them down a little, will you? Then we can talk about cuticles.”

The coronel, kneeling on the floor, left hand pressed to left eye, tried, through continuous tears and blood, to see enough with his right one to shape Pluck’s nail, with the file in his trembling right hand, to some approximation of its former elegance.

“You’re doing a pitiful job, I must say,” Pluck critiqued. “I only hope Larry Snede, my new valet, will take the job a mite more seriously than you. Do that one again. You’ve fouled it up.”

When Pluck was more or less satisfied, he sighed, offered some more tips for the coronel’s future manicuring career, then threw a tin of shoe polish at the old man’s mouth, and flung a few pairs of shoes, inadvertently boxing him on the ears. Apparently, the clap of sound this boxing made reverberated through the coronel’s ear canals to such an extent that he was rendered temporarily deaf; or at least, that’s as much as Pluck could

make out from the scream of curses the old man hurled his way, hands over his ears, dancing about manically and, to Pluck's mind, comically. Pluck had to laugh.

"What are you on about now, you old donkey?" He sighed, as expression of his extreme tolerance. "Very well. You may wait until all your senses are righted once more before shining the shoes. Just sit down on the bed and relax, can't you, you poor old jellyfish?"

Meanwhile, to the rhythm of the coronel's howling and cursing, Pluck sought to loosen up his person, in preparation for what he predicted might be a momentous turning point in the investigation: the interrogation of Glen Stoupes. Pluck performed a series of press-ups (two sets of one rep), running in place (fifteen seconds, moderate pace) and leg lifts (he found lifting his own legs too demanding an exertion, so threw the coronel to the floor and lifted his instead). Pluck then turned to the exercise of his mind: word puzzles, simple algebraic equations and the contemplation of koans (the loud recitation of which Zen enigmas only serving to further confuse the coronel, who at this point was slumped against the wall in a corner, bewailing his fate in teeth-gritted Spanish). All the while, Pluck kept front and centre in his thoughts, as inspiration for the imminent interview, the dual visions of Enid (naked) and Stoupes (clothed, definitely, except for a couple of seconds by accident).

"Now, I'll need your help for this one," he appealed of his friend.

"What?"

Pluck threw open the doors of a large wardrobe, smacking the coronel in the face; the audible crack as the wood struck the distinguished soldier's nose would have seemed to suggest something having broken, but Pluck made a quick appraisal of the door and could detect barely a scratch. He pulled out clothes and blankets from the wardrobe and tossed them about the room; some objects hit the coronel, but he could feel very little by this stage.

"Now, help me up!" he commanded.

"What are you talking about?" asked the coronel.

Pluck sighed, for what else could he do? "Just watch what I'm doing, all right?!" He knelt down, facing away from the wardrobe, and bent his head to the floor—for a hallucinogenic instant, the coronel thought the man might kiss his shoe—then raised, with knee-trembling effort, his feet off the ground behind him. "Help me, for Christ's sake!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Place my feet on the upper shelf, of course!"

"But why?"

"But why?!" Pluck mocked him. "Cretin! So that I might hang head-downwards, and the blood might flow to my brain, and I might meditate productively before my interview with Mister Stoupes—that's why!"

With senescent clumsiness, the coronel moved to the wardrobe, until he stood over Pluck's head, grasped the inspector's tottering ankles, and fought to raise them to the level of the highest shelf.

"Keep still, damn you!" Pluck seethed from beneath him.

The coronel, in order to extend Pluck's feet higher, had to lower his grip, hands climbing down Pluck's legs as they would a ladder, rolling back the inspector's robe whilst he did so, thereby exposing more and more of the backs of his friend's naked legs.

“Higher!” shouted Pluck, whose chest was off the floor by now, and who dug his newly trimmed nails into the carpet to hold himself somewhat steady. “I need my feet on the highest shelf, so that my whole body can hang down!”

“I understand, but it may not be possible!” protested the coronel, as he struggled with his hands round Pluck’s knees.

“It’s possible, I assure you! If you’d just believe in yourself, you dumb old goat, you could achieve anything—such is the message I’ve always aimed to spread around the globe; at least for the hearing of those born with sufficient intellect, class status and land-based income to appreciate! Now push me up! Just push me up!”

The coronel did as he’d been bid, and shortly Pluck’s robe rolled down to reveal his utterly naked buttocks to within a hair’s breadth of the Spanish gentleman’s pained, bloody eye.

“Why haven’t you the decency to wear undergarments?!” the soldier demanded to know.

“Why is it any business of yours what I wear over my intimate parts?!” shouted Pluck, outraged at the question. “Though I’m relieved to hear your so-called blindness has been miraculously cured!”

“If this is the cure, I would rather stay blind!”

“Well, if you weren’t stealing perverted glances under my robe, you would never even know, you slimy degenerate!”

“I can hardly avoid seeing, from this vantage, you ape!” retorted the coronel.

“Give me a final thrust up! Up!”

The coronel did so, dropping back down with the effort, his own venerable buttocks dropping onto the back of his friend’s head, Pluck’s feet reaching the coveted top shelf, and the entire wardrobe falling forward and crashing onto the two comrades, who were presently entombed in complete darkness within. Cue panic, profanity and general thrashing-about.

“Get off me, you snake!”

“Shut up, you Italian worm!”

They had not an inch in which to move, nor even a dim shape to perceive. They fought and pushed and accomplished not a whit. After some seconds of effort, the two companions ceased their struggle, lying, twisted up in shirts and each other, in silence, save for their panting.

Naturally, inevitably, Pluck’s thoughts turned to death. The many aspirations he still harboured in his breast, the majority of which concerned fat women but some of which had to do with criminology and making himself a better man, seemed to mock him, if this really was the end. He lay for what could have been an eternity, floating in a waking nightmare of being interred with a strange hybrid creature made up of equal parts Larry, Charles Snede and a decomposed obese lady.

“There’s something alive in here!” the coronel suddenly screamed.

“We’re the both of us alive, you cretin!” Pluck corrected.

“I meant besides us, you fool!”

“Well, how was I to know what you meant? You’re hardly taking pains to make yourself understood.”

“There! I felt it again! On my face!”

“What did you feel on your face? Your nose, perhaps?”

“No! Something slimy, and soft, brushing against it!”

“It’s just your nose!”

“It is not!”

“What is it then?”

“I don’t know!”

“Best to forget it, then, I always say.”

“There! There it is again!”

“No!”

“Yes! Urgh!”

“What’s that? ‘Urgh’?”

“It popped into my mouth, then rushed out again!”

“But what was ‘Urgh’?”

“The thing—the living thing—”

“Yes, yes, I understand that, but I don’t know this Italian word *urgh*.”

“I was retching, because it went into my mouth!”

“Your nose?”

“No!”

“You tried to swallow your own nose?”

“No!”

“Do you think it might be a rat?”

“A rat! Yes! That must be it!”

“A rat! How horrid! This hotel’s infested with vermin—I knew it!”

“I think you’re right—there it is again!”

“Wait—do you mean this?”

“What?”

“There—did you feel it?”

“Just now?”

“Yes.”

“Yes! I did!”

“Just when I said it?”

“Yes!”

“Let me try it again—there.”

“Yes!”

“You felt it?”

“Yes!”

“Oh, all right. That explains it.”

“What?”

“It’s not your nose.”

“It’s a rat!”

“It’s not a rat.”

“No?”

“No. It’s my penis.”

Cue further thrashing.

“Give me a rat! I want a rat across my face, any day!” the coronel screamed, trying to elbow Pluck in the face but, due to their twistyupedness, only hitting his own knee instead.



“Help! Help! I’m trapped in a tomb with an Italian madman! I don’t want to die! I’m too young to die!” Pluck screamed.

The noise of Pluck’s screaming in that confined space blasted the coronel’s ears once again. “Shut up!” he shouted back, scarcely more softly. “Shut up!”

“No! *You* shut up!”

“You’re the one who’s ruining my life!”

“*I*’m ruining *your* life?!”

“You’re intent on besmirching my honour!”

“*Your* honour?! You haven’t the simple decency to ask a fellow gentleman before taking his penis into your mouth, and you accuse me of besmirching *your* honour?!”

Then a noise, from outside.

And a voice: “Who’s in there?”

“It’s me, Pluck! Help me out at once, whoever you are, or I’ll place you instantly under arrest!”

“I thought I heard two voices.”

“No, it’s just me. And, well, Eye-Goo, but mainly me.”

“Here, come over here.” The voice was evidently, Pluck inferred, speaking to somebody else. “We’ll lift up the wardrobe. Ready? One—two—three!”

Their tomb ascended enough to admit a crack of godly light, but the coronel’s simply unprovoked howl of horror frightened their saviours into dropping it back down.

“What the hell’s the matter?!” Pluck demanded.

“My leg!” the coronel wailed. “It’s caught up in the frame, somehow.”

“Is the coronel hurt?” came another voice from outside.

“No, he’s fine!” answered Pluck.

“Does it hurt him when we lift it up?” someone asked.

“No, go ahead, there’s no problem!” Pluck answered.

“Please!” the coronel begged to the disembodied voices—angels, for all he knew.

“Don’t lift the wardrobe!”

“Great,” sighed Pluck with what he intended as absolutely withering sarcasm, “we’ll just die in here together. We’ll survive for a few days through the exchange of each other’s bodily fluids, then whoever dies first will be eaten by the other, till he, too, kicks off. No problem. Just don’t lift the wardrobe, whatever you do. We certainly wouldn’t want to be free.”

“We’ll spare the coronel’s leg,” someone said from without. “Hang on!”

The two friends lay in the silent darkness for a few minutes. At one point, Pluck muttered: “It’s not like you don’t have another leg. Or like you’re going to be entering a footrace in the near future. And I don’t mean to be rude, but your dancing skills—take it from your recent partner—are simply atrocious.” The coronel, silently sobbing in pain, declined to reply.

The silence was smashed to smithereens at the same time the wardrobe was, with a pickaxe’s point crashing through the wood from above, the hacked fragments torn away by several pairs of hands, the finger-cracks in the handclasp of their darkness widening more and more until the black whistled out and away like a handkerchief into a vacuum or freed bat from a cave, and Pluck and the coronel were yanked up from their tomb into the light of the inspector’s bedroom. Others were there—Mister Drig, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt and a middle-aged man in a wig among them—but the first face Pluck was

destined to see upon his deliverance was the ruddy, grinning one belonging to Glen Stoupes.

## Chapter Thirty

“Now, about this porter.” Enid was determined, this time.

“What porter?” Pluck was pacing the interview room, trying to still his roiling thoughts.

“Curtis.”

“What, what?!”

“The porter, ‘Curtis’! Remember? Remember what Larry told us? That he’d—”

“Yes, yes! Just forget about that, will you?!”

Bartoff was trying to teach his dog to play patty-cake. Enid got up, went over to Pluck, grabbed him by the arm to keep him in one place and whispered to him: “Do you remember your promise to show me some respect?”

Pluck mumbled something resentful.

“Now sit down and let me call for Curtis the porter.”

“Not now. Later. We’ve scheduled Mister Stoupes, remember? He’s promised to come.”

Enid sat Pluck down in his seat and smoothed the dandruff off his shoulders. “We needn’t call Mister Stoupes. I assure you he can have been in no way involved with any murder, and consequently has nothing to offer this investigation.”

Pluck eyed her—he shut one eye and peered at her with the other, as if squinting through a telescope. “How can you be sure?”

She shrugged and sat down, and fiddled with her bun of hair. “A woman has her intuition, hasn’t she?”

“No, no, it isn’t that, is it?” He took her hand—she whisked it away, instinctively, in reaction to the iciness and sliminess of his. “Are you in love with Stoupes, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“Don’t be absurd!”

“Will you do me the kindness of looking me in the eye and saying so?”

She turned and looked him in the eye and enunciated with painstaking deliberateness: “I am not in love with Mister Stoupes. Satisfied?”

He sighed, and slapped the bell to summon Larry. “I am never that, Miss Trojczakowski, I assure you.”

While Larry went off to escort Stoupes to the room, Pluck nudged Bartoff—who was giggling delightedly at Sam’s clumsy attempts to slap his paws against his master’s—and whispered, “I’ll need your help with this one, old boy.”

Bartoff nodded, patted Sam and ensconced him beneath his seat. “Understood, Inspector.”

“At your highest volume, if you please.”

“Understood.”

It was at that moment that Stoupes strode in, flashing an altogether winning smile.

“Good morning, Inspector, Miss Trojczakowski, Mister Bartoff.”

“Please be so good as to sit down, kind sir,” Pluck invited.

“Sit down!” Bartoff screamed, true to form.

Stoupes, a bit taken aback at the blast of sound, quickly restored his smile to its previous place, i.e., on his lips, and sat down.

“A drink of refreshing melted mountain snow, monsieur?” Pluck rose with the jug of water in his hand.

“No thank you, Inspector.”

“Eh? What was that?”

“What did you say?!” screamed Bartoff.

“I politely declined your offer of water, sir,” Glen explained.

“Ah! I see.” Pluck looked to the jug, then quickly back to Stoupes. “But you wouldn’t mind if I enjoyed some myself?”

“Not a bit.”

Pluck eyed him with implacable nerve—had he got him so swiftly? He asked slowly: “Are you sure...Mister Stoupes?”

“Why, yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Pluck laughed. “I hardly think that a sensible question.” He turned quickly to Enid: “Do you, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Inspector. As far as I heard, you offered the man water, and he declined. That’s the end of it.”

“An insensible question!” Bartoff boomed.

“Thank you, Mister Bartoff.” Pluck bowed.

“Not at all, sir.” Bartoff returned the bow. Then Pluck, perhaps forgetting that he had bowed first, interpreted Bartoff’s bow as the introductory bow in what was destined to be a delightful series of bows, each bow deeper and more communicative of respect than the last, and so embarked upon a responsive bow, which was in turn echoed by a bow from Bartoff, and so on. Stoupes watched them bowing, back and forth, and either had no comment on the proceedings to make, or chose, for reasons of his own, to keep his comment to himself. Eventually, intent on outdoing Bartoff in the depth and reverence of his bows, Pluck bowed so deeply that he fell, face-forward, into Bartoff’s stomach, bounced backwards off the brawny man’s adamantine abdomen, and onto Enid, who collapsed with Pluck and her chair to the floor. She shoved him off her with a few choice yet profoundly unladylike imprecations, then, having risen on her own (repulsing his grovelling offer to help), righted her chair and re-seated herself, apologised for her outburst to all three gentlemen present, and begged Pluck to proceed with the interview. Pluck, in response, bowed to her—repeatedly.

“I beg you, sir, might we get on with the interview?” repeated Enid. “I’m sure Mister Stoupes would be happy to assist in any way.”

“Indeed I would,” agreed Stoupes.

“Not so fast,” cautioned Pluck, reluctantly straightening up and sitting back down. “I’d first like to get to the bottom of this water business.”

“Have some water!” Bartoff boomed to Stoupes.

“No thank you.”

Pluck stared at him. “...What are you talking about?” he finally asked.

“Could we please get on with it?” Enid pleaded.

Pluck waved her away, still glaring at Stoupes. “No, no. This is important. I think we’re finally getting somewhere with this line of inquiry.”

“Really?” asked Stoupes. “Do you figure that by harping on over whether I’d like any water, you might be led to the identity of the murderer?”

“Indeed,” nodded Pluck, stroking the smooth, perspiring glass of the jug and staring at Stoupes with renewed interest. “Indeed. For I happen to know as a fact that the murderer, whoever he may be—whether he’s concealed himself somewhere in the bowels of the hotel, or, perhaps, sat in a chair in this room across from me this very moment—*abstained from the consumption of water for up to forty-eight hours prior to the deed!*”

“Murderers don’t like water!” Bartoff shouted.

“How do you know that?” asked Enid.

“My question exactly,” added Stoupes.

“And yet, a pointless question, all the same,” Pluck dismissed. “For it’s become clear to me, over the course of this interview, that the consumption or lack thereof of the refreshing, restoring, irreplaceable drink known as ‘water’ is the key to this whole conundrum.”

“Water!” Bartoff shouted.

“Water!” Pluck toasted, raising his glass and clinking it with Bartoff’s, then turning to Enid, who sat, arms folded in annoyance, her water untouched. Pluck made a quick mental note that she, his co-investigator and friend, did not appear to like water, and continued: “Water! That sublimest of the elements, that liquid rendering of Heaven, a reification of—”

“All right, you’ve convinced me,” laughed Stoupes. “Go on. I’ll have a glass of water.”

Pluck froze, shocked.

“...I said I’d be happy to enjoy some of your lauded water. Go on—pour me a glass.”

Pluck looked to Bartoff, who was equally flummoxed, then back to Stoupes. He chuckled, and pulled his collar from his neck; it was suddenly too tight.

“...I’m not sure I understand,” he admitted.

“Just pour him a glass of water, won’t you?” Enid sighed.

Stoupes was laughing. “Unless you don’t really want me to have a drink, after all.”

“No! Of course I want you to drink!” spat Pluck.

“He wants you to drink!” shouted Bartoff.

“Then pour him the water so we can get on with it!” insisted Enid. “Here, let me.”

“No!” Pluck cradled the jug in the crook of his arm and held it away from her. “I’ll pour it! I will! . . . Just as soon as I remember how.”

“Would you like me—” began Stoupes, before Bartoff interrupted:

“Give him time to think, man!”

Hands shaking, Pluck picked up his own glass, which was full, and poured water from the jug: it immediately overflowed onto the papers on the table.

“Idiot!” shouted Pluck, at Stoupes. “Do you see what you’ve made me do?!”

“Idiot!” Bartoff shouted at Stoupes.

“It wasn’t his fault!” Enid felt the need to defend the interviewee.

“Oh yes it was!” snarled Pluck, wiping up the water from the papers with a handful of screwed-up other papers, “with his incessant demands for *water!*” After bunching up the papers and tossing them to the floor, Pluck began to pour again, into the same cup, which promptly overflowed.

“Damn!” he shouted.

“Damn!” echoed Bartoff.

“Are you trying to sabotage this investigation?!” Pluck accused Stoupes.

“Hardly. But I am getting a little thirsty, with all this interesting conversation. Do you think I could have that glass of water now?”

Pluck gritted his teeth, dug his (incompetently manicured) nails into his palms, and shook his fists. “Will you never relent?! What is this obsession with water, man?!”

Stoupes laughed. “It is rather necessary for the sustainment of one’s life, you know.”

“And maintaining the continuity of your measly, wretched life is so important to you, I suppose!”

Enid placed a calming hand on Pluck’s arm, and softly suggested: “Why don’t you try pouring the water into one of the empty glasses?”

“There’s hardly any water left in the jug, thanks to him!” Pluck wailed. It looked as if he might start to cry.

“Thank you very much!” Bartoff shouted at Stoupes, with forceful, fist-to-the-face sarcasm.

Pluck raised both his hands to signal that he demanded immediate, unequivocal silence. His authority having achieved that, he picked up the jug in one hand, an empty glass in the other, and poured, but shook them both so much that all of the water spilled onto Enid’s lap. She jumped up and cursed him. Pluck hung his head.

She sat back down, dabbing at her dress with a napkin. “I am sorry that I swore,” she said, in what was becoming something of a habit.

“I forgive you!” announced Pluck with sweeping magnanimity.

“Blessed soul!” Bartoff boomed of Pluck.

Pluck, annoyed with the ineptitude with which Enid was drying her dress, whisked the napkin from her fingers and began vigorously dabbing at her lap himself. She batted his hand away, slapped his cheek and shouted: “Pig!”

At that exclamation, Pluck leapt onto the table and hysterically scanned the floor for runaway swine. “What? Where?”

Stoupes guffawed. “Let me know when the Pluck and Trojczakowski act will be at the local music hall, won’t you? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Ever masterful at redirecting attention, Pluck, from his position atop the table, stamped on the bell to summon Larry. Larry appeared at once, saluting with noticeably flaccid hand. “Inspector?”

“You fucking imbecile!” Pluck screamed at him. “What do you mean by stocking the interview room with only one jug of water?! And a trick jug that dribbles water instead of containing it, at that?! From now on, I demand four jugs, of pristine mountain snowmelt, in this room at all times, exchanged for fresh supplies each half-hour, on the half-hour! Do you hear me?!”

“Do it now!” screamed Bartoff, and moved as if he would attack the lad; Larry ran out.

Bartoff and Enid helped Pluck, who was shaking violently, down from the table and eased him into his seat. The inspector gripped his right forearm in his left hand and tried to steady it. He was panting something fierce. Bartoff fanned him with a paper; Pluck nodded his appreciation.

“Are you all right, Inspector?” asked Stoupes with a grin. “Would you like a glass of water, to calm your nerves?”

“Heathen!” Pluck hissed between his teeth. “Unsalvageable reprobate!”

“And a very pleasant afternoon to you too, sir.”

Soon enough, Larry returned, carrying a new jug of water, followed by three other porters, each of whom carried his own. Pluck grabbed the jug out of Larry’s hands, examined it up and down, and stuck a finger inside; he whipped it out, wincing.

“It’s cold!”

“You asked for snowmelt, sir.”

“But I wanted it warmed up, obviously, cretin!”

The interview remained stalled while Larry and the porters took the water to be heated, then brought it back. Pluck dipped in a finger and whipped it out, wincing.

“I’ve burnt my finger! You ass!”

He kicked Larry in the shin and threw down the jug, which shattered.

“Lukewarm!” Pluck shouted.

“He wants the water lukewarm!” Bartoff added, helpfully.

The ritual was repeated, and this time, after inserting his finger into the jug, wincing beforehand, he opened his eyes in pleased surprise. He withdrew his finger, licked the droplets thereupon, and nodded. “Well done, my child. You’ll make a fine valet yet.” Larry remained stoical, waiting to be dismissed. He was.

“Now then, monsieur,” began Pluck, recovering some of his erstwhile grandeur, “I ask you again: would you, or would you not, like a glass of water?”

“Yes, please,” Stoupes answered. “You won’t be surprised to hear that I’m desperately parched by now.”

Pluck let that remark pass, engaged as he was with the careful pouring of lukewarm water from the non-trick jug into an empty glass (never let it be said that the good inspector failed to learn from his setbacks). Triumphant, he leant gracefully over the table to hand the three-quarter-full glass to his nemesis, pinky stuck out with a flourish. The glass having thus changed hands, Pluck sat down, crossed his legs, and awaited the total victory he felt sure was to follow.

Stoupes raised the rim of the glass to his lips, without preamble but with, thought Pluck, prodigiously fateful hubris. The glass hovered in the air; the water dislodged, tilted and began to flow down Stoupes’s cursed oesophagus. Pluck held his breath and watched—would he cough it out? Could he really keep it down? Would it leak out his ears, or cause his internal plumbing to seize up?

. . . . .To Pluck’s overwhelming disappointment, Stoupes swallowed it, relished it, and emitted a satisfied “Ah! Most refreshing! I’ve got to hand it to you, Inspector, you were right—water is indeed an exemplary beverage. And you sure do pour a mean glass of it!” The firelight lapped over the man’s outline, never settling on any patch for long, as if in awe of him. “Now tell me, Inspector, if you don’t mind...”

Pluck, on the verge of admitting defeat and publicly impaling himself with his pen, raised his eyelids and responded, “What is it?”

“Whatever happened to your eye?”

“Oh...you mean, the lashes?”

“Yes—exactly. What happened to your lashes?”

Pluck shrugged, no longer caring what happened to him or to any of them. “They melted off whilst I was sought to sip from a geyser above a subterranean volcano as a boy.”

“Indeed! Most remarkable. And what about that big ugly gash on the side of your face?”

“What face?” asked Pluck.

“Excuse me—‘What face’?”

“Yes, do you not understand my question?”

“No, not really. For when I said, ‘your face’, I thought I made it clear—”

“I meant to say, ‘What gash’?”

“Oh—well, that one, there, on the side of your face. *Your* face.”

Pluck shrugged. “Polar bear,” he said simply.

“Ah. I see.”

There was silence in the room while Pluck considered how to offer his surrender in the most dignified manner left to him.

“Are you all right?” Enid asked.

“Shh. I’m thinking.”

“Let the man think!” Bartoff screamed.

“Oh, shut up!” said Enid.

Bartoff looked hurt. Unseen, he reached under his chair to stroke Sam and in that way glean some tender affection.

Pluck retreated to internal monologue, albeit one represented here in free indirect speech: Would he let this offensive turd get the better of him? Of him, Thaddeus Pluck? Yes! No, no, he meant no! A thousand times no! A million times no! A billion times no! . . . He didn’t know what came after that—this was before the days of mind-goggling national debt, you understand—but felt that a billion times should suffice for anything.

Having wrenched himself out of his grave, back to full-blooded life, life, with all its majesty and promise, Pluck shoved his notes aside, leant back with his hands clasping the back of his head, and asked with superhuman casualness: “So, Mister Stoupes—how’s the weather in the Yukon this time of year? Rather draughty, I expect.”

Stoupes was exiled from his daydream—something about Enid’s thighs straddling his face—and, after clearing his throat, answered: “I wouldn’t know, Inspector, as I’ve never been to the Yukon.”

“Really? Is that so?”

“It’s so.”

“Hm.” Pluck sat up, took a drink of water, which refreshed him no end, and continued his onward push: “And yet, I know for a fact that the dead man, I mean Mister Larry Snede Snilliams, that his very last words before being carved into thin, ham-like slices were, and I quote: ‘Stoupes is Yukon born and bred.’ End quote.”

“I find that rather hard to believe, Inspector.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment.”

“Unless, of course, you were present at the time of the fellow’s death.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I thought it must be obvious.”

“Many things that may seem obvious to others are not so obvious to the criminological mind. Enlighten me, sir.”

“Well, if you weren’t present at the man’s death—”

“Yes?”

“—Then how would you know what his last words were?”



Pluck shrugged. "He wrote them."

"Where? On a suicide note?"

"Yes. Maybe."

"Before he cut himself to ribbons?"

"Yes. Perhaps."

"But I thought it was supposed to be murder."

"That's right. It was."

"And furthermore, wasn't Snede bludgeoned to death with a blunt instrument?"

"Oh, so not only are you not Yukonese, but you're a police inspector now—is that right?"

"I haven't that honour, no."

Pluck, feeling quite hot all of a sudden, poured and drank down several glasses of water, completely draining the first jug, before suspending the interview so he could go pee, a most pleasant discharge accompanied by a profound wave of relief radiating over his whole person, then, after returning, refreshed and even more in command of his not inconsiderable faculties than before, continued: "So you admit that you killed Williams?"

"It's 'Snede', not 'Williams', but let's carry on along the line we'd been pursuing before your extended trek to the men's room, if you don't mind."

Pluck shrugged. "Fine by me. I've nothing to hide."

"Of course not. So," Stoupes went on, "he wrote a note—"

"Yes."

"A suicide note—"

"Yes."

"Before he was murdered."

Pluck shrugged. "Perhaps he intended to kill himself, but was prevented from doing so by being murdered."

"Shame, that—somebody ruining all the plans he'd taken so much trouble to put into place."

"It happens."

"I'm sure it does. And in this note, he wrote that I—"

"Pardon me, Mister Stoupes, but when you say 'I'..."

"Yes?"

Pluck shrugged, again. "I assumed the balance of my question was obvious."

"I don't suppose you were going to ask, what do I mean by the word 'I'?"

"Yes—that's it precisely. What *do* you mean, Mister Stoupes, if my question isn't a tad too blunt?"

"Can we stop all this, please?" begged Enid. "We're not getting anywhere."

"I disagree," said Pluck.

"And I'm afraid I must agree with the inspector on this one, Miss Trojczakowski," said Stoupes. Pluck looked on him with warm appreciation. "I think we really might get to the bottom of this, this whole thing, right now. So, Inspector: you were wondering to whom I was referring when I used the word 'I'—is that right?"

"Correct, sir."

"Well—I can illuminate you at once: I meant myself."

"And by 'myself', you mean, presumably, 'Glen Stoupes—Yukonese'?"

"No, I mean, if you need to put it in those terms, 'Glen Stoupes, American'."

Pluck ejaculated a (totally platonic) laugh. “Absurd.”

“Absurd!” echoed Bartoff.

“Is it? We’ll let that pass. To get back to what you said earlier—”

“Yes?”

“The dead man, Snede—”

“You mean Silliams.”

“No, I mean Snede, because that was his name—” Pluck shrugged at the man’s penchant for obsessing over technicalities, and stared at the ceiling. “—he wrote a suicide note, before he was murdered, in which he stated that I—”

“Glen Stoupes, Yukonese.”

“—Yes, that I was ‘Yukonese’, as you put it.”

“Yes. That’s quite right.”

“And you found this note, I suppose, in the room? On the dead man’s body?”

Pluck shrugged, but said nothing.

“Did Larry the bellhop find it, before he came and reported the murder to the hotel at large?”

“Larry Williams—the dead man? Reporting his own murder? Ha! Come now, Mister Stoupes...”

“Larry Williams, the bellhop, who is very much alive, at least as of a few minutes ago, when he came in this room to satisfy your compulsion for water. Did he see the note? Did he report it, at least?”

“Well—”

“Because if he did, he certainly kept it a secret from the rest of the guests, and myself, for I’ve heard nothing of it. Have you, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“I have not.”

“Have you, Mister Bartoff?”

“The inspector is correct!” Bartoff yelled.

“Well, that remains to be seen,” Stoupes said.

“Nothing remains to be seen but that the inspector is always correct, in all matters, at all times!” Bartoff was foaming at the mouth.

“Thank you, my friend, but I’ll take it from here,” Pluck soothed him. “As a matter of fact, Mister Stoupes, to answer your inquiry, trivial and offensive though it is: the dead man’s letter was posted to me.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed.”

“Was it posted before or after he arrived at the hotel?”

“After, of course.”

“Ah. And was this before or after we were snowed in, all contact with the outside world, including the postal service, severed?”

“After.”

“I see. So then, by what manner did he convey the letter to you, Inspector?”

Pluck nodded, sagely, always at least two or three moves ahead of his opponent. “I see where you’re going with this line, sir. You’re about to ask me by what manner the dead man conveyed the letter to me, I suppose—am I right?”

“That’s what I just asked, yes.”

“Well—to put it into terms a layman like yourself will understand...”

“Please.”

“Well. He—or someone in cahoots with him—placed it in the pocket of my nightdress.”

“And when did he do that?”

“While I was asleep.”

“While you were asleep, and wearing the nightdress?”

“That is so.”

“May I be so bold as to ask to see this letter myself?”

Pluck shrugged. “No.”

“And why not?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I asked, ‘why not’?”

Pluck shrugged. “You know very well why not.”

“I do?”

“Yes. You do.”

“Would you be so kind as to remind me?”

Pluck shrugged. “Because, my dear Mister Stoupes—” And here Pluck stood, commanding the attention of all present, and, with a histrionic flourish of his arms, played his trump: “You are the one who wrote the letter, and delivered it.” He reached out and nudged Bartoff, who snapped into action:

“Murderer and intruder!” he screamed.

“Mister Stoupes,” Pluck declaimed, magnificently, “I charge you with the murder of Glen Stoupes, the unlawful entering of an inspector’s hotel room and the impersonation of a postal officer.”

“I’ll kill the bastard!” screamed Bartoff.

Pluck began pacing about the room, unwinding the narrative of the crime he’d been weaving together from a series of scattered, almost microscopic, and seemingly irreconcilable clues into a rich, subtly textured tapestry of inductive genius: “You struck up a friendship with Glen Stoupes, envious of the improper affections shown to him by Miss Trojczakowski.”

“That is not so!” protested that lady.

“Nevertheless—you, nursing criminally lecherous cravings for the person of Miss Trojczakowski, concluded that the sole way to satisfy your despicable urges was to remove Glen Stoupes from the scene—and that the best, and most permanent, way of doing so was to murder the poor bastard.”

“This is impossible! Stop, stop!” Enid demanded. “You’re making an idiot of yourself!”

“Wait until I finish, my dear, and all will become clear.” Readdressing himself to the suspect: “You drugged him, fondled his genitalia, sliced him into pieces, then bludgeoned him with a hammer, to make it look like he’d walked into a wall or suffered some similar innocent accident, then placed a pen in the dead man’s hand, gripped his rapidly cooling fingers with your own warm and vibrant ones, and wrote a note announcing that Glen Stoupes was killing himself out of unrequited love for Enid Trojczakowski, before adding, by way of postscript, that both you yourself and the victim hailed from the same small village in the Yukon. You then—dishonour heaped upon dishonour!—made use of the dead man’s rapidly drying tongue to seal the missive, stole upstairs to where I

napped, knocked down the door to my room, slipped the letter into the pocket of my nightgown, had a quick play with *my* genitalia, noiselessly slipped the door back onto its hinges, and returned to the lobby like all was right with the world.”

When he was sure that Pluck had finished, Stoupes nodded, forgetting to hide his smirk. “That’s a mighty fine yarn you’ve spun there, Inspector.”

Pluck bowed. “I am pleased that you like it, sir. Perhaps you might regale your fellow inmates with your own rendering, in prison—before the dawn, and with it your firing squad, appears, of course.”

“Perhaps. But there is—and I hate to puncture your perfectly formed story with this tiny detail, but there it is—a tiny detail, that keeps nagging at me, and I was hoping you could clear it up.”

Pluck, majestic in his conquest, could not refuse a last request from his trounced foe. “By all means.”

“It’s just that: *I* am Glen Stoupes.”

Pluck’s breath caught—here was something he hadn’t counted on. He didn’t know where to look, how to move, what to do. The only straw that presented itself, at which to grasp, was one that had proved semi-successful once before:

“Now...what exactly do you mean by ‘I’?”

“Are you quite through, now?” asked Enid. “Because I feel that Mister Stoupes has more than satisfied your ridiculous queries, and might be excused to try and enjoy the shreds that remain of his vacation.”

Pluck turned to Enid, but stared hard at Stoupes over his shoulder; he had wrestled inconclusively with a dangerous rival, and knew somehow that this holiday could only end with one or both of them dead.

“For you, my dear, and only for you,” Pluck said tenderly, “I will let this matter pass.” He turned back to Stoupes. “Be so good as to remain in this hotel until further notice.”

“I did not think any of us was going anywhere.”

“Be that as it may—I am convinced you are caught up in this murder somehow, Mister Snede—”

“Stoupes.”

“—Stoupes; it only remains for me to deduce precisely how.”

## Chapter Thirty-One

It goes without saying that Pluck had a plan.

Late that night, he made his way to the rooms of Signora Bergamaschi, the artist, and her companion, Rosella, the model; on the way, he happened to pass the coronel, who, oddly, in reply to the inspector's warm greeting, cowered against the wall and held up a small knife. The distinguished old Spaniard fled, as best he could on his one good leg, making, Pluck felt, a rather comical scene, limping along at speed, cursing in his incomprehensible tongue and waving his blade like a madman.

When Pluck arrived at the ladies' door, he knocked, and, receiving no immediate reply, knocked continuously for some four or five minutes (maybe even six), before the door opened and Genevra, clad in a man's night-robe, stood before him, mouth glazed with a curious liquid, and looked him up and down as one might a pile of vomit.

"Good evening, Herr Bergamaschi."

"Good evening, Inspector."

"I hope I have not interrupted you. Were you occupied with anything when I knocked?"

Genevra slurped up the syrupy fluid which had been dripping down her lip. "Nothing much."

"I wonder if I might have a word with your sister Rosella."

"Mademoiselle Rosella is not my sister, and I'm afraid she's indisposed."

"Ah! Not ill, I hope?"

"No. But tired."

"Tired?"

"Yes. You do know the word, I take it?"

"Which word?"

"'Tired'."

"The word 'tired'? What about it? I'm afraid I do not understand you."

"That's because you must be tired, Inspector. It is, after all, rather late."

"Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that it must be well past your bedtime. You'll want your rest, so as to more capably terrorise the occupants of the hotel in the morning, won't you?"

"If by 'terrorise' you mean 'conduct a professional and impartial investigation into a heinous crime', then, yes. But it is exactly to that end that I pay you and your sister this visit, I'll have you know, Herr Bergamaschi."

"You may call me 'Signora', if you like, Inspector."

"Forgive me—I did not know you were Spanish."

"I am Italian, sir."

"Ah! Eye-Goo's countrywoman, then!"

"Coronel Feosalma is Spanish, sir."

Pluck gripped his head and looked like he was ready to swoon.

"Are you all right?" asked Genevra, although in her heart of hearts, I feel I can tell you authoritatively, she really did not care.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine...just give me a moment..." Pluck leant against the doorframe to recover himself. He chuckled. "Would you agree, Herr Bergamaschi, that the job of

inspector must have been much easier before Babel—when we all lived as one nation, with one...er...”—here he looked away—“tongue?”

Genevra nodded, and lit a cigarette. “Perhaps. Though I feel for the professional translator, who would have had a hard time finding work.”

“Yes, ha-ha. Yes.” He waved away her offer of a cigarette. “I wonder if there was call for investigators like myself in what I construe to have been a more peaceful age.”

She shrugged. “Cain. Abel.”

“Ah, yes. I wonder if my professional ancestor, whoever he might have been, managed to solve that case.”

“He might have required divine intervention.”

“Quite. Now, my dear Herr Bergamaschi, if we may return from the age of the ancients for a moment, I’m afraid that I really must insist that you wake your sister from her slumber. I have most urgent investigatory business, and I need her help.”

“If you mean Rosella, I hardly think she’s qualified—”

“Tut-tut—the only qualification is a passion for justice, for which I’m sure I can take your assurance your sister possesses.”

Genevra sighed out a clump of smoke and moved aside so the inspector could enter. “Rosa!” she called. “We have company.”

Pluck found Rosella in the sitting room, draped flaccidly across an ottoman, leaden-lidded, floating in a drowsy haze as in an opium den, one bare leg trailing out from her robe. Pluck stopped where he was and stared at this leg, insensible to Genevra’s increasingly exasperated remarks. Finally, Genevra walked over and threw a shawl over the leg; Pluck, shaken back to consciousness, looked bewilderedly about him.

“Where am I?!” he inquired, with incipient fury.

“You are in our rooms,” Genevra sighed.

“Who—who brought me here?”

“You came under your own steam—you claimed you required Rosella’s services for the solution of the murder, as I understood you.”

Pluck scoffed, “Your sister?! Why would I need her to—oh! Yes, yes, I remember now! Yes.” He turned to Rosella. “Mademoiselle Bergamaschi, I’ll come right out with it: Will you help me catch a murderer?”

“You may just call her ‘Rosella’,” Genevra interrupted.

“Ah! Yes, yes, I would be delighted to savour the delicate sensation of that exquisite name rolling off of my tongue!” Again, at the word *tongue*, he felt a little flustered and cleared his throat. “‘Rosella’, yes!”

Rosella suddenly seemed to notice his existence. “Why, Inspector. What are you doing in my room?”

“Rosella, I’ll come right out with it: Will you help me catch a murderer?”

“Isn’t that *your* job, Inspector?”

“Well, yes, quite.”

“And isn’t it my job to pose for Genevra’s art?”

“I suppose so. If you say that it is.”

“Then—if I am going to catch a murderer, can I count on you to pose for Genevra?”

Genevra laughed. “That won’t be necessary.”

Pluck looked from one to the other, a little intrigued. “Would I...”

“Yes?” asked Rosella.

"I mean, would I have to...would I be able to..."

"What is it?"

"Must I keep on my undergarments? That is—over my indecencies?"

"Please do," Genevra hastened to put in, "and, in fact, all your clothes."

"Ah." Pluck could not conceal his disappointment. "I'd assumed..."

"In fact, the less of you that is shown, the better."

"Ah."

"And the darker the room, the better for the tonal qualities of the piece."

"I see."

"Would you like me to paint you now?"

"All right..."

"I'll get my brushes and be right with you. Just step into that closet there—"

"The closet?"

"I'm going for a close-cropped composition, to signify the pressure an inspector of the police must feel, when all and sundry are against him."

"Ah! I understand you perfectly, sir."

"Yes. Just toddle off in there—"

"And, and..."

"What is it?"

"My...fee?"

"Oh! Well, we'll make it an even trade for Rosella catching the murderer, shall we?"

"Oh, yes, that sounds fine!"

"Excellent. Now step in here."

Pluck stepped into the closet, and let Genevra shut the door after him.

After a good three hours, during which the two ladies giggled, read, and slept, Pluck exited the dark closet.

"Herr Bergamaschi?"

That lady roused. "Uh...yes, yes, Inspector. I've finished the painting."

"You have?" His eyes lit up.

"It's simply magnificent," Rosella yawned.

"It is? May I see it?"

Genevra got up, found a canvas she'd slapped black paint all over, as a prelude to painting a night scene, and showed it to him. Pluck leant in closely, squinting.

"You might not be able to see much, but that's symbolic of the human condition," Genevra lectured him.

"Ah!"

"The bleakness of man's soul," Rosella added, "as distinct to the bright, superficial fluffiness of woman's."

"Ah. I couldn't agree more."

"Well, it's very late in the night now, Inspector," Genevra pointed out. "I'll see you to the door."

"But Herr Bergamaschi! Your sister promised she would assist me with my stratagem!"

"Ah, yes. What stratagem was that, exactly?"

"I need her to seduce Glen Stoupes, the Canadian blackguard, and in the process of lovemaking entice a confession of murder from his lips."

“I’m afraid that’s rather impossible, Inspector,” yawned Rosella.

“It is? Why is that?”

Rosella looked to Genevra, who answered for her: “Um...because Rosella and Glen are brother and sister, of course.”

Pluck was, for lack of a better term, flabbergasted. “Brother and sister!”

“It’s true,” Rosella nodded, warring with her lips which insisted on trembling into a smile. “Big brother Glen! How I’ve missed him.”

“But that means.. !” The ladies could practically hear the cogs whirring within Pluck’s brain.

“That’s right,” Genevra finished the thought for him: “The three of us are siblings.”

Pluck slapped his forehead, with, it soon became apparent, a little too much vigour, and fell backwards, after which he rolled about on the floor, holding his brow, in pain.

“Are you all right, Inspector?” asked Genevra, before giggling silently with a look to her companion.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine—why wouldn’t I be?!” He gripped the side of an unoccupied settee to assist his rise, but, rising, tipped it towards him till it fell over on top of him. Now sprawled beneath it, he struggled to shift it off him, but could not.

“Um, ah, would one of the Bergamaschis, or Stoupeseses, kindly assist me? I’m afraid I’m rather stuck.”

“Oh, has the settee taken a dislike to you, Inspector?” asked Genevra as the two ladies slowly rose, taking their time to assist. “It does that sometimes.”

“Does it? Does it really?” Pluck asked, from the floor.

“Oh yes,” Rosella elaborated, taking the other side of the upturned piece, “it’s quite like a dog, in that sense: he either takes to you or he doesn’t.”

The ladies freed Pluck. He bowed and apologised for disturbing them, left in a hurry, and went straight to Bartoff’s room.

The big man answered the door, in his nightclothes, dog in hand. “Inspector?”

“Pardon me for bothering you so early, my good man, but I need your help. I think we might just crack this whole thing this evening.”

“Crack what?”

“The case, naturally. May I come in?”

They sat on a sofa, and Pluck began: “I’ll come right out with it: Will you help me catch a murderer?”

Bartoff yawned, and rubbed his eyes. “You know I will, Inspector.”

“Excellent! I knew I could count on you. Now, all you have to do—I’ll be doing most of the work; internally, you understand, deductively, calculations and all that—but you, externally, by which I mean with the use of your body—”

“I’m sorry, Inspector, but it’s quite late in the evening, and I fear I’m not understanding—”

“I need you to seduce Glen Stoupes, and in the process of lovemaking entice a confession of murder from his lips.”

“I’m...not sure I understand you.”

Pluck sighed. He’d predicted this might cause trouble. “Look: you needn’t complete the...transaction, so to speak. Although, for purposes of theatrical authenticity, it would be more satisfying if you did.”

“You want me...to...”



“Well, not in your current guise, of course! Ha! You silly man!”

“Ha! Ha ha!” Bartoff wasn’t sure what they were laughing about.

“Yes, ha, yes. No, you’d have to dress as a woman, of course. Now, as regards the logistics of the thing—”

“What! I—I am sorry, Inspector—you know I would do most anything for you—”

“Yes, yes, that’s precisely what I’m relying upon.”

“And how committed I am to seeing the investigation through—”

“And how indebted you are to me for that business with the telegram and your family.”

“Of course, that too. But to ask me to—”

“You would make a lovely woman, Bartoff! If you could just see yourself!”

The large man heaved a huge sigh. “I’m afraid I must refuse.”

“But, my friend—I wouldn’t ask you if I weren’t certain it’s the only way.”

Bartoff started moving about the place, tidying up, turning certain baubles he’d brought with him on holiday—an ashtray bearing a Slavonic inscription, an ambiguous wooden structure amateurishly glued together, a small crystal hippopotamus—to face all in the same direction, all lined up.

“Why not make use of Miss Trojczakowski?” he finally asked.

“Well, it’s unfortunate that we cannot, but Mister Stoupes already knows Miss Trojczakowski—a little, I fear, too well. And besides, she’s proven herself, to her continuing disgrace, too well-disposed towards the scoundrel to ever entertain the possibility that he might not be all he seems, let alone to conspire with us to bring him to justice.”

“Well—she could dress as a man, could she not? That way, he would not recognise, nor suspect, her.”

“I fear that Miss Trojczakowski is of too dainty a disposition. By that I mean that she, like many, confuses our gossamer-strong erotic traditions, and prejudices, with the legal laws of the land. By which I mean that I anticipate she would find it somehow unworthy, immoral, beneath her station to, for example, constrict her vaginal muscles around Mister Stoupes’s erotic member until such time as an eruption is inevitable, then tenderly dismount and complete the stimulation with her oral orifice, finally consuming the rogue’s procreative milk down her throat—however much she clearly, beneath the surface of her waking thought, desires it.”

“I dare say you’re right.”

“Whereas you—an open-minded sort of fellow, a man of the world, not one to kneel before the majority’s sexual tyrannies, would have no qualms with such an endeavour—substituting the rectal muscles for the vaginal, of course.”

“Well...let us see if we cannot discover some less disquieting, less revolutionary, approach.”

Bartoff began pacing, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back—assuming the traditional pacing posture, in other words—until he stopped, reasonably suddenly, and turned to his friend, exclaiming: “I’ve got it!”

“Yes?” Pluck, for an instant, allowed himself a smidgeon of hope.

“Why not assume the habiliments of a lady yourself?”

Pluck coughed. “Oh, no, not I—”

“Of course! You would make a fine female, sir! A fine spectacle of the gentler sex!”

“Do you really think so?”

“I do indeed! I would certainly court you, for one.”

Pluck blushed, and looked down. He pointed the toes of his shoes towards each other, then out, then back in, with a coy smile. “...I’ll tell you, friend Bartoff, that I had the same notion myself. Of assuming the role of the seductress, I mean. And I held a sort of dress rehearsal, with myself, this evening, with a sheet round my torso, a towel on my head for hair, and a razored chest—I’ve got the scars to prove it—supplemented with two modest-sized keepsake boxes from my room—cuboid, not spherical, I grant you, but it was all I had to hand—and when finally I viewed myself in my bedroom mirror, I felt, I can tell you, an existential revulsion, and vomited over my fake bosom. I had to have the cleaning lady, the bitter-looking one, come clean me up. No, my friend, I’ve considered every possible candidate in the hotel, and you, friend, true, true friend, are the only one who will do.”

“I admit my profoundest admiration for you, Inspector, and my unshakeable commitment to this investigation, but I must maintain that there are some...deeds... which honour simply will not allow me to commit.”

Pluck sighed condescendingly and began walking about the room, lecturing his confused friend, stopping every now and again to nudge the baubles out of line. “Mister Bartoff, do you know what a dichotomy is? I’ll define it for you—I’ll wait for you to find some paper and an implement with which to write. Are you ready? A dichotomy is a false division of a rich, complex multiplicity into a piddling, reductive bichrome. When applied to human gender, it is the diminishment of a vast spectrum into a single, frayed, clichéd band, which had once been looped, but whose two ragged, opposing ends no longer recognise oneself in the other; put more visually, it is the shearing of either the breasts, leaving the penis, or the penis, leaving breasts—whereas if Mother Nature had had her druthers, we would all of us have both. And who can live a life without the most narrow, precise definitions tagging them from head to toe, I ask with palpable irony? Think, my friend, of the great actors of Shakespeare’s age—of Alexander Cooke! Were they ashamed to assume the mannerisms, histrionics and dress of the female? Were Persian eunuchs ashamed to admit their masters’ members up their backsides? There is every reason, friend, in a close reading of the Holy Writ, to interpret that Eve was really one facet of Adam’s manifold personality; that is, Adam dressed up, of an evening, in a petticoat and conversed with himself, these monologues later being allocated to two interlocutors by priggish Biblical editors.”

Bartoff, having no idea what his friend was on about, seized on something concrete: “I had not heard that they had access to such modern modes of dress as petticoats in Eden, Inspector.”

“Well, that’s a very good question, friend, and I can only say that from my study of the Zohar—”

“The what, Inspector?”

“The Zohar—an ancient compendium of Jewish mysticism, of course—and from it, I am convinced that Eden did in fact have its own tailoring department, along with a maid service and public baths.”

Bartoff, listening avidly—sitting on a chair, stroking Sam, who meanwhile dreamt of simpler, more relevant, more tangible things—felt his mind expanding, almost to the bursting point.

“I...Inspector.. ?”

“Yes? What is it? All questions are valid, my good man, all questions are valid.”

“It’s just...I wonder, then, if there was no Eve...”

“Yes?”

“How did Adam, on his own, propagate a people?”

“All right—excellent question. Do you know what masturbation is?”

“Well, sir—”

“Go on, go on, write it down: em-ay-ess—”

“I assure you, sir, that—”

But Pluck insisted on describing, with the utmost delicacy yet in minute detail, just how it was done, thankfully, to Bartoff’s mind, stopping short of offering a demonstration. Pluck concluded by begging his friend to share his notes with those guests and staff who had not been able to make this evening’s lecture; Pluck made him promise thrice that he would.

After such a whirlwind of cogency, Bartoff could hardly any longer refuse the inspector’s request, and so accompanied him on a midnight raid to—where else?—the suite occupied by Madame Tautphoeus. The porter who had been commissioned with guarding her, a lanky lad with an unsightly birthmark staining his skin from his ear to his nose, had, to his disgrace, fallen asleep in his chair in the corridor. He was soon roused by the unstintingly ferocious invective aimed at him courtesy of the good inspector at such volume that several nearby doors opened and heads popped out, until Bartoff barked at them “Go to bed!” and the doors closed.

Upon Pluck’s orders, the apologetic porter unlocked the door to Madame Tautphoeus’s suite and let them in. The two heroes strode straight to the bedroom, where Bartoff, who’d brought Sam along—he’d trained him to despise, and seek blood vengeance upon, his old master—now released the dog onto the face of the dignified old dame, who greeted her former sweetums with a scream of shock and pain.

“Millicent! Down, girl!”

“His name is ‘Sam’, and he’s a boy!” corrected Bartoff, with some force.

“Although the false distinction between those two poles is exactly the misunderstanding we’ve come into your bedroom at this rude hour of the morning to clear up,” put in Pluck, by way of explanation.

She switched on the light and looked into a mirror near her bed to better appreciate the sight of Sam/Millicent-Millicent/Sam tearing at the skin of her neck. Not wishing to injure the former light of her life, she tried pushing it away gently, screaming all the while, until, that approach having failed, she stood up on her bed and booted it up into a corner of the ceiling; it hit the wall and fell onto the top of a large wardrobe. Pluck, having of late acquired an irrational fear of wardrobes, stood well back. Bartoff looked from the old lady wobbling on the bed to Sam yipping in a panic atop the wardrobe and back again, utterly confused. As the pair of interlopers had failed to make known their reason for disturbing the lady’s rest, she felt obliged to put the question to them:

“Would you two cretins mind acquainting me with the reason for your visit?”

Pluck performed a lightning-quick count of the members in the room, and decided that she must have been referring to the dog and to herself. As such, he felt no obligation to reply.

“Have you nothing to say?!” she persevered.

Pluck noticed, with a little bafflement, that she appeared to be looking at him. Still, there must have been age-related reasons for the confused direction of her eyesight, in tandem with her general senility. Bartoff was looking at him too, but he, of course, could be trusted to have no idea what was going on at any given time. So Pluck stood on his spot, patiently waiting for one of the two “cretins”, as Madame Tautphoeus had put it—that is, her or Sam—to answer her, he felt, perfectly reasonable question.

“Well, if you’ve got nothing to say, would you please leave?!”

Pluck nodded. “Bartoff, you heard the lady. She would like to leave with Sam, while you and I remain here.”

“Ha! That’s hardly what I said.” So quoth Madame Tautphoeus.

“Well, I can hardly help it if your thoughts are tangled, can I, madame? After all—the blame for your accelerating descent into useless decrepitude can hardly be laid at my door.”

“Get out, at once.”

Pluck nodded again. “Bartoff, madame would like Sam and madame to leave. Give madame the dog and help her out of the room; I shouldn’t be surprised if she’s grown too senile to walk sans assistance.”

Ever ready to help, Bartoff yanked Madame Tautphoeus off her bed, tearing her nightdress a little in the process, with the result that the old lady lay thrashing in his arms, cradled like a babe, one of her bare, veined, spotted, saggy legs stuck through the rent in the dress. It was at this bare leg that Pluck naturally found himself staring unbudgeably.

“Inspector! I demand an explanation!”

“Um...”

“Inspector!”

“An...explanation?” The leg consumed all his attention.

“Yes! At once!”

“Well...from what I gather...” He licked his lips. “When the skin ages, its tautness and strength deteriorate, in conjunction with its aesthetic appeal...”

“What are you blabbering about?!”

“Pardon, madame, but did you not just ask me to discourse on the repellent appearance of your leg?”

“I certainly did not!”

“Then I suppose we must agree to perpetually misunderstand each other, and leave it at that.”

“I will not leave it at that! I demand to know why you two oafs barged into my room!”

“Would you be so kind as to specify which oafs you mean, madame?”

“I mean you and this huge idiot here!”

“By ‘you’, do you mean you, or me?”

“I mean ‘you’ in the normal way people mean it, and by ‘this huge idiot’, I mean the one who’s holding me in his arms!”

“Ah, but madame, allow me to explain in words what you misapprehend through the use of your dilapidated eyes: the idiot to whom you refer, otherwise known as ‘Sam’, otherwise known as ‘Millicent’, is in reality neither huge nor holding you in its arms.”

“Well then, my dear inspector, by process of elimination, do you think you could arrive at the identities of the idiots I mean?!”

Pluck considered, then took up the challenge. It could not be herself, he reasoned, as she could hardly be considered huge—except, perhaps, from the point of view of a child, or dwarf, or insect—and, in any event, she could not really be described as holding herself; it would have been different if she'd been standing up, straight, and could therefore be described as “holding herself erect”. But that was not the case. In fact, she tended to stoop, pitifully, laughably. Or, if she had committed a sin, or several, or a multitude—a scenario which Pluck considered absolutely certain, as he could deduce from one look at her positively satanic visage—and now, belatedly possessed by a sense of shame, could have been said to be “holding herself responsible” for the unmitigated misery she'd gifted the world. But a sense of shame would suggest a sense of decency, a moral core interred deep down beneath her corrupt, putrid flesh, and such a seat of grace was more than he could bring himself to impute to this disgusting hag. So it could not have been herself to whom she referred, he reasoned; and, as he'd already explained, the dog was neither huge nor, in any capacity, holding her (except, perhaps, accountable for its ethically impoverished upbringing). Perhaps by “me”, in the phrase “holding me in his arms”, she really meant, say, Bartoff. But Bartoff was not being held in anybody's arms—in fact, with his size, how could he be! But then, another possibility popped into his head; the kind of thought-leap that would have never intruded upon the cogitation of a layperson, but which could, through the subtle twistings of an inspector's mole-like nosings through the starless clay and dirt of this dark, dark world, intrude into his: namely, that Madame's “you” in fact expanded to include both himself, Pluck, and Bartoff, his friend.

“I have a theory,” he announced to all present. His auditors, including Sam, who had been yapping now and again from his helpless position atop the wardrobe, silenced themselves in anticipation. “Madame, I submit that the idiots to whom you refer are none other than Mister Bartoff and myself.”

“Bravo!” Madame Tautphoeus attempted to applaud, but, given her awkward position in Bartoff's arms, and the lack of space for her left hand to extend without coming up indecorously against his chest, she only succeeded in producing a feeble slapping sound, not dissimilar to that of a beached, still-living fish flapping about the hot sand in sudden realisation of its mortality.

“Yes, I dare say you're right!” exclaimed Bartoff.

Even Sam, from up high, seemed in accord.

“I congratulate you, Inspector,” said the old lady.

Pluck bowed. Victory on top of victory; the air up in this stratosphere of triumph, he discerned, was heady.

“I trust that now, madame, you will assist us in our enquiry.”

“Would you kindly ask this brute to put me down?” she asked.

Pluck froze. Another test! Some “brute”—and she seemed to imply it was one of them!

“I refer to Mister Bartoff,” she sighed.

“Ah!” exclaimed Pluck. “But, madame, with a clue of that size, I can hardly fail to answer that the brute in question is none other than—”

Bartoff's mind, spurred on through the exercise of these mental games, was tailing just on the heels of Pluck's—if minds can, indeed, be said to have heels, in a strikingly odd image (picture a brain attached solely to feet—ugh!)—I say, Bartoff seemed to

understand at once, lowered the venerable lady to the ground, and used the palm of his hand to, a little roughly, brush off any dust that might have accumulated upon her shoulders, her legs, her breasts and her buttocks. She slapped his hand away.

"Well, thank you for stopping by," yawned Pluck, "but I'm afraid that I really must have my nap before this morning's interrogations." He turned from them, and began to undress. "I'm sure you can see yourself out." The lady watched, appalled, as Pluck unbuttoned his shirt, removed it, pulled off his undershirt, and began undoing his trousers. At this point, she shielded her eyes with her hand and turned away.

"Inspector."

"Hm, yes? Oh, you're still here, are you? Would you like to sleep on my sofa? I'm sure Bartoff wouldn't mind tossing you a blanket, and a big book for use as a pillow. Only kindly refrain from the use of the privy; I'm really quite particular about whose buttocks graze my thinking-seat. Bartoff, give her a bucket or vase of some sort, will you?"

"May I remind you that this is my room, Inspector?"

But Pluck had by now removed every stitch of clothing and retired to bed. "Please, please, keep your voice low, madame, I beg you." Eyes fluttering, sleep almost upon him, he reached under his pillow, then sat up in a panic. "Where is my rabbit?!"

At the word "rabbit", Sam barked.

"Your what, Inspector?"

"My rabbit! My cuddly rabbit!" He glared at Madame Tautphoeus with venom. "What have you done with him?!"

"Give him back his rabbit, you witch!" thundered Bartoff, who grabbed her by the shoulders and began shaking her violently, apparently in the hope that the stolen rabbit, somewhere about her person, would in that way fly out from beneath her robe.

"I don't have your stupid rabbit!" she shouted.

Incensed, Pluck threw off the covers and stood up on the bed, hitting his head on the ceiling and exposing his nakedness. "If that is so, madame, then would you tell me how you were able to so accurately identify it?"

"What do you mean?" She covered her eyes. "Put on some clothes, please!"

He covered his genitals with one hand—that was the most he was willing to concede. "You described Bunny as 'stupid', which was thoroughly correct; much as I love the little fellow, I, his owner and master, and, indeed, father, am the first to admit that he's not exactly the leporine equivalent of, say, Isaac Newton."

"Might I suggest, monsieur, that your rabbit is in your room?"

"Ah! But as this *is*—"

"And that this is, in fact, *my* room, in which I was happily asleep until you two came barging in?"

Pluck thought—he raised his hand with which to scratch his chin, thereby once more exposing his glorious manhood and sending madame twisting away as if on the receiving end of a vicious blow. He ignored the question as to whom she meant with the words "my" and "you", but the rest of it sounded, he granted, vaguely familiar...

"I admit, madame, that you may have something there; you may have something there at that."

"Thank you for your graciousness, Inspector. Now if you would be so kind as to dress yourself again—"

Contorted away from him in disgust as she was, Madame Tautphoeus unwittingly tore a slight slit in her nightgown, through which saggy, whey-hued portions of her behind could be contemplated. The immediate effect of this was the solidification, elevation and overall augmentation of Pluck's aforementioned manhood.

Just then, when all had seemed so happily resolved, Sam the dog chose that moment to summon all his reserves of canine courage and leap down from the top of the wardrobe, landing squarely onto Pluck's pride, bouncing upwards, dropping again, bouncing up, as a sparrow might take it into its head to leap joyfully towards its Maker in His Heaven from a flagpole extended from the side of a building, only a flagpole made of, let's say, rubber, which rebounds the sparrow with the same degree of force which the sparrow expended in its self-launching. The critical reception to this event from those present in the room was as follows: Sam enjoyed his playful fun; Pluck was aggrieved by the patent indignity; Bartoff envisaged how he, with his indisputably larger organ, could propel Sam clear to the ceiling; and Madame—well, you can just imagine.

When some semblance of sanity was restored—Pluck clothed, Sam safe in Bartoff's arms, Madame Tautphoeus recovered from her fainting spell—Pluck was finally prevailed upon to disclose the purpose of his visit.

"Madame, I am afraid we must commandeer certain articles of clothing and accessories from your room—for official detection business, it need hardly be said. If you will kindly accompany us from my room to your chambers, we may proceed."

"This is my room, Inspector."

"Yes, quite right, quite right."

"But I hardly see why you'd need my clothes to—"

"I'm afraid I can't go into details, as yet, madame—not until the murderer is caught. So please surrender your clothes. We can start with that nightgown—off, please."

"I certainly will not—"

"Strip!" Bartoff thundered.

"Absolutely not!"

"Give her a towel," Pluck sighed, "so that she might preserve her supposed modesty, and give flesh to the lie that she's not a shameless, hedonistic whore."

"How dare you, sir!"

"How dare *you*, madame! For did you not, just ten minutes ago, flagrantly expose your nether regions to our bewildered eyes for no purpose other than your own base gratification?"

"I most certainly did not!"

"Then would you kindly examine your nightgown and explain this new, avant-garde fashion you've adopted?"

A look of dawning horror upon her face, Madame Tautphoeus scratched at all sides of her nightgown before discovering the tear, then pulled the tattered pieces more closely about herself in absolute mortification.

"And let me advise you," Pluck went on, in triumph, "that next time you insist on exhibiting your indecencies, you might wish to take a razor to your buttocks in advance; unless your preferred venue for your show is the circus, and more specifically, the tent of the Hirsute Lady!"

Her spirit finally broken, Madame Tautphoeus dropped to the floor, wept pathetically, held her gown tightly around her and sobbed impotent, unintelligible vows

of revenge. Pluck was finally satisfied. Upon request, she surrendered her wig, revealing a completely bald head, a sight which inspired great quantities of jubilant mockery from the inspector. Pluck then shooed her out of the room, bidding Bartoff with supreme mercy to leave her her rags, before proceeding to grab handfuls of gowns, makeup, jewellery and underthings. Spying madame's ear trumpet on a table—an implement for which she'd, magically, had no need this night, confirming at a stroke all of Pluck's suspicions that she was in reality a lying piece of shit—he wiped off the end, made a few tentative bleats, then hid it in the back of a drawer.

An hour later, as Therbeoo, Eous, Aethiops, Bronte, Charlotte, Sterope, Pyrois, Eous, Aethon, Phlegon, and Helios's other noble steeds spanned the sky, dragging an insouciant dawn from slumber, Pluck was applying the final masterstrokes to his creation: Bartoff, breathtakingly beautiful in a heavy cake of pasty makeup, ringworm-bright rouge upon his cheeks, with a slatternly display of lipstick, topped with Madame Tautpheous's cascading brown wig, garbed in a Byzantine blue evening dress ripped at the sides to fit the frame of its current occupant, but held together with a rose sash. Madame's shoes were all laughably unfit for purpose, so were discarded into the waste receptacle in Bartoff's room. The man had to retain his normal shoes, but, if Pluck's plan was destined to succeed, his large friend would shed his shoes, and all his garments, soon enough.

Pluck stood a little back from Bartoff, so as to gain a more objective view of what he'd wrought, then a little further back, tripping over a stool and cracking the side of his face against the bedstead. When he was roused, after his initial terror at the maniacal clown's face which hovered over him, he found that Bartoff had stopped the bleeding with the only soft, fabric-like material he'd had to hand, viz., Sam, for which Pluck was grateful. He rose and stepped back from Bartoff once again, more carefully this time, and beheld a towering achievement, with only the minutest flaw.

"You've got no breasts, man!" he scolded.

Bartoff seemed hurt. "I can't help it, Inspector."

"No, no, of course not. I blame your mother and father, and above all the good Lord your Creator, for this predicament. But He has also provided us with wits with wit... with which wits..."

"Are you all right, Inspector?"

Pluck tilted his head to the side and slapped his ear, as if trying to expel water—"I've got my tongue all twisted up, heh-heh," he explained—but he ended up striking his gash, which resumed its fountain of blood. Sam came running up and lapped at the burgeoning pool. "What I was trying to say was that God has provided us with wits with which to whittle down our impediments."

"Pardon, Inspector?"

"Just stuff something in your shirt."

"Why?"

"To give yourself the appearance of possessing a bosom, of course."

"Well... what, Inspector?" He looked around. "What shall I use?"

"I don't care. Pillows, rags, what have you. I've got to go, I've got to hurry—we must implement the plan before breakfast. Do you remember your lines?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you study your script, whilst I unmanned you?"

"Yes, sir."



“Very good. Now all that remains is to wash out your rectum and get on with it. . . .I trust you can see to that on your own...yes...?”

“I would prefer it that way, Inspector.”

“Excellent. May the winds be with you.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

“What a waste of time!” Stoupes remonstrated, striding down the corridor in his robe, Poor Larry struggling to keep up by his side.

“I’m so sorry, monsieur, but you see it couldn’t be helped.”

“The very idea! A valise of papers hinting that I’m some sort of traitor to the international order—why, it’s the most clear-cut case of forgery one could imagine. As if I were a spy!”

“I’m devastated to have woken you with a sense of alarm over nothing, monsieur.”

Stoupes, reaching the door to his room, shrugged. “It’s all right, really. I know it wasn’t your fault. I can guess quite well who was behind this latest scene in this ongoing farce.” He blinked, remembering something. “And I had just stumbled upon a most delicious dream, too...”

He shut the door in the face of the bowing Larry, and proceeded into his bedroom, where, after nearly colliding with a chest of drawers which stood almost in the centre of the room, he found a tall, muscular figure in attire traditionally ascribed to the female identity. This being an epoch well in advance of the most microscopic antenatal figment of a gender studies department, Stoupes had no reason to dissociate the notion of female identity from that of a creature biologically nominated a female, but all the same, he was no idiot and so laughed on the instant.

“Pardon me, monsieur—I seem to have wandered into the wrong room!” spoke the delicate lady in ill-disguised stentorian tones.

“No, no, mademoiselle, pardon me; the fault is mine. This is your room, and I was just leaving.” He turned to do so.

“I beg you, monsieur, not to leave a poor, feeble, fragile, aroused creature such as myself all alone.”

Stoupes laughed; his fellow dialogist appeared to take umbrage.

“Is something amusing, monsieur?” His/her lips, violently red, curled up almost into a sneer; his/her beard, pricking through the clumsily applied layers of white face paint, shuddered in inchoate rage.

“No, no, mademoiselle. Pardon me; I’d just remembered a joke a friend of mine told me.”

His guest, resuming their former gaiety, bounced delightedly. “Oh goody! I do love amusements. What was the joke, pray tell?”

“Well—it was actually some time ago when it was told, and I couldn’t promise to accurately remember it, now that I think about it.”

“No, no, monsieur, I insist!” one said. “It’s surely bad enough that you enticed me to your room for, oh, who knows what nefarious purposes, but now to refuse me a giggle!”

“Very well, very well. Please, mademoiselle, won’t you be seated?”

One lowered one’s posterior onto a chair. “Thank you, monsieur,” sie smiled. “Pray continue.”

“Well, I guess I was seven or so when the joke was told me. The sophistication of the joke in question rendered it unintelligible at the time, but just now, having dwelt on it for a couple of decades, I’ve come to understand it.”

“I can see you’ve had a lot of time on your hands!” ze giggled. “But don’t let me stop you.”

“Well, I believe it began with two children climbing a hill to fetch a pail of—water, I suppose.”

“Ah!” ip ejaculated. “Jack and Jill, surely!”

“No, no, it wasn’t quite Jack and Jill. This is quite different, as you’ll soon see. Now...where was I, again?”

“The two darlings were headed up the hill.”

“Exactly. The two darlings were headed up the hill—oh, excuse me, I’ve neglected to offer you a drink, Mademoiselle...what was your name again?”

“Mademoiselle...” thon struggled a little, here. “—Erbershot, of course.”

““Mademoiselle Erbershot’, yes, of course. I think I have a little brandy...”

“Ooh, yes, please!”

Stoupes poured ver a brandy and offered a cigarette, which tey declined. (*tey* itself, it should be noted, declines as *tey*, *ter*, *tem*, *ters* and *terself*—but you already knew that.)

“Now—you’ll have to keep forgiving me: I’m still a little bleary-eyed, this hour of the morning. As a matter of fact, I was rather rudely woken from bed for—”

“Oh, go on, it doesn’t matter,” e interrupted. Zie crossed eir legs, which rather resembled an extensively arranged series of feline hairballs matted together for some unknown purpose. “And I’ll forgive you *anything*.” Ou winked, to accentuate the meaning, in case Stoupes could have possibly missed it.

“So, if I’m not mistaken, I was at the part of the tale when the two children had reached the top of the hill. Yes?”

“Quite.” Co downed co’s drink in one.

“Er—would you like another drink?” Stoupes asked the carbon-based Terran with whom he was communicating.

“Please,” jhey replied, holding out xyr glass. Stoupes promptly did the deed (in this context: poured out another drink).

“Anyway, to cut a long story short—”

Bored with the story, and with a cry of desire pitched somewhere between the tonal strata traditionally, and for that reason discriminatorily, segregated into “male” and “female”, the gender-indeterminate individual suddenly leapt up and tried to grab his (Stoupes’) groin.

“Mademoiselle! Please!” Stoupes protested, throwing the personage against the wall. “I flatter myself that I’m a man of some honour, with some understanding of propriety!”

The other person in the room—the one who wasn’t Stoupes—adjusted that person’s (own) dress, and shouted, a little brusquely: “Kindly undress yourself, monsieur, indulge in passionate intercourse with me, and, and...” Here mae looked a mite confused, and quickly reached into kirs dress, pulled out a paper, and read therefrom: ““Kindly undress yourself, monsieur, indulge in passionate intercourse with me, and, while so doing, regale me with details of the murder of Lawrence Wede Snilliams which you are reputed to have committed.”” That said, jee returned the paper to its compartment and adopted a pleasant smile which involved the explicit licking of hume lips with zan tongue.

“That all sounds perfectly delightful, Mademoiselle Erbershot—”

““Carolyn’, actually.”

“Mademoiselle Carolyn, but...is that your...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You seem to be suffering some...some degree of...movement...there.”

Mademoiselle Carolyn followed Stoupes’s gaze to thaers chest, and couldn’t help but notice one of sheers bosoms moving about. Recalling that this was not a usual phenomenon, lee panicked, and, placing feyr hands upon it, sought to continually shift it back into place. Kye (the person, not the breast) smiled, and explained: “I’ve been having a problem with gas.”

“Ah,” Glen sympathised.

Then, a bark.

“Pardon me, mademoiselle—”

“Yes? Yes? What is it? Yes?” jam asked.

“Was that your breast which just barked?”

Fir giggled, wiping sweat off kyne face; the white face paint peeled right off and stuck to neir hand. “My b-breast? Barking? Ha-ha—don’t be silly, sir! Of course, it was my vagina.”

Stoupes made a decision: he would confess; he would confess all.

“Darling!” He seized the walking ambiguity in his arms. “Of course I killed Snede-Willaims-Sheed-Charles-Villiams-Peed! Isn’t it obvious? I shot him in the elbow, then cut off his head, then sewed it back on and smashed it with a tuning fork, then cut it off and dunked it in a vat of poison I happened to have to hand, then sewed it back on and fed him spoilt milk, and, darling, would you believe it—it was the milk wot did it!”

“Fascinating, fascinating, tell me more!” The object of his affection, whilst moaning under Stoupes’s caresses, scribbled down his disclosure in handsome, non-binary penmanship.

“Will you forgive me my senseless act of homicide, darling? Will you love me after all? Will you make tender, brutal, ferocious, loving love to me, in spite of my sociopathic shortcomings?”

Stoupes, grabbing a buttock in each fist, moved in to ostensibly consummate his threat, when the lovers were interrupted by a sudden noise emanating from behind the chest of drawers. Stoupes pulled aside that object to reveal Pluck, who had, absolutely unplanned, ejaculated—sexually, now, not conversationally—in his trousers, absent any manual stimulation. The inspector leapt out from behind the drawers and, immediately, accused Stoupes thus:

“Mister Stoupes, or, should I say, ‘Mister Murderer’!”

“Forgive me, but what has happened to your trousers, Inspector?”

“I have been having issues with an unpredictable prostate of late—not that it’s any business of yours, you perverted peeping Tim!”

“By that, do you by any chance mean ‘peeping Tom’, Inspector?”

“The Christian name of the peeper hardly makes a meaningful difference, sir!”

“And in what way can I be described as a peeping Tim, pray tell?”

““In what way”?! Cannot a gentleman masturbate in his own room without being interrupted by a clumsy farce such as the one you’ve been enacting with that dignified lady over there?!”

“But this is my room, Inspector.”

“Very well! We’ll give you the benefit of the doubt! So, then, the question becomes: ‘Cannot a gentleman masturbate in *somebody else’s room* without being interrupted by that room’s rightful occupant and his mistress?!’”

For some reason, with a mighty rip in Madame Tautphoeus’s dress, Sam chose that moment to leap out of his master’s bosom, lick his master’s face clean of most of the paint, tear the wig off with his teeth and deposit it proudly at Bartoff’s feet. (So now we can, with the greatest relief, revert to offensive, stereotypical pronomination.)

“Mister Bartoff—pleasure to see you,” greeted Stoupes. The two gentlemen shook hands. “Can I offer you a drink?”

Bartoff looked to Pluck, for permission. Pluck, though fuming, nodded.

“Don’t mind if I do, sir.”

“Inspector?”

Pluck, looking away, nodded.

Stoupes poured, then one more for himself, and the three friends sipped. There was silence for a time, before Pluck came up with:

“Nasty weather.”

“Yes,” Stoupes agreed. “What with being snowed in and cut off from civilisation and all.”

“What do you say, Mister Bartoff?” Pluck inquired.

“Pardon?”

“About the weather,” he clarified.

“Oh. Um...rotten.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Stoupes agreed.

“Indisputably,” Pluck full-stopped, and then there was little more to be said.

Pluck and Bartoff thanked Stoupes for the drink, and departed.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

And now, Reader, I must ask you to pardon me once again for suspending the story to address you explicitly. But you'll be glad that I did. I propose, now, to speed up our slow slog through the narrative; Pluck, and we, have got many more guests and staff to interview, and, as this volume in no way aspires to the condition of verbatim transcript of the proceedings, I will endeavour to spare you the more abjectly pointless episodes, and merely serve up the more middlingly pointless ones.

We may start with Herra Kivi Hjalmar Booboo Brotherus, a Finnish banker who, upon entering the interview room that morning, apologised profusely for various matters he mumbled uncertainly about.

"Please, Herra Brotherus, sit," Pluck invited. To Pluck's right, Bartoff, remnants of makeup still streaking his cheeks, massaged Sam under the chin. To his left, Enid, unacquainted with the events in Mister Stoupes' room of early that morning, looked on the little banker, with his wrinkly bald head, habitually bitten lower lip, spherical torso and tiny legs, and wished the best for him (such was the generosity of her heart).

"Excuse me, sir, if I was a little late."

"Not at all," answered Pluck. "You were just on time."

"And I must apologise if I am deficient in looking my interrogator directly in the eye. It's a weakness of mine, I'm afraid, ingrained, and something I've never been able to overcome, no matter how I try."

"I assure you, Herra Brotherus—"

"And I'd like to apologise in advance, for the record, if I at any time during the proceedings fail to address any of my examiners with the correct honorific."

"We will do our best to put you at ease, sir."

"And, well...may I mention an unmentionable subject, in the presence of a lady?"

Pluck looked to Enid, who signalled with a stern look back that she had no intention of being dispatched to the nursery.

"Miss Trojczakowski is well acquainted with the unmentionables of this world, I assure you, sir. Pray proceed."

"It is just that I've for a long while been having problems with my—my bowels, sir."

"Ah."

"And so if—"

"I quite understand. Have you any other notices to serve?"

"Well..."

"What is it, please, Herra Brotherus?"

"May I be so bold as to put a modest question, myself, before the interview properly begins—that is to say, if it hasn't properly begun already?"

"Of course, sir. We wouldn't wish to be uncivil, or to cause undue anxiety. I want this to be a pleasant, informal chat, in every particular."

"Thank you, kind Inspector. In that case, would you please tell me what is the matter with your eye? I refer specifically to the prominent absence of eyelashes over that, your right eye."

Pluck sighed. "Well, sir, since you ask, I might as well tell you that they blew off in the wind."

“Really!”

“Yes—just like that!” Pluck snapped his fingers, to indicate the brevity of the event. “That was how quickly it occurred!” he reinforced, verbally.

“How frightful!”

“You needn’t tell me, sir.”

“And where was this, Inspector?”

“On the Cap de la Circoncision, it need hardly be said, during an arctic blast. Polar bears tumbled over, and snow foxes flipped up into the clouds. In sum, I would classify it as an experience at once horrifying and glorious.”

“That is breathtaking, sir!”

“Thank you. And now, Herra Brotherus—why did you kill Larry Snipp?”

The poor man giggled, then, realising it hadn’t been intended as a joke, covered his mouth—both hands—and looked over his fingers in terror.

“I—I—”

“Murderer!” Bartoff shouted. “Filthy scum!”

Pluck stood, and began pacing, something he liked to do while he lectured. “It’s quite clear from everything you’ve volunteered already that you tortured, disgraced and executed the poor clerk to satisfy your own unnatural standards of justice.”

“Barbarian!” screamed Bartoff. “Bring the guillotine!”

Herra Brotherus shrank in his seat, a frightened, farting little bird.

“Perhaps I might pose a question more pertinent to the evidence,” Enid ventured.

Pluck looked on her with raised brow. “By all means, Miss Trojczakowski. Proceed.”

Enid stood, walked around the table, went over to the banker, bent a little at the waist, took his chin in her hand, and compelled him to look her in the eye.

“Where were you at three o’clock in the afternoon on the day of the murder?” she asked him softly.

“I—I—I—I...” He blinked, repeatedly, then finally closed his eyes, unable to bear it. “I was in your bed.”

“What!” exclaimed Pluck.

“Off with his head!” Bartoff shouted.

“What do you mean?” asked Enid, dropping his chin and moving away.

“Don’t you remember?” pleaded Herra Brotherus, growing tinier every moment. “I was in your bed, debasing myself for your own erotic pleasure.”

“It’s a lie!” she yelled. “What’s the matter with you?!”

Pluck came up and slapped him on the face. “Did you kill Larry?! Yes or no!”

“Yes!” he wept. “Yes, yes! I killed him! I killed him with Miss Trojczakowski!”

“Don’t be an idiot!” she shouted, and ran up and punched him hard in the nose, which exploded, mucus and blood splattering on all of them. As for his flatulence: well, what had started as a squeaking trickle now burst into a roaring detonation.

“His evidence is tainted!” Pluck declared. “He’s a harmless, mindless fool. Lock him away for his own protection, and call that whingeing maid to clean up this mess.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Next arrived Senhor La Paiva, an Iberian burgher who strutted in with not a little pomp. Passing over preliminaries, I can tell you that as soon as he was seated, Pluck began by saying, “Senhor La Paiva, you might have noticed something peculiar about my eye.”

“Pardon, sir? I had not.”

“Look closely. That’s it.” Pluck leant in. “Stand up, and come over, if you need to.”

“Not his eye precisely, but something to do with the area around it,” Enid assisted.

“Don’t give it away!” he hissed to her.

“I won’t.” She folded one hand over the other, realising she might have gone too far.

Senhor La Paiva indeed rose from the seat he had so recently taken, and stepped to the table. Pluck craned his neck up and pulled down his lower eyelid with his (stylishly filthy) finger. “Look closely.”

“Look at his eye!” Bartoff commanded.

“I notice nothing out of the ordinary, monsieur.” Seen close-up, Pluck’s pupil looked a tiny black island in an ocean of white, as seen by a passing gull who had much more important matters to attend to than stop off and look around.

Pluck sighed. “Look.” He pointed at his eyelashes—or, to be perfectly accurate, to where they were not. After La Paiva had stood and stared for some time, still coming up dry, Pluck reached his hand behind the interviewee’s neck and yanked him in closer, but pulled a little too strongly, never one to know the extent of his own formidable strength, the result being that the two gentlemen’s foreheads collided with a resounding thud that could have been heard one or two feet away, at least, and both fell to the ground in a state of unconsciousness.

Senhor La Paiva awoke in a bedroom, on the second floor, darkened by thick shades. The air in the room registered to him as a rich chestnut colour, heavy with significance but light in detail. He sat up in bed, and looked over to find the inspector sleeping in another small bed, parallel to his own. His head throbbed, but he remembered everything—and when I say “everything”, I mean a perfect, minutely detailed recall of every moment of his, contextually speaking, insignificant life, as well as the bounty born of all-pervasive admission to the universal unconscious, and, as a bonus, transliteration of the Mind of God.

Among his infinite realisations, he realised that he had Pluck, and more specifically, Pluck’s mindless clumsiness, to thank for this gift. He stood up and, placing his fingers upon the inspector’s bruised forehead, blessed him.

When both La Paiva and Pluck had returned to interview room, with the intention of resuming their damnably superficial discussion, the Iberian gentleman sat back in his chair and looked out benevolently upon the inspector as upon a trembling three-legged beetle struggling through a patch of grass.

Pluck, understanding none of this, cleared his throat. “Now, then, Senhor. If we might pick up where we left off: please be so kind as to look at my eye.”

“I am, Inspector.”

“Do you see anything amiss?”

“I do not, Inspector.”

Pluck nodded. “Very well. That will be all.”



## Chapter Thirty-Five

Senhor La Paiva's interview was followed, after a short break for Pluck, Enid and Bartoff to enjoy a plate of biscuits and milk, with that of that gentleman's adolescent son, Phil. Given his age, Pluck dispensed with the "senhor" and simply addressed him as "boy".

For example: "Sit down, boy," as the character entered, but the lad did not sit.

"Are you the one who thrashed my father?" he demanded.

Pluck shrugged. "And what if I am?"

The boy strode toward him—Pluck jumped behind Bartoff.

"Then I'd like to shake your hand."

Phil La Paiva stood, mad-eyed, shiver-chinned, the flames from the fireplace behind him massaging his head, giving the impression that his hair was on fire.

"Your hair's on fire," Pluck suddenly said, neatly echoing the narrative impression.

"What did you say?"

Pluck realised that it was all—at the very least, this man's fiery hair; at most, all existence—in his mind. "Nothing. What were you saying? Something about shaking hands?"

They shook, and became instant friends. After chatting for some time about Grecian ruins which Phil had seen on one of his tours of Europe, he extended his apologies for not being able to stay any longer, and rose to leave. As he was half out the door, Pluck called to him one last question:

"Oh, Phil, friend..."

"Yes, Curtis?"

"You—ah, this is a little awkward, really!"

"What is?" Phil smiled. "You know I'm at your service."

"Just, you know, having to ask you this...something this trivial, and rather sordid."

"Go on. I promise I won't be offended in the slightest."

"Well—you didn't have anything to do with the murder of Charlie Spats Williams, did you?"

Phil chuckled. "Of course not. Anything else?"

"No, just—I hope you'll enjoy your lunch."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

After lunch, during which Pluck accidentally impaled a waiter's hand with a salad fork, then, after its extraction and Pluck's outraged vituperation against the fellow, the inspector accidentally impaled the same waiter's same hand with a fish fork, and finally, equally unintentionally, when he'd thought the waiter had been taken for bandaging and was therefore nowhere in the vicinity, Pluck attempted to spear a grape in a bowl on the table before him, but ended up falling backwards in his chair and puncturing the waiter's hand with his dessert fork—after lunch, a tired-looking middle-aged man, who seemed vaguely familiar to the inspector, was escorted in.

"Please sit down, monsieur."

"Thank you." The man sat, and yawned.

"Could you state your full name, please?"

The man snored.

"Bartoff—wake him up, will you?"

Bartoff threw one of the four jugs of water at the man—it struck him in the face, shattering, tearing gashes in his cheeks and forehead and sending his wig flying into the fireplace. The man leapt up, screaming in pain, rushed to the hearth, and thrust in his hand, which lit aflame, but he'd extracted the flaming wig, which, unthinkingly, he slapped back atop his head. His screaming, naturally, redoubled, and it took a quick-thinking Enid to douse him with two more jugs of water (she intentionally left one jug's contents intact, in case Pluck should find cause to complain that he was thirsty). She helped the smouldering, whimpering wreck of a man back to his seat. Pluck shuffled his papers, then asked him:

"Now, sir: do I have your attention?"

"What...what is it?"

"Your full name, if you'd be so kind."

"Alan Brigeiboit Sanns."

Pluck nodded. "That is sufficient. It accords with my records precisely. You are free to go. And..."

Enid was helping the vanquished opponent out of his seat. Mister Sanns turned back to Pluck.

"...Remember: there is much in life worth savouring," Pluck expounded. "Your life might appear pointless and pathetic, but it does not follow that it is. I beg you to keep that in mind and never to lose faith, sir."

The man turned without a word, and allowed Enid to help him out.

## **Chapter Thirty-Seven**

After Enid upbraided her fellow investigators for their needlessly violent methods—her protests falling, it must be said, on mostly deaf ears—the final suspect of the afternoon was ushered into the room. This was a burly, hairy individual who only spoke some language none of them could guess. After a long hour and a half of Pluck pontificating on various subjects dear to his heart, none of which discourse could have made the slightest impact on the patently bored interviewee, the man was dismissed, and supper awaited.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Pluck couldn't sleep. Although he'd as much as solved the case, and was awaiting the conclusion of the interview process before making his public denunciations, there were still a couple of niggling details which refused to slot into his theory.

He lit his bedside candle, stroked his rabbit and opened up his album of photographic portraits. Ah, one of his favourites: a dark-haired lady, amply endowed across all sectors of her person, walking a dog along a fenced-off pond in a well-lit, sylvan scene, the lady in question being, for unexplained artistic reasons, bereft of clothes. The lady smiled, a little dubiously, at the viewer. She was not at all comfortable with the aesthetic necessity of exposing her pudendum, Pluck decided, having subjected the image to his peerless analytical powers. There it was: the façade of a smile upon her lips, but the death of innocence, caught in the unforgiving flash of the camera lamp, in her eyes.

He found his magnifying glass and studied the picture in detail, lingering over armpit hair, creases circling the navel, nipple wrinkles, and toenails in need of a trim. All the while, his left hand stroked, and stroked true. His gaze had happened to fall, of all places, on the unpromising lumps of her knee, when all thought ceased, mystical angel-lamps flashed across the vault of his cranium, and his brain shut down, leaving the cave of his skull cold, and dark, and hushed in hesitant peace.

He awoke some time later, coughed, and banished the squeaky condemnations spouted by some interrogating spirit to a distant cupboard of his brain. Post-coitally, now, for want of anything better, he took another look at the lady's dog. A silly little thing. Dark and light in splotches, avoiding the camera; it would never be a celebrity of note, Pluck judged, although he was forced to admire its relative indifference to its state of undress, in contrast with its master's manifest shame. He peered closer. It actually looked a little like Sam. He peered still closer; his nose pressed sensually against the gelatin. It *was* Sam. Or, should he say: "Millicent". Or her ancestor. Which meant... Pluck's lightning-fast cogitation put two and two together, made twenty-two, dismissed the result and began again, and, after forty-odd minutes of brow-knitting, arrived at the inevitable conclusion that the hussy in the photograph was none other than the distinguished Madame Tautphoeus, in younger and, it would seem, more dishonourable days.

There was nothing to be done but to rush at once to her room and seek a brutal confrontation. Halfway there, he gleaned from the reaction of a night porter that he'd forgotten to dress himself; he returned to his room, threw on his robe, promising himself to tie it on the way, and finally arrived at the door. Justice waiting for no man or woman, he did not bother to knock, but let himself in with the master key he'd browbeaten Poor Larry into lending him. He walked into the bedroom, lit a lamp, opened the album to the incriminating page and shouted: "Wake up and behold thy wickedness, woman! I submit that the trollop in this picture is *you*!"

The figure in the bed rolled over; terrified eye-whites shone.

"Eye-Goo!" Pluck uttered in disbelief. "What are you doing in Madame's room?! What have you done with her?! Produce her this instant!"

The coronel squinted drowsily at the photograph which was still thrust before him. "That looks nothing like me!" he protested.

Pluck ripped off the blankets and searched the bed for Madame Tautphoeus; he found nothing. While he was thus engaged, the coronel withdrew a knife from under his pillow and held it to Pluck's nose.

"Get out of my room or I'll kill you," he declared without preamble.

"Don't be absurd," laughed Pluck. "Firstly, this is Madame's room—not yours. Secondly,"—here he counted on his fingers, to ensure he had not made one of the basic arithmetical errors to which he was prone—"you're my best friend. Thirdly..." They both waited for a third reason why Pluck should not be killed; after several long minutes, Pluck finally came up with: "Well, it's the law of the land, you know."

The coronel jabbed his knife at Pluck's nose in response. Escaping with merely a prick (by which I mean, "a tiny cut on the nose"; not, "a penis"), Pluck darted from the room, his precious album under his arm.

As he bolted down the corridor, screaming in mortal terror, a door opened: it was Madame Tautphoeus, cinching her robe-strap round her waist, seeing what was the commotion.

"Madame! Quick, let me in!" Without waiting for any sign of accord, Pluck burst into her room and locked the door behind him. He panted, eyes closed, hugging his album. "Thank you, madame. It so happens that I have just bested Coronel Feosalma in single combat over the insult to your person he rendered by ejecting you from your room. Now, if—by way of thanks—you would kindly be so good as to explain *this*!" He flung open his eyes and the album at once, only to find he had been speaking to no one.

A knock on the door—who could it be?

"Who's there?" he asked through the door, all sorts of dreadful possibilities invading his imagination.

"Madame Tautphoeus," came the reply. "You've locked me out of my room."

He laughed. "But that's absurd! Tell me, exactly when did I do a thing like that?"

"Only moments ago," came the answer through the wood.

"Really?" He found the charge extraordinary. "Then prove it."

"Open the door and see."

Pluck considered. He could find no obvious objection to the proposal, and so unlocked and opened the door, to find Madame where she'd claimed to be.

"Madame! Quick! Into my room!" He grabbed her arm and wrenched her inside. "There's at least one madman on the loose!" He shut and locked the door.

"I could not agree more," she sighed, readjusting her robe from his manhandling. "Now what is the latest crisis which necessitated the disturbance of my rest?"

"Nothing, madame, nothing save the revelation of your ancient indignities!"

"By which you mean what, exactly, pray tell?"

"By which I mean the unveiling of this cloak of genteel decency under which you've been masquerading in evasion of your former whoredom—madame!"

That esteemed gentlewoman was forced to demand, unrhetorically: "How dare you!"

"And I retort, how dare *you*, woman!" And with that, he threw open the album to the page in question.

"What's that? What have you got there? What are you looking at?"

Baffled by madame's queries, Pluck looked down, to discover that he had opened the album to face himself, with its untitled covers facing her. With a deft manoeuvre or two, he twisted one arm under the other, so as to more properly display to his practically

vanquished opponent the page he had found so distasteful, but somehow got tangled up and ended up locking his arms around each other, the album tumbling to the floor.

"One moment, if you please, madame!" He disengaged his arms and stooped to pick up the album, which he did, and then, this done, he opened it up, flipped through some pages, found the one he'd been intent on showing her, and finally, carefully, turned it around so that it should be exposed to her view.

"What is that? A photograph?"

"Your sight is keen, madame."

"She's not wearing any clothes."

"Of course she isn't; she is a dog, madame."

"I refer to the woman, Inspector."

"The what?"

"The woman. The person. The human being, who has been photographed holding the lead of the dog."

"What of her?"

"She's not wearing any clothes."

"You mean the woman?"

"I do. You understand my meaning perfectly, Inspector."

"You are correct, madame: neither the dog nor the woman is pictured in clothes."

"It is disgusting; revolting."

"I agree."

"I know that park and that patch very well, and it is absolutely off-limits to dogs!"

"And are you disgusted by the woman's failure to have dressed herself before leaving her home?"

"It was awfully careless of her, anyway."

"Take a close look at the dog, madame."

"Yes? What of it?"

"Does anything about it seem familiar?"

"You're not suggesting—?"

"I am."

"Inspector, you're not suggesting—?"

"Indeed I am."

"*This dog is the murderer?!?*"

"Yes, madame, that is correct: this dog is the—...no, no, you don't comprehend me at all."

"Then what is it? Why have you barged into my room in the middle of the night and shown me a pornographic photograph of a woman and her dog, if it has not something to do with the case under investigation?"

"Look once again at the dog, if you'll humour me one last time, madame, and I think all will become clear."

She did as she was bid.

"...It looks rather like Millicent."

"It does."

"Down to the splotches and the adorable way she has of holding herself."

"Agreed. And do you notice anything about the lady?"

"You mean the lady?"

“That is what I mean, madame.”

She looked closely.

“...She is beautiful.”

“Agreed.”

“She has a well-moulded face. With a poignant intimation of lost youth about her eyes. And she is rather large, about the body—”

“Indeed.”

“But it becomes her. Her breasts...are shaped with an exquisite delicacy...perfectly pitched, as if miraculously levitating, by the grace of the Almighty, between gravity’s will and Heaven’s savour...”

“You’ve described them magnificently, madame!”

“And her hips...devised wide, for childbirth...”

“Yes.”

“Quintuplets, one might say. With creamy columns of flesh descending to the feet—I refer to her legs—soft and rich with taut nerves which would, if clasped in the manly grip of a lover, irradiate waves of pleasure throughout her person.”

“Yes!”

“And as for her maidenhead—”

“Yes?”

“Her deep cleft peeks out, with a bit of a wink at us, through the clump of weeds as if inviting the viewer to investigate the greatest, cosmic, mystery at the centre of us all.. !”

For the second time that evening, Pluck achieved orgasm, though without recourse to the use of his, or for that matter anybody else’s, hands. When it was over, his head bowed, he closed his eyes, and was silent.

“...And yes, Inspector, if you are intent on knowing it: *I* am the lady in the photograph. Or rather, I was...several lifetimes ago.”

Still catching his breath, Pluck muttered: “You are a slattern and a whore, madame.”

“I haven’t the decency to disagree, monsieur. Although, since you’ve found me out, will you allow me one, small, request?”

“Of course, madame; honour demands it.”

“Would you terribly mind closing your robe?”

Pluck had forgotten to do so, he now realised; he placed the album on the floor, wiped the milk of his manhood off the book, off his belly, off Madame Tautphoeus’s gown, then off his hands onto the lime-green wallpaper nearby, and, finally, closed his robe.

By this time, the dignified lady had sunk into a chair and wept. Pluck smouldered, despising himself.

“I know I am ugly, madame; even revolting. But one cannot choose the appearance of one’s naked person so easily, you must know.”

“It’s not that,” she sniffled.

“I have made you cry in revulsion at the appearance of my naked self.”

“No, no, it’s not that.” She found a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. “It’s that damned dog.”

“The dog, madame?”

“I shed my flesh, I changed my hair, I gained wrinkles and veins; I altered every aspect of my appearance through these years, but I never dreamt I’d be found out by my dog.”

“Madame...as head of the investigating committee...all I can tell you is that: I will cherish your secret to my grave.”

She looked at him with an appreciation he’d never thought he’d see in her. She rose, he wiped away his own tear, and they shared an ineffably transcendent hug.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

It was a nobler, more thoughtful Inspector Pluck who glided into the interview room next morning. Both Bartoff and Enid seemed to sense something different, maturer, about him. He bowed to the one, kissed the hand of the other, with an unruffled ease which was new to him. When he sent Larry to summon Signora Genevra Bergamaschi to be interviewed, they secretly expected a more civilised order of interview than they'd seen heretofore.

Genevra entered, in baggy trousers from which drips of paint had been inexpertly washed, and a strange jacket with many pockets, greeted them all formally, and sat down. Enid pondered the artist's appearance, while Pluck examined his notes: the firelight, playing upon her, softened her features, revealing a refined femininity, as a sculpture fully formed in Michelangelo's marble, beneath. And yet, there, still, was her manly way of carrying herself: her shoulders thrust back, her trousered legs well apart, her stoical frown. It was over this alloy of features that Enid's glance ranged, admiringly and confusedly.

Pluck, on the other hand, remembered his duty.

"I submit," he began, "that you had nothing whatever to do with the murder of Gary Snede Bill."

"You are correct."

"Further, I submit that you never planned to kill him, never wished to kill him, never *conceived* of killing him, at any point in your life."

"That's it exactly."

"And that to waste time attempting to establish some dubious motive derived from, say, a misunderstanding of semantics would be just that—a waste of time, with no progress made toward the aim of this investigation."

"I am of the exact same mind."

"Good. Then we are agreed." Pluck stood. "Please send in your companion, Signora Rosella. Thank you for your co-operation."

"My pleasure." Genevra rose, looked at him, with a surprise identical to that on the faces of Enid and Bartoff, and left. The door then opened, and Poor Larry stood on the threshold, bearing a jug of water.

"You asked for more water, Inspector?" he asked meekly.

"I did. Please come in. And dust the table while you're at it."

"Yes, sir."

Larry came in. A moment later, Rosella entered, and with her, a fragrance of roses.

"Thank you for coming, signora. Please sit down."

She did so, without a word.

Pluck looked through his papers. "I cannot seem to find a surname for you in these lists, signora."

"I have no surname. I am legally mononymous."

"Ah. Well, there you are. One learns something new every day. To proceed: Signora Rosella, I submit that you had nothing at all to do with the murder of Bill Snarry."

"That's right."

"And that to prolong this interrogation would be a scandalous waste of your time and ours."

“Yes.”

Rosella’s flesh, so thin as to be practically transparent, and so glossy as to look like wax, seemed, in the firelight, to be melting, Enid remarked (purely internally). The flames flickered behind the model, creating an optical effect of her skin undulating, slowly and sensually, as if kneaded by reverential palms. Her face, strange and sketch-like, half-finished, as it was to Enid’s mind, yoked to her body, with its ethereal, acalephan flesh, evoked in her a palpable pang. It was a pang she did not immediately recognise, but she felt it, and thought on it, and dismissed it, but could not stop herself from, unaccountably, savouring it, and defining it, in the absence of any other notion, as envy. But why? Was it her young, supple, unaged body, that, if time were, as her flesh seemed to suggest, merely a whimsy, would never die? That must be it. And so her meditation drifted, as meditations do, to the subject of her own mortality. Her mind overlaid the theme of death on the body of Rosella before her: death and desire, all jumbled up.

“Are you all right, Miss Trojczakowski?” It was Pluck, who’d turned to her.

“Yes, yes, of course. Carry on.”

Pluck shrugged. “I have nothing further to add. Signora Rosella—you are in the clear.”

“You’re innocent!” Bartoff screamed violently.

“Thank you.” Rosella nodded her head and stood up, about to go, when Pluck detained her with:

“Oh, just one more thing, please. There’s just one more thing to be done.” He stood up, turned around to view Larry dusting the snacks table, and threw himself murderously upon him. His blows were vicious and bestial; Larry, too surprised and frightened to put up a defence, curled up on the floor under the assault. Enid and Bartoff had to drag Pluck off him, and hold him in a chair, where he panted and wheezed and glared hatefully at the bellhop.

“Why did you do that?!” Enid wondered.

“What?! What?!”

“Why?!”

“Why what?! Speak plainly, woman!”

“Why did you attack Larry?!”

“Oh—that.” Pluck became thoughtful. “In truth, I couldn’t tell you why. Sometimes in life, Miss Trojczakowski, you’ll find yourself faced with an instinct, an instinct you neither welcome nor understand, and, rather than chase it away, you embrace it—ride it, like you’d ride a manic, wild horse with red death burning in its eye—and cling on for dear life. That, put simply, is what I’ve just done.”

On that note, Larry was taken, snivelling pathetically, to calm down, and the others broke for tea.

## Chapter Forty

During lunch, the Drig children had a table to themselves. Amidst the tinkling of spoons, murmur of gossip and squeaking of chairs that charged the air of the dining hall, the siblings slurped their strawberries and cream and chatted about the main topic of conversation over that holiday.

“He’s a rat,” Charlie opined.

“He’s just doing his job,” Betsy, adding another couple of words to her list, argued.

“He’s a clown,” judged Doobie.

Eric just made a silly noise.

Bo giggled.

“He’s a rat.” Charlie said it with an air of finality.

“He’s all that, and more,” Danny harrumphed. “And I vow revenge on him for what he did to Father.”

Betsy shrugged. “I like him. He asks funny questions. He’s funny.”

## Chapter Forty-One

Pluck looked up from his papers, which he'd glanced over hundreds of times anyway, never taking very much in, at the sound of indignant protest coming their way. The door to the interview room flew open, and Modeste, the sometime cleaning lady of that establishment, was shunted in by two porters, one on each side of her, holding tightly to the ends of two or more bedsheets which had been, on Pluck's orders, by Bartoff's request, wrapped round the poor woman and pinned so as to construct a huge sumo-style diaper.

"I beg you to sit and be calm yourself, girl," said Pluck with his most charming smile. "This should only take a moment."

She sat. "I don't know nothing about the murder, sir. You can rely on that." The shadow forged by the fireplace's flames creeping over the diaper was of a monstrous shape swallowing the floor.

"The evidence suggests otherwise, woman," countered Pluck, quickly forgetting his promises of old to serve as her devoted knight. "For a forensic examination of the corpse has revealed traces of very implicating faecal matter upon the person."

"Would you be so kind as to translate, sir?"

"Human excrement," Enid explained. "On Mister Snede's body."

"'Williams'," Pluck corrected her. "But the name of the deceased is hardly our concern; that is a matter for the registry officers and clerks and those sort of, frankly, boring people of the world to deal with. No, our concern here is the question of how your excrement ended up on Mister Williams' body."

"How do you know it was mine?" Modeste wished to know; she felt her modesty, as it were, insulted.

"The body?" asked Pluck. "No, no, you misunderstand: the body was Williams'. The faeces were yours."

"I get that," she said. "I meant the faeces."

Pluck sighed. "The body I refer to is that of the dead man. It can hardly have been yours, girl, now could it? If it were, then you would be a dead man, rather than a, well, vaguely living woman, and we couldn't very well be having this conversation. Am I getting through?"

"I believe she understands that," Enid put in. "She understands that the dead man's body is not her own."

Pluck rephrased his remarks so Modeste might have a chance of gleaning these difficult ideas: "You did not share a body. You and Larry Williams have always been, to the best of my knowledge, distinct individuals—in body *and soul*." (Emphasis his.)

"I know that, sir. The dead man, who you call 'Williams' but was actually 'Snede', is no relation of mine."

"I don't just mean you weren't kin," Pluck, sighing and throttling his pencil in his fist, continued, "I mean that you are separate people—entirely."

"Aye, sir. Snede was Snede, and me am me. I got it."

"No, no, I don't think that you do." The inspector was growing increasingly frustrated, and took it out on various papers he scrunched up, pencils he snapped and glasses he knocked to the floor.

"She's well aware of this," Enid told him, her hand on his arm. "She's never claimed to be Mister Snede. She knows she was never he."

"Well, she's sure acting like she thinks she is." He couldn't look at any of them. He kept his blazing eyes fixed on the tabletop in front of him. Then he stood, grabbed a piece of paper and started furiously scribbling lines thereupon. "Look—just, look, damn you!" he shouted at Modeste while he drew. "This is Adam, all right?! And this is Eve. Cain, Abel, Moses, Jesus, and all the rest of it—do you see?! Look, damn you!"

"I'm looking, sir."

"But look and *see*, you stupid cow, don't look and *not see*! This dot, here, represents, let's say, your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. And this dot *here*, all the way over *here*, represents Wipp Billiams' great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. All right?!"

"Aye, but what about me great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother, now, sir? I hardly think me great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather could have made much of a go of having me without her help. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes, all right, all right! Have it your way! I need a bigger piece of paper."

An hour later, the blackboard had been wheeled in once again, and a series of papers had been tacked over it, pasted to others which ran down along its legs, over the floor, and were generally scattered all over the room, on walls and on furniture—one piece was even stuck to Sam, who pranced about the room—in mad yet ingenious disarray.

"...And so, finally, Miss Snede, these two lines here"—he drew them as he cited them—"prove, once and for all, that this final, large dot here"—he scribbled his crowning achievement—is none other than Mister Snede Williams, and yourself." He tripped over his own ankle in shock, then jumped back up and stared, panicked and appalled, at his calculations. "By God!"

"What is it?" asked Enid.

Pluck turned to stare at her, terror-eyed: "They really are the same person!" He turned to Modeste. "Mademoiselle...forgive me...I'm so sorry to be the bearer of evil tidings, but: you are Larry Snede, and—you are dead!" To the porters, he ordered: "Take this corpse to lie with the other."

"But sir—" one of the porters began.

"No, no, no, you degenerate!" Pluck had anticipated the remainder of the man's protest. "By 'lie', I do not mean 'enjoy necrophiliac intercourse with'! Just lay them side by side. Given their condition, neither is likely to object."

"Inspector," Enid interrupted. "Would you like to take a closer look at this lady, and determine more accurately whether she's alive or dead?"

"I hardly think that is necessary, mademoiselle, when the mathematics have proved it." He gestured to the board.

"And yet," Enid contended, "she appears to be breathing, and looking, and moving about, and even speaking, when you give her a chance to do so."

Pluck looked over at Modeste, and nodded. "You might have something there after all, Miss Trojczakowski. Yes. I dare say." He nodded to the porters: "Remove her diaper."

"We cannot, Inspector," protested the porter.

"Are you aware that this is a matter of official police business?!" Pluck screamed.

"Official police business!" Bartoff shouted.

"I shall only disrobe if I'm allowed to defecate on the floor!" Modeste declared. At the mental image, Bartoff began to feel queasy; he clasped his abdomen with both hands and started to swivel in his chair at the waist.

"Shall we have an adjournment?" suggested Enid. "So that everyone might calm down?"

"I beg that we might," put in Bartoff.

"Very well," said Pluck. "Everyone meet back here in thirty seconds."

"Perhaps a little longer?" asked Enid.

Pluck shook his head. "Twenty-seven seconds, now. Would you like to spend the remainder of the adjournment arguing over timekeeping? Or perhaps, as I suggest, we all make use of the remaining twenty-one seconds in freshening up and calming down?"

Twenty seconds later, the group reassembled in the interview room.

"Thank you, everyone, for arriving back so promptly," Pluck began. "I hope we're all relaxed and better able to focus on the task at hand." He'd been scanning the room, and suddenly his eyes lit upon Modeste. "What's that?"

"Do you mean Mademoiselle Cranat?" asked Enid.

"No—I mean that dead woman stuffed in a diaper."

"Perhaps we might, for the sake of argument, presume she is still living—all your evidence to the contrary—and proceed from the forensic discovery of faeces on the dead man's body."

"You mean, her body."

"No—I mean the body of Charles Snede."

"You mean, the first murdered man."

"Yes."

"Ah. All right. For, as you've said, argument's sake."

"That would be splendid."

"Very good." Pluck cleared his throat, and turned to Modeste. "Girl—let us proceed on the assumption that you're not dead."

"Very well, sir. Thank you."

"You're quite welcome. Ahem. Could you please tell me, in your own voice and using your own words, how your excrement came to violate the person of Charles Williams?"

"But how do you know the excrement was mine, sir?"

"Oh, come now, woman! Can you name me another member of staff or guest in this hotel, children excepted, who so audaciously relieves himself in public as you?" He turned and said softly to Bartoff: "Sorry, monsieur; you might wish to cover your ears about now."

"I'll be all right," his friend whispered back. In truth, he had closed his eyes and was busy picturing his beloved Sam cavorting through a field of daisies in some more agreeable world far off from the execrable one into which they had both had the foul luck to be born. Only when, in his master's daydream, Sam ceased his frolic and begin to unburden his bowels onto the outraged heads of the flowers, did Bartoff call a premature halt to that vision and commence a fresh one centred more wholesomely on rugby.

"You've got me there, sir," Modeste had to admit, answering the question Pluck had put.

Pluck bowed. "And now, if you would kindly admit your guilt in this murder-suicide, we might be able to enjoy an early supper."

"But I didn't kill no one, Inspector—Snedo or myself."

"Then how do you explain the faeces on the dead man's body?"

"Just a minute," Enid interrupted. "You say that faeces were found on the dead man's body, yes?"

"Yes."

"Just how much?"

Pluck shrugged. "Trace amounts. What does that matter?"

"Where?"

"Pardon, mademoiselle?"

"Where were the faeces found?"

"On the body. I fear we're really not getting anywhere with this line—"

"Pardon me for interrupting, Inspector, but *where* on the body?"

"Pardon?"

"Where on the body?"

Pluck shrugged. He began to sweat. He took a few moments—about three minutes, rounding down—to wipe the sweat off his brow, and his palms; he twisted up his handkerchief and stuck it in first one ear, then the other; then reached inside his shirt and dried both armpits. When he was done, he wrung out the handkerchief on the guest register before him, turned to Enid, and asked: "What was the question?"

"Where on the body were the faeces found?"

He shrugged, and answered, but at such a minute volume that no one could hear.

"Pardon, Inspector?" Enid asked.

He answered again, no more loudly.

"Could you speak up, please?"

He sighed, and declared: "Inside his rectum! All right?!"

"You mean his bum-hole?!" Modeste queried. "There was excrement up his bum-hole?"

"And I submit that *you* put it there, mademoiselle!" Pluck screamed at her.

"You shat up his arse!" Bartoff boomed.

"Really, Mister Bartoff! Inspector Pluck!" Enid had not thought their outbursts at all proper.

Pluck turned to her, and pleaded, "But don't you see, Enid? It's the only explanation! I've thought it through, time and again, and it's the only scenario which fits the facts! Look, would you like me to work it all out on paper? Have you got a few hours to kill?"

Enid gave him her best unimpressed-schoolmistress's glare. "I think you should dismiss Miss Cranat, now, Curtis."

"But—!"

"Now, Inspector."

Pluck closed his eyes, gulped, and muttered to the porters: "Take her away." Then, as an afterthought: "And see that she hasn't soiled the bed linen."

## Chapter Forty-Two

Into the room shuffled the other cleaning lady, the one who was younger and more militant and who, despite her innermost anathema towards the male half of the human race, adhered more rigidly to society's conventions on the proper time and place for relieving oneself of one's food waste; the one we took it upon ourselves to dub "Maisie", but who, it turns out, according to the staff list on the table in front of Pluck, and to the surprise of all, including, astonishingly enough, your usually omniscient narrator, was really named "Annette Godefroi".

"Thank you for coming. Sit down, now, girl," Pluck said anyway, seeing no point in over-embellishing the modest dignity of a servant with so ostentatious an adornment as a legal name. "Please state your duties in this hotel."

"I clean."

"Very good. Do you enjoy your job?"

"No."

"Very good. What is your favourite colour?"

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

She appeared hard, in the firelight: the flickers continually ventured to dance upon her, but were repulsed, as if by some forbidding pith within her, and so seemed to shudder away, vanquished yet nursing a serious case of sour grapes, leaving her solidly in the dark.

Pluck leafed through his papers, and settled upon something written on one of them. "What is the sum of one thousand six hundred and thirty-seven and one thousand seven hundred and thirty-six?"

Her eyes darted quickly to the cheese knife on the snacks table, then back to him. "I don't know."

"But you could work it out," Pluck led her on.

"I suppose."

"But you don't want to?"

"No."

"I see." Pluck watched her glance jump to the knife again, then back. He turned to see where she'd been looking. "...What was the name of the first Merovingian emperor?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know, or you don't care?"

"Both."

"Would you say he was an emperor, or merely a king?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know, or you don't care?"

"Both."

"Mm. What if I were to tell you that his name was 'Snede'?"

"I wouldn't care."

"Okay—we'll test that. Girl, the name of the first Merovingian king was 'Snede'."

She shrugged.

"Now then, tell me: do you care?"



“No.”

“I see.” He watched her eyes flick once more to the knife—but this time, they rested a fraction of an instant longer. (And a fraction of an instant, you don’t need me to tell you, is a very short time indeed.) “What was the name of your first Snede?” he asked.

“Pardon?”

“Your first—I’m sorry, did I say ‘Snede’?”

“You did.”

“A thousand pardons! I meant to say, ‘your first lover’.”

“I don’t see how it’s any business of yours.”

“Ah, but this is a criminal investigation into a murder. Were you not aware of that?”

“I was.”

“Very well, then: what was the name of your first Snede?”

“Do you mean, my first lover?”

“Yes, that is what I meant; for that is what I said.”

She shrugged. “I haven’t had any lovers.”

Pluck laughed, loudly—Bartoff echoed it in a roar—and opened his arms expansively, as if to embrace the world entire. “Come now, girl! You’re no simpering lamb, are you? Why, you must have had dozens!”

“Hundreds!” shouted Bartoff.

“Millions!” laughed Pluck. “At least!”

“These questions seem most inappropriate,” Enid protested.

Pluck, laughing, made a gesture with his open hand, as if to say, “Very well, calm down, you pathetic prude, we won’t go any further in that direction,” nodded to the table, and asked, aloud, of Maisie/Annette: “How many times did you enjoy sexual relations with Mister Williams?”

“Who’s ‘Mister Williams’?”

“‘Who’s ‘Mister Williams’!’” Pluck laughed. “Priceless! Why, Mister Williams is the dead man with whom you slept! —When he was alive, of course.”

“That’s a lie.”

“When he was dead, then?”

“No—all of it. It’s a lie.”

“No, it is a fact. We’ve established it mathematically from the analysis of your colleague’s faeces inside the rectum of the corpse in question.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but you’d better take it back.” She spoke calmly, but with a rising intensity; Pluck noted it. He had read the tales of Pompeii. He scrutinised her glare, which was resting, unbudgingly, on the cheese knife.

He closed his legs: his kneecaps kissed, like unassuageable lovers. “I declare this suspect cleared. I beg you to have a good afternoon, mademoiselle. Say, does anybody know what’s on for supper?”

## Chapter Forty-Three

An evening of cribbage had been arranged for the guests' amusement. Guests were assessed for their skill in the game, and assigned to tables based on their relative expertise; at least one accomplished player for every cluster of casual participants, so that the night should pass amiably and absent the rancour of competition.

Pluck did not play; he disdained such pointless exertions of the mind, when there were real, purposeful mysteries to be solved all about them—not only the murder of Sir Mortimer Snede-Williams, but the imponderables of the universe, on which he made it a habit to meditate for several minutes a day, three times a week, fifty-one weeks of the year. (He'd taken to holidaying at least one week a year—this was that week. Although, as the reader has no doubt understood, it had turned, through no fault of our protagonist, into a working holiday.) Tonight, he strolled into the ballroom, breathed in the cigarette smoke, the laughter and the camaraderie, and peeked over a few shoulders to see how the game was played. He had to crane his neck, more than a little, to view all the players' cards, while sometimes they were so rude as to face them down at his approach, necessitating his having to rip the cards from their hands and peruse them before handing them back. At one point, he leant in, to gather a good view of a game, pressing down on a man's shoulder to assist his incline, leaning in a little more, pressing down harder, and so on, until the man groaned in pain and tried to throw off Pluck's hand; Pluck, offended, slapped the back of the man's head a couple of times, then carried on pushing down on his shoulder until the man collapsed to the floor, his chair tumbling away, Pluck dropping onto his back, and the tablecloth, with its drinks and snack plates, crashing upon the both of them, and so on. Pluck rolled over, covered in some sort of jam and biscuits, and confronted his foe:

“Eye-Goo! My old, old friend!”

The coronel, shuddering, placed one palm on the floor in an attempt to rise. But Pluck, having missed his comrade, knocked his arm away so he would drop to the floor and remain.

“I haven't seen you in ages! Try as we might to gain each other's company, we keep missing each other! Something—is it that old scoundrel Fate?—prevents it. But we won't kow-tow to a little thing like Fate, will we, old friend, eh?” Pluck slapped his face, and laughed good-naturedly.

“Get away...I'll kill you...” Such ramblings did the coronel mumble.

A pair of waiters arrived and offered to help the men up, but Pluck kicked at them until they left, and asked of the coronel: “So tell, *mon ami*, what you've been up to since last we met.”

The coronel's eyes were wild, like those of a trapped, I don't know, cougar, or something: he was busy begging God, in Whom he'd never believed, for but an ounce of his youthful strength, so that he might tear this walking plague who called himself an inspector limb from limb, bone from bone, strip of flesh from strip of flesh. But, his prayer passing for the moment ungranted, he had to make do with muttering: “I've been holed up in this hotel praying for your death and for that which must necessarily follow: peace.”

Pluck laughed. “Italian nonsense! *En anglais, s'il vous plaît, monsieur!*”

The old man closed his eyes, and lay, as if in capitulation, amongst the fragments of profiterole on the floor.

"May I sleep with you tonight?" That was Pluck.

"No."

"Please?"

"Certainly not. Get away from me, or I will kill you."

"But you haven't answered my question."

"I have."

"You have not. May I sleep with you tonight?"

"No."

"Do you mean, 'No, I haven't answered the question', or, 'No, you may not sleep with me tonight'?"

"The second!"

"By 'The second', do you mean, 'The latter', or, 'Yes, come to my room this second'?"

"Stay out of my room!"

"By 'Stay out of my room', are you speaking with amusing irony, or in earnest?"

"In earnest!"

"By 'In earnest', do you mean—"

"Absolutely not!"

"By 'Absolutely not', do you mean, 'Absolutely not, no milk in my tea', or 'Absolutely not, Inspector Pluck, I never wish to see you again'?"

"Yes! That is it! I never wish to see you again!"

"By 'I never wish to see you again,' do you mean..."

As that conversation continued, Enid, who had been half-heartedly losing a game of cribbage across the room, stood up from her seat.

"Is everything all right?" Stoupes asked.

"Yes. Fine."

"I hope you aren't upset with me. I've tried my best, you know, but this is hardly my game."

She raised her hand to shield her eyes, as if from a glare.

He rose. "You look unwell. Are you feeling faint?"

She smiled, removed her hand, and nodded. "I'm just not in the mood for games tonight. Don't bother about me. I'd rather go someplace and think."

"I don't wish to presume, but—might I join you?"

"I'd rather you didn't. I'd just like some quiet. I'm sorry."

He nodded, watching her face curiously. "Very well. I wish you a pleasant night."

She nodded, then took a handful of her dress and turned and walked away, through the tables, past Pluck, who was still on the floor, laughing as he crushed the coronel in a savage bear hug, and out of the ballroom.

After wandering through the dim, empty corridors, she found herself in the glass patio, alone. No lamp was lit, so the sole light was that of the moon, as diffused through the twinkling crystals of snow suctioned to the outside of the windows. It lent her dress a monochromatic sheen, and a long, deep shadow trickling like a slick of oil behind her.

Despite the cold, she was sweating. She bent her brow against the glass and sighed. She had taught her students the English poems of mind-warping romance, she had

watched her sister bloom and marry, and had even shared a kiss with a boy when she was sixteen—but she had never felt this. Not for real. Since it had begun, only a few days before, everything she looked at was as if refracted through thick, cloudy glass; every sound was a gargled echo of something else; every smell dilated into something intoxicating. She was afraid to close her eyes, at night, knowing she would picture him. She was afraid of her own breathing, lying in bed in the dark, thinking it would mutate into his breath at her neck.

There was a sound, approaching the patio. Was it Glen? Coming to say good night, once more? But Genevra Bergamaschi, in dirty, baggy white trousers and dark jacket, walked in. She looked surprised when her eyes rested on Enid.

“Forgive me, Miss Trojczakowski. I did not think anyone would be here.”

“It’s quite all right. I was just going to bed.”

“No—please, stay a moment.” She took a sip of her cocktail. “I usually find this room deserted. I come here to think, sometimes.”

“I too.”

Genevra held the glass toward her.

“No thank you.”

“Hm. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen you take a drink,” Genevra realised.

“I never do.”

“Why?”

Enid shrugged, and turned to the dark void outside. “I just never have. My father taught me not to, I guess.”

“Was he a teetotaler?”

“Just the opposite.”

“Really? Mine too.” Genevra moved next to her, and looked out as well. “I left home when I was fifteen. Never saw him again.” She took a drink. “I hope he’s well.”

“He must have inspired you, one way or another,” Enid guessed.

Genevra nodded. “I suppose you’re right. I suppose everything has.”

“It must be fascinating to be an artist,” Enid mused.

Genevra shrugged. “If you’re so predisposed, there’s nothing else to be. Come penury or riches, mockery or acclaim, you’re got no choice.”

“Is that how you met Rosella?”

“It is. I was in Paris, and she’d left her husband, and hadn’t a franc. I found her getting fired from a bar. She was one step away from the street. She hadn’t even thought of modelling, but I convinced her. Sure, she was bashful, at first. She’s a fragile creature, you know. But...it’s different when it’s a woman, painting you. A woman sees things in you that a man never could. Through your clothes, and through your skin.” Genevra’s gaze was unyielding, and painful; although it was not at all threatening, Enid felt herself backing away, until she came up against a chair. She felt the artist’s eyes trace up her legs, her abdomen, her neck, then back to her eyes. “For instance, I can see that you’re in love, Miss Trojczakowski. Are you aware of this yourself?”

Enid nodded, quickly, like a frightened little girl to her headmistress.

“But you don’t want to be.”

She shook her head, quickly. She didn’t want to hold Genevra’s gaze, but she didn’t dare look away.

“Don’t fret. It happens to the best of us. It will pass, if you give in. Or, if you don’t give in, it will haunt you till you die. I’m sure there are a few more scattered possibilities, too. But don’t fret—this is the sort of material that makes life interesting.”

Enid nodded.

“Will you pose for me, sometime, Miss Trojczakowski? With or without the paints.”

Enid felt her hand on her waist. The fingers squeezed her flesh as if assessing the quality of a length of cloth. She coughed, excused herself, and ran off to her room.

## Chapter Forty-Four

Apparently, Pluck had caused some appalling commotion after Enid left the ballroom last night, but this morning, he was on his best behaviour, as no other personage than Frau Hühnerbeinstein appeared in the interview room, promptly at ten, as invited.

“Thank you for gracing us with your monumental presence, madame,” Pluck bowed.

Frau Hühnerbeinstein curtsied, grandly.

“Please sit down.”

But just as the singer had lowered her copiousness into the seat, Pluck forestalled her: “No, please bring the chair over here, so that—no, please, allow me.” Pluck jumped up and carried the chair so that it was closer to the fire. “I wouldn’t want you to catch a chill and jeopardise that magnificent voice.” She curtsied, and moved to grace the chair with her posterior, when Pluck interrupted her, again: “On second thought—ah—” He was flustered; he kept smoothing the back of his hair, and giggling, breaking off and commencing again to no obvious purpose. “—Would you terribly mind standing, just there, by the window.”

“Stand by the window!” directed Bartoff.

“That’s it,” Pluck smiled.

“Like this, monsieur?”

“Well—with a somewhat more arched back, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Arch your back!” shouted Bartoff.

“Like so?”

Pluck tilted his head and pursed his lips. The light from the fire trickled down the eminent lady’s shoulders, back and behind, under the last of which it was extinguished in shadow.

“This is ridiculous! Please!” The unexpected and, frankly, unmaidenly outburst had come from Miss Trojczakowski.

Pluck turned to her. “Do you think she should undo her scarf?” he asked her. He nodded at her frown. “Very good—I was thinking the same.” He turned to Frau Hühnerbeinstein: “Remove your scarf, please.”

“Strip!” Bartoff boomed.

“I protest!” declared Enid, who now stood.

Pluck was bewildered. “You like the scarf?”

“You may have it, my dear, if you fancy it so very much.” Frau Hühnerbeinstein extended the article in question towards her.

But Enid was storming out.

After a few minutes of fuming in the lobby, Enid watched the door to the interview room open and Pluck escort a laughing Frau Hühnerbeinstein out.

“I think we can say that you have certainly shown nothing remotely suspicious in your actions, my dear,” he was saying to her.

“I am only too happy to oblige this investigation, monsieur,” she replied.

He took her hand—she removed the glove—he kissed it (the hand), and she swanned off. He gazed after her, his eyes unambiguously trained on her behind.

“May I speak with you for a moment, monsieur?” Enid asked him.

But he was leaning against the doorframe, stroking his chin.

“Inspector Pluck!”

He turned to her, all alert. “What is it?”

“A word, please.”

“Pardon?”

“A word!”

“Er—‘sandwich’?”

“What?!”

“Well—how about ‘festoon’?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve got it: ‘cumquat’!”

It was straightened out, and they went to a larder, which was otherwise unoccupied.

“Are you hungry?” asked Pluck.

“Listen, Curtis—that whole so-called ‘interview’ with Frau Hühnerbeinstein was utterly disgraceful—even more so than usual, if that’s possible.”

“What do you mean? She offered you the scarf, and you refused to take it. There, as far as I can tell, the matter ends.”

“It has nothing to do with the scarf! You are clearly letting your attraction for Frau Hühnerbeinstein overrule the rational faculties with which you are, or rather, with which you should be, running the investigation.”

“‘Attraction for Frau Hühnerbeinstein’? Is that what you think?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Well, no, not at all. But I thought I’d been keeping it pretty well hidden.”

“I’ve no doubt that’s exactly what you thought. And yet, I have observed it.”

“Well, that only testifies to your formidable deductive faculties, Miss Hühnerbeinstein, which itself testifies to my good judgement in appointing you my co-investigator.”

“You’ve just called me ‘Miss Hühnerbeinstein’.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did.”

“I promise you that I didn’t. Friends?”

He offered her his hand. Sighing, she took it, and they shook, with the utmost propriety.

## Chapter Forty-Five

Herr Voot, when he was brought into the interview room, had lost his former stiff-backed gait. His bottom dropped onto the seat before being so bidden, his head bowed pensively over his knees, and his fingers interlocked like humbled worms nestling abjectly into nooks.

“Thank you for joining us, Herr Voot!” Pluck loudly greeted him. “It’s been too long since we’ve seen you.”

The man would not answer.

“Tell me,” Pluck went on, “where have you been hiding yourself? What have you been doing?”

His face still pointed at the floor, Voot peered up from under his brows at him—it was a look that could have killed a canary, knocking it right off its perch. “I’ve been imprisoned in my room, on your orders.”

“Ah, yes! I do seem to recollect something along those lines...” Pluck looked to the window. His thoughts drifted away...

After several minutes of silence, Voot asked him: “Are we through?”

Pluck, blinking, coughing, spluttered, “What, you still here?” He looked around at the room, at Enid and Bartoff and Sam, and remembered. “Ah...yes... Yes.”

“We’re through?”

“No! No, we’ve only just begun.” He proceeded to consult his notes, for several more minutes. Bartoff yawned, and tickled Sam under his chin. Enid assigned all of her strength to the suppression of an urge to scream, primordially, at the world. Voot rehearsed the image of a Final Judgement, entailing as it necessarily would the annihilation of Pluck, which he’d built up over the days in his room. Finally, Pluck began:

“Well, as you’ve already been irrefutably implicated in the murder—”

“That is not so,” Voot, quite rudely, interrupted. “I had nothing to do with any murder, and, as such, there cannot be any proof of it.”

“Proof or not, we know what we know, and proof will, I have faith, come along of its own accord to confirm it,” Pluck muttered quickly, as if reciting a well-worn dictum. “In the meantime, can you account for the presence of faeces inside Mister Billiams’ rectum?”

“Who is ‘Mister Billiams’?” Voot wanted to know.

“Mister Snede,” Enid explained.

“Oh. What was the question again?”

“How did faeces get there?” Pluck repeated.

“Why are you asking me?”

“I have reason to believe that you secretly retrieved a sample of your cleaning lady’s excrement from her toilet, then methodically inserted it through Billiams’ anus.”

“Why would I want to do a thing like that?”

“Pardon?”

“I asked why I would want to do a thing like that?”

“Excellent question, Herr Voot! I was wondering that myself. So would you do us the courtesy of answering it yourself, so that we might all enjoy the remainder of our



holiday absent the pall of a murder investigation, and, eventually, go home, to live out the balance of our lives and, best of all possible worlds, one day die, aged, in peace, surrounded by snotty grandchildren, in our respective beds?”

Voot stared at Pluck, and, deciding that, if he'd been cast in a farce, he might as well see it through to the end, sat back, now, in his seat, half-closed his eyes, and answered: “Because my rectum was full. And I had to put it somewhere—hadn't I?”

Pluck blinked. “I...yes, I suppose you had, Herr Voot. Thank you for being so forthcoming. You may return to your room.”

## Chapter Forty-Six

After a lunch in which Pluck spat in a waiter's ear, he, Bartoff and Enid resumed their places in the interview room. Enid had the sudden impression that she had somehow got stuck in an unending eddy in time, from which she would never escape—at least, alive—with a looping river of suspects, whose appearance, voice and personalities underwent minute alterations once out the door, before their re-emergence under different identities shortly thereafter. But she shook off this notion, as does a horse a fly with its mane, and watched a woman with dirty trails of hair walk silently into the room and sit down. Her skin was alarmingly pale, and, though she couldn't have been out of her twenties, it was riven into valleys of wrinkles as if clawed relentlessly by a wild cat.

"Miss Deirdre Laoghaire?" Pluck asked.

She nodded, looking at her fingers, which wouldn't stop moving atop her knees.

"There is an issue with the dead man's rectum I'd like to discuss with you."

She looked up at him, now, as if he'd said something she hadn't expected to hear.

"Have you seen it?" he asked.

"Seen what, monsieur?"

"Shilliams' rectum, of course. Please state how many times."

"Who is 'Shilliams'?" she asked.

Pluck sighed. "I can see we're going to have to start from the beginning," he said, to himself, although aloud. Then, more explicitly to Miss Laoghaire, he began: "You do understand what happens to food after you've eaten it, yes, mademoiselle? That is, you have gone to relieve yourself, in a toilet, in your life, have you not?"

"Please don't mind him," Enid thought it proper to interrupt. "He wants to know if you'd ever spoken to Mister Snede, the dead man."

"That is most certainly *not* what I want to know," Pluck protested testily.

"Nevertheless, it is what you *should* want to know, if you weren't acting so thoughtlessly," she returned icily, then, to Miss Laoghaire, continued: "Have you?"

That lady shook her head, and looked back down. "I'd been intending to, but he died before I had the chance."

"Thank you, then, Miss Laoghaire," Pluck declared. "That will be all."

"Hold on a minute, please," said Enid.

"Goodbye!" Bartoff shouted.

"Now just wait, will you?! I have some questions I'd like to put."

Pluck sighed and, opening his hands as if to indicate that whatever he had, whatever the world had, to give, they would give it to her, not out of any deserving qualities of her own, but solely because the chivalry of a gentleman demands it. "Please," he invited her indulgently.

Enid ignored his noble gesture and put to the lady: "Miss Laoghaire—you said you'd been intending to speak with Mister Snede?"

"Entirely irrelevant," huffed Pluck.

"Yes," she answered. "I'd been wishing to have a word with everyone in the hotel."

"And why was that?" asked Enid.

"Thank you," said Pluck, "I think that's quite enough."

"Goodbye!" Bartoff boomed.

Both ladies ignored them.

"I do so wherever I go," Miss Laoghaire answered, soft as the skim of a gull's wing against a lake. "You see, I've been on a quest, all my life long—a hopeless quest, I am constantly on the point of admitting to myself—and yet, I still hope, against all hope, that I might someday stumble upon—the right man. The one I am looking for, but whom I do not know. The one who will have the answer I seek."

Pluck yawned, forcefully.

"And to what question do you seek this answer?" Enid begged.

"I hardly see how this pertains to the substance of the investigation," Pluck insisted. "It patently bears no relation to the dead man's gastrointestinal tract."

"I am looking for my father."

Pluck raised his glass to his lips and proceeded to gargle.

"Tell me more, please, Miss Laoghaire, won't you?" Enid asked.

Miss Laoghaire shrugged, and went on: "I never knew him. He was something of an adventurer, from what my mother, who is now, mercifully for her sake, dead, told me. But then he moved to the country and ran a fruit stand, from what my auntie claims. But my uncle thinks he was killed in the French Foreign Legion. Others, that he's still a sailor. So I really do not know, and, I half-suspect, I never will. Still...here I am, still searching."

"How's Sam doing, these days, Mister Bartoff?" Pluck asked loudly.

"Very well!" The large gentleman was pleased at his friend's interest.

"No problems with fleas, or anything of that sort, I hope?"

"None! He's as healthy and vigorous as a dog twice his size and half his age."

The two men laughed, amiably.

"Have you a husband?" Enid asked.

Pluck looked askance. "Were you speaking to me, Miss Trojczakowski?"

"I do not," answered Miss Laoghaire. "I was engaged...but the gentleman passed away."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

Pluck was tickling Sam, who was growling, making Bartoff giggle.

Miss Laoghaire shrugged. "He left me his fortune, anyway. Not that I craved a fortune. Or know what to do with it."

"March! March! That's it!" Pluck was helping Bartoff hold Sam's forepaws, whilst the little dog walked like a person along the table. "March, little soldier, ha! You've got them now! Blind them with your bayonet, by God, by God!"

Enid cleared her throat. "Pardon me for speaking so boldly, Deirdre—but you seem a very sad woman."

Miss Laoghaire looked up. "I don't seek to hide it."

"May I ask why—your family issues notwithstanding?"

Miss Laoghaire looked to the window. It was covered with snow, and so hardly acted as a window at all. The firelight, in her case, infused her with an altogether orange lustre, filling in the dearth of colour of her skin, and looked as if it might swallow her altogether till nothing were left but the burnt imprint of a bony shadow where she'd been sitting.

"Whatever faculty Nature thought fit, in Her benevolence, to implant in men's souls with which to discover something of worth in this world—whatever that faculty is, I do not have it. I look on the world, and I see dry riverbeds with cracks. Nothing but

riverbeds with cracks. And so, yes, in society with persons unrelievedly jabbering about pools and streams and waterfalls, I am sad.”

Enid blinked, and nodded. “Thank you, Miss Laoghaire. I wish you peace.”

That lady stood, and walked to the door, ignoring the clapping and hooting of Pluck and Bartoff over Sam’s shenanigans. Having opened the door, and taken one step out, Miss Laoghaire turned, and, as a last thought, asked of Enid: “Would you consider the notion, mademoiselle, that, this world being what it is, Mister Snede is far better off than we? Perhaps the investigation should be redirected into, rather, why are so many of us so cowardly as to close our eyes to the world and wilfully remain therein.”

Pluck suddenly stopped, paw in hand, and looked at her as at a madwoman. “Who in blazes is ‘Mister Snede’?!”

Miss Laoghaire turned and went out.

Pluck clapped his hands, once, loudly, and exclaimed: “Thank God that’s finally over! I thought I would have to go on listening to her insipid frivolities all afternoon!”

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Pluck took supper on his own, in his room, so that he might have some moments of quiet in which to perfect the formulation of his hypothesis. The interviews were winding down. He'd just about deduced the whole of the conspiracy. But he needed to be sure, and to be sure, he needed to satisfy his erotic impulses, so that their debilitating influence should not, like a herd of passionate cows gathering on a train track, derail his thinking.

There was no question in his mind: he would have to have Frau Hühnerbeinstein.

He leapt up, overturning his table and his supper, and dashed out of his room. He raced down the corridor, up a flight of stairs, to a door and knocked with ardour.

"Madame! Open at once! Remove your clothes, and open the door! It is of the utmost importance, I assure you!"

The door opened, and the coronel held a knife against Pluck's cheek.

"Eye-Goo! Old friend!" But his pleasure at seeing his comrade soured into offence:

"But what are you doing in Frau Hühnerbeinstein's suite?!"

"This is my suite, and if you don't go away, I'll cut you up—'friend'!"

"Out of my way this instant!" He pushed Eyague aside, hard, and strode in. Frau Hühnerbeinstein was nowhere to be found, but the coronel took the opportunity to slice at Pluck's cheek, earning the inspector a gash to twin with his original.

"Ow! You fool—you stumbled and cut my cheek!"

"Get out!" the coronel screeched.

"Not till you produce Frau Hühnerbeinstein!" Pluck wiped the blood, then pulled out the flowers from a vase and looked inside.

"She's across the hall, you cretin!" the coronel seethed.

"You imprisoned her in a room across the hall? Tsk, tsk." Pluck walked across the corridor. "It's a good thing you're friends with a detective, *mio amico*, or you'd be dead or in jail by now." He rapped on the door. "Frau Hühnerbeinstein—are you tied up? Are you hurt?"

The door opened, and the diva appeared, in nightcap and robe. "What's the matter, Inspector?"

"Nothing, nothing—only, will you please come with me to my bedroom?"

"What for?"

"Sexual relations, madame. I wish to enjoy your body, and I make no apologies for it."

"No," she said simply.

"Really?"

"Absolutely not."

"By 'Absolutely not', do you mean—"

"Shall I kill him, madame?" the coronel asked, holding his knife to Pluck's throat.

"No, no, just get him back to his room, if you please. Good night, Inspector."

Pluck hung his head. He was sad.

"I said 'Good night', Inspector."

"Good night, madame," he mumbled, and shuffled off to his room.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

The next morning, Monsieur Marcel Lapin-Défunt strode into the interview room.

Pluck looked up from his notes. "What are you doing here?"

"I was sent for."

"I don't want to see you."

"Then I shall retire to my room." He bowed to Enid and Bartoff, and left.

After a few minutes, Pluck rang his bell. Larry entered.

"Bring me Monsieur Lapin-Défunt," he demanded.

"Yes, monsieur." Larry went out.

"But he was just here," said Enid.

"Eh? What's that?"

"You just sent him away."

"Well, I don't for a moment, Miss Trojczakowski, concede that I did, but if, as you claim, that is what happened—well then, I must have had a reason for it."

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt returned. "Well?"

"Well what?" asked Pluck.

"You asked to see me?"

Pluck looked behind him, then back to the diplomat. "Are you speaking to me, sir?"

"Did you not send for me?"

"He did," said Enid.

Pluck looked at her coolly. "I did not," he maintained.

"Then I shall go," the Frenchman said, and turned to do just that, when Pluck halted him with:

"Now, now, don't be so hasty, monsieur. Since you're in the neighbourhood, as they say, why not pull up a chair and stay awhile?"

"No thank you."

"Ah! But I insist." Pluck gestured to the seat.

"Sit the fuck down!" Bartoff screamed; even Sam was shaken by the volume.

"Please, Mister Bartoff!" begged Enid.

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt looked to Enid. "I will be happy to remain, if mademoiselle wishes it, as she seems to be the sole rational person in this room."

"Yourself included?" Pluck asked him.

"Please stay," said Enid.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Pluck.

"I was speaking to monsieur," Enid explained.

"I am a 'monsieur'," Pluck pointed out.

Lapin-Défunt sat, brushed off a hint of dust from his slacks with his hand, straightened his coat, and waited.

"Make yourself comfortable," said Pluck.

"Yes, thank you."

The firelight danced around his features, encroaching and withdrawing, seeping and fleeing, as if not knowing what to make of him. None of it made contact with his person, but only watched tentatively from the hearth. He waited, stiff and patient.

"Would you be so kind as to provide us with your full name, monsieur?"

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

Pluck nodded, and checked it against his records. Then he shook his head.

“That’s not what’s written here.”

“And what do you have written there?”

“Pardon?”

“What do you have written there?”

“Oh. I thought that was what you said.”

“And the answer?”

“Monsieur?”

Lapin-Défunt sighed. “What name do you have written there?”

“Oh, that!” Pluck chuckled. “It says here that your name is ‘Deirdre Laoghaire’.”

“That was the previous interviewee,” Enid explained.

“I cannot imagine why you persist in apologising for this man,” Pluck growled at her.

“I’m just trying to explain about his name, so we might proceed with the interview.”

Although it had been Enid who’d said it, Pluck now looked at Lapin-Défunt and demanded: “Do you have somewhere more pressing to go, monsieur?”

“Not really, seeing as we’re all snowed in.”

“And what is that supposed to mean, eh?”

“What does it mean?!” Bartoff thundered.

“It means precisely what I say, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say of you gentlemen.” He turned to Enid. “Apologies for my language, mademoiselle.”

She smiled that no apology was necessary.

Pluck looked down to his papers, then back to Lapin-Défunt. “What was your name again, monsieur? Kindly repeat your variation on it.”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

“That doesn’t sound remotely like ‘Deirdre Laoghaire’, I must say.”

“Perhaps it is because that is not my name.”

“What isn’t?” Pluck asked quickly. “‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’?” He’d got him!

“No, that lady’s name, ‘Deirdre’ something-or-other.”

“Don’t you mean, ‘Lapin-Défunt’?”

“No, I do not; for ‘Lapin-Défunt’ is my name.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, it is.”

Pluck looked him up and down. “You seem a mite unsure of that, Miss Laoghaire.”

“You mean, ‘Monsieur Lapin-Défunt’.”

“Whatever—you seem a mite unsure.”

“Do I?”

Pluck nodded, authoritatively. “You do. And you’re sure that ‘Lapin...’ ‘Lapin...’”

“‘Lapin-Défunt’.”

“Yes, that *that* is your real name? You insist on it?”

“I do, although I must say it isn’t something I’ve ever had to insist on before.”

“And why haven’t you?”

“Why haven’t I what?”

“Ever had to insist on it before?”

“Oh, I suppose because I’ve never been interviewed by such a cretin as yourself.”

“We’ll let my cretinness pass, for the moment, if you’ll be so kind, monsieur, and return to the matter at hand: namely, your name.”

“All right. What would you like to know about my name?”

“Well, firstly: what is it?”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

Pluck threw his papers into the air. “There you go again!”

“Scoundrel!” Bartoff shouted.

“If you would only be honest with us—”

“I am being honest, monsieur. It is you who is being stupid—that is all.”

“Come, come, Miss Laoghaire—do you really think that insulting the lead detective in a murder investigation is the wisest path to take?”

“I’m sorry—were you speaking to me?”

“I was indeed.”

“Oh, because I was certain I’d heard you address your remarks to a Miss Laoghaire.”

“So, you are suggesting that there are *two* guests in this hotel, each of whom is named ‘Deirdre Laoghaire’?”

“Not at all. I’m merely suggesting that you are an idiot.”

Pluck nodded. “I’ll make a note of your suggestion, and it will be entered as evidence. In the meantime, I must ask you to confirm your full name—”

“Oh, for God’s sake!”

“That is not a name, monsieur, unless you are claiming to be God.”

“If there were a God, He would have struck you dead, if He’d any sense of justice at all!”

Pluck spoke slowly and precisely: “Monsieur: we will deal with your criminal blasphemy at a later date, but for the moment: what—is—your—name?”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

“And you are certain?”

“Yes.”

“The seeds of doubt I’ve ventured to plant in you have not, as yet, borne fruit?”

“They have not.”

“What is your name, monsieur?”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’. What’s yours?”

“Mine?”

“Yes—what is your name, Inspector?”

Pluck shrugged. “My name is ‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt switched which leg was resting over which knee. “Is it, now?”

“No, no, no, that’s not right, no!” Pluck shut his eyes and shook his head. “You’re getting me all muddled up, with your inane answers and groundless queries! My name is ‘Thaddeus Pluck’, and yours is not!”

“I agree with you there.”

“So, then—I’m glad we’re finally getting somewhere, you and I, mademoiselle—for if we’ve established that ‘Thaddeus Pluck’ is my name, and not yours, then...”

“Yes?”

“What *is* your name—if I may be so bold as to ask.”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”



"It is?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Oh, I can think of several reasons, just off the top of my head."

"Name one, please."

"Well—that you are the murderer of Marcel Snip Williams."

"And who is that, exactly?"

"He means Larry Bipp Williams," Enid explained.

"Oh," said Lapin-Défunt. "And who is that?"

"Yes, who is that?" asked Pluck.

"Sorry, sorry—now I'm getting confused," Enid laughed. "The dead man is Charles Snede."

"It is?" asked Pluck.

"Yes," confirmed Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

"Well, then." Pluck cleared his throat. "The question now becomes, Miss Laoghaire —"

"'Lapin-Défunt'," Enid corrected.

Pluck sighed. "Whatever! The question becomes, monsieur: Why did you kill him?"

"I did not kill him," Lapin-Défunt answered.

"You didn't?"

"No."

"And why not?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly how it sounds, monsieur: Why did you not kill this man—if, as you say, you did not?"

"I did not know him, and had no reason to."

Pluck raised an eyebrow, meaningfully. "Indeed?" No one said anything, so he raised his other eyebrow—they were now both raised, both eyebrows, and yet, still, no one spoke. "Indeed?" he said again, with no more effect. If he'd had a third eyebrow, that, too, no doubt, would have been raised. Alas, he had but the two.

After several—up to ten—minutes of silence, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt asked: "So are we through here?"

"Did you kill Deirdre Défunt?" Pluck shouted, taking the opportunity to finally lower his eyebrows.

"Murderer!" screamed Bartoff.

"'Charles Snede'!" Enid corrected.

"Snede!" Bartoff screamed.

"No, none of them," Lapin-Défunt answered.

"Please answer the question, monsieur," Pluck demanded.

"I have," Lapin-Défunt argued.

"Please remove your hat and answer the question."

"I'm not wearing any hat, and I've already answered the question."

Pluck laughed. "I beg to differ, monsieur."

"With which aspect?"

"With both of them, monsieur."

“He isn’t wearing any hat. Can’t you see?” asked Enid.

“Take off your bloody hat!” Bartoff shouted.

“Kindly point it out to me, and I will remove it,” Lapin-Défunt offered.

At this challenge, Pluck stood up, walked around the table to the suspect, and slapped him lightly upon the top of his head. Lapin-Défunt knocked his arm away and rose, ready to defend himself. Pluck sprinted back around the table and sat down.

“Sit down, please, sir! We have not yet excused you!”

“Sit down!” screamed Bartoff.

Pluck watched himself pull his shirtsleeves further out from his jacket’s cuffs. “You may retrieve your hat at the close of the interview. In the meantime, would you kindly answer me one question.”

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt resumed his seat, proceeded to engage in all the dusting and coat-straightening business he’d done the first time, and said, “Go on.”

“What is your name?”

“‘Marcel Lapin-Défunt’.”

Pluck muttered something under his breath, and scribbled a note. “So be it. I will not argue with you, monsieur.”

“That is most gentlemanly of you.”

“I have been accused of being the consummate gentleman more than once, I can tell you, monsieur. Now then: I must ask you to provide a sample of your excrement.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

“Miss Trojczakowski? Kindly inspect the gentleman’s fingernails for evidence of the cleaning lady’s faeces.”

“What are you babbling about?” Lapin-Défunt wished to know.

Pluck pushed an empty water jug across the table—it squeaked, a little, on its journey.

“Kindly deposit said excrement therein.”

“Go hang yourself.”

“Shit in the jug!” Bartoff screamed.

“I said, ‘Go hang!’”

Pluck rose, magisterially. “I am warning you, sir!”

“He’s warning you!” Bartoff shouted.

“This is no time to be bashful!”

“This is no time to be bashful!” shouted Bartoff.

“If you refuse, you’re as good as guilty!”

“As good as guilty!” Bartoff shouted.

“Must Mister Bartoff continually parrot your remarks in so infuriatingly loud a manner?” wondered Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, aloud.

“I don’t see how he’s parroting my remarks,” Pluck protested.

“He is most certainly parroting your remarks!”

“He is not parroting my remarks!”

“I’m not parroting his remarks!” agreed Bartoff, in a shout.

“Shit in the jug!” Pluck resumed.

“Shit in the jug!” Bartoff screamed.

“Don’t be an ass!” Lapin-Défunt screamed.

“Don’t be an ass!” Bartoff shouted, then, realising what he’d done, swiftly covered his mouth with his hand, and uttered to Pluck: “Sorry, Inspector.”

Fists clenched, Pluck decided to appeal to the suspect’s reason. “Look here, Laoghaire: I’m giving you this chance to defecate in this jug. If you don’t take it, then I may be tempted to do so myself.”

“By all means, sir.” Lapin-Défunt gestured with a sweep of his arm that Pluck was welcome to it.

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course. If you wish to defecate in this jug, Inspector, far be it from me to seek to prevent you.”

Pluck, pleasantly surprised, lifted the jug and considered it for some time, then stopped, and looked to Enid. “...Miss Trojczakowski...”

“Yes?”

“What was I on about?”

“Pardon?”

“Why did I want to defecate in a jug?”

“I really couldn’t tell you, Inspector.”

He thought. “I will do so—indeed, I will do so—but in the privacy of my own suite, and entirely by my own impetus, as befits a gentleman—not in order to indulge the debased erotic fantasies of a such a degenerate as Monsieur Laoghaire here.” Pluck set down the jug, and looked to Lapin-Défunt, as one grandmaster might look to another, equally matched, across a stalemated table littered with the scorned corpses of pointlessly sacrificed pawns. “Although I know you to have been involved in the murder, sir, I cannot, as yet, prove it. And so you may go.”

Lapin-Défunt rose. “I’ve had nothing to do with it, but am happy to discontinue this enormously unpleasant conversation.”

Pluck bowed at the compliment. “I will see you again soon, monsieur—you can count on that.”

## Chapter Forty-Nine

They had the pleasure, after a short break for tea, of interviewing Madame Pétunia Lapin-Défunt, who glided into the room, flashed them all a smile striking for its enchanting demureness, and, at Pluck's silent request, settled her insubstantial frame onto the seat, without making so much as a crinkle in its cushion. The firelight shimmered around her slim, elegant outline, but appeared frightened to brush too closely, in case this fragile beauty should be somehow singed, or overexposed, and, like photographic film, drowned in the light.

"Your eye, monsieur."

"Yes, madame?"

"It lacks its lashes."

Pluck bowed at the consideration revealed by the observation. "An accident, madame. Nothing more."

"And that awful cut, on your cheek. And another, on the other!" Her gloved hand went to her own cheek, in unconscious sympathy.

"You are too kind to notice my *blessures de guerre*, madame, but I assure you I am well, and, in fact, have never been better."

She stared at his slight face, into his tarpit eyes.

"You are a deeply troubled man, Inspector—aren't you?"

There was something about the woman that drew Enid's highest aesthetic esteem, and even Bartoff's attention from his dog. She seemed to possess as it were a spyglass into people's souls, and, being an exceedingly feeling woman, was wounded when what she saw was pain; and always, always, she saw pain.

Pluck shrugged, and looked away. "No more than the next, I suspect."

She shook her head. "No, Inspector: much more than most. You have a vortex inside you—a raging, annihilating vortex, that drowns all sentiment that might otherwise arise."

"I thank you for your attention," he said softly, tracing his fingertip along his fingers, "but I am afraid I must put to you some questions for our investigation."

"Of course. I'm sorry if I've made you uneasy. I'm eager to help in any way I can."

Pluck cleared his throat, and began. "On a scale of one to fourteen, how large would you estimate your husband's copulatory organ to be?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"His *penis*, if you insist on it being so called, madame. How big?"

She appeared unsure whether to giggle or take offence.

"I should point out that fourteen is the largest—elephantine, rather—with one being the smallest, *Manneken Pis*-like," Pluck clarified.

Her jaw solidified and set. "I—I—I really could not say, Inspector."

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that I don't believe you, madame. No matter; let's move on. Have you ever enjoyed the act of sodomy?"

"Really, Inspector!"

"I must protest, on behalf of madame—" Enid began.

Pluck continued over both of them: "Has your husband ever, to your knowledge, extracted, or sought to extract, from your rectum—perhaps, if it's decent-sized enough,

via a coating on his penis—faecal matter of any amount, no matter how seemingly negligible?”

“Answer the question!” Bartoff screamed.

Madame Lapin-Défunt rose, and spoke, still in a soft voice, “I find your questions outrageous, monsieur. I am sorry to have to admit that my husband was right about you.”

“The husband of which you speak is most probably a murderer, madame, and the only question we have now is to what extent you can be proved to be his accessory. So I’ll ask you only one time: Has excrement born of the cleaning lady Cranat ever troubled your own nether canal, and if so, have you reason to believe that your husband extracted it and transported it—perhaps, if not as a film over his penis, then via the tip of his tongue—into the rectum of Charles Lipp Lilliams?”

“You have gone too far, monsieur!” was madame’s sole response. Tears flashed firelight in the corners of her eyes.

“I must agree with madame,” Enid put in. “You may insult the guests, not to mention the proprieties of civilisation, all you want, Inspector, but it will lead us no closer to the truth of this murder.”

“Madame,” Pluck addressed his guest for the final time, “Answer me this, and we will be through here.”

Madame Lapin-Défunt, head thrown back, stared with growing contempt at Pluck’s little face. Her sympathy for his inner pain had been entirely snuffed out.

“Would you be willing for my assistant, Monsieur Bartoff, to examine your fingernails with scientific precision?”

“For what?” she demanded.

“For traces of the cleaning lady Cranat’s faeces; for, madame, I submit that you inserted them into the victim yourself.”

“You did it with your fingers! Your fingers!” Bartoff shouted.

Blaze-eyed, madame stared at Pluck. “You are a revolting exhibition of humanity, monsieur. And I wish never to speak to you again.”

The lady turned, marched to the door and left them, without another word.

Pluck bowed his head. He whispered to Enid: “You must think me an unfeeling man.”

“I think you a scoundrel,” she answered honestly.

Pluck nodded. “I may be that, indeed. But I have done what I had to do. I am sorry to have dragged madame through that sewer-sludge, but its object has been accomplished: we know that she, for one, is not guilty.”

## Chapter Fifty

Pluck, after dinner, was masturbating in his room when a note was slipped under his door. Anxious as to its contents, he hurried along his exercise, finally ejaculating in a beeline straight into his eye, blinding himself, then rose and stumbled about in squealing agony, tripping and overturning the furniture. He tottered to the door, flung it open, grabbed Larry, who was passing by, dragged him into his room, and ordered: "For the love of God, lick the sperm off my eyeball and be quick about it!"

When Larry had been taken away to recover, Modeste had finished cleaning up the lad's vomit and Pluck had ceased his harangue against the universe, he remembered the note, which he found still on the floor. He unfolded it and read thereupon the name, background and mannerisms of a certain character he was to play that evening.

The same ritual—that of the note and the allocation of a character, not of the ejaculation and aftermath—was described in each of the guests' rooms. A little later, Poor Larry and a disgruntled-looking porter pulled a trolley along the corridors, stopping at each room. On the trolley was a huge chest of clothes; to each guest was distributed a prearranged costume and mask.

Then, at ten o'clock that night, everyone, as instructed, left their rooms—even those who had been ordered by Inspector Pluck to remain confined—and made their way through what had earlier that day been their accustomed hotel, but was tonight decorated with paper flowers, herbage and brooks, and was by other devices thoroughly transformed into the scene of an enchanted forest.

So, for example, a "surly woodsman, with a heart of gold", in a heavy coat and a mask which looked like a mass of nests covering his—her?—face, strutted about the lobby, whilst a "faery queen with an insatiable passion for romance", in shimmering dress, face cloaked with large butterfly wings, bore her—his?—wings through the lunchroom, in search of a cocktail.

And so we find, in the ballroom, under trestles of stars and a giant moon, a mythical menagerie of otherworldly creatures and folkloric characters. A lithe mermaid, face covered in shells, swept her tail through the undergrowth, more bosom exposed above her flowery chemise than would be permissible of humans, drawing the lecherous eyes of her fellow actors and actresses; in her own eyes could be read a medley of shame, frisson and disgust. Not far behind moped a faun, replete with hooves and bum-slapping tail, his scrawny, unsightly chest unclad, eyes of abasement and dearth of lust visible beneath a mask with a lubricious smile painted thereupon. The sexes of these creatures, at least, could be identified from certain corporal hallmarks; of many of the others, one could not be so sure. The princess, for instance, seemed to have the frontal carriage of a woman, but the rest of his or her boxy frame, and manner of carrying him- or her-self, rather like a stevedore porting a sack of exotic fruit, seemed to belie it. Or the top-hatted, bandana-faced magician, leaning on a cane, who appeared to be male, but, when he or she began to walk, rolled with a distinctly effeminate gait.

In the corners, half-hidden behind large artificial rocks and foliage, pairs of guests, never sure to whom they were speaking, commented mostly unfavourably on the physical features of their peers: that bare thigh over there, with its flesh packed upon it like something you'd find in a particularly insalubrious abattoir, spotted with age but all the

more beguiling, because usually kept under wraps, for that; that yawning navel over there, like a gaping, unblinking eye, into which you were afraid to gaze too lingeringly, for fear of being somehow sucked in; that toothy snarl just there, confessing a fellow knowledge to your own hidden, disreputable cravings. There was, across the room, an unavoidable stench of the prurient, unleashed, perhaps, not only by the anonymity and compulsory characterisation, but by the overhanging air of the murder investigation, and the sense that it was finally approaching its, because it's the proper word, climax.

"Evening," muttered, a little self-consciously, muffled through a tin mask, a hoplite to an ostrich.

"Evening," returned the ostrich—for that was the customary response to such a greeting, regardless of anachronistic dress or distinction in species.

A rubber-faced sailor, joining them, sipped his, or her, drink. "Pardon me, but do either of you two fellows, or ladies, or one or the other, for all I know—I meant to say, do you know who exactly wrote this damned scenario? Oh—if either of you is a lady, do pardon me my language, won't you?"

"To answer your question, no, I don't know," returned the hoplite, in a decidedly androgynous voice, "but it rather seems the sort of thing that cretinous inspector would have come up with."

"I imagine so," shrugged the ostrich, shedding a feather from its rump in the process. "Although I overheard someone speaking to Voot—I assume it was Voot, from the way he wears his sideburns, but then again, they looked awfully fake, those sideburns—"

"What did Voot, or whoever it was who'd appropriated his sideburns, say?" asked the sailor.

"Oh, well, he claimed that Pluck had nothing to do with it, and was as much in the dark as to the outcome of the evening as the rest of us. He insisted that the cards and the roles and the costumes are the same every year, though allocated randomly."

"Pluck might have tampered with them, though," mused the sailor.

"Redistributed them, to humiliate those he disfavoured and reward those he fancied," added the hoplite.

The sailor eyed the hoplite with amused eyes. "How do you know *I*'m not Pluck, for all that?"

"Well, you're too tall, for one thing; and your voice is too deep."

The sailor scrunched down, rendering his or her legs rubbery and, possibly, semi-artificial. The sailor responded, at a higher pitch: "Is that better?"

"Now you sound like a girl," laughed the ostrich. "I don't mean a lady—I mean a girl."

"How about that?" The sailor, laughing, was trying to get Pluck's voice about right, but was having a hard time of it.

"Well, are you?" asked the hoplite.

The sailor chuckled. "You know we're sworn to secrecy. Who wants to invoke the wrath of Dionysus?"

The erotic edge to the proceedings was heightened by the curious addition, among many of the costumes, of certain weights, perfectly distributed to coincide with certain areas of the anatomy, resulting in pressure upon those areas whenever a step was taken, a sigh heaved or a torso twisted. A perspicacious observer, had one been present, might have remarked on the gradations of sensation to be discerned in their fellow

masqueraders' eyes: beginning with irritated discomfort, proceeding to disorientated stimulation, and culminating in suppressed arousal. This inflammation, when concurring with the sight of exposed flesh and eroticised personae, tended to establish a perceived attraction, as in one struck by Cupid's arrow, to individuals they would never ordinarily view in any manner other than a civilised one.

A puffed-up sheep, presumably a member of the staff, ambled about dispensing copies of a script. The actors, after having been given a few minutes to peruse it, were herded out of the ballroom and into a room they hadn't yet had the privilege of enjoying: it was a theatre, large enough to hold the same number of guests as they had beds for, with a shallow stage which had been done up like a desert island: what looked and, when people stooped down to take a few grains between their fingers, felt like sand, a couple of token, amateurishly constructed palm trees, and a large yellow sun painted on the backdrop.

A Chinese dragon at the piano played a short introductory passage, and the spectacle commenced.

The hoplite, realising it was he or she who was called to begin, hurried on-stage, tripping a little over his or her heels in the process. Picking him- or her-self up, he or she shook the script and proceeded to declaim: "Hail, fellow travellers through time, space, fiction and reality! I salute you, as I do the Muses, whom I here invoke to inspire us with their mystical talents for impersonation and self-revelation!" The hoplite puzzled over some stage direction, then moved off, replaced by a portly king, whose cheekbones looked rather feminine beneath his mask, and his queen, of whom the reverse could be said.

"My dear," quoth the king, in a sexually ambiguous voice, "I fear our kingdom is overrun with degeneracy."

"Why, whatever do you mean?" wondered the queen, in a likewise indeterminate tone.

"Well," explained the king, "firstly, I have myself witnessed the spectacle of men cohabiting with other men."

"By 'cohabit'," asked the queen, "do you mean, 'living together'?"

"Nay," quoth the king. "Rather, I intended the phrase euphemistically—I meant that they indulged in sexual relations."

"By 'sexual relations'," wondered the queen, "do you mean, 'sharing a kind word across the conjugal breakfast'?"

"No," explained the king, "more precisely, I mean, 'sodomy'."

"By 'sodomy'," persisted the queen, "do you mean, 'inserting the male member into a male rectum for purposes of mutual erotic gratification'?"

"That is precisely what I mean," quoth the king, who then, in fidelity to stage direction, bowed.

"That is most peculiar," agreed the queen, "for I, during the May festivities this very month, have witnessed the spectacle of women enjoying sensual pleasures with other women."

"Do you mean," cried the king, aghast, "inserting their members into rectums for, again, gratification?"

The queen tittered, and blew some air her way with a fan she was wont to carry with her for that purpose. "To what members do you refer, my liege? No, no indeed; but if you



were to substitute the words ‘tongues’ and ‘fingers’ for ‘members’, and the word ‘vagina’ for ‘rectum’, then would you be nearer the truth.”

“‘Nearer’ the truth,” chuckled the king—that sly dog—“or, do you rather mean, ‘inside’ it?”

They shared a good laugh over that.

Suddenly, a full-grown pig—walking upright, at that—waddled into the room and exclaimed, “Your majesties! A murder has occurred in the kingdom!”

“What?! What did you say?! Did you say, ‘Sodomy has occurred in the kingdom’?!” asked the king.

“Not at all, my liege,” the pig bowed, with some difficulty, given the wear of the costume. “In fact, what I reported was a murder.”

The king—or rather, the actor playing the king—turned to his mate, affecting some bewilderment. “Did he just say ‘sodomy’ again?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “It sure sounded like it, but it’s always hard to tell, you know, with their barbarous peasants’ accents, just what they’re trying to say; if indeed they’ve got anything intelligible to say at all.”

The king cleared his throat. “Pardon me, my good man,” he said to the pig, who once again, impoverished of further dialogue at this point, thought fit to bow, “but I keep hearing the word ‘sodomy’ issue upon the foul smell of your breath. Is that truly what you meant to say, here in the throne room, in the presence of your queen and king?”

“Not I, your majesty,” quoth the pig, “I did not utter that word.”

“What word?” asked the queen. “Surely you can say the word you mean—whatever word it is you’re babbling about, after all.”

“Yes, go on: say the word!” commanded the king.

At this moment, as instructed, other members of the company strayed on-stage, chanting, “Say the word! Say the word! Say the word! Say the word!”

The pig raised a trotter in the air, establishing an instantaneous, hushed silence, and declared: “The word is ‘sodomy’.”

Cue indignant gasps.

“Apologise! Apologise at once!” ordered the queen. “Or your head will be off!”

The pig bowed, profoundly. “I apologise most humbly, your majesty.”

“A real apology!” she demanded. “A sincere one.”

The pig bowed still more deeply. “I assure your liege that I never intended to utter that word.”

“What word?” asked a winged creature.

“‘Sodomy’,” whispered the pig, head bowed.

“Apologise again!” demanded the queen. “Like you mean it!”

The pig prostrated itself completely, and snorted: “I beg your liege’s forgiveness.”

“Not like that! An apology! A *real* apology!”

The pig stood up and ran off. Noise could be heard beneath the stage. Then, from beneath their feet, they heard a voice: “I’m sorry, your majesty!”

Enter a unicorn.

“What’s that?!” asked the king.

“It’s a unicorn!” explained the assembled company in unison.

“I’m a unicorn,” the unicorn repeated, bowing.

“What do you want?” asked the king.

“Pardon?”

“What do you want?”

“Oh. I have reason to believe that a murder has been committed.”

“Did it just say ‘sodomy’?” the queen whispered to her consort.

“I’m not sure,” the king whispered back. Then, at a louder, more theatrically suitable, volume, he asked of their guest: “Did you just say ‘sodomy’, unicorn?”

“I did not,” stated the unicorn, almost as if it were a matter of fact. “I said ‘murder’.”

At this, the courtiers gasped. “Sodomy!” “He said it!” “Somebody’s committed sodomy!”, etc.

The unicorn stood, on four legs, patiently. It shook its mane. “No, no, and no again. I said, ‘murder’.”

“The punishment for sodomy is murder!” exclaimed the queen. “And the punishment for murder is sodomy. So which one is it, my one-horned pony friend—which one is it?!”

“Perhaps both,” admitted the unicorn, “but definitely murder.”

“Murder, or sodomy?”

“Murder.”

“Sodomy?”

“No. Murder.”

“Sodomy, or sodomy?”

“Neither.” The unicorn stood its ground. “Murder.”

“Sodomy?”

“No. Murder.”

“Sodomy?”

“Murder.”

“Sodomy?”

“Murder.”

“Murder?”

“Sodomy.”

“There! He said it!”

“Wait! Wait, no, I meant, ‘murder’!”

“But that’s not what you said! You said ‘sodomy’! I heard it, I heard it!” The queen turned to her husband. “Did you hear it, dearie?”

“I heard it, my love.”

She turned to the courtiers. “Did you hear it, everyone?”

“Aye!” they affirmed as one.

The unicorn held its head between its hooves. “I meant to say ‘murder’, all right? It was a murder. A *murder*. Doesn’t anybody care?! Don’t any of you care?!”

Just then—not earlier, nor later, but, like I said, just then—a walking sunflower, face brown and catacombed like an insect’s eye, a wreath of huge, wilting petals encircling it, body covered in a green sheath, swayed forward. “I believe you,” it said.

The unicorn looked up. “Who, me?”

“No, me,” said the sunflower. “I was the one speaking.”

“No, but, I meant, were you referring to me?”

“When?”

“Just now—when you spoke.”

The sunflower, insofar as any emotion could be visually discerned, appeared confused. “Do you mean, when I said ‘I was the one speaking’?”

“No-o: when you said, ‘I believe you’.”

The sunflower shook its head. “I never said that you believed me. I said that *I* believed *you*.”

“I understand,” persisted the unicorn, “I understand what you’re saying. So, then, *you* believe *me*?”

“Well, yes, if by ‘you’ you mean ‘me’, but not ‘you’, as in, you know, if *you* were saying ‘me’, but rather, if *I* was saying ‘me’, or rather ‘I’, if *I* was saying ‘I’, or rather, if *I* were saying ‘I’—”

“Yes, yes, that’s all very well, but, grammar and style aside, the crux of the matter, semantically, is that *you*, the sunflower, believe *me*, the unicorn?”

“Well, yes, but I think all this would be very much easier if we subtracted the pronouns from the equation.”

“All right, as you please. ‘The sunflower believes the unicorn’—does that satisfy you?”

“Does *what* satisfy...*whom*?”

“Was my sentence not clear enough for you?”

“It was, it was clear—in a vacuum of unparticularity.”

“Now whatever do you mean by that?”

“Are you referring to some ethereal, Platonic forms of sunflower and unicorn?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because I haven’t been convinced as to which sunflower and which unicorn you refer.”

“Well, *this*”—here the unicorn, in accordance with the stage directions, indicated itself with a hoof—“unicorn, and *that*”—here, as the reader can probably determine for him- or her-self, the unicorn pointed to the sunflower—“sunflower.”

The sunflower turned, awkwardly in the costume, behind itself, first to its left, then to its right, then once more to its left. “To whom are you pointing?” it asked.

The unicorn galloped over and placed a hoof, with the utmost gentleness, on one of the sunflower’s petals; at once, the sunflower, a leg somehow coming free, kicked the unicorn, hard, in the belly; the unicorn collapsed in a cry of pain.

“Ow!” That was the unicorn.

“Get your damned hands off me!” That was the sunflower.

“The script says ‘*The sunflower gently shoves the unicorn away*!’” the unicorn protested.

“It also says, ‘“*Unicorn: The script says, ‘The sunflower gently shoves the unicorn away.*’”’” returned the sunflower.

“It also says, ‘“*Sunflower: It also says, ‘Unicorn: The script says, “The sunflower gently shoves the unicorn away.*”’”’” the unicorn retorted.

“If ever I believed you,” muttered the sunflower, “I certainly don’t anymore.”

Suddenly, the guests discovered as they turned to the final page, the script ended, with the instructions: *Improvisation follows, resolutely in character*. Cue much sighing, groaning, tittering and amused muttering. Many wandered off the stage, trying to deduce identities and looking for a drink.

A large sphinx wandered through a corridor, stopping at some sounds through one of the doors. Curious, and with an impulse to satisfy that curiosity to which the sphinx would never in normal circumstances consider yielding, it opened the door and beheld, there amongst some boxes and brooms, a grunting daemon penetrating a grunting faerie. The sphinx couldn't be sure, but I, as the narrator, can tell you with some authority: neither the daemon nor the faerie knew the other's identity, nor the other's gender, nor, for certain, the nature of the orifice being violated; well, the faerie knew, to be sure, but not the daemon, I mean.

On the other side of the hotel, an androgynous naiad, back bereft of attire, with prominent shoulder blades jutting out from a flesh whose lustre had long since faded, and was now etched with wrinkles which carved and uncarved with each step, trod with unshod foot down a different corridor. Her—we shall call her a 'she'—face was invisible beneath a wig of waterfall hair pouring down every side. She entered a small lounge; she lit a lamp, and found that no one else was about. The room was cool, without a fire, and suffused with a heavy purple shadow.

The naiad walked, the padding of her feet audible in the silence, to a mirror. She stood before it. She started to remove her wig, but thought better of it.

All right, it was Enid, I don't mind telling you. And as if she'd heard my narration, she chose this moment to part the streaming green hair, just for this moment, and look, at least, into her own eyes.

She reflected that she was hopelessly in love. That she had never felt this way, in her life, even when young. That she didn't know what she would do, where it would lead, to what degradations she would stoop. That whatever the object of her infatuation would ask her to do, she would do it, in flagrant breach of her rational and moral prejudices. And that she wished, she prayed, it would go away, and soon.

She saw a half-drunk glass left on a small table under the mirror. Somebody had been here.

She drank it, banishing her internal commands to the contrary. It revolted her, but she fought not to cough it back up, and forced herself to swallow. It deadened her mind and enlivened her body. Now she felt she could do anything.

A noise behind her. Was it he? The hoplite stumbled in, drunk. "Greetings!" he laughed. "Whoever you may be. Tell me, are you friend or foe?"

The voice was now undisguised; the middle of a smile identifiable through the break in the helmet.

It was Glen.

He staggered close, and whispered, with a breath which made her gag, "Are you anyone I might know?"

She felt his hot, wet hand press through her toga upon her stomach. He did not know her, she was sure. The hand massaged her. She moaned, softly. She felt like she might swoon, but she wanted to have this, first.

She folded over the shell of his ear between her lips, enclosing it completely, and whispered into the sealed orifice on flicks of her tongue, "Take me first, and ask me after."

She let him kiss her, let his tongue violate the sanctity of her mouth, let his sweaty hands climb up the inside of her toga, over her thighs, press under her undergarments and fumble over her buttocks; she gasped, his mouth on her neck, for she had never felt hands

there, and recognised, from some sober corner of her mind, that she was almost allowing herself to undergo these things for the practically scientific purpose of observing their effects on her. When he suddenly spread her open, she caught her breath and realised she would imminently discharge the processed remnants of the juice she'd enjoyed that evening, so pushed him away, wrapped herself more discreetly in her robe and ran off to her room.

## Chapter Fifty-One

The next morning, Enid took her seat beside Pluck in the interview room as if nothing had happened.

“The next interviewee,” announced Pluck, “will be Miss Enid Trojczakowski.”

Enid and Bartoff looked at him. (Sam could not be bothered.)

Pluck placed his hand on hers. “It is just a formality,” he assured her.

She looked around her. “Shall I move seats?”

“If you would not mind.”

She got up, walked around the table and sat in the suspects’ seat. She crossed her legs and awaited the first question.

“Did you have anything to do with the murder of...”

“Charles Snede?”

“Yes, if that’s how you say it. Did you?”

She looked at his small, pasty, ridiculous face, and into his pinprick-little eyes. “No.”

Pluck nodded. “That’s good enough for me. Kindly resume your old seat by my side, and we shall proceed with our work at this most critical juncture.”

She took a deep breath. “There is something I should like to say first, Inspector, if I may.”

He shrugged. “By all means. Only pray don’t let it take too long, Miss Trojczakowski, as we still have several more witnesses to attend to today.”

“It will not take long, Inspector.”

Pluck shrugged. “Then—out with it.”

Now she shrugged, and shook her head, and smiled, as if to say, “What can you do in a world as absurd as ours, with human feelings as unpredictable and inexplicable as ours, but to laugh and give in?” But what she did say was: “Thaddeus Curtis Pluck—I love you.”

Pluck stared at her. Bartoff did too.

“Come again, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“I said that I love you.”

“She loves you!” Bartoff shouted.

Pluck began to shake. “Surely...there is some mistake?”

“I love you!” she insisted.

“She loves you!” screamed Bartoff. “She wants to marry you! She wants to make babies!” Even Sam woofed, caught up in the excitement but not, in truth, understanding the finer points of what was being discussed.

Pluck rose, unsteadily, and gripped the table for support. “I’m woozy,” he whispered.

Enid went over and offered him her glass of water.

“Thank you.” He took it, raised it to his lips, forgot to open his mouth and poured the water all over the bottom half of his face. “Another,” he begged. She filled the glass, and handed it to him once more; he raised it towards his face, this time remembering to open his mouth, wide and well ahead of time, but dropped the glass; it broke apart on the table. “Another,” he begged. Enid took another glass, filled it, and handed it to him; this time, his hand shook so much that the glass’s contents splashed all over his face, Enid’s face, Bartoff’s face, Sam’s face (Sam found that rather funny) and the papers on the table. Enid

filled the glass again, and Pluck dropped it; it broke. Enid found another glass and filled it, this time placing it to Pluck's lips herself; he sipped it, nodded, and whispered, "Thank you."

Then he fainted to the floor.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

More interviews were conducted than we have space, or inclination, to describe, all of which yielded no substantial evidence towards the conclusion of the investigation, but all of which would have been seen to contain incidents of thoroughly gratifying hilarity, had the reader only been present. On the other hand, I'm certain that the reader is, in some chamber of his or her psyche, grateful for this uncharacteristic reticence on the narrator's part, as the book is, let's be honest, getting on a bit. So we'll pass stoically over the American cowboy, the Belgian swindler, the Siamese hermaphrodite and the Russian pretender to the throne; but I feel I would be remiss in neglecting to include one particular scene, which concerns one of the most beloved of our characters, as detailed below.

Of an afternoon, not long after the masquerade which all the guests, in unspoken agreement, tried to exile from their minds, Pluck was whistling into the reading room when he spotted the coronel, dozing in an armchair, from behind. What did our indomitable protagonist do but clap the fellow heartily on the back and greet him volubly, hail-fellow-well-met and all that, causing the old man to wake and attempt, thin-bonedly, to look over his shoulder, with an expression on his martial visage as if a bird had shat on him.

"May I join you?" Pluck asked, as a formality, of his friend, squeezing down beside him in the armchair while speaking.

"Leave me!" the old man begged.

Pluck roared at his friend's joke. "What are you doing in the reading room, you old idiot? You know you've never picked up a book in your life!"

The coronel's brittle fingers fumbled in his jacket pocket, but it was difficult to manoeuvre with Pluck pressed stiflingly against him.

"What have you got there, you silly fool?" laughed Pluck. "Some sordid 'ethnographic' photograph, I surmise?"

The coronel found his knife and jammed it between Pluck's ribs. Pluck cried out, like a woman. The coronel, hissing through gritted teeth, twisted the handle. Pluck stood up, and pushed the coronel to the floor.

"You clumsy old fool!" Pluck screamed. "Look what you've done! Didn't your mother ever warn you to be careful with knives?! You hand somebody a knife *handle-side out!*"

From the floor, the coronel stared up at what he'd done—and something shifted, in his eyes. It was as if he was not looking at Pluck, at that moment, but, by gazing upon what he'd wrought, the effect of his action, he was gazing upon himself—the deed defining the doer—and he saw himself a monster.

"Forgive me!" he cried, and tried to get to his feet. "I am an ogre!"

"You're a bloody idiot, is what you are," Pluck agreed, and, holding his breath, pulled out the knife in a quick, clean go and threw it to the floor.

"Are you all right?" asked the coronel, rising, with the help of the armchair and a floor lamp.



“Yes, I’m all right, you stupid fool! I’ve been a detective for the better part of twenty years, I’ll have you know; this isn’t the first time I’ve been stabbed by some well-meaning but blundering cretin like yourself. Here, give me that.”

“Give you what?”

Pluck grabbed hold of the coronel’s dress shirt, which peeked out from between the flanks of his uniform, and tore off a strip, with which he set to sopping up the blood spilling from his side. “I expect the management will increase your bill by the value of this armchair you’ve stained. Assuming that all members of the management haven’t been sent before a firing squad as accessories to murder by that point, of course.”

The coronel, overcome with rage at himself, dragged his feet across the carpet, his fingers outstretched before him, shaking pathetically. His mouth hung open, and drool was to be seen.

“You look awful, my friend,” sighed Pluck. “Sit down, why don’t you, and I’ll call for someone to see to you.”

But the coronel did not sit down; rather, when he reached his friend, he tried to take the rumpled strip of cloth out of Pluck’s hand and sop up the blood himself, but he was careless and, due to the tears gushing down his face, inept.

“Oh, you’re just making it worse, you moron!” shouted Pluck. “Here, give it here.”

The coronel embraced the inspector, and wept onto his chest.

“I’m sorry!” he sobbed. “I’m sorry for what I’ve done!”

“Don’t make a scene! You’re making a fool out of yourself! A fool enacting a fool, in some nightmarish infinite regress of roles!”

By this time, alerted by the screams and tears, some staff and other guests wandered in—not with undue haste, as both screaming and crying had been heard almost every hour of this holiday—to observe and assist.

The coronel, his arms still round Pluck’s waist, dropped to his knees—two soft cracks could be heard as each knee hit the rug—lay his cheek against Pluck’s groin, and, before these witnesses, weepily proclaimed: “I love you! I love you! I denied it, to myself, I lied to myself, because it was not meet for a soldier—but I love you, and I’ve only come to see it when I hurt you!”

Pluck, standing in an awkward position, couldn’t properly right himself, because of the presence of his best friend clutching him so passionately. Truth told, he was getting a little bored with declarations of love. He looked down at this man: the subtle glow from the fire invested him with a kind of ethereality, as if his time for this world was but momentary, and would flicker out, with the flame, before he knew it.

As Enid and Bartoff were among those present, Pluck saw no reason why this scene should not function in the role of interview. In that frame of mind, he placed two fingers upon the thin white dandruff-dappled hair which bestrew the coronel’s bowed head and pronounced: “I find you—innocent.”

## Chapter Fifty-Three

It was the final day of interviews. The three investigators took their seats in the interview room, each, in his or her own way, enduring a sense of anticipated nostalgia, at some future time, for what they were sure would prove to have been a pivotal stretch in their lives.

Pluck rang the bell to call Larry. The bellhop appeared promptly, smilingly, aware too that all this would soon be coming to an end.

“Boy, bring in Curtis Vacaresteanu.”

“At last!” Enid exclaimed.

Poor Larry nodded and left to do so.

A porter was brought in, late thirties, scruffily attired, hair in a mess beneath his cap, unshaven, shuffling to the chair.

“That’s the man!” Enid whispered to Pluck. “The disgruntled porter—the one I saw! That’s him!”

Pluck motioned for her to calm down, and addressed the suspect: “Curtis Vacaresteanu?”

“Yes?” The man clearly did not want to be there—a detail that was not lost on, and did not endear the suspect to, our investigator. The man (Curtis) was a clearly unsavoury character: sullen, and insolent, in the looks he gave the three of them.

“Sir, I am not too proud to tell you that I am considerably envious of your name.”

“It’s quite a rare name.” The man smiled, crook-toothedly.

“No, no, not your surname; no, I wouldn’t want that. I mean your Christian name: I mean ‘Curtis’.”

The man shrugged, as if to imply, at once, that his name was of no special import, and of no conceivable relevance to the investigation. But he was wrong, on both counts, as we shall presently see.

“In fact,” Pluck resumed, “I rather wonder whether it is too great a coincidence.”

“What is?” asked the man, stupidly.

Pluck sighed, realising he’d have to spell it out for him. “Your name is ‘Curtis’, and ‘Curtis’ is a name of which I, the chief investigator in this investigation, am inordinately fond.”

The man, appallingly, shrugged again.

“Did you, by any chance, have a different name at birth?” asked Pluck.

“No.”

“Did you change your name somewhere along the way?”

“No.”

“Is ‘Curtis’ some sort of *nom de plume*—or, perhaps, stage name?”

“No.”

“Is your real name—you’ll have to forgive me,” he added with a short chuckle, “I’m just guessing at random here—is your real name, by any chance, something along the lines of—‘Snedé’?”

The man called Curtis sat in his chair, immobile in figure and face; the firelight shone upon him, the last time it would grace a suspect with its lustre, outfitting him with a kind of nimbus, and flattening his perspective into that of a gold-plated icon.

“No,” he said simply. “‘Curtis’ is my name, and has always been.”

“‘Charles Snede’?”

“No.”

Pluck crossed his arms, looked over at Enid, then at Bartoff, significantly, and asked: “And why not?”

“What do you mean?” asked the suspect.

Pluck shrugged. “‘Charles Snede’ is a perfectly good name, I’d argue, so far as names go; I can’t imagine anybody contesting that opinion.” He looked to his co-investigators, and, in the absence of any protest, assumed his opinion was a valid one. “So,” he addressed the suspect once more, “why not adopt it? Why not elect to be born with it, in the first place, or, failing that, change it by deed poll? If not in the past—why not now, today?”

“Why would I?” asked the suspect, ridiculously.

“Aha! You ask why would you, while I ask: Why *wouldn’t* you?”

The man shrugged with egregious impudence. “I’m satisfied with my name. I’ve got no reason to change it, or to pretend to be anybody other than who I am.”

“Fine words, great, noble words, my friend—but what do they mean?” Pluck challenged him.

The man shrugged again. “I think my meaning is clear.”

“I beg to differ,” said Pluck.

The man shrugged. “You have that right.”

“I beg your pardon, but I certainly do not.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked the suspect.

Pluck eyed him narrowly. “I think you understand me perfectly well.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well, so be it, then—I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree, as they say.”

“Very well. May I go now?”

Pluck asked, a little more softly: “I...don’t suppose you’d be willing to...”

“Willing to what?”

“Willing to...trade names with me?”

The man stared at him. “I’m afraid I cannot. But perhaps you can change yours, by deed poll, once all this is over, to ‘Curtis’, ‘Larry’, ‘Snede’, or what have you.”

“Yes...yes. Perhaps you’re right.”

“May I go?”

Pluck lowered his eyes, and nodded. “Yes. And I can say without hesitation that you are the only occupant of this hotel whom I can clear completely from association with this crime.”

The man stood up and turned to go, but Enid halted him: “Pardon, monsieur, but I have a few more questions to ask.” She turned to Pluck, who bowed, and so she asked of the suspect: “Please: be seated.”

The suspect sighed, and sat back down. He stared at Enid, waiting for her first question.

She did not disappoint him: “What is your name?”

He merely glared at her.

“No—I’m sorry,” she said with a little chuckle. “We’ve already quite been through that, haven’t we? Let’s move straight on to my second question, then: Why did you ask Larry to stock the newspapers in the reading room on the morning of the murder?”

“It is part of our daily duties to stock the papers in the reading room. I was otherwise engaged, so asked Larry to do so in my place.”

“To whom were you engaged—and did the marriage go ahead?” Pluck wondered.

They both ignored him. Enid asked: “What were you doing at the time?”

“Washing the floor of the pantry, as I recall.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Mademoiselle Cranat, the cleaning lady, had soiled it through one of her gastrointestinal accidents.”

“Please describe the exact nature of her ailment,” demanded Pluck.

“Never mind that just now, please,” begged Enid of Pluck, and asked the suspect:

“How far is the pantry from the reading room?”

“About a minute’s walk.”

“I see. And would that be the north reading room, or the south?”

“The...north.”

“I see.”

“Wait,” Pluck interrupted them. “There are two reading rooms?”

Enid nodded. “I hadn’t been aware of that fact myself, until recently. I happened, the night of the masquerade, to stumble upon a small lounge, which was stocked with books and periodicals, and so, I concluded, could be described with some accuracy as a second ‘reading room’.”

“So...in which reading room was the dead man murdered?” Pluck asked.

Enid turned to the suspect. “Could you please answer that... ‘Curtis’?”

The man blinked. Something was going on with the firelight, which now shaded certain facets of his face, seemingly adding an extra dimension. “...The south one, I believe.”

“You believe, yes.”

“But...hang on a moment, wasn’t it a reading room I fell asleep in, that morning of the murder?” asked Pluck.

“I don’t know,” said Enid. “Was it?”

“Was it?” asked the suspect.

Pluck nodded, staring at Sam, of all things, who dozed on Bartoff’s lap. “Yes...so was it the north or the south? Or, are both of you mistaken, and there is only one reading room after all?”

“I can assure you there are two such rooms,” said Enid.

“Mademoiselle is correct,” averred the suspect.

But Pluck would not be derailed from this new train of thought: “Hang on...was it, in fact...hang on...”

“What is it?” whispered Enid.

“Could it be—?!” Pluck cried. “Good God!”

“What is it?”

“Could I have been the murder victim, all along?! And the man, here, today, standing before you—” With a slap, unintentionally, because of the vigour born of his earnestness, painful, upon his heart, thereby meaning to indicate himself, Pluck was about to go on,

when he realised he was not standing; he promptly stood up, and resumed: “Could the man here, today, standing before you—I—could I be...Larry Snede?”

He fell down at once, unconscious, in the shock of realisation of his own death.

“My friend is dead!” Bartoff screamed. Sam, rudely awoken, woofed. “Damn you, stupid furry creature!” Bartoff shouted, throwing the dog over his shoulder. “My friend is dead!”

He rushed over to where Pluck lay; Enid was already wiping his hair from his brow and kissing his cheeks. Pluck, miraculously, soon revived. With his friends’ assistance—his friends, here, being Enid and Bartoff; the porter ostensibly named “Curtis” really didn’t come into it—he sat up.

“Curtis...Curtis, are you all right?” Enid asked.

Pluck shook his head slowly, looking at her in bewilderment. “Am I Curtis...or Pluck...or Snede?” he whispered.

“You are Thaddeus Pluck,” she smiled through her tears, “and I love you.”

“May I go now?” the suspect asked. “I’ve got my rounds to do, you know.”

Pluck waved aside his friends’ protests at his premature resumption of his duties, and, with their help, struggled to his feet. They still held either side of him as he brushed off his jacket and straightened his shirt. “Monsieur Vicarage?”

““Vacaresteanu’.”

“Whatever. Monsieur...would you consider...at least...*lending* me your name?”

““Curtis’, or ‘Vacaresteanu’?”

“The former. Obviously.”

The man shrugged, and exposed his crooked grin. “Why not? I hope you’ll enjoy it, Inspector.”

Pluck nodded, gratefully, and let himself be helped into his seat.

## Chapter Fifty-Four

The investigators—Pluck, Enid and Bartoff—were exhausted, their analytical energy spent, and so were glad to have a break for lunch.

Pluck stood in the doorway to the lunchroom, contemplating the scene: guests were unhurriedly consuming sandwiches and fish, relaxing with books or engaging in soft conversation. The room was airy, bright, and full of people's tolerance of each other in a shared situation that was not what you might call ideal. These people had formed, in spite of the fears of a murderer in their midst, and the terror of a not entirely competent investigation, an undeniable bond; they had become, in the absence of any connection with the greater society outside these walls, a family.

"Attention! Attention, everyone!" Pluck shouted from the doorway. The guests, naturally, ceased what they were doing and looked his way. He paused. "...Could everybody please look this way?" he asked, although they already were. Now that he had their attention, he was a trifle unsure how to put into words what he wanted to say. He was not too proud to admit as much: "...Thank you for looking this way. I—I'll tell you straight off that I'm not too sure how to put into words what I want to say." People sighed, awaiting resignedly whatever this newest idiocy would be. "...Miss Trojczakowski, would you kindly join me?"

Enid, her heart leaping—it was really something located more squarely in the region of her stomach, but she thought it more romantic to refer to it, inwardly, as her heart, rather than taking the time, at that moment of all moments, to try to recollect the exact locations and functions of her intestines—her heart leaping, I say, Enid rose from her seat, abandoned without further thought a half-piece of toast smeared with egg, and walked calmly, composedly, over to Pluck. She turned, proud, ennobled, to stand by his side as he would announce to all what was surely going to be an engagement to marry.

"Mister Bartoff—please."

Bartoff, too, rose, scooping up Sam, barking to his tablemates not to touch his muffin, and strolled over to Pluck and Enid. Bartoff's heart was not elated; he simply did as he was bid, per the demands of friendship, and thought no more about it. Enid, on the other hand, had to wonder how he fit into all this. Surely her soon-to-be fiancé was not about to suggest, publicly, some sort of immoral cohabitation?

Once Bartoff had taken his place by Pluck, Pluck cleared his throat—"Ahem"—and began: "Ladies and gentlemen—you are all under arrest, for a series of murders that have taken place in this hotel over the course of the past week. The victims are named as follows: Sam Tweed, Larry Bell Williams, Bipp Snede, Johnny Silver, Thaddeus Feosalma, and Louie Blue. I beg you all to remain calm, leave your food at your plates and return to your rooms. Mister Bartoff will be along presently to tie you to the chair of your choice. Thank you."

"Enough!" shouted someone, some man without tact.

"Yes!" shouted another. "I'll stand for no more!"

"Nor I!" Men and ladies, guests and staff, began to stand, shout, profane their noble inspector and throw silverware at him.

"Stand down! Stand down!" Bartoff boomed, shielding his friend with his massive chest, but the people would not abide.

Mister Stoupes, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt and Madame Tautphoeus led the charge, up the aisle, brandishing butter knives and chairs, lion tamer-like. On the side of justice, Pluck stood firm, with only Bartoff, the coronel, who stumbled up from his seat to help his friend, and Enid to back him.

“Stop it! Stop it, everybody!” Enid screamed, and, unaccustomed to an angry outburst from that quarter, they halted in their tracks. “Inspector Pluck is a good man! A good, good man! Any mistakes he has made are only the result of a low intelligence—they are not born of evil! Over these days I’ve come to know, and love, this man, and I can tell you that while, technically, a psychiatrist might deem him an idiot, his heart is pure!”

The mob muttered amongst themselves, deciding whether or not the lynching should go ahead. Suddenly, *deus ex machina*, Monsieur Mifkin appeared, and begged of the guests: “Please, ladies and gentlemen! Miss Trojczakowski is right: the man is a moron, but he means well, and if we could only play along until the storm clears and the authorities can be summoned, I’m sure everything can be straightened out then. Let us not forget that, most likely, there *is* a murderer among us—and I’m sure that he would prefer nothing more than that we should squabble amongst ourselves and extrajudicially execute our sole representative of law and order. So, please, refrain; curb the sense of injustice I know you’re suffering; for the sake of us all.”

Grumblingly, the mob decided not to kill Pluck, and returned to their seats and mushroom soup.

## Chapter Fifty-Five

“We have one last interview to conduct.”

Enid and Bartoff were in the interview room for what they’d thought would be the task of sifting through the evidence of statements with a view to establishing a sensible probability of guilt; instead, they were taken by surprise by Pluck’s announcement.

“Whom?” asked Enid.

“I realised that we’d forgotten to interrogate Manager Mifkin. I’ll have him brought in now.”

The bell was rung, the bellboy dispatched, and the manager came in, with a look of no little surprise across his broad, friendly face.

“Can I be of service, Inspector?”

It was not Mifkin, as might have been expected, who said this—it was Pluck.

“I am sorry, monsieur?”

“That is what you should ask: ‘Can I be of service, Inspector?’”

Mifkin chuckled at what he presumed was Pluck’s little joke. “Very well: ‘Can I be of service, Inspector?’”

Pluck stared him down, humourlessly. “You may. Pray be seated.”

The surrogate manager sat. His knees were together, his hands calmly on them, his back straight, his face open and expectant. The fire, for its part, was low, and the light it cast could not reach this man, who sat half in shadow, half in the manmade light of an oil lamp whose glow had nothing artful or noteworthy about it.

Pluck consulted his papers, before placing them in a neat pile to his side, looking Mifkin straight in the eye, and asking: “Are you in love with me?”

Mifkin started, then laughed. “Why do you think that, monsieur?”

Pluck shrugged. “Everybody else seems to be.”

Mifkin cleared his throat. “I assure you that that is not the case, Inspector.”

“Well, that point is moot. I grant you. Let’s stick with you, then: Are you in love with me?”

“I respect your professional position and your deductive capacities no end, Inspector. But on the subject of an unnatural romantic inclination—positively not.”

“I’ll ignore that. I ask you again: Are you in love with me?”

“Answer the question!” Bartoff barked; Sam yipped in sympathy.

“No.” Something was happening to the man’s jaw.

“I’ll ask you again,” Pluck spoke calmly. “Do you feel an erotic attraction to my person?”

“No! Why do you keep asking that?!”

“Did you kill Charles Snipp in order to attract my attention?”

“I didn’t kill anyone! Not that there’s anyone of that name in this hotel, anyway!”

“Did you kill him to impress me?”

“No!”

“Did you molest the corpse?”

“Don’t be a buffoon!”

“I’ll be a buffoon if it pleases me. Answer the question, damn you.”

“No!”



“‘No’ what?”

“No, I did not molest the corpse!”

“But did you molest the corpse?”

“No!”

“Answer the question.”

“I’ve answered it!”

“Answer the question!” Bartoff boomed.

“I did! And the answer is no!”

“Why not?”

“What?!”

“Why didn’t you molest the corpse? Was it not to your liking?”

“No, dead men aren’t particularly to my liking, you cretin!”

Pluck shrugged. “I shouldn’t wonder that Mister Snipp would feel insulted by that remark.”

Enid watched Mifkin’s bloodless fingers clutch his knees as if to crush the life out of them: his twitching visage implied a man used to maintaining exterior control, but who was now losing that ability in the face of this unprecedented onslaught of stupidity.

She placed her hand on Pluck’s arm, as she so dearly loved to do: “Perhaps we’re going too far...”

“None of it.” Pluck shook his head, with decision.

“After all,” she reasoned, “what evidence do you have for any of this?”

He shook off her hand. “If it wasn’t for your own sexual gratification,” he asked the witness, “please explain for what reason you were tampering with Mister Snipp’s anus—after he was dead.”

“Reprobate!” whispered Bartoff—only in a whisper, for even he could hardly believe how this was panning out.

“I did no such thing, you bastard!” Mifkin shouted. “And I’ll have you for slander for saying so!”

Pluck nodded. “As you like.” He rang the bell. Larry appeared. “Charlie,” he told him, “please take this note. And assemble all the guests and staff, and have it read out by someone with a commanding voice—Frau Hühnerbeinstein’s will do nicely.”

Larry came over to the table. Pluck stared at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Pardon, monsieur?”

“Why have you approached the table?”

“Didn’t you wish me to take the note, monsieur?”

“Yes—and now that I’ve given it to you, be off at once.”

“You haven’t yet given it to me, monsieur.”

Pluck was about to slap him for insubordination, but his innate propensity for clemency made him look to Enid, who nodded a confirmation that in this case, Larry was correct.

“Very well,” said Pluck. “Take it, then.”

“Where is it, monsieur?”

“Eh? Oh—I don’t seem to have written it yet.”

Silence, while all looked to Pluck. It was his move, but he didn’t seem to know it.

“Good God! Why is everybody staring at me?!”

“Aren’t you going to write him the note?” Enid asked.

“Eh? Whom?! What note?!”

“Didn’t you want Larry to take a note for Frau Hühnerbeinstein to read aloud?”

“‘Larry’?! Who the devil is Larry?!”

“I am, Inspector.”

“Who said that?!”

“I, monsieur,” said Larry.

“Oh, very well! Just as you please! Give me a piece of paper!”

Larry took a blank piece of paper that was on the table just in front of Pluck, picked it up, and set it back down where it had been.

“And a pen, damn you! I can’t very well write without a pen, can I?!”

Larry did the same with a pen.

“Finally!” Pluck looked to a corner of the ceiling to think. “Oh yes.” He scribbled a few lines, folded the paper, and handed it to Larry. “Assemble everyone at once, and direct Frau Hühnerbeinstein, on my instructions, to declaim its contents ringingly, with scrupulous objectivity yet with undisguised feeling.”

Larry bowed and went away.

Pluck now turned, complacently, to Mifkin. “Wondering what I wrote, I suppose?”

“Something libellous and mindless, I expect.”

Pluck shrugged. “Merely that we have concluded that all evidence points to your having killed Snipp in a lover’s spat, because he would not agree to leave his wife in order to act as permanent receptacle for your plebeian semen.”

Mifkin sprang to his feet. “I demand satisfaction, monsieur!”

Pluck, cool as a polar bear’s testicles, laughed. “You demanded satisfaction of Larry Snipp, as well, I seem to recall, and yet you did not get it.”

Mifkin turned away and marched out of the room.

Pluck turned to Bartoff. “A coward, as well as a degenerate, after all,” he mused.

Bartoff chuckled.

In a moment, Mifkin returned, carrying a glove, with which, after striding up to the table, he slapped Pluck across the face.

## Chapter Fifty-Six

As there was still no viable means of leaving the premises, the duel was arranged for the hotel's theatre, bedecked as it still was with the remnants of an enchanted forest.

Needless to say, every seat was taken.

Pluck had balked at the idea of a duel. He'd offered various reasons why it would be impossible, including that he was a gentleman and Mifkin, a servant. The guests and staff, itching as one for such a showdown, dismissed his gentlemanliness out of hand. Pluck contended that the suspect was using the distraction of a duel merely as a means of evading the justice his crime would ordinarily call down on him. To this, various medieval arguments of the righteousness of the victor deciding his victory were put in answer. Finally, Pluck tried to hide in a basket of laundry, but was discovered by Annette Godefroi and unceremoniously dumped onto the floor of the lobby in front of the amused guests.

In a small chamber backstage which was used as a dressing room, Pluck paced back and forth. Bartoff was with him.

"You will smash him!" Bartoff insisted. "And if you do not, I will step in and do it for you, my friend."

"No, no, you mustn't do that," Pluck instructed him. "While nothing would be lovelier than the sight of you pulverising Mifkin's smug face, it would shame me forever after. No. This is a daemon I must face, and I must face him alone."

A soft knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was Enid. She held a handkerchief to one of her eyes.

Bartoff squeezed his friend's bicep, as if to say, "I know you'll kick the shit out of that oaf," and left the room.

Enid rushed to Pluck and embraced him. "Please don't do this," she begged him, softly, at his ear.

"Don't do what?"

"The duel, you idiot. What do you think?!"

"I don't know. I thought you meant, maybe, tie my shoes."

"Were you tying your shoes when I said it?"

"Wasn't I?"

"No. You weren't."

Pluck looked down at his shoes. He realised she was right.

"Huh. I must've only been thinking about doing so. But you're right, I need to do it, before the duel."

He knelt on one knee and tied his shoes.

"Please don't do it!" she repeated.

"But they're loose."

"No: the duel."

"Hang on—hang on, I can't talk right now; I always get a little mixed-up when it comes to the part with tying the loops. Hang on."

She waited, watching, while he tied the loops. Then, satisfied with his work, he stood once more, beheld her, and smiled with satisfaction at a job well done.

“Please,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Don’t do it.”

He laughed. “Too late, I’m afraid! Look!” He pointed to his shoes. “Snug and ready for action!”

“I’m not talking about your shoes.”

He looked at her in bewilderment. “You’re not?”

She shook her head.

He nodded, understanding. “Aha...you’re talking about the duel, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “I thought as much. And you don’t really care about my shoes, now do you? Admit it—it’s all right.”

“I don’t care about your shoes, Thaddeus. I just want you to be safe.”

“Well, I’ll have you know I want to be safe, too, and I don’t see how that would be possible if I go tripping about all over the stage while Mifkin’s taking shots at me!”

“Can we please stop talking about your shoes? Just for a moment.”

“Well...all right. I suppose.” He leant back and to the side and took a gander at her shoes: they were stark, black, worn, and in need of a good polish. The grace with which they were tied, on the other hand, was second to none. “I can’t see that there’s anything much to talk about on the subject of *your* shoes, though, so I can’t exactly see what all the fuss is about.”

A quick rap at the door, and Bartoff entered. “It’s time,” he said in a voice which was, for him, uncommonly low.

“Please, just a couple more minutes,” Enid begged of Bartoff.

“There’s nothing more to say about our shoes,” Pluck reassured her. “I think we’ve covered the topic exhaustively.”

“I don’t want to talk about shoes.”

Pluck looked at her strangely. “Then...why did you bring them up? In the first place?”

“I didn’t! Come on, Thaddeus, this might be the last time we ever speak!”

Pluck laughed, loudly, and looked at Bartoff. “Then why she’d want to spend the last time we ever speak speaking about shoes is beyond me!”

He started to move toward the door, but Enid held him by his waist. “Please! Please, don’t go—don’t leave me, like this!”

A trifle embarrassed at this scene of womanly infatuation in front of his exceedingly masculine friend, Pluck reached down, pulled off a shoe—with sublime agility, without unlacing—and placed it into Enid’s loving hands. “To remember me by,” he whispered in her ear, turned, and was gone.

Pluck and Bartoff came out on stage to a packed auditorium. While some of the glistening tree props remained, a plain black backdrop dominated the scene. On the other side was Mifkin, standing at attention, with his second, Curtis Vacaresteanu, who grinned snarlingly their way. In the centre of the stage stood a man Pluck barely recognised: a short Indian gentleman, in a white suit, with flashing eyes and an unusually straight mouth, tending to turn neither upwards nor down. This was Sri Aadi Gangakanta, who had been subject to cursory scrutiny in one of those many interviews which had been carried out but were too numerous and tedious to be recorded in this volume—you

remember, I told you that before. A refreshingly tolerant inquisitor, Pluck had not held the man's colour or creed against him, and, finding nothing particularly suspicious about the man's behaviour, more or less cleared him. And now, though there was no shortage of applicants for the position, as no one else in the hotel could be found to possess the slightest claim to impartiality when it came to the inspector, Sri Gangakanta was elected to act as sole referee.

He summoned the combatants and their seconds to the centre of the stage. "Gentlemen—have you exhausted all means for a peaceful resolution to your disagreement?" He spoke in a soft, mild tone, as if to suggest that every man in the world was a brother of the next, and that all disputes could be chuckled away if only reason could be sought and rendered its due devotion.

"Monsieur Mifkin would settle for an apology and a handshake," Curtis muttered. "He has no wish to harm the inspector."

Sri Gangakanta looked to Bartoff. Bartoff looked to Pluck. Pluck nodded.

"Inspector Pluck will accept an apology, if suitably grovelling, from Mister Mifkin, if followed by a confession of murder and public display of nudity," Bartoff explained.

"Don't be an idiot!" snarled Mifkin. Sri Gangakanta sighed. Pluck was looking at the floor.

"What if both Monsieur Mifkin and Monsieur Pluck apologised to each other, for their respective hurts, and shook hands?" Sri Gangakanta asked of all.

Mifkin conferred with Curtis. Curtis nodded, and said: "That would be satisfactory."

Bartoff looked to Pluck. Pluck shook his head, looking at the floor.

"Inspector Pluck's honour would not allow it," Bartoff answered. "He insists on a confession of murder. As to the nudity—Mifkin need not manually stimulate himself, unless he cares to." He looked to Pluck for confirmation, and received it in the form of a curt nod. Bartoff resumed: "But we will require a serious degree of humiliation. Perhaps erotic intercourse with some inanimate object?"

The negotiation went on like this for some time, but the parties failed to reach agreement. It came down to Pluck's insistence, via Bartoff, on Mifkin publicly fellating a boiled egg. Sri Gangakanta was saddened to have to produce the small briefcase and open it to disclose two pistols. Pluck grabbed a pistol first, weighed it, first in one hand and then in the other, and handed it to Mifkin. Curtis objected to this on Mifkin's behalf, and further negotiations were carried out over this topic. Mifkin finally agreed to take whichever pistol Pluck did not want, at which Pluck objected, citing his opponent's offer as clear evidence of chicanery. Eventually, a system was established whereby both weapons were placed under napkins and moved about behind the referee's back, before Pluck was allowed to choose his. Pluck refused, at first, claiming to find a spot on one of the napkins. Another napkin was secured, and subjected to Pluck's concentrated scrutiny—he held it under a lamp and inched it in folds between his fingers until he was satisfied—then he chose one of the identical pistols, and the two men were placed, back-to-back, pistols up, stage centre.

"Please ask Monsieur Mifkin to refrain from protruding his backside up against mine," Pluck requested.

"I am not!" his opponent seethed.

"Oh? Then, if not your backside, which body part is it which is stiffened so saliently against me, hm?"

The audience, who had been initially in a heightened state of anticipation, was now a little bored at Pluck's incessant interruptions of what had been billed as a most diverting drama.

"I shall count out the ten paces," announced Sri Gangakanta.

"How many?" queried Pluck.

"Ten, as agreed."

"Did you say ten?"

"Yes."

"All right. I wasn't consulted about any of this, but all right."

"We spent twenty minutes discussing it," Curtis objected.

"That's a lie, and a damned one, but I have more important things to worry about just now, so I'll let it pass," Pluck muttered in supreme magnanimity.

"One!"

"What?"

"Wait, stop!" sighed Sri Gangakanta. "I was counting the paces."

"Then whyever did you not start with 'one', my good man?"

"That's what he did!" Mifkin snarled, over his shoulder.

"Well, that's certainly not what I heard," Pluck spluttered.

"What did you hear?" asked Curtis.

"Pardon?"

"What did you hear?" Curtis asked, a little louder.

"I heard him say 'won'," said Pluck.

"Yes, that's indeed what I said," Sri Gangakanta confirmed.

"Not 'one'," Pluck clarified, "'won'—as in, 'Pluck "won", not lost, the duel. Mifkin lost. He was injured, frightfully.'"

"Can we just get on with it, please?!" demanded Mifkin.

Pluck shrugged. The men resumed their positions, and the counting recommenced.

"One!"

Pluck and Mifkin stepped one pace apart.

"Two!"

"Hang on!"

"Ugh!"

"Did you mean, 'two', as in, 'number two, between one and three', or 'to', as in, 'to the pleasure garden shall we wend', or 'too', as in, 'I dare say she's had a little too much to imbibe, what ho!', or 'too', as in, 'me too', or 'tu', as in, French for 'you'?"

"The first one," Sri Gangakanta clarified.

"Which was the first one again?"

"Number two!" Mifkin shouted. "Damn you! It's all numbers, if it's counting! Isn't that obvious?!"

They squabbled a bit more, then were persuaded to resume their positions, and the counting began again:

"One, as in, 'number one'!"

The antagonists took a step.

"Two, as in, 'number two'!"

Another step.

"Three, as in... 'three'!"

Another.

“Four, not as in, ‘for all time’, or as in, ‘the fore of the vessel’, but as in, ‘number four’!”

Pluck, nodding his head approvingly at the exactitude, advanced another step.

“Five! . . .Six, as in, ‘number six’, not as in, ‘the hunter sics his hound on the fox’, nor as in, ‘sex’! . . .Seven! . . .Eight, as in, ‘number eight’, not as in, ‘Patrick ate all of the tarts’!”

Pluck, chuckling at the image of some poor slob named Patrick wolfing down a tableful of tarts, stepped forward.

“Nine, not as in the German for the negative, but as in, ‘number nine’! . . .Ten!”

At “ten”, Pluck swung around, and demanded: “Wait, wait, have you elided the final ‘t’ in ‘tent’?”—but at that same instant, Mifkin, who had, obviously, also spun around, fired. Pluck collapsed to the floor. The crowd, although a fired shot and a casualty should hardly have been a surprise, given the nature of the entertainment, gasped and shouted.

“Is he dead?” “Is he dead?” “Is he finally dead?”, and other such remarks were called out. On stage, Enid was already on top of him, pushing a napkin against the hole in his arm and stroking his cheek, onto which her own tears splattered.

“Is this Heaven?” Pluck, staring up into the darkness of the ceiling, wondered. “It’s absolutely pathetic! If people really knew that this was where they were going to end up if they’re good, they’d stop trying altogether, and there’d be murder and mayhem in the streets!”

## Chapter Fifty-Seven

In Enid's room, Pluck sat in a chair whilst she tended to his wound. His left shirt sleeve had been ripped open up the shoulder, and she did her best to bathe the gash in cold water.

"We'll have to wait until the snow abates," she thought aloud, "and a doctor can be brought in, for that bullet to come out. You stupid boys, you. You and Mifkin and all the rest of you. Do you see what's happened? Do you see what might have been?"

Pluck wasn't in the mood to be lectured by a schoolmistress. His head back over the top of the chair, he stared at the small paintings that adorned the walls. One was blocky and gauzy and appeared to represent two maidens and a gentleman on a boating excursion. The ladies had bonnets, one had a parasol, and the man had a straw hat. But they were so far away from the painter, or at least from the viewer, that their faces could be seen as nothing more than peach ovals, which might have been thumbs, or nothing at all.

He had never been on a boat trip. Not for pleasure, anyway; he'd had to take vessels to conduct investigations in far-flung territories around the world, but he'd never witnessed a scene like that one, outside the occasional hotel room decoration.

"Ow!"

"Did that hurt?"

"Excellent deductive reasoning, Miss Trojczakowski."

"You don't have to call me by my surname. There's nobody here but us, you know."

She said some more, but he wasn't listening. He was considering that his arm was hurt, but it would heal, and the snow would go, and he would go on with his life, and career, and that would be that. Or would she insist on going with him? Good God! Every road led to a different hell.

"I don't know what I would have done. If you'd died, I mean..."

He half-heard that. Death...it was not an unbroached topic in his line of work. As an inspector, he'd come face-to-face with Monsieur Mort many times, but rarely had the death in question been his own.

"Just leave it. Leave it!" He stood up, yanked the rag from her hands and tried to tie it round his arm himself.

"I should wash it."

"Never mind. If I died of infection it would be just as well."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just answer me one thing, Miss Trojczakowski, if you're able—because I cannot."

"Yes?" She looked at him with a dawning sense of dread behind her eyes.

"Why did the murderer, whoever he might be, kill Blip?"

"Snedes."

"Whomever. Why him? Why not any of us—say, me?"

"I'm glad that he didn't."

"But don't you see? It means that it's all random! It might have been me, or the next man, or a dog, or you!"

"Well, presumably, the killer chose Snedes for some particular reason."



“Yes, but if it hadn’t been that killer choosing Snid for that reason, it would have been another killing another for another!”

“You’re not making any sense. Anything you’re ascribing to chance could just as easily be ascribed to Providence.”

“Yes, yes, that’s what I used to think, once, too. But you’d be surprised to discover, Miss Trojczakowski, just how much your view changes with a bullet in your arm.”

She came close. “I thank God it’s only in your arm.”

And with that, Pluck experienced the altogether curious sensation of not caring whether the bullet was in his arm, his chest, his eye or his pinky toe.

“Perhaps it doesn’t matter,” he muttered feebly.

“What do you mean?” Everything stood still for Enid; she could hear each of them breathe, but nothing more.

He gave up trying to tie the rag round his bad arm with his good one; without saying a word, she did it for him.

“Nobody likes me,” he finally said, softly.

“That’s not true!”

“Only you, and that’s only because of some strange inflammation in the brain mankind dubs ‘love’. No, they all hate me. They hate me for doing my job, they hate me out of envy, and they hate me because they know I can see straight through them.”

“I do think...sometimes...people might get frustrated when you mishear them, or misinterpret what they say, or mean...or jump to conclusions which might not be altogether justified by the facts.”

“I can hardly help that!”

“Well, have you considered trying to concentrate a little harder?”

“Concentrate on what?”

“On what others are saying, on what you’re saying...maybe, before speaking, you could try to internally judge the veracity of what you’re about to say, and the probability of it being true versus being not quite so true.”

“I prefer to bring my conclusions up out of my bowels.” He slapped his belly hardily.

“I know, I know, you go about things differently to everybody else. And that’s one of the things I love about you.” She tried to put her arms around him, but Pluck shook her off, like a bull a cowboy.

“Please, Miss Trojczakowski!”

“Call me ‘Enid’!” Enid pleaded.

He tightened his bow tie with his right hand; it was hard to do so, with just the one hand, and when she moved, instinctively, to help, he ran across the room into a corner.

“If you must be told plainly, Miss Trojczakowski—you disgust me. You are too old, and fawning, and suffocating, and, and, and, and, and *slim*, for me. No, Miss Trojczakowski, I do not love you, and I never could.”

Enid, it need hardly be described, fell back against the opposite wall, as if she’d been struck; and in a sense, she had been, by the force and ferocity of her beloved’s words; hence the simile.

“Now that I’ve seen Death, close-up, for what it is,” he went on, mercilessly, “I realise how he stalks us all, crouching behind each bureau, slinking through every shadow, and no matter what we eat, how much exercise we take, or how much cotton wool we wrap ourselves in, he might jump out at any moment and render it all—

pointless. And so, I intend to start living my life, at once, while I've still got it. Goodbye, Miss Trojczakowski. I wish you every happiness—so long as it's with someone else.”

She'd sunk to her knees, overcome with wretchedness, weeping over the loss of her love and the debilitating humiliation of knowing how idiotic was the whole scene.

She grasped at a straw: “But what about the investigation?”

Pluck shrugged—a shrug of cosmically vast insouciance. “Guilty, or innocent—let them all go hang. It's all one to me, from now on.”

And out he walked.

## Chapter Fifty-Eight

He strode down the corridor, up the stairs, around the bend, got confused, asked a porter for directions, and arrived at Frau Hühnerbeinstein's door. He knocked, as a method of communicating to the occupant of said room that a visitor wished to be admitted. (It was a tried and true method, for, I don't know, probably millennia. And Pluck, a card-carrying member of the human race for as long as he could remember, had learnt this method from an early age; not having been taught it explicitly, but merely through his keen observation of the actions of others. And then, when he'd grown old enough to attempt it himself, one evening, at the age of seven, in a village in Tuscany, where he'd been holidaying with his parents, he formed a purposeful fist, readied his knuckles, and rapped on the door of a farmhouse where he knew a girl his age, to whom he'd taken something of a schoolboy fancy, resided. In this instance, the girl's mother opened the door, questioned the future detective on his intentions, and called her husband, who informed the child in no uncertain terms, as they say, that his daughter had better things to do than play with a halfwit like him—Pluck—and when Pluck insisted on seeing her, even going so far as to try to push his way past the fellow, the burly farmer took up Pluck in his arms, threw him against the ground, boxed his ears, and in sundry other ways thrashed the lad. Pluck was disgraced; soon, the whole village heard of it. Young Pluck vowed to return to that village, one day, when he was older and strong, and exact revenge against him whom he had hoped to have for a father-in-law, but his life sailed in a myriad other directions, and he had yet to make good on his promise. Nevertheless, he had knocked, and the door had opened, and so one lesson had been learnt: If you want somebody inside a place to know you are outside, it's simple: knock on the door.)

So, keeping that backstory in mind, you'll understand why and how Pluck now knocked on Frau Hühnerbeinstein's door: for the simple purpose of wishing to let her know he was there.

(Frau Hühnerbeinstein, too, understood this social contract. When *she* had been seven, Gilda—for that had been, and remained, her Christian name—had witnessed a happy family meal round the table be interrupted by a frightful, commanding knock on their front door. Her father, a large, rosy-cheeked, good-natured man, put down his napkin, looked his wife in the eye, kissed his daughter's forehead, and went to open it. From her corner of the table, through the small width of the opened door, Gilda could see only some boots and brightly polished buttons without, and the occasional glint of the last ray of the day's sun off a rifle. Ever since that day, when she had trouble falling asleep, Gilda would, eyes closed, feel still that last scratchy kiss of her father's bristly lips upon her forehead.)

She did so, now, where our narrative resumes, until a knock resounded through her hotel room door.

"Who is it?"—not the most original line, perhaps, but faultlessly suited to the purpose.

"It is I, Inspector Pluck."

"Oh, good God."

"Pardon?"

“I was just falling asleep, Inspector. Whatever it may be, could it not wait till morning?”

“Pardon? Forgive me, Frau Hühnerbeinstein, but it’s awfully difficult to make out what you’re trying to say with this obstacle of vertically installed wooden planks between us.”

Muttering curses, she arose from bed, put on her bathrobe and went to the door. She opened it a crack. “What is it, for Heaven’s sake?”

“You look positively ravishing.”

She emitted an ejaculation of disgust, up her throat, from somewhere deep and essential inside her. “Is there something to do with the investigation, Inspector?”

“Pardon?”

“Why have you come?”

“Where?”

“Here! To my door! Do you have a reason for disturbing my sleep, or not?”

Pluck, bashful now, shrugged. “Not really. No.”

She closed the door and went back to bed.

A little while later, another knock. She’d been just in the middle of a dream in which she was playing Turandot to an ecstatic reaction from the stalls of La Scala. “Go away!” she screamed, fortissimo.

“Pardon, madame, but I have instructions for you.” It was not Pluck’s voice, and was thus a little less irritating. She got up, put on her bathrobe and opened the door. It was Poor Larry, the bellboy.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Inspector Pluck wishes to see you on important case-related business, madame.”

“I’m sure that he does. What’s that there?”

Larry handed over the note. It was a series of instructions, insisting she should shower, and stipulating in revolting, intimate and offensive detail how she should sanitise and perfume herself.

“He’s a boor, and a madman. I will not go.”

“As you wish, madame.” Larry turned to go.

“Wait a moment.” She had a second thought. Perhaps this madness could all end tonight. “I’ll be up at his room shortly. What room is it?”

Larry told her; I’m not going to tell you. When he’d departed, Frau Hühnerbeinstein, ignoring Pluck’s instructions, dressed in full, regal evening dress, complete with sinuous gloves up to her armpits. She fortified herself with a drink; then, feeling the need for additional fortification, another; then, because those two drinks in quick succession on an empty stomach had made her legs a little jiggly, she realised that she was now in real need of fortification, so downed three more. She now found herself in a quandary: the more she drank, the more she needed to drink her way out of it; as if the alcohol were a well, and her increased imbibition filled the cavity and caused her to ascend with elegant buoyancy to the surface, the sunshine and, well, life—life!—once more.

While she was incapacitated with confusion, the problem was solved for her when both her bottles were dry. She raised herself up off the floor where she’d been sitting, exited her room and, after some missteps, found her way to Pluck’s chambers. Remembering the communicative code we’ve already discussed in some detail, she knocked. Pluck, alerted by this sign to the presence of another without, opened the door.

A beautiful smile passed over his face, banishing the clouds—metaphorical clouds, you understand—that had coalesced there. With a slight movement of his hand, he invited her inside; they both understood this invitation without a word needing to be uttered; that, Reader, is how deeply they had each drunk from the basin of inter-human semiotic discourse.

The investigator (Pluck) closed the door, and locked it. He lit a candle, switched off the lamp, and lay down on his side on a settee.

“I believe you have some business about the case you wished to discuss, Inspector?” Those were the words—it was Frau Hühnerbeinstein who said them.

“I’m sorry?” asked Pluck, erotically removing his cufflinks from his cuffs.

“I was told you have some business about your murder investigation to discuss with me,” she repeated.

“Is that a question?” Pluck asked, unfastening his sleeves and thereby revealing some few strands of arm hair, rife with virility. “I did not hear a question mark at the end of it.”

“What business about the murder investigation did you wish to discuss with me?”

“Was *that* a question?” asked Pluck, unbuttoning the buttons from his neck downwards, eyeing Frau Hühnerbeinstein a little more intently with each button thus undone. “I ask because I believe I detected a question mark at the end of it.”

“It was,” she confirmed.

“Very good. . . .What was it again?”

“What do you want to say to me about the murder?”

Pluck had by now fully unbuttoned his shirt—his fingers, set in the pattern of their exercise, continued further downwards in blind search of buttons, but hit upon his belt buckle, so stopped there. “Pardon?”

Frau Hühnerbeinstein had to sigh. “You silly man! Can’t you hear me? What is the problem?!”

Through a series of undulating rolls of his shoulders, Pluck freed himself of his shirt, and was left in his vest; two scrawny arms were thus revealed. “But can you not see, madame, that I have almost rendered myself nude from the waist up?”

“That’s neither here nor there. What about the investigation?”

“The investigation is complete. I merely wanted to engage in sexual relations with you—that is all.” And on that beat, he twisted his vest up over his head, but, somehow, got his raised arms tangled up in the neckhole, and, the vest swaddling his head like an upside-down ghost, his tiny pink nipples blinking in innocent bafflement out of his emaciated frame, the blind inspector jumped up and started stumbling about the place, knocking into his bureau and tripping over a stool.

“Frau Hühnerbeinstein! Frau Hühnerbeinstein! Where are you?”

“You idiot!” she replied.

“I hear you! I hear your voice!” he called, and, in a feeble attempt at echolocation, ran straight past her into a wall and fell down, out cold.

## Chapter Fifty-Nine

When Pluck awoke, he found his shirt in shreds all about him, a pair of scissors nearby. He realised his nudity, and hastily covered his nipples with his forearms. Sitting up, he saw Frau Hühnerbeinstein dozing on the settee. He couldn't remember what had happened. From a pessimistic streak he'd acquired through years of investigation of the darkest depths of human depravity, he feared the worst.

"Frau Hühnerbeinstein! Wake up!" He shook her, by the thigh, with some alarm.

"What is it?" Her eyes popped open. She looked around her.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked.

"What?!" She tried to gather her bearings, but, if she'd had any to begin with, they were surely scattered over the floor, under furniture, like marbles.

"Because if so, we should wed immediately. I'll want to call him 'Curtis', of course, after me; or, depending on your point of view, after that rascally porter about whom I'd rather not just now speak. I shall raise him to be a detective. Pluck Junior, I mean—not the porter. The porter can go to Hell, quite frankly, and the sooner, the better—so say I. Now, I know what you're thinking, Gilda, but don't worry: if, someday, we are additionally blessed with a little girl, you are perfectly entitled to call her 'Gilda' and train her for a career on the stage. I couldn't care less about that end of things, the female end, you understand; and while Curtis Junior and I are out saving the world from evildoers, you and Gilda are free to tread the boards and choke on the sawdust of the finest venues on the operatic circuit—so long as you two can support yourselves financially in your artistic adventures, I should have thought it would go without saying."

"What are you talking about?" she finally asked.

"Didn't we fuck last night?" he asked.

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps I misspoke. Didn't we indulge in tender, mutually respectful lovemaking last night?"

"We didn't do that either."

"Oh. . . Could we do it now?"

"No."

"To which one?"

"To both."

"Oh." His feelings were hurt; he began to cry.

"Don't be a child," she scoffed.

"What do you mean?" he sobbed.

"My head hurts."

"My *heart* hurts!" he wailed. "Please! Will you at least suck my penis?"

"You're disgusting." She got up and went to the door.

"*Murderess!*" he screamed. He stood up, readjusted his arms so he could cover both his nipples with his left, wounded one and extend a finger from the hand of his right, robust one to point straight at her nose. "*You murdered Larry!*"

There were noises from outside the door.

"Shut up!" she hissed.

"I will not!" he screamed. He leapt up and opened the door: Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, Mister Drig, Signora Bergamaschi, Rosella, Monsieur Bartoff, Aloysius, and several others were gathered outside. "Ladies and gentlemen, enter! But promise not to ogle my exposed nipples."

The crowd came in. Frau Hühnerbeinstein stood with a dignified bearing, accustomed as she was to the leers of an audience.

"I wish to formally accuse Frau Hühnerbeinstein of the murder of all the victims I enumerated before. The rest of you are clearly innocent, while this woman is clearly guilty."

"What is the proof?" asked Signora Bergamaschi.

"Pardon?"

"What is the evidence?" Missus Drig asked.

"Excellent question," Pluck admitted. "A very excellent question indeed."

There was silence for some time.

"Are you going to answer the excellent question?" It was Enid—she'd come in too.

Pluck glared at her. "And which 'excellent' question would that be, exactly—I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

"My name is Enid Trojczakowski, and the question in question is 'what is the proof of Frau Hühnerbeinstein's guilt'."

"That didn't sound like a question—I didn't hear any question mark."

"What is the proof of Frau Hühnerbeinstein's guilt?" Enid exaggeratedly raised the pitch of the last word so as to allow no ambiguity over which class of sentence it was.

Pluck nodded. "I acknowledge the interrogative nature of that sentence," he admitted.

"Very good," said Enid. "Then please answer it."

"Answer what?"

"The question, you cretin," added Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

"Shut up, you pig, or I'll accuse you too," Pluck muttered to him out of the side of his mouth.

"What proof do you have of Frau Hühnerbeinstein's guilt?" Enid repeated.

"You've already asked me that. I fail to see why you keep on repeating the same question, over and over and over and over—I'm sorry, I've gone and forgotten your name again."

"My name is not the issue here. The issue is whether you are a real inspector, who goes about his business by accumulating evidence before making accusations of murder, or whether you are an imposter, who has made a farce of this investigation and gone about ruining the lives of nearly every person in this hotel."

"I didn't hear a question there," Pluck sniffed, scrutinising a crack in the ceiling.

Enid enunciated each word meticulously: "*What proof do you have that Frau Hühnerbeinstein is a murderess?*"

Pluck looked at his accusers, defiant to the last. "And by 'Frau Hühnerbeinstein', I suppose you mean this lady here?" He pointed at Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

"I do not. I refer to the lady whose name that is."

"So by 'Frau Hühnerbeinstein', you mean, in reality, Frau Hühnerbeinstein."

"I do."

"Hm. Very good."

“And the answer?”

“Pardon?”

“What is the answer to my question?”

“Which question was that?”

The audience groaned, and the rumblings of a new revolt could be felt.

“*What proof do you have that Frau Hühnerbeinstein is a murderess?*”

“This Frau Hühnerbeinstein? This one, here?”

“That’s right.”

“I didn’t hear a question there.”

“That’s because I didn’t put one; I merely confirmed that you were correct concerning the identity of the person I nominated in the question I *did* put.”

“Which was?”

“*What proof do you have that Frau Hühnerbeinstein is a murderess?*”

“But you’ve already asked that!” Pluck exclaimed, in exasperation. “How many times must you bore us with the same damn question?!”

“Tell me what proof you have against me, right now, or I shall call you a ‘villain’ and make you pay for all the wrongs you have inflicted on us over this holiday.” The words—and strong words they were, too—came courtesy of the oft-discussed Frau Hühnerbeinstein.

Pluck whirled around. “Are you speaking to me, madame?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Because, I thought, perhaps you might have been speaking to Miss Trojczakowski.”

“No.”

“I can’t quite remember her name, but I think it was something like that.”

“No. I was speaking to you.”

“Yes, of course.” He chuckled, a little. “You must forgive me, madame; but sometimes I have a little difficulty in remembering people’s names. Faces—no problem. Dates, events—I am an expert, I’m pleased to say, with no false modesty. But names...”

“Cease the inane details and tell me the grounds for your accusation this instant, or you shall pay,” Frau Hühnerbeinstein said slowly and softly.

Pluck turned to Enid. “You heard her, Miss Trojczakowski: offer your proof, or keep quiet.”

“I was speaking to you, Inspector Pluck,” Frau Hühnerbeinstein continued calmly. “I was looking at you, and I was speaking to you.”

“Yes, but, you must admit, Frau Hühnerbeinstein, that people often do speak to people at whom they are not at that moment looking. If I were to fill my pipe, for instance, while speaking to you—eyeing the essential details of tamping the tobacco, or what have you, so that it should be properly done, and not spill onto the floor and make yet another mess for the attention of Mademoiselle Godefroi; or, in prayer, when one begs help of, let’s say, Christ, without his being physically present in the room, and eye-to-eye discourse being, therefore, something of a difficulty—”

“Inspector Pluck!” Frau Hühnerbeinstein interrupted him. “What proof have you against me?”

Pluck swept the floor with the sole of his shoe, and watched himself do it; as if the tobacco spillage he’d imagined in his example had magically materialised, right there, in



that room, in the presence of all those witnesses. "...I hardly think you need interrupt me so imperiously, madame. I had several more examples I'd wished to submit."

Frau Hühnerbeinstein walked to him; he backed away, emitting a girlish shriek, but she grabbed him under his chin and forced him to look her in the eye; her thumb and forefinger crushing his mouth into a pucker, he for an instant thought she meant to kiss him, and stuck out his tongue in anticipation, but was disappointed to discover that she merely wished him to acknowledge without excuse that she was addressing him. "*What proof have you against me?*"

"All right!" He knocked her arm away, stumbled back a few steps, into Monsieur Lapin-Défunct, and spat on the rug. "All right! You want to know the proof? I'll tell you, and before these good people! The proof is that you insultingly refused to take my penis into your mouth, not out of any aesthetic reproof, of which there clearly could be none, but out of fear that the erotic arousal which would necessarily ensue would disarm you of your scruples and lead to your confession—of murder."

She, and the rest of his auditors, stood aghast at what was, even for him, a new low.

"Now," he continued, feeling that he'd reclaimed control of the scene and won the audience to his side, "if you wish to prove, once and for all, that you are innocent of the charge, you will agree, before these witnesses, to become my wife."

All eyes turned to Frau Hühnerbeinstein. Her reaction to his proposal was most anticipated.

She took a deep breath; her bosom rose, like two massive goitres which had been sprinkled with fairy dust; and, turning to her side, throwing him an enigmatical glance, she began to slowly unwrap her long left glove down her arm.

"Yes-s-s-s-s-s!" he hissed. As more and more of her arm became exposed, he fumbled in his trousers for his penis, the idea suddenly occurring to him that the intensity of the scene would be heightened if he were able to manipulate himself for bodily pleasure. The response of the onlookers, as can be readily imagined, ranged variously across the spectrum of disgust.

The glove off, Pluck naturally expected her to progress to her other glove, then her gown, then her underthings, then his, culminating in a public display of love. Instead, she took the divested glove in her other hand and used it to slap him across the face. "I demand satisfaction!" she roared in glorious contralto. "Tomorrow, at dawn."

## Chapter Sixty

Pluck dressed in front of his mirror. He brushed his coat, then combed his hair. His left arm was numb from the bullet it still enwombed, and he had difficulty getting on his coat. He could really use a helpmeet, he reflected. Someone of ample bulk, absent sexual scruples or standards, possessing very low expectations as regards her consort's penis size, and, most of all, boasting a kind, loving, selfless, self-abasing heart.

He stared at his own image in the glass. He looked, he determined, as if assessing a suspect in the interviewee's chair instead of himself, an exhausted mess. A rest—a long rest was what he needed. Perhaps when he returned to work, when this holiday was through, he might finally unearth for himself a small moment of peace, somewhere, somehow.

And if this should be his last day on Earth?, he wondered. What kind of an end is this? All those things he dreamt, when he was young...

He took out his photo album for what might be the last time. He knew them all, intimately; every grain of every image, every frond of every plant, every crease in every belly fold, every suety sag of every buttock, every ironical tint in a smile. What if he should never find that beach? Never enjoy the pleasures of those ladies' flesh?

He must not satisfy himself bodily, this morning. He must conserve his virility for the defence of his life, so that he might seek those pleasures another day. Not merely between the sperm-splotched pages of his album, but in reality—reality—whatever, he mused, that might discover itself to be.

Bartoff knocked and came in.

"You will smash her!" Bartoff insisted. "I have every confidence you will vindicate not only your own honour, but that of our sex!"

"What sex? You and I have never had sex."

"I mean man!"

"Which man?"

"Our gender, Inspector!"

"Ah! Yes. What about it?"

"That you shall defend the dignity of man!"

"Yes! The dignity of man!"

"The dignity of man!"

"Dignity of man!"

They drank to the dignity of man.

Bartoff accompanied Pluck on his long walk down the corridor. As they entered the lobby, Missus Drig, with a relieved smile of having done her duty, rushed up to them.

"Inspector! I have completed me list."

He took it and glanced it over: there it was—a list of all the places she could think of where she hadn't been on the night of the murder, grouped by continent, country, county, town, down to individual addresses she could recall. He nodded with appreciation.

"A formidable, and exacting, accomplishment, Missus Drig. I can clear you from suspicion with the clearest of consciences. Thank you."

She curtsied, and they stepped forward, only to now be accosted by Missus Drig's daughter Betsy.

“Inspector! Oh, Inspector!”

Pluck stopped. “What is it, child?”

“I’ve made *my* list, of all the places my brother Bo wasn’t on the third of October, three years ago, aside from the Mind of God! I’ve got it here!”

He took it, and looked it over. It was similar to her mother’s list, but haphazard, with a plethora of misspellings and geographical anomalies, but he forgave her everything.

He squatted down to her level. “You are a wonderful child, do you know that?”

“No, I...”

A tear came to his eye. “Thank you. Now please, go to your room and find some doll to play with. What is to come is not for your young eyes.” He embraced her. “I wish you a long and happy life, free from the sordid concerns of the world through which I’ve had the regrettable misfortune to move in mine.” And he rose once more, to go off with Bartoff, for there was nothing more to be said.

The hotel staff, in consultation with Frau Hühnerbeinstein, had managed to burrow a tunnel outside, through the snow, and up to the top of a solidly packed drift. Through this tunnel, now, Pluck and Bartoff crawled, arriving on top of the snow, on a vast sea of white, under a colourless sky, level with the roof of the hotel.

The air was biting but invigorating. The guests and staff were arranged to observe the duel. Out along the field of snow, besides the roof, only treetops poking through, like chopped broccoli tops, broke the horizontality. The audience was a sober, silent lot, in their overcoats. They looked on Pluck as on a villain in a pantomime, with this the premiere performance, following the earlier dress rehearsal.

“I’d like to protest,” began Pluck, before realising that his voice could not carry in that immense open space; it had disintegrated like sprinkled pollen. “I’d like to protest,” he shouted, although it only came across to his listeners like a whiny peep, “at the idea of fighting a woman in a duel! It is not honourable, it is not civilised, and it is not dignified!”

Sri Gangakanta, again acting in the capacity of referee, shook his head. “Those chivalric notions hold no purchase here. We are outside civilisation, outside law; the definitions of honour over which you and your opponent will battle are definitions exclusive to yourselves. We are only here to watch, and make sure you behave in accordance with universally agreed protocols of fairness—if, indeed, such a thing could be said to exist.”

At that moment, Frau Hühnerbeinstein, dressed in Wagnerian Viking gear, appeared from out of the tunnel, followed by her second, Madame Lapin-Défunt. They approached Sri Gangakanta, Pluck and Bartoff, the group isolated by a large space from the spectators.

“Now is the time to negotiate a peaceful resolution to this argument,” began Sri Gangakanta.

“No,” said Gilda, stonily, staring at Pluck without emotion. “Give me the sword.”

Sri Gangakanta opened a long case. Frau Hühnerbeinstein took one blade. Pluck took the other; he tried a few practice swings, and accidentally cut into his left arm. He screamed, but no one was moved to assist. He looked into the audience for some sliver of sympathy, but found none. This time, Enid was not on hand to cheer him, beg him to refrain or remind him just how much life is to be relished; she was, instead, at that

moment crying into her counterpane, cursing Cupid for his really rather inconvenient myopia.

Pluck turned to face his antagonist. Frau Hühnerbeinstein stared at him, and he at her, while Sri Gangakanta recited some rules to which neither of them was listening. In Gilda's eyes, Pluck saw the cumulative resentment stockpiled by her sex since Eve; while she, looking unrewardingly deep into the dead black cesspools of his eyes, saw nothing worth the noting.

The duel began. Frau Hühnerbeinstein slashed at him, tearing a gash through his coat and into his chest. He screamed. She stabbed his shoulder, then his stomach. He collapsed to the ground. She hacked at his back, the backs of his legs, and chopped off his left foot. His shrieking ceased when he blacked out.

## Chapter Sixty-One

He awoke in a dark room. A thin layering of light spilled in from under the door. He was lying on the floor, in a pool, or pools, of blood; presumably, he calculated, his own. He looked down at his bloody clothes, dim in the murk. He felt a mixture of intense pain over parts of his body with an overlathering of numbness. He looked down his leg, which extended out of the light. Something was amiss, there, he vaguely recalled. He shifted his legs about, until one foot was illumined. His left one, he saw, was gone. Well, he had never intended to become a professional dancer, anyway, he muttered in a huff, before proceeding to work out what he would do with the savings he would make from henceforth purchasing only one shoe at a time.

There was a scratching, at the door. Had she come to finish him off? Or was it Enid, come to beg forgiveness?

"Come in," he cracked from his unlubricated throat. No one entered; the scratching stopped, for a moment, then resumed.

Pluck dragged himself over to the door, reached up for the handle, hit his head on it, fell back down, then, after more struggling, managed to get onto his knees, grab the doorknob, turn it, and pull open the door.

A torrent of light broke over him and Sam the dog came pattering in. He barked and licked his master's friend's hand.

"Get away from me, you little shit!" he screamed, and moved to kick him, forgetting that the foot he'd had in mind to use was no longer present; as he collapsed once more to the floor, the stump of his shin passed by the dog, who yelped, as if in mockery. Pluck was going to take no more of that. He seized the mutt around his neck, and squeezed.

The door flew wide open and Bartoff appeared. "Sam!"

Pluck let the dog go and immediately shouted, "He tried to kill me! It's the murderer! *He* killed Blip Williams!"

Bartoff, entirely still, stared at Pluck: in his eyes came the transformation of one who has witnessed the death of his god.

What happened next proceeded in a blur: the corridor was filled with all the guests and staff, manhandling Pluck, shoving him along; soon he was tied to a chair on the stage in the hotel theatre, with Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, Mister Stoupes, Bartoff and others making fiery speeches to incensed spectators, none of which he could hear. His head was filled with a lullaby of some sort, which he could not recognise but felt like he'd heard long ago. Many fingers pointed at him, many faces wept and raged, much spit was spat. He surmised, with the talent that had made him such a redoubtable detective, that the general mood in the room was one of hostility towards himself. It did not seem to be just about the dog, but about various things, too numerous to count, too trivial to attend to; he preferred to listen to the music.

Suddenly, there was silence. Every face was turned toward his. Something had been said, which he had not quite caught. It was said again:

"How do you plead?"

He was practically blinded by lights, which were disproportionate in relation to the number of lamps, and were coming from who knew where.

"How do you plead?"

He gulped the spit he did not have, and whispered: "... You are all guilty."

He was raised—he felt certain he'd grown wings, or was being carried by those who had—and a rope placed round his neck. The sinews in his throat felt like they were being twisted by a sailor into a knot, and the bones like they were being crushed in a giant, supernatural fist. His remaining foot flapped about in the air, freed from the floor. His arms, he just now realised, were tied behind his back.

A long stick appeared (uncircumcised). It was passed from person to person, each taking a nice whack at the dangling inspector:

Glen Stoupes, face with smug expression of American righteousness, whacked Pluck across the face;

Danny Drig, the eldest son, broke a rib;

Monsieur Lapin-Défunct clenched his teeth as he smacked Pluck, again and again, about his legs, chest and neck;

Rosella glared fiery-eyed, fingers between her legs, as she orgasmically thumped him in the face, smashing his nose, its blood spurting down upon her lusting tongue;

Genevra Bergamaschi waited till he spun on his rope, then repeatedly thrust the stick up the back of his trousers, cracking open his sphincter;

Charles Bartoff smacked him about the mouth with the stick until his jaw was smashed and his teeth fragmented about the floor;

Aloysius Delphi stabbed him in the stomach until he couldn't breathe;

The Scottish horsebreeder smacked him about the flanks;

A porter beat him about the ears, bursting a drum;

Herra Kivi Brotherus, with savagery, upon the neck;

A sweaty financier, with bourgeois aplomb, cracked open his knuckles;

Alan Sanns, exhaustedly, could barely lift the stick to reach his calves;

Modeste Cranat slapped him about the buttocks, screaming and laughing all the while;

Annette Godefroi stabbed him viciously in the groin, smashing apart first one, then the other, testicle;

Mifkin broke both his arms;

Herr Voot cracked the bones about his eye sockets;

Curtis Vacaresteanu broke both his knees;

Sri Gangakanta passed, handing the stick to Madame Tautphoeus, who rammed it into Pluck's mouth, breaking through his palate and the base of his skull;

Deirdre Laoghaire struck him savagely, all over, before finding a cleaver and sawing off his other foot;

At which point Coronel Feosalma hobbled in, irate at the scene, and grabbed the stick, which he swung at the assembled, trying to shoo them off, only to have it wrestled from his hands, and he was shoved aside, knocked to the floor.

Now came a final whacking, all about Pluck's body; his bloody, dislodged corneas lent his vision an impenetrable blurriness, and through the haze, Pluck swore it was Charles Snede who now attacked him; but as the fog cleared for a moment, he saw it was really Poor Larry who was bringing the stick crashing up at his head, over and over, with a merciless, clear-sighted savagery.

In the spaces between the covetous blackness which pulsed over and off of him, Pluck looked away from the braying faces and off to the side, in a corner of the stage,

where Enid stood, hugging herself, crying silently, though refusing to help. Enid; then blackness; Enid; then blackness, like the shadow of a cloud passing over a lily in a pond.

Then the rope snapped, Pluck fell to the floor, and the stick, and kicks, and fists, rained down upon him, refreshingly, as upon a fresh-faced bud just ready to peep up from the forest floor. The cloud drifted forward; the lily was lost; the bud opened; and the pain ceased.

Pluck was dead.

## **Book Two**



## Chapter One

Reader, we must dampen our tone. A man has died—a hero; a protagonist. Like a wasting disease, which gnaws away at one's unreconstructable flesh, leaving one a crumpled wreck, studded with a savaged landscape of unsightly, frankly revolting scars, utterly off-putting to any would-be romantic cohabitant—like that, we might say, has Pluck's death made its mark on every character who has had the pleasure to share this tale with him, and, perhaps, one may with the sincerest humility hope, on the reader.

His like will not come again—not so soon.

And yet, it was a modest turnout which stood, on the blinding lake of snow level with the hotel roof, like lone, immobile totems, shadows at an unnatural slant, at his makeshift funeral: the heads of Enid, the coronel and Betsy were bowed over the hole in the snow into which the inspector's mangled remains had been stuffed. Betsy's eyes had been shielded by Enid's soft palm, to save her from witnessing any signs of the erotic disgrace to which Pluck's dismembered body had been put, or of that to which such deeds bore tragic testament, namely, the decrepit ignobility of humankind.

Betsy mouthed a few words, then whispered, "He was a funny man. I liked him."

Enid put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "I liked him too."

The coronel's eyes were mucous; this had tended to happen, for the past fifteen or so years. Indignities of the body which would have appalled him as a young, virile soldier were now a matter of course with him, and, as he gazed upon the tufts of snow which covered the mortal remnants of his friend, he felt a sudden transcendent envy—he wished, oh how he wished, he could change places with Pluck! To melt away, into that soft, pure snow, and never be bothered by any man or woman or bureaucrat or pang of conscience again... Now, only now, did the tears finally come to the eyes of Coronel Eyague Feosalma.

For even now—even in death—had Pluck humbled him.

## Chapter Two

That night, Enid lay, as was her custom, in bed. She felt as though she were a stained glass window, having been ignored in stately, unregarded dust for centuries, only to have been lately shattered into uncomprehending shards by a stone thrown by some wretched, apostate boy. She searched the unlit ceiling of her room for Pluck's countenance, and sought to relive, in the antiseptic confines of her thoughts, all they had experienced together.

Bartoff, in his bed, swooned in admiration, whilst suffering in penance for his role in his friend's undoing. Pluck, he realised now, was a man who had made his own rules; who pursued his goals through methods of his own impromptu devising; to whom the concept of censoring one's speech, let alone thoughts, was alien. What would a life along those lines entail?, Bartoff asked himself. With what self-sprouting ankle-wings might a man traverse the chasm separating Pluck's outlook from his? Bartoff was half-minded, even now, even now, to rise up from his comfortable bed and attempt to take flight—only, considering how foolish he might appear, if not to a human witness, of which there was none, then at least to God, he refrained.

Sri Gangakanta, resting on *his* bed, breathing deeply, at one with the room, saw both Pluck's life and his passing as a pointless waste; further, this life was too short, and the undeniable presence of far greater mysteries of the universe too salient, to spend one's waking minutes contemplating that idiot of an inspector. And yet...yes, yes, *and yet...* might this gnarled weed dip down through its root into an underground lake of insight, which would have otherwise gone undiscovered?

Marcel Lapin-Défunt, lying beside his wife's cold, unresponsive form, neither thought about Pluck nor cared; his thoughts centred, rather, around the profound, near-erotic ecstasy he'd beheld on the face of Deirdre as she'd attacked Pluck so viciously. He turned on his side so that Petunia wouldn't notice his erection.

Petunia Lapin-Défunt didn't notice, or care about, her husband's erection. About Pluck, she felt sad, but she was used to sadness, shackled to the husband she'd been given. Sadness was life; the only alternatives, she pondered now, were the mental defective's ill-reasoned and empirically unsupportable euphoria, or death.

Mifkin lay in bed, aching for company, for a strong hand to seize hold of his penis and do what it was decreed should be done to it. As for Pluck: it was a sense of good riddance, and relief.

Voot, having moments before masturbated, found his mind wiped clear of all erotic thought, but, as he lay in his bed, eyeing disconsolately the lugubrious strings of semen, gleaming in the moonlight, which garlanded his chest hair, he shared, albeit unwittingly, Mifkin's sense of good riddance, and relief.

Poor Larry, lying contortedly on the little cot which had been provided him in a corner of a storage room, in lieu of a room of his own, was sad—despite his own participation in the tragedy—because, he felt, it was sad that any creature should die, even if the specific creature that had been Pluck had been so beastly to him. Why did we have to live in a world which was, minute to minute and hour to hour, shadowed by death, anyway?, he wondered. This he pondered; and, just at the moment he felt the last knot in the sutra was about to unravel, and the revelation be confessed, he fell asleep.

Aloysius smirked as he thought about Pluck, shrugged to himself—physically moved his shoulders up and down, in bed, as if to communicate his insouciance to the world—then sought to draw from the event a sort of moral: a good lesson, he thought, in what can happen if you reach too far beyond your abilities and your allocated station. Then, satisfied, he slept.

Curtis's mind was filled with a zoetrope of random images, none of which referenced Pluck. And yet, the idea suddenly seized him that it would be nice to change his name to "Thaddeus". He rolled over and frothed himself against his pillow, imagining it to be Enid's denuded buttocks.

Frau Hühnerbeinstein couldn't bring herself to think of Pluck's passing. He was, she was sure, the Devil, or some pathetic approximation thereof. Though it was warm in her room, she pulled the covers closer up to her chin.

Arthur Drig thought on Pluck, and the more he did so, the more he admired the man for following his own path; even if, in this case, the path led him to an early and degrading death. It just goes to show, Drig thought, that you never know where your path will lead. He slowly turned his head, audibly creasing his pillow, to look over at his wife, who lay on her back, eyes closed. He desired her; even after all these years, he desired her. What he would really crave, he admitted to himself, was to take possession of his wife in front of a respectable crowd; not excessively large, of course—an opera house-sized spectatorship would, necessarily, inhibit his ability to perform—but a modest number of thoughtful observers capable of appreciating the scene in an aesthetic sense, rather than with a chorus of catcalls, hoots and hollers more reminiscent of, say, a music hall.

Charlotte Drig, lying next to him, was not imagining a public exhibition of the discharge of her marital duties with her husband. Rather, she was regretting not having saved Inspector Pluck from the mob and running off with him; someplace, maybe, warm all year round.

Danny Drig, in a room with his siblings, pondered with pleasure the destruction of the man who'd insulted his daddy.

Charlie Drig dreamt of cricket.

Doobie Drig dreamt of destroying his despised schoolmaster.

Eric Drig dreamt of the end of the world, and shortly woke up whimpering.

Betsy couldn't sleep. She was missing Pluck's silliness, as a counterpoint to the tragic earnestness with which it had been replaced.

Bo dreamt he was an angel in a Heaven filled with sweets.

Vanessa Tautphoeus lay beside the nigh-tangible form of Guilt, who—metaphorically, now—winked knowingly out of his peeling, scarecrow-like head and cuddled her a little closer. Madame Tautphoeus, who had devoted her life to passing lightly through the world, posing no hindrance to any man's or woman's destiny, inflicting no pain on any creature fortunate enough to have been endowed with the breath of life, and remaining unentangled in any romantic adventures, had yielded blindly to a dam-burst of bloodlust when she had helped to kill Pluck. As despicable an entity as he had been, she had let herself degenerate far lower. All her sensitivities, now, were numbed. In the blackness at the back of her wardrobe; in the doorway to her sitting room; in the mirror; on the inside of her eyelids; everywhere, she saw his mangled, half-dead form crying out to her for help. The thought of leaving her room, now, or of any

communication with another instance of humanity, made her ill. Whilst she was thinking these things, Guilt inched closer and sought to stick his tongue in her mouth; disgusted, she turned on her side. Disappointed, Guilt harrumphed, turned on *his* side, and fell asleep. He dreamt of polar bears racing majestically across the arctic—a scene which had nothing obvious to do with the concept of guilt, but which pleased him nevertheless.

In the second between wakefulness and the welcome nullity of sleep, Deirdre thought on Pluck: she envied his obliteration, but couldn't have cared less for the man. Then she slept, and dreamt of Hell.

Glen Stoupes, tossing about in his sheets, felt bad for Pluck. Surely the idiot deserved a punishment somewhere lower down the spectrum from torture and execution? They might have just chopped off his penis and been done with it; that way, they could have enjoyed the pain and disgrace which would have been visible on his face for the rest of the holiday. At the same time, the phrase which presented itself to his mind went something along the lines of, *There but for the grace of God went Glen*.

Genevra Bergamaschi, eyes closed, pictured the mutilation of Pluck on the canvas of her mind. It was fascinating, from an artistic point of view. When she awoke the next morning, she resolved, she would begin work on a huge mural, across the ceiling of their bedroom, of a naked Pluck being tortured and sexually humiliated by his fellow guests. She would have to wheedle people to pose for her for that purpose, but she was confident of her success.

Next to her, her cheek on Genevra's bosom, Rosella didn't think about Pluck at all. She was remembering her girlhood, and pondering the long path which had led her here.

Alan Brigeiboit Sanns, hairless head sunk into his pillow, drifting off, decided that, in retrospect, he missed Pluck's clownish spirit. He aimed to keep a little of that irreverence alive in the world, if he could.

Marie-Adélaïde, Duchess of Loon, had known little of Pluck, but, reverting to a time-honed ideology under which she had been smothered, daily since girlhood, by books and priests, regretted the unnecessary passing of any person. Her attention was soon diverted by the erotic urge amassing in the region of her crotch; she wondered what her footman was up to, just now. She set her jaw against the unexpressed glare of contempt which would no doubt smoulder in his eye, and rang for him.

Sniggly, her footman, heard the bell, but buried his head beneath his pillow. What new humiliation had she in mind for him now? He as much as wished he'd volunteered as Pluck's valet, to be smuggled to safety back in Greece, where, the footman felt sure, he would enjoy indolent afternoons drowsing on the beach. While Pluck had still been alive, Sniggly had half-wished the inspector would have stumbled, of his own accord, on his mistress's dissolute ways and arrested her—though what Sniggly would have done then on the pecuniary front, he had no idea.

Kivi Brotherus fantasied about having even half the heap of scorn dumped upon him which had been dumped upon Pluck. His penis swelled, and his anus contracted, at the thought.

Modeste Cranat hadn't, at first, given Pluck's passing a passing thought, preoccupied by the ever-onrolling business of her bowels as she was, but now, splayed upon her soiled mattress, she came to regret the loss of a man she remembered as embodying infinite kindness, and who had acted as her champion.

Annette Godefroi, creaking on her miserable cot in her draughty mousehole of a room, reflected on Pluck as a particularly incompetent symbol of patriarchal society, and approved of his downfall. He was to be, she vowed, merely the first.

Philip La Paiva regretted Pluck's death, having thought him a friend for his perceived thrashing of his father. He'd been the sort of fellow Phil could have seen himself going about with, taking lunch, maybe visiting museums and attending the odd lecture, before concluding the evening at one of the finer brothels he was wont to frequent. Alas, it was evidently not to be.

His father, Eli La Paiva, had initially blessed Pluck, as it had been the inspector's clumsiness which resulted in La Paiva's present omniscience. But now, after these several days of terrifying understanding, he cursed him for it.

Coronel Eyague Feosalma shivered under his sheet in intense regret, and determined to rededicate his life to *el magnifico*'s splendid memory.

Enid, again, having trawled through the episodes of her shared hours with Pluck, still lay dazed on her bed, but with a newfound inspiration: when she reached in her reminiscences Pluck's final, wretched minutes, she opined to herself that with Pluck's death, it was as if a refreshing, merciful wind had finally blown away an unbudgeable cloud bank; as if the ceiling had collapsed in a church, and the true heavens above finally could be gazed upon; and she vowed, then and there, to live her life without a single thought spared for propriety, or for consequence, or for rationality—as had he.

## Chapter Three

Not because it made any sense; not because they thought it would make any difference to anything; but because they were people, and people believe in symbolic gestures, did Enid, Glen, Voot and the coronel, per the coronel's insistent suggestion, spend an hour in the late afternoon drinking a toast to the late inspector in the manager's office.

"This, then, is a celebration," the coronel muttered between sips, "of friendship."

"Curtis had wanted it," Enid remembered. To the looks of confusion, she added: "I mean Inspector Pluck." She smiled. "He always did like the name 'Curtis'."

"It was a more innocent time, in a way," mused Glen, intent on getting as drunk as he could, and to hell with the ramifications as regards his social standing; which was, he considered, non-existent to begin with. "I mean, we each of us stepped into this hotel for the first time with, I'd say, clean hands, more or less."

"There are different kinds of dirt," the coronel noted quietly. "Some of it is pale. Some, invisible."

"Yes, well, it's a shame what happened," Voot sniffed. "It really is. That is to say: all of it. A shame."

The small window shuddered from the wind outside. Voot poured the coronel another drink, which that aged Spanish gentleman duly drew past his lips, and let remain, a still pool in the basin of his mouth, sedate under the firmament of his palate, its flavour seeping into him in slow, steady pulses. "We all have it coming to us," he opined aloud. "And as such, we all play our roles as instruments of Fate."

"That's right," Voot was quick to agree. "If it hadn't been us who destroyed him, it would have been the lot he'd antagonise at the next hotel he visited."

"Don't we have a choice, then?" asked Stoupes. "If we kill a man or not?"

"How should I know?" mumbled the coronel, staring into the swaying remains of his drink, which collected reflections of the lamps behind him and to the side, reduplicating them into a revolving burgundy starfield. "I don't know if my excuses for lacking freewill are something I've contrived, or whether they've popped into my head, uninvited."

"If we don't choose to kill," added Voot, "neither do we choose to scratch our eyes out from guilt."

When they emerged from Voot's office—like Venus from the waves, only, instead of one beautiful goddess, there were four of them, all very mortal, and none of them especially beautiful or in any way transcendent, so that, despite this simile, there was little practical danger of their being confused for that Greek deity—they saw, in the warm light of evening, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, Mister Arthur Drig and some other guests, together with Mifkin, heatedly discussing the same subject (by which I mean, Pluck, not Voot et al's purported resemblance to Venus).

"Of course Pluck was the murderer," said Lapin-Défunt, with some authority. "Who else would have done it?"

"The murder was pointless, and idiotic," added Mifkin.

"Like Pluck!" cried Lapin-Défunt.

"Exactly," nodded Mifkin. "An idiotic crime requires an idiot for its perpetration."

“Do you think he was really capable of such an act?” asked Drig. “I mean, getting away with it—wouldn’t that be giving him a little too much credit?”

Lapin-Défunt shrugged. “Maybe he was, in reality, a genius, masked as a buffoon.”

“Or a buffoon playing a genius who convinced us all he was, really, a buffoon,” Mifkin submitted.

“In any event, we’ve now found peace,” sighed a Belgian.

“That’s right,” Lapin-Défunt agreed. “The circus is over, the clown having exited.”

Their comments trailed off in Enid’s ears whilst she ascended the staircase toward her room. She didn’t want to hear it. She would much rather have had, for example, a total stranger accost her on the stairway and scream in her face that she bore no resemblance whatsoever to Venus—as much as such a confrontation would shock and upset her, she would have preferred it to the question that had now infected her thoughts over the true nature of her departed beloved.

## Chapter Four

Prior to the drinks in Voot's office, I should mention, Mifkin had wandered past Gangakanta, who nodded his head while passing down the corridor. Mifkin, under his breath, cursed the fellow for his calm demeanour and, he suspected, asceticism. A man who appeared to have conquered his desires and thus suffered no guilt was, as far as Mifkin was concerned, untrustworthy, and therefore his enemy.

To a vision of Gangakanta's torture, Mifkin threw open the door to the office, only to find Voot sat behind his (Voot's/Mifkin's) desk. Mifkin stopped—for what else could he do? continue walking straight into the furniture? why, in such a contest of brute expression of material solidity, the furniture, all satinwood and walnut, would undoubtedly prevail, and Mifkin would be left hurt and humiliated! stupid idea, Reader, it pains me to tell you—appalled and embarrassed, for, during Voot's incarceration in his room, by order of Pluck, it had been Mifkin who had reigned in his stead. Now, in the aftermath of Pluck's annihilation, Voot had been reinstalled as manager of the hotel, and Mifkin was left...once again, a slave.

Voot looked up from whatever mindless paperwork he had before him and asked, with the appearance of kindness, his monocle ablaze with reflected lamplight, "Can I help you with something, Mifkin?"

Mifkin, having instantaneously relearned his place, at once bowed, and apologised for having failed to knock.

"Think nothing of it," smiled Voot, with all the appurtenances of civility, but, to Mifkin's ear, none of its spirit. "I hope you don't mind my having resumed my duties?"

"Of course not, Herr Manager," Mifkin mumbled. "I beg your pardon." And he withdrew, vowing revenge (inwardly, that is).

Voot nodded, and returned to his work, which was not what you or I would ordinarily call work, but was, in this case, a rough sketch he'd been making in a space at the bottom of a bill of his younger self sodomising a whore in Trieste—as best he could remember it, at any rate, with only a few formal modifications for aesthetics' sake, such as a slight reduction in the protuberance of his belly and the erasure of some of her more unsightly blemishes. However, to give credit where credit is due, we must admit that the region incorporating the explicit fusion of his penis with her anus was spot-on, and could be thought of as representative of the same loving act from the very first post-simian, instinctive fumbling of early man and woman, through to the incestuous sibling romancing of medieval royals, and up to the hauntingly disgraceful pornography of our present day. In this—and only this—did Voot touch eternity.

I will plummet into obsolescence soon enough, he thought, although not exactly in those terms. So if given the chance to forestall it, then, by God, I will. This hotel was his life, you see (your loyal narrator speaking again, now), and by retaining a hold on it with a sphincter-like rigidity, that forestalment might, he reasoned—no, he felt, with a cunning and unerring instinct—be achieved. In this manner, the hotel would remain in competent hands, order would be preserved and his life's purpose would subsist; as for the feigned respect from his underlings he chose to ignore, and the offensive condescension from guests he unflinchingly suffered, well, to Hell with it.



His mind set at rest, he nodded, pulled open the upper drawer of his desk, unbuttoned his trousers, withdrew his penis, laid the poor, spineless, unloved thing over the rampart, and prepared to shove closed the drawer with all his might. If he had been interrupted at this moment, I can tell you, and queried, reasonably, as to the purpose of this imminent procedure, he would have been lost to explain it in terms corresponding to traditional notions of sense. In fact—to drop a bit from the plane of the theoretical to that of the quotidian—Poor Larry, at this moment, as if by coincidence, knocked and peremptorily entered, saw, even from the distance of the door and from his low angle, what threatened to transpire, and proceeded to ask his superior, almost exactly as we'd predicted, albeit in his own idiomatic manner, bless him: "Sir—what are you doing?"

"Nothing." Voot's answer carried with it a (wholly intended) tone of finality. He stuffed his penis back into his trousers, closed the drawer, and, observing the unyielding curiosity on the boy's face, blatantly lied: "If you must know, I had just finished ejaculating into this drawer."

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, sir."

"Not at all."

"Will you need it to be cleaned, sir?"

"What—the drawer?"

"Or your penis, if you wish, sir."

"That won't be necessary."

"I could send for Modeste—"

"No, thank you, Larry. That will be all."

Larry, a naturally thoughtful young man (I might as well come right out and tell you, fearing that it might not have been adequately conveyed through the course of the narrative itself), pondered the situation for a moment—then for another—before finally asking of Voot, "Is there a tiny woman in the drawer, sir?"

"No, Larry."

It was with some relief that Larry exhaled an audible "Phew!", following it up with: "Are we infested with rats again, then?"

"Not at all."

"Then...a fairy?"

"No, Larry. No, I was indulging in what you might call 'onanism'."

"Sir?"

"Know ye your Bible, lad?"

"Only the New Testament, sir. I've always found the Old somewhat over my head."

"I see. Yes, I suppose it would be, wouldn't it, at that? Well—you might know the deed by its more secular name of 'masturbation'."

"Sir?"

"You haven't heard of that either?"

"Of what, sir?"

"Masturbation?"

Poor Larry searched his scanty lexicon and had to admit that he had not.

"'Frigging'?" asked Voot. "'Tossing off'? 'Fetching mettle'? 'Devil's delight'? 'Self-abuse'?"

Larry shook his head, once, twice, thrice, and, er, a fourth time. Then a fifth.

Voot nodded, leant back in his chair, and laced his fingers on his desk in preparation for a lesson. “These terms refer to the manipulation of one’s genitals by oneself for one’s own erotic pleasure,” he lectured.

“I’m afraid I still don’t follow, sir.”

Voot nodded. “I’ll put it into terms you can understand, my good man: ‘Pulling up and down on your penis till you ejaculate’.”

“...” Larry seemed to have nothing to say.

Voot nodded, once again. “I think we understand each other now, my good fellow, do we not?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. I...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“...I hadn’t known such a thing could be done.”

(The reader being implored to recall that Larry was no small child but, rather, in his late teens; consequently, the reader being reminded to consider the differences in sexual understanding from era to era.)

“Well...it can. I assure you.”

“I...I do not mean to offend you, sir.”

“I assure you you do not.”

“It’s just that...” Here Larry looked first to his shoes, then up, resolvedly, to Voot, the first inklings of moral superiority aglint in his eye. “I dare say I shall never attempt such a feat.”

Voot shrugged, coolly. “That’s your prerogative.”

“Yes. And, I dare say, I was a happier man, those few moments ago, when I still believed I persisted in a world in which the possibility remained of there being fairies hiding in desk drawers content to convey anonymous pleasure on the male member.”

“Well, there is that, too, you know.”

Larry had begun to turn around to the door, but, upon hearing this, stumbled. “There is?”

“Of course. Those fairies do exist—they’re called, um, *armarii succubi*, and they only perform for those pure enough never to touch their own genitalia.”

“Their own what?”

“Penises.”

“Even for making pee pee?”

“I think that’s allowed, actually.”

Larry shook his head. “I shall not do even that—just to be sure.”

“Then I think you’ll do just fine, my lad.”

“Thank you, monsieur.” Larry bowed and went out. Voot, for his part, had gone off the idea of severing his member, so decided to look out the window and daydream instead.

## Chapter Five

Enid wasn't sure if she approved or not of the halting return to normality which could be felt, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, as she prodded her egg in the lunchroom. It seemed to sort of relax—the egg—and wriggle, joyously buoyant in its hard-boiledness, luxuriating in its firm yet supple flesh, while the spoon teased and indented it. Enid's knees nudged closer together, when the chair across from her squeaked, a hand gripped its top, and Glen Stoupes appeared, asking, as if from another dimension: "May I?" Enid could not very well, with any politeness, refuse, and so nodded—a bodily gesture Glen interpreted, correctly, as an assent, and proceeded to do exactly that which they were now both expecting him to do: sit down.

Enid, her mind, as we have endeavoured to illustrate, elsewhere, was consequently lagging a little behind the rest of reality, and so, a moment after Glen had taken his seat, squeaked a little closer to the table, taken a napkin and spread it on his lap, she added: "Please sit." He looked at her, and laughed, and she laughed as well, although that was only to hide the fact that she had no idea what they were laughing about (even this fact that she was laughing to hide her ignorance was lost on her, you see).

Turning away in mild disgust from Glen's vulgar penetration of a grapefruit with his spoon, Enid scoped out the room, which was practically monochromatic amidst the glades and pools of sunlight splashed from the windows, casting some diners as blanched, ethereal mannequins, while others, faceless in the shadows, raised their forks to their mouths in seeming slow motion.

Gilda Hühnerbeinstein was laughing at a table with some burping Slav, whose name Enid had forgot, draping her arm over his shoulder and pawing at her own wig in shameless flirtation. This—this was the woman Pluck had desired? She boasted a figure, which rolled through her dress and over the chair like choppy waves, Enid could never hope to match, she knew, and she cursed Pluck for his superficial approach to the other sex, then cursed herself for loving such a man.

The duchess was sitting with her footman, the latter coldly cutting up her fish for her, with proper, dainty little slices of the knife, whilst she glowered at the side of his head, intoxicated with some tension the origins of which Enid knew not, and didn't particularly care about, but it was interesting to watch him purposely avoid his mistress's glance, lifting and depositing the plate before her with the utmost propriety in a vacuum of emotional regard.

Enid and Glen lunching together like this, meanwhile, was as if another lap on a circuit they had begun only—how long had it been? A week? Two? It seemed so long ago, and as if in another world, or as hazily recalled from an impossibly unrealistic tale desultorily scanned on the downstream drift into sleep.

"They must have stocked all this fruit in the freezer, in case of such an eventuality as being snowed in like this," Glen observed, bathetically wrenching Enid back to the plane of the prosaic, juice dripping revoltingly over his lower lip, before he slurped it back up, "although from the pleasing taste, you certainly wouldn't know it."

Enid was for some reason reminded of their drunken kiss, the night of the masquerade, and felt sick.

"Are you all right?" Glen noticed. "You don't look well."

"I've never looked well."

Glen smiled. "That's hardly what I meant. In fact, since you brought it up, I think you're looking perfectly divine—even if I fear there's a small chance you might at any instant expel your half-digested egg all over my shirt."

"Glen—may I ask you something?" She realised she'd seized his hand.

"Of course..."

"Why do we—why do we love those whom we love?"

He looked at her earnestly for just a moment before he laughed. "Well, I imagine I could make quite a pretty penny if I had answers to questions like those! But I don't suppose you actually thought I had the answer, did you?"

She let go his hand. "No."

"I suppose, rather, it was your way of trying to convey, consciously or not, that you're still in love with...our late friend. Am I wrong?"

She held her head in her hands and looked down at what remained of her egg. "No," she whispered.

"...And that, adjunctively, you could never love, say, for example, me."

"I don't know, I don't..." She couldn't bring herself to look at him, now. "Whatever could you see in me, Glen?"

His jaw quivered, but, manfully, he hardened it. "There we are, back to the same age-old question. To which my answer is: Who cares? Why do you like eggs? Why do I like grapefruit? Let the aestheticians waste their hours trying to map their longings—I just want to live!"

Equally manfully, she fought not to let herself whimper. "I'm not so sure I do."

"That's nonsense! Come away with me! Forget this place, forget him! Why, when all this is over—"

"I'm not so sure it will be over."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're speaking as if the blizzard will finally cease, civilisation's reign will be re-imposed, and we'll all be free to leave this place and go back to our everyday lives."

He laughed, unintentionally. "Well, won't it? Won't we?"

"How do you know we won't be stuck here forever?"

He looked at her, amused, but also worried for her. "Well—we'll eventually run out of grapefruit, for one thing."

She looked at the faces in the shadows, empty thumbnails in the gloom. "I think that might be for the best. To starve...I might see some things I've missed. And who knows? In our absence from the outside world, God Almighty might have, for all we know, laid waste to all lands. We might be all that's left, in here, maddeningly preoccupied with our grubby little troubles. We'd better purge ourselves, if He's on His way. Excuse me, Glen—I've got to—" She stood up. "I don't think I can keep this egg down, after all."

## Chapter Six

Bartoff was not in the lunchroom; Bartoff was in his room, cradling Sam and weeping. All manner of metaphysical questions, none of which was destined to be recorded here, were put by him to Sam, but none met with an intelligible response. In Sam, Bartoff saw the innocence and natural joy in being alive which he, Bartoff, felt to have lost since he'd been a wee, unbearded lad. When the blizzard finished, he, Bartoff, would go back to his old life, his work, his family—and for what? True, Sam would without question accompany him—if that Tautphoeus woman tried to stop him, Bartoff would not hesitate to tear her arms from their sockets—but he (Bartoff) feared he (Sam) would not recognise him (Bartoff) against his (Bartoff's) domestic backdrop, so muted and humbled and gelded would he (Bartoff) be. No. No!

He would not let Sam see him like that.

## Chapter Seven

Mifkin, at that moment, more or less, sat in *his* room, looking gloomily out the window at—nothing. Exactly nothing!

*Deputy Manager*, he thought. *Deputy Manager!* Would that be the inscription on his gravestone? *Here lies Mifkin, Deputy Manager—loveless, unwed, childless, having accomplished absolutely nothing in life, and slightly less in death. Pity him—yet thank the Lord you were not he.* Something along those lines, he reckoned, snarling his lip in satisfyingly morbid self-pity.

And yet: even if he had remained Manager, without the *Deputy*, would he have found somebody to love? Would he have ever touched Happiness, hovering tantalisingly always one arm's length above him, a mirage? He had to admit, to himself, to the bright white perspectiveless panorama out there, that he didn't believe, in his heart of hearts, he ever would.

## Chapter Eight

Several short seconds after that, Vanessa Tautphoeus, in *her* room, mind you, longed for Millicent (as she called Sam) to embrace, as she stared in disgust at her naked thighs. This, then, was what she had survived for? To wither away, like a tree with wasted roots, feeling numbly in the dirt for something left with which to connect?

She thought she felt a breath over her shoulder, and instinctively wrapped up her nakedness; had that been Pluck's spirit, come for revenge? Had it been Guilt, come to mock? Her imagination? Or something else; perhaps, she admitted, her own exhalation, seeing as her face was at that moment twisted over her shoulder.

Her parents...her shyness...the men she'd paid...when she rummaged through the squandered detritus of her life, she found only regrets, shame and shrivelled strips of what had once been her integrity. To do her life over, without regrets—that was her dearest wish. Was that possible? Was that possible, in this world, or another?

Let's say it's not been my fault, she proposed, that I've never found love. Let's call it punishment, test, or purification. Does that mean it had been, or was still, possible? Or, rather, is there something about me constitutionally unsuited to any form of love?

Put another way: Is my life just a tedious waiting game for death?

## Chapter Nine

The coronel had acquired, through the timeless stratagem of a knife to Poor Larry's wool-white throat, the key to Pluck's room. Now he entered, alone, and shut the door. He stood, as in the hallowed hush of a mausoleum, in the thin, spectral haze allowed by the closed shutters, amidst semi-decipherable objects which, as was the case when stumbling around curse-evoking obstacles in pre-dawn military manoeuvres, he intuited, rather than saw, were there.

The room had not been cleaned, or otherwise altered, since the inspector had last exited it (shortly before, it pains me to remind you, he exited this world). The coronel sat down on the bed, and rubbed the back of his hand along the indentation in the pillow where the great man's head had lain.

Then he, with trembling hands, denuded himself of every article of clothing and lay himself down in the bed, cuddling up with the covers, and dreamt.

He dreamt he and Pluck were embracing whilst floating through timeless space. His love for Pluck, he was relieved to realise, was not romantic, let alone erotic—though he couldn't have, with any honesty, completely ruled out the historical, hypothetical possibility of having engaged in a light bout of sodomy with him, had they both been young men left alone in the barracks in the remote wastelands of, say, Molina de Aragon, or some similarly godforsaken hell on earth, and had the most impeccable hygienic standards been adhered to. No, his love for Pluck was on a much higher plane—a spiritual plane, decided the coronel, although not without some hesitation, for he had never considered himself much of a spiritual man. The sodomy he felt he was enjoying, even now, even now, with Pluck, was what you might be justified in calling a sodomy of the heart, or even of the soul. An interpenetrative, mind you—dually active—mutually violative, ouroborotic sort of sodomising, if that makes any sort of anatomical sense, with synchronised orgasming, meaning, in this context, shared epiphany. At that thought, the coronel's feeble, shrivelled, withered husk of a penis apologetically spluttered up a few drops of a watery excuse for ejaculate into the holy sheets which had once shrouded Pluck's classically proportioned buttocks. Even that pathetic oblation had unmanned the coronel of the paltry store of vim he still hoarded, and he splayed out, still asleep, as if on a bier, awaiting his final rest.



## Chapter Ten

As the days wore on—as wear on inexorably, you won't be very surprised to learn, they did—the coronel moved into Pluck's room, and, through the accumulation of objects belonging to or known or suspected to have been touched by Pluck, handwritten testimonials sourced from other guests, and his own childish drawings, set up a shrine to his late friend. He devoted all his attentions to the candle he was sure not to let go out: he would spend hours staring at it, clearing his mind of everything but the sight, the subtle sounds of the dribble of wax and minutely enervating wick, the stale, cupboard-immured smell, and the discernible heat upon his face. The image the candle presented to his mind was that of an erect penis, quivering under the miraculously, divinely animated feather of pre-cum dancing without cease upon its tip. It was in the mercifully insoluble mystery of the afterlife with which the coronel was content to wrap himself, like a heavy, unyielding yet sympathetic cloak round his bare shoulders, rather than seek to penetrate with logic.

Pride of place amongst the relics was Pluck's photographic album, which the coronel, in his thorough ransacking of the room, had discovered and broke open. Bent over the book, straining his muggy eyes to trace the same lines and curves as had Pluck's, the coronel felt closer to the man than ever; for they were inhabiting, aesthetically, the same fantasy realm; as a painter must feel, before a masterpiece in a museum, knowing not only that his heroes had stood on this wood and gazed at the same square inches of consecrated paint, but that his heroes' heroes had done so, and, if you regress far enough, the first hero had dragged his brush across his canvas, in imitation of, it would seem, the natural engravings into primaeval matter made flesh and plant and rock by God. So the coronel was, as it were, lugging through the same grooves as Pluck's innermost erotic being whilst he followed along the arc of a fat model's bum, and in this process not only came to know Pluck, the real Pluck, but came, in a sense, to replicate him, and thus become him. When this occurred, whole new vistas, mountainous facets, of Pluck's character came into view for him, and he sensed the pointlessness of isolating matter into arbitrary conglomerations and labelling them with ultimately meaningless blends of phonemes. There, just there, on the page, a few sparse lines burnt by iodine and mercury vapour had resulted in the revivification of a large naked woman bending over her flower bed, face twisted up and around so that she might, in what appeared a painfully unnatural contortion, smile invitingly at her fellow hortiphile, that is, the viewer. The barest implication of her labia could be inferred by peering into her own God-given goldkissen, as Moses might once, not so near here, have gazed into a bush he was certain, deep within himself, would suddenly, at any instant, ignite.

He (the coronel, not Moses) slept at the foot of the shrine, so that he might be close to the things that had meant so much to his hero, and so the dripping wax would fall upon his brow and wake him when time decreed a new candle must be lit, so that whatever misfortunes might be fated to befall man without the hotel, within, the light might never snuff out.

## Chapter Eleven

Genevra and Rosella were picking at their lunch, which, like all the hotel's meals of late, seemed to have been prepared with an increasing lack of care, if not actual, studied contempt, boasting an insipid, viscous mishmash of random elements appearing to originate from various acrid weeds and unspeakable animal parts, proving fundamentally inedible, so that in Genevra and Rosella's case, they consequently lacked the vigour with which to attempt conversation, when the coronel, one morning, strode—to the extent that he could, at his age, still stride—up.

"I beg of you, Signora Bergamaschi, a favour," he mumbled.

"Leave us alone, old man!" hissed Rosella, who had a limited ocular appetite for old, unattractive people.

"Please, Rosa!" Genevra snapped. "Let's hear what the coronel has to say. Please, coronel"—speaking to the coronel, now, obviously, as indicated by her use of his title *coronel*—"what can we do for you?"

The coronel, trembling in ecstasy, stretched out his arms, as if offering his wrists to be nailed to a cross, dropped back his head—Rosella was sure he was having a stroke, at, of all places, of course, *her* table—and declaimed: "I wish to embrace art!"

It transpired that by this outburst, the coronel was really asking if Genevra might condescend to give him drawing lessons, which she graciously did. Beginning that afternoon, and continuing twice a day thereafter, Genevra communicated the rudiments of sketching and painting, until the coronel could inflict on paper crude representations of Pluck—as heroic, horse-borne general; as bloodied saint, flinging the proffered mercy of his tormentors back in their faces; as nude, nubile Greek god—with which to adorn his (Pluck's) walls, floors and ceilings. He then organised tours of the rooms, to visit the shrine and ponder Pluck's legacy, for which he charged a very reasonable admission fee, one hundred per cent of which, he vowed, went to the museum's upkeep.

Then, each night, when the rooms were once more his alone to enjoy, he would ritualistically close the day's disgraces by masturbating to the album pages, in so doing, conjoining, he felt, with its former owner's ever-present spirit. The physical result was more akin to a dry-heave, as his thumbnail-sized organ, resembling a hairless newborn hamster which had been somehow accidentally grafted onto his pelvis, sighed a vacant puff of musty air in place of the teeming, life-germinating nectar which had once cascaded from his long, muscular *carabina*. But upon point of discharge, though his body failed him, his spirit *sissonned*, ripping away all the militaristic pride he'd erected around his conscience for years, exposing the false, shallow prestige which had paraded through his village and which he, as a boy, had devoted his life to joining and serving; he realised, now, that if he'd had a granule of sense, he would have absconded from duty, the very moment he met that girl in Callao, and sought to marry her and join her and serve *her* instead! He watched, projected across the unspooling snake of his orgasm behind his lids, a montage of the life with the girl he might have had: family, peace, laughter, farming, daughters and sons and granddaughters and grandsons. Days sweating cleanly beneath a cloudless sky, coaxing life up out of the soil, then nights violating his wife, who would, by law, have been duty-bound to suffer whatever erotic indignities he had a mind to bestow.

He wanted, now, peace. He had forgiven, on Pluck's behalf—"forgiven", a term with which his basic training manual had hardly been riddled—all those in the hotel who had contributed to his demise. He knew he would shortly be joining Pluck, wherever he was; the coronel's body, and spirit, were tired, and saw no point in persisting to fight a battle they were ultimately doomed to lose. All the coronel sought, now, was peaceful co-existence in the bosom of *el magnifico*.

He wanted peace.

He wanted rest.

He wanted love.

He wanted absolution for all his life up to this moment.

And he felt, somehow, that there was only one man to give it.

## Chapter Twelve

The coronel had gone, one evening, to get a new candle. As there was nothing especially exciting about that, in and of itself, let me proceed: walking back down the dim brown corridor, candle in hand, he heard a noise coming through the door of another room. The noise, for some reason, put him in the mind of a huge, flightless, alien bird which was the sole advance guard for an interstellar army which would wipe out everything we knew and held dear. But he was not even close: it was, in fact, Madame Tautphoeus sobbing in her chamber. But the coronel didn't know that; not yet—you and I, dear Reader, know it, yes, I realise—but the coronel? No. And so, he found himself with a dilemma, namely, whether to heroically save humanity from an invasion, or to cower like a goddamn baby back in his room in the hope of preserving his worthless life for a few more pointless hours. The reader may decide for him- or her-self what he or she would have done. I know what *I* would have done, although I'm not prepared to divulge it. But the coronel?

Well: he turned—to his shame—and started shuffling away, face warped from existential panic, when he heard the door open.

“Coronel?”

His whole body became rigid, like an unsummoned erection, mid-shuffle. The voice of this alien bird mimicked that of an old lady who was perfectly fluent in Spanish. To what devious stratagems will Earth's enemies not stoop?, he enquired, internally. Meanwhile, while he enjoyed his inner dialogue, the presumed alien bird was still awaiting a reply.

“Coronel?” it repeated, as if that were the sole Spanish word it had found time to study in its frankly unprofessionally hasty pre-invasion cramming.

“I'm thinking, I'm thinking!” he spat, without turning round. It could probably incinerate me at any moment, with beams from its accursed eyes, he reasoned. So—*why hasn't it done so already?!*

“Please come in.”

*It knew English too!*

Slowly, he turned, pivoting gracefully on his heel, ready to spring and to kill—

“Madame Tautphoeus!”

“Good evening, coronel. It is very late.” She was wiping her eyes.

“You alien scum, dare you ape my species?!” He leapt forward to kill it, but Vanessa, through sheer instinct, stepped to the side, allowing the coronel to collide painfully with the doorframe, then poked her index and middle fingers into his eyes, blinding him, then, whilst he fell to his knees, finally kicking him in his throat, eliciting silence.

He came to on the floor of her sitting room, fully expecting to be tortured and experimented on with no limit to the degradation an alien mind—if they even had minds—could impose.

“You miss him too, don't you?”

It was that voice again! He rolled over, rubbed his eyes, and saw a hazy vision before him of a nimbused Vanessa Tautphoeus sat on an ottoman, appearing disappointingly human.

He decided to be blunt: “Pardon me, but are you an alien bird?”

“I’m sorry?”

The bird was clearly stalling for time, pillaging its vocabulary for the right words with which to parry him.

“Are you an alien bird?” he pressed.

“No,” she answered. “Are you?”

He chuckled; even in the shadow of death, he chuckled. “Don’t be absurd.”

She shrugged.

“But tell me,” he went on, “who is the ‘him’ to whom you refer?”

“What?”

He felt more confident that, through such verbal circumlocutions, he could outwit an adversary who had, after all, only recently, he could only presume, mastered the basics of the English tongue. “When you said ‘You miss him too’—who is the ‘him’ in that sentence?”

“Why, Inspector Pluck, of course.”

He would have swooned, and collapsed girlishly to the floor, had he not already been lying thereupon. “So you haven’t disintegrated Madame Tautphoeus and transmogrified into her likeness!” he reasoned aloud. “You’ve inhabited her body, snuffed out her soul and ransacked her memories!”

Vanessa, in her robe, unimproved by makeup, looked at him—so would you, had you been there, conversing with the fellow—not through the eyes of a bird, but through sad, wise, wrinkly whale eyes, which conveyed not only her own desolation, but that of the universe, as a whole, ever expanding, ever yearning, ever reaching, since time began, for something out there, in the emptiness beyond matter, but failing, failing, and finally, after all this while, as the coronel could now infer from the face before him, concluding that, in reality, if that’s indeed the right word, there’d never been anything there for which to reach.

“I don’t care if you’re an alien bird, sent to annihilate humanity, or not,” he whispered. “If you love the inspector like I think you do, then I’m on your side.”

He led her by the hand back to Pluck’s room and showed her the shrine (in this instance, with an unanticipated, noble gesture, waiving the entrance fee). They knelt, and stared at the tower of tat he’d accumulated.

“I have a ritual,” he found himself whispering, “which I perform. Nightly.”

“Show me,” quoth his wizened angel.

He shook his head, with unmissable import: “It’s not a ritual you would like to see.”

“Tell me,” she whispered. “Please.”

“...It involves...” He considered how best to allude to it.

“Keeping the candle lit?”

“Yes, that...and...”

“Offering a prayer?”

“Um, yes...”

“Say it. Please.”

“...Evoking a spiritual eruption through my...gentlemanly member.”

“Do you mean, stroking your cock to climax?”

He sighed, thankful the matter had been divulged, yet a little wary lest she turn out to be an alien after all, now bent on disseminating the admission of his nocturnal self-

abasement through the world's newspapers and academic journals. "Aye, madame—I mean that."

She pressed her flaccid palm upon his bare head and begged him: "Let us do that as one."

Hardly believing his luck, the coronel, sucking up his drool with a manly slurp, panting like a graceless dog, fixed his eyes on his favourite of his painted representations of Pluck; in a flash, his trousers were off and he took his tiny throbbing manhood gently between his index finger and thumb, half-hearing his co-novitiate's charmless groans as she, fully clothed, manipulated her nether regions towards a feminine fusion with the universe, gazing, likewise, devoutly at Pluck's image, when all at once, the hamster snapped off—there, between his fingers, it trembled, detached as if finally born, unbloodied and slowly sinking into a dreamless sleep. There was no wailing, no grief-ravaged accusations at the perceived unfairness of his Creator from the coronel, but rather a silent mourning—Vanessa, nodding with gentle understanding, took his other hand in hers (taking care to wipe hers first, as matronly honour and hygiene prescribe), and together they gazed at the little fella, who, having already undergone unaccustomed strain of late, could simply no longer hold up his head with any pride and go on; his place in this world was gone, and so, with irreproachable logic wedded to unstinting dignity, he melted away.

But the coronel hadn't counted on his angel's quick thinking—Vanessa scooped up a wad of melted candle wax, slathered it over the coronel's lonely abdomen and stuck the fucker back on. The crumbly residue, which was all that was left of the coronel's once-mighty cock, bubbled a little, shocked at this unseemly attempt to, as it were, snatch it up out of the peace of its grave and expose it to yet a few more seconds of unsolicited, demeaning existence. He (the coronel, not his penis) thanked her for her effort, and, rather than try to communicate the hopelessness of such an endeavour, medically speaking, he bade her good night and showed her to the door.

In the morning, when he awoke from a dream of having been surrounded by enemy snipers and, refusing to beg for clemency, steeling himself for execution, he remembered the member of his platoon, as it were, he had lost the night before, winced as he rolled down the bedsheet, and was flabbergasted to behold a miracle: it had fused back to the mothership, although it was, he found it fruitless to deny, even smaller than before, now resembling the runt of a tadpole's litter. Still, he blessed it, and weeping, blinked his thanks to Pluck's portrait above.

## Chapter Thirteen

In a reading room, by himself, the coronel sat and stared into nothingness. The shelves of musty books hemmed him in; the chairs and tables were arranged in such a way, he felt, as to allow no room for retreat. He had come here seeking company, someone with whom to share his allegiance to the inspector, but the other guests, who had been wasting their time with literature or conversation or cards, had pooh-poohed his passion, mocked his age and quality of intellect, and finally left. They were leading meaningless lives, he realised, and were too blind to see it. The brief snatches of discourse he'd overheard, centring as they did on such transient issues as family, politics, philosophy and art, pained him in the extreme, the way a small child, whose heart had yet to accrue the callouses of cynicism, might watch with aching sympathy a tortoise in a small enclosure, wandering round and round and round, congenitally unable, perhaps, to recognise that that tuft of grass over which he plods is the same he plodded moments ago, never finding the exit, because never knowing there was one.

When Enid, hair mussed up, a most unflattering wrap thrown over her person, came in, sat down, and greeted the coronel.

"You couldn't sleep either?" she asked.

"I will sleep soon enough," he mumbled back.

She sighed, and looked over his head at a dusty portrait of some old, dead person nobody remembered and about whom she wouldn't have been able to summon the curiosity to ask even had a professor who'd written his definitive biography suddenly appeared; rather, in that scenario, she, startled, would have no doubt asked him to explain his apparent powers of teleportation. The professor, for his part, would have been, it would turn out, at a loss, seeing as his devaporisation had come about not through any skill, or even will, of his own, but rather through the (limited) omnipotence of yours truly, the narrator. Thus, awkwardly, would that hypothetical conversation end.

"...I once loved a woman," the coronel suddenly remembered, out loud.

"Oh?" Enid found this, although something of a non sequitur, significantly more interesting than the identity of the dead sitter above him.

"I said, 'I once loved a woman.'"

"Yes, I heard you."

"But you said, 'Oh?'—like that."

"Yes, but I meant it as a—well, I didn't really know what else to say."

"So you heard me the first time?"

"Yes."

"When I said that I loved a woman."

"Yes."

"Ah."

There was silence, now, for some time. Enid supposed that he wanted her to ask him to expand on his statement, and, as she did, in fact, have some interest, she went right ahead and asked: "Who was the woman?"

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"Who was the woman?"

The coronel, somewhat in a daze, looked about him. "Were you speaking to me?"

“Yes, coronel. You told me that you once loved a woman—”

“How did you know that?!” He drilled his gaze into her, fisting his hands with suspicion.

“You’ve just told me, coronel.”

“I did?”

“You did. And so, naturally, I asked you who she was.”

“Who who was—my mother?”

“No...unless, that was the woman you were referring to.”

“Do you mean, Irina?”

“Was that your mother?”

“No, damn you! That was the woman I loved!”

“Ah!”

And so, in this roundabout manner, did the coronel relate the story of his love for his Peruvian girl.

“...I was finally a man,” he concluded, “and my comrades and I were inebriating ourselves at the cantina, when, lo and behold, in she walked!”

“Irina?”

“The very same!” The coronel smiled, eyes closed, grasping with wistful fingers at the memory the edges of which had been, over the decades, like an old document, yellowing and charring away at the edges. “She saw me, recognised me, slowly walked over—on bare feet, I remember, in a torn dress—all of us ceased our chattering as she stood before me; our tankards wavered between table and chins; all in the tavern blurred save her...”

“And what happened?”

“...She looked at me as if I were just another brute, another killer, another piece of filth in a uniform...and turned and walked out. And it is that scene, that moment, that has echoed through my dreams, my ponderings, my sleepless nights, ever since.”

“I’m sorry, Eyague. But Fate must have written it this way.”

“Fate...and the laughable clumsiness of the universe...there’s not so much to distinguish the two, in my eyes, at my age, senorita.”

“I wonder where she is now,” Enid mused, “and what she’s like.”

“Who knows? She might be happily wed, with bushels of grandchildren. She might be dead.”

“She might be reminiscing about that moment in the cantina with you, Eyague.”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t wish that on her. If anything...if that moment convinced her never to marry a soldier—never to allow her sons to be soldiers—then, finally, I can rest, knowing that there was something good that I did in this world.”



## Chapter Fourteen

Soon after this, at the foot of the shrine, as the candle flung the trembling shadow of the pillar of Pluck-associated artefacts across the floor and up a wall, the coronel, once again, thought fit to manipulate his member towards (anti)climax—his mind did not prompt him, his body did not urge him, but his soul inspired him to enact this ritual, not for the incitement of, but rather as a reproof to, his flesh, and, ultimately, out of devotion to his saint—and, *in medias res*, it fell off—again.

He got down on all fours—yes, like a fucking dog—and searched the floor for it. Gingerly, so as not to provoke an avalanche about his head, he untucked from the pile Pluck's hallowed magnifying glass, and, after scouring every inch of the floor, found it where it lay, surrendering itself, in the dust. When he prodded it, with a loving fingertip, it crumbled into miniscule motes of meaningless flesh.

He nodded. He understood.

Weeping, whilst reciting under his breath garbled, bastardised, half-remembered prayers from his youth, he served up the fragments, burning them in a teaspoon over the candle, a humble offering to Whoever might be listening, an apology, and a plea for peace to come to him soon.

## Chapter Fifteen

Just at this moment, Poor Larry was in *his* room, patiently developing an entirely original style of interpretative dance. In unconscious echo of the coronel's (rapidly disintegrating) penis, Larry danced to the innate music in his head, voluptuising his legs and lotusing his arms as if immolating himself in a straight arrow-shot to Heaven. In this ritual, all the opprobrium and patronising scorn he soaked up from all quarters simply sprinkled off him like water from a shaking mutt, and he found himself at once rooted to the earth beneath him and penetrating the vault above.

## Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, which followed the night—because, whether we like it or not, that’s the way these things work; unless, if you really prefer looking at it another way, it could be said that night follows day—Mifkin was stood behind the counter in the lobby, going over some accounts with another member of staff. Or rather, his eyes traced the elegantly scripted numerals, curvaceously erotic, drawn by someone, he could divine, with an active procreative impulse, each swish a brush of fingers along a thigh, each dot a forceful penetration into the maidenhood of the page, each loop a tongue around a nipple, until the entry tapered to the singularity of orgasm—but Mifkin’s mind soon tired of these things, and he began to contemplate if it would really be so bad if he were to impale himself with the pen he held between two fingers. Would anybody care? Would anyone mourn him? He knew the answer, and it was not “Of course, yes, yes they would!”

His attention was torn from these thoughts by a commotion at the top of the stairs.

“Somebody!”

“Help!”

“There’s been a scream!”

“From Inspector Pluck’s room!”

“Hurry!”

Etcetera, etcetera.

Grabbing the arm of the porter beside him (he couldn’t resist a fleeting, appreciative squeeze of the bicep), Mifkin led his troupe up the stairs. Indeed, outside the inspector’s room, a group of concerned guests was milling.

Kivi Brotherus approached him. “Monsieur Mifkin—I wonder if you could settle an argument between Mister Philip La Paiva and myself on the subject of hockey.”

Mifkin pushed past him. “What’s happened?” he asked of the group.

“A scream,” said Stoupes. “Coming from the inspector’s room.”

Gilda Hühnerbeinstein looked alarmed. “You don’t think...?”

“Coronel Feosalma has been in the habit of occupying the late inspector’s room,” said Gangakanta, hoping to allay her fears.

Mifkin went to the door and tried the knob. It was—wait for it—locked. While he searched his pockets for his key, Marcel Lapin-Défunt came up alongside him and spoke softly in his (Mifkin’s) ear: “Monsieur...I heard the scream myself, as my wife and I were just walking down the corridor at the time...”

“Yes?” asked Mifkin, not terribly bothered, as he found his key in an upper vest pocket.

“Well, it’s just that...between you and me...”

Mifkin turned to him, key at the ready. “What is it, monsieur?”

Lapin-Défunt looked at the others, watching them, sighed, and whispered so they could not hear: “The cry was not one of pain, or agony, necessarily—though I suppose there was that too.”

“Then which emotion could the cry be described as having expressed, monsieur?”

Lapin-Défunt considered how best to word it, then simply said it outright: “Sexual crescendo. Monsieur.”

Mifkin squinted at him whilst turning the key in the lock, then opened the door and stepped in to find the bare soles of the coronel's feet sticking out from the collapsed tower of relics, the candle long since extinguished. Lapin-Défunt, Arthur Drig, Glenn Stoupes and others helped him throw off the debris, and, once he had been revealed and rolled over, the coronel's dead, open eyes stared out at the crowd as if at a surpassingly entertaining carnival attraction. His mouth hung open in a grimace, with dried blood tracing a trail from it, down his neck, and rivuleting off across his chest, where there were, unignorably, the unmistakable marks of repeated blows from a blunt instrument which had broken through his ribs and exposed his organs to the eyes of his spectators.

## Chapter Seventeen

As the reader will without too much difficulty imagine, the news of a second murder, the strong suspicion that Pluck could not have been the murderer, and the consequent, logical surmise that the true murderer was still at large, replaced all other topics of conversation amongst the hotel's patrons with the deranged vehemence of an outraged matriarch jerking the tablecloth, along with its contents, off a dinner table by way of conveying her opinion.

Many guests remained in their rooms, locking their doors, and, in so doing, unconsciously resurrecting Pluck's original intention of incarcerating the whole of the hotel. One member of each party—usually, with a ruthless, unapologetic sexism with which the era was rife, the male—would venture, cautiously, unlit candle holder or some other implement at the ready, in order to snatch a hamper of food from the kitchen, then return. The dining room was depopulated to a startling degree—startling, I suppose, if you were easily startled, lacking any steel to your nerve or spine in your ethics—save for some older guests, who had made their peace with life, or the likes of Deirdre Laoghaire, who positively welcomed death.

The porter, Curtis/Thaddeus, for unexplained reasons, had taken it into his head to run around tripping and insulting people, evoking appalled remonstrations and threats of physical retribution against his person. For instance, whilst passing Monsieur Bruneau on the stairs, Curtis/Thaddeus openly described him as a “fucking pig”. To Bruneau's polite “Pardon?”, Curtis/Thaddeus repeated, openly: “You, monsieur, are a fucking pig.” Twisting round awkwardly on the steps to confront this impudent servant, Bruneau caught sight of him skipping away, laughing. Bruneau took chase, but lost him in the labyrinth of interconnecting service rooms. Or, again, Curtis/Thaddeus thought nothing of strolling up to Rosella one morning in the patio and claiming, “I once had sexual relations with you”—when, in fact, which Rosella could have told you as authoritatively as could I, no such coitus had ever occurred. As such, she moved to slap him, but again, he skipped nimbly away, blowing raspberries lovingly over his shoulder at her.

Enid—not from any extraordinary, conscious courage, but more from a habit of gliding along with only a blurred focus on life; like a mother's fluttering fingertips brushing just above her drowsing toddler's hair-tuft, establishing without physical contact a logically insupportable, yet emotionally undeniable, union—did not remain in her room, but wandered about, pondering things. One of the things she pondered was, *Why go on, since I'm as good as resolved that everything around me is entirely devoid of meaning?* Another, more apropos of current events, was, *Who could want the coronel dead?* She mentally inventoried all the guests and staff she knew, but none would seem to have a—what was that term? That thing that never seemed to much trouble Pluck? Oh yes: motive.

She knocked on the door of Sri Aadi Gangakanta—she wasn't sure why. He opened the door (what choice did he have—cry out “Go away, damn you! Damn you!” and remain within?), Nod-eyed.

“I'm sorry. Have I woken you?”

He shook his head. “Meditating,” he explained.

“Oh. I've never tried that...not formally.”

“May I help you, Miss Trojczakowski?”

“I’m sorry?” She’d been thinking about something else.

He smiled, tolerantly. “Was there a reason you’ve come to my room?”

“Oh, that? No. Not really.”

The gentleman was unsure how to respond; his mouth opened, but no relevant words volunteered themselves.

Enid, meanwhile, found herself staring at this eminently sensible-looking man: in a modest white suit (who meditates in a suit?), barefoot, face unsketchably peaceful in repose, staring back at her.

“Yes,” she finally answered, “yes, I do have a reason, come to think of it. May I come in?”

After a hasty mental calculation concluding that it would have been interpreted by society as unacceptably ungallant to refuse and shut the door in her face, Gangakanta stepped aside to allow her to enter. As, likewise, it would have seemed pointlessly rude to, after his gesture, turn and walk away without a word, Enid followed suit by entering. Her host, as an unofficial sacrifice on the altar of the goddess Propriety, left the door open. She (Enid, not the goddess Propriety) took a quick glance at the scrupulous arrangement of native trinkets about the room, dismissed them as barbaric totems and turned to face him.

“Who do you think killed Snede?”

He replied as if he’d been expecting such a question, though how could he have? “I do not know. At what conclusion did you, and the rest of the investigating team, arrive?”

She shrugged, as she figured it would adequately evince the tone she wished to convey without the more cumbersome involvement of words. She then expanded on this gesture verbally: “The inspector had many theories, none of them stable.”

“Perhaps that is the nature of this world,” Gangakanta offered. “In an unstable world, how can truths about that world prove stable?” He gestured to a chair, and, immediately comprehending his meaning, she sat therein (in the chair—not in the meaning). He, taking his cue from her, sat down on an ottoman across the way (“the way” here carrying the sense of “across the small room”, unfreighted with any Taoist implication); meaning that both of them could, now, be said to be seated. (Not to put too fine a point on it.)

“Perhaps, but in this world, as far as I’ve gathered,” Enid riposted with both charm and logic, “people would feel far more comfortable to know that murderers have been caught and punished according to some measure of solidity. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“You sound as if you’ve had more truck with the world than I. As such, I will bow to your experience.”

Enid smiled, and waved away his offer of a drink of water. “It’s all very well to treat it all as a game...”

He sighed, with a hint of a chortle within it as well. “I must confess that that is precisely how I’ve always treated life. I cannot help it. It seems, to me, to be the way life begs us to treat it.”

“I understand. And I wonder if your approach might be just that which I’d need to help me.”

“To help you with what?”

“Do you think Pluck could have killed Snede?”

“Do you?”

“No. But that’s what many people were saying.”

She looked at him, awaiting a reply, while, for a minute, he thought in silence. “... It’s entirely possible that it had been he, out of an unsurprising streak of sociopathy, or cry for attention, or conscious effort to manufacture a situation through which to amass unto himself a degree of respect to which he would otherwise never be entitled, or misdirected spiritual or sexual impulses—or some uncataloguable mixture thereof. But then again, it’s just as possible it was not.”

Enid bent forward. “I agree.”

“If Pluck killed Snede, the death of the coronel could be unrelated.”

“Yes.”

“Or, one man—”

“Or woman.”

“Or combination, could have killed them both.”

“What if the coronel killed Snede?”

“Then someone who, unlike you or I, was privy to such information might have killed the coronel for revenge.”

“Or Pluck and the coronel might have been working together.”

“Or Pluck might have, somehow, killed Snede without intending to. As I understand it, the inspector’s clumsiness and incompetence reached such unprecedentedly stratospheric levels that he might very well have, say, repeatedly tripped against Snede whilst negligently carrying a sledgehammer.”

“Truth told, it might be any one of us, guest or staff, or someone hiding somewhere we’ve never even seen!”

“Or me—or even you, Miss Trojczakowski, if it comes to that.”

They smiled at one another. Enid wondered how he could muse upon such provocative possibilities so calmly—that the woman sat across from him in his room might be a murderess, or that he was half-confessing his own crimes?

She lay one hand upon the other on her knee, and, just for the moment, risking his mockery, sought to swing open the farm gate and let logic trot off for a leisurely graze. She said, looking anywhere but at him, “All suppositions aside, Sri Gangakanta, I know in my heart that Pluck had nothing to do with it.”

“That is perfectly all right with me, Miss Trojczakowski. I hope you realise that I don’t much care if anybody’s been murdered or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well—if it comes to being a game...perhaps I should explain. I apologise in advance for troubling you with references to my personal situation.”

“Not at all.”

“You did ask...”

“Yes. I wish to know. Please go on.”

“Well. I imagine that most of the patrons of this establishment travelled out here, to the middle of, if we’re going to call a thing what it is, nowhere—a nowhere in which we’re now all trapped, seemingly for eternity—for purposes of relaxation, exercise, or, in short, some form of enjoyment. But not I.”

“You came here for spiritual purposes?” she guessed.

He looked her up and down, rather comically, then laughed, a little, through his nose, a laugh that, were it bound up with mucus, would never have been considered a laugh at

all, but rather the rude expulsion of phlegm unapprehended by handkerchief, or even prevented from visibility by the cruder barrier prophylactic of a gentleman's sleeve. "I'm afraid I can't properly lay claim to that, Miss Trojczakowski, no. Rather, it was an escape from crushing city life, a place to wallow in pure coldness. Not to commune with God, you see, but to commune with nothingness."

"I'm afraid of nothingness." She didn't know why she was volunteering this bit of personal weakness to a stranger, but there it was. "It makes me feel as if I were going to fall off the edge of the world."

"Imagine that!" He sat back. "What a splendid experience would that be."

For a moment, in the silence that followed, with both of them still—Gangakanta sat rigidly straight, a hand on each knee, eyes closed, strange ecstatic half-smile tweaking his lips, and Enid watching him as she would a statue, whilst willing all her thoughts into vapour—the scene would have appeared, had an observer been present, to show a universe just ended, its final exposure having imprinted itself on the retina for an elongated instant before it, with everything else, would fade.

But Gangakanta's eyes opened, and Enid smoothed the back of her hair with her palm, embarrassed at the untoward intimacy she'd felt but for which she could not account, and time resumed.

"Help me," she asked. "Let us find the murderer, or murderers."

Something glinted in his eye. "And if Fate is the murderer?"

"Then let us find his instruments."

He nodded. "I have finished my last copy of *Boy's Own*. I suppose this will do."



## Chapter Eighteen

In a musty storeroom, Mifkin held a lantern whilst Voot and Larry wedged their fingers into crevices between huge casks. The sense was that of a tomb: rows of casks and crates, dignified in their weighty immobility like overlorded burghers, columned like mute soldiers, reduplicating into the darkness. The backs of Voot and Larry were of a piece with the casks in their inescapable, overpowering brownness encompassed by anaemic lamplight. Mifkin was well aware that with a well-aimed push from his brawny forearm, a cask could be made to come crashing down upon Voot—possibly taking Larry with it—thus, in a stroke, relieving Mifkin of one of the chief banes of his existence. Did Voot not sense this?, he wondered. Was he, in fact, testing him? And which action, indicative of which quality, would net him a pass—forbearance, symptomatic of loyalty? Or murder, symptomatic of an authentic dedication to his personal muse? Would Voot, in his agonised, dying seconds, respect Mifkin more for yielding to his impulse, and thus, in the close of Voot’s own private apocalypse, the two wrathful foes might finally, between them, achieve a kind of peace?

“We were extremely well stocked,” Voot concluded, slapping the dust from his hands, having stood up and turned to Mifkin before the latter could test his theory. “But we’ve never had a snow-in like this before. We’ll need to start rationing.”

“Rationing what, monsieur?” asked Larry, as if he really cared.

“Food, and oil,” replied his master. “Staff on half-rations, and, if it comes to it, guests on three-quarter.”

*So that’s it!*, Mifkin thought. *By depleting me of my physical strength, he hopes to overcome me!*

“I’ll make an announcement this evening,” Voot went on, chiefly, Mifkin inferred, because he liked to hear his own voice, regardless of whether the actual content of his speech possessed any merit.

Voot and Larry turned to go, not wishing, apparently, to spend the rest of their lives in the storeroom, when Mifkin halted them with the following dialogue: “With all due respect, Herr Voot”—this was uttered without the slightest veneer aimed to understate the sarcasm—“might I put forward a counterproposal?”

“What is it, then?”

Mifkin looked at him, through the gloom, blankly, as if he’d just now woken from the profoundest sleep. “...What?”

“Did you say you had a counterproposal to make?” Voot asked him.

“Did I?”—a phrase Mifkin invested with a profusion of tonal facets, such that neither Voot nor Larry could with any degree of confidence state precisely what their crafty colleague meant to imply.

Voot, perhaps owing to the relatively meagre number of objects fit for visual appreciation in their present surroundings, looked to Larry. Larry, as politeness and professional duty required, looked back, not understanding what Voot was, silently, asking of him, necessitating Voot to explicitly ask: “Larry, did Monsieur Mifkin say he had a counterproposal?”

Larry nodded. “Yes.”

Voot looked to Larry, in triumph. “So, Monsieur Mifkin—now that it has been indisputably established that you have claimed to offer a counterproposal—what is your counterproposal?”

Gears screeching, uncoiled, within him at a furious pace, Mifkin had to come up with something. He decided, first of all, that a distracting technique would buy him some time: “What was that?!” he exclaimed, his outburst exploding in their vicinity like a bomb in a bonnet, then echoing away down the rows of casks like a mis-shot firework fizzling into oblivion. Inexplicably, Voot and Larry remained staring at him, forcing him to eventually demand, with no small show of indignation: “Aren’t you going to ask what I’m talking about?!”

Voot sighed. Larry, biting, asked: “What are you talking about?”

“...I thought I saw a bat.” It was the best he could muster, in such a short time frame, under such anxious conditions.

Voot turned to go, but Mifkin sought to forestall him yet again: “Wait! You claimed, a moment ago, that you wished to hear my counterproposal, Herr Voot. Was that a lie?”

Voot twisted back at the waist. “It was not.”

“Very good,” Mifkin sniffed.

Voot stared at him. “Well?”

“‘Well’! ‘Well’ what, sir?!” Mifkin chortled.

“*Well*, what is this counterproposal we’re all awaiting with bated breath?”

Then, suddenly, Genius chose to plant her inspirational buttocks upon the encephalous cushion within the capacious confines of Mifkin’s cranium: “...I counterpropose—that—that—that the staff’s rations be restored to full, whilst those of the guests be halved!”

Voot, sighing, turned, with an undisguised dearth of interest, fully to Mifkin. “And what is your reasoning?” he asked.

Mifkin scoffed. “What do you mean?”

“How can you justify your comment?”

“Which one?”

“Your counterproposal.”

“Again, sir, I ask you—which one?”

“Have you made more than one counterproposal?”

Mifkin twitched. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Voot turned to go. “Then we will proceed with my original decision.”

“But you haven’t sought to even dignify my counterproposal with a rebuttal!” Mifkin protested.

Voot turned back to Mifkin. He worried that the lamp might go out, and they would be stuck down here, debating inanities till history finally wheezed to a close. “I am waiting for you to explain your reasoning,” he said, slowly, patiently.

“But you’ve neglected to explain what you mean by such a statement!” Mifkin touched.

“I’m asking you to explain why more rations should be distributed to each member of staff than to each guest.”

“But I’m waiting for *you* to explain it to *me*!” Mifkin countered.

“I haven’t the time for this.” Voot turned and started walking away. “Feel free to remain down here, cogitating on this matter, monsieur, if you see fit.”

Mifkin shouted after him: "Because I'm *hungry*! I need to *eat*! I am a *man*!"

Larry followed Voot out. If Larry were impressed with Mifkin's reasoning, he chose, for reasons of his own, not to show it.

Mifkin could no longer see them, but heard them suddenly stop, in the darkness. Then a grumble, and a sigh. Then came Voot's voice, melodiously out of the void: "We'll need that lantern, Mifkin."

"What's that?"

"We can't see."

Mifkin nodded, revelling in his irrefutable vindication. "Then I suppose you'll just have to come back over here, to this dim-lit agora, and continue our debate."

Voot and Larry reappeared in the arc of lamplight, the former now visibly annoyed. "Give me that lantern," he requested.

"Go fuck yourself," Mifkin demurred. "Now, tell me: how do you respond to my argument?"

"What argument?! Give me the lantern!"

"My argument," Mifkin continued coolly, "that I am hungry?"

Voot made a lunge for the lantern, but Mifkin soft-shoed sprightlily to the side, causing his superior to crash headfirst into a cask.

"Ow!"

"And why should the hunger of a stranger," Mifkin pursued, "trump the hunger of the person whose consciousness is, after all, making the deliberation?"

"Larry!" Voot spat. "Take the lantern from him!"

"He knows I will kill him if he tries," Mifkin calmly explained. Larry made no move; his eyes were closed; he was imagining a butterfly-permeated sky o'er a flower-strewn field. "I demand you cut the guests' rations by half," Mifkin insisted.

"Don't be an idiot! How do you predict they would react to such an announcement?!"

Mifkin shrugged. "You may tell them that your staff, to a man, are noble members of the human race, built of the same stuff as God and His angels."

"And you expect them to hear that without mockery?"

"I expect my dignity as a human being to be respected, yes."

"So I suppose I should tell them that Monsieur Mifkin is hungry, and for that reason, they, the paying guests, should go without food?!"

"I pay the guests the compliment of assuming they will understand raw reason, yes."

"And do you anticipate such a strategy will endear our guests to our establishment?!"

"They're not likely to be going anywhere else. Not in this snowstorm, at any rate."

"And do you predict the reputation of the hotel will be bolstered?"

Mifkin shrugged, again. "Not my concern. I just want my belly to be fed, you see."

"Larry! Take the lantern from Monsieur Mifkin!"

But Larry was dancing, naked, in his field. Amongst the butterflies (also naked), and a coy bluebird who just might have been a fairy in disguise.

"Considering the problem psychologically," Mifkin mused, Voot having little choice but to listen, "the scrawnier and more malnourished they get, and the beefier and more virile we become, the more respect will be redistributed from them—to us."

"And you don't feel we have a duty to maintain our guests, to the best of our ability, in the comfort for which they've handsomely paid this establishment?"

Mifkin closed his eyes and repeated: "I want my belly to be fed."

"Speaking ontologically," Larry suddenly put in—his field having evidently dematerialised—"if all the staff starved to death, the hotel would cease to exist along with us. But if all the guests starved to death, the hotel, through us, would live on."

"Yes!" Mifkin exclaimed. "And, as Herr Voot has always hammered into us, the welfare of the hotel must come first!"

As if in punctuation, the lamp blinked out. The three friends felt, as one, that they, too, had blinked out of existence, or else were fated to float, the three of them, through starless space, insolubly conjoined, for all time.

## Chapter Nineteen

Aloysius, meanwhile, having no reason to suspect that his manager, deputy manager and colleague were floating through outer space, stood bemused at the front desk, fielding complaints about several guests' toilets: specifically, that their personal possessions had appeared bobbing inside them (inside the toilets, not inside the guests). Some reprobate, it transpired, had been breaking into rooms while their occupants were out and dropping things into the receptacles in question—sometimes articles of clothing, such as the guests' undergarments, fished out of their drawers and now clogging the works, sometimes sentimental family photographs, still in their frames, torn off the mantelpiece, or the like. Aloysius, doing his best to pay attention, was obviously distracted. He happened to have a large stock of liquid lust bottled up within him, a circumstance which was wont to impair his ability to think straight. Instead of handling the complaints with sympathy, delicacy and competence, he found himself fantasising about the disgraceful acts he desired to perform upon the persons of various female guests who now only very occasionally appeared in public in his vicinity. In puncturing their pride, stripping them of their airs, and debasing them, he reasoned, he would debase himself, and, wallowing, soiled, in the cesspool of mutual debasement, they would jointly find peace, and purpose. This noble ambition, however, hardly helped clean the guests' toilets, and so he dispatched as best he could Annette, Modeste and Janice to retrieve the guests' treasured effects and, in so doing, free the passages through which the insalubrious processed material of guests' corporal forms—material the reader will understand their narrator is far too demure to name—might discreetly proceed, and, thereby, restore order to chaos.

## Chapter Twenty

More and more, guests chose to remain in their rooms. Out there, after all, was at least one murderer, as well as some baffling pervert—possibly the same person—who delighted in stuffing things in people’s toilets. Many a guest planned to demand a refund from the hotel’s proprietor, through their solicitors, if and when they escaped from this holiday.

Philip La Paiva, though, came and went. His father could hear him, through their suite’s communicating door, leave his bedroom, at all hours of the day and night, and return, chuckling to himself over—who knew what?

His father, actually, knew, having been granted—the reader will (or won’t) recall—total knowledge of the universe, for better or for worse. Thus he knew, ironically, perhaps, too much to judge, and more than enough to forgive. One night, his son having just come in, La Paiva the elder rose from his unwanted and inescapable communion and entered his son’s room.

“Couldn’t you knock, Father?” Phil was at the mirror, undoing his tie. “Just once?”

“There is nothing you could think or do to which I would not remain, through no will of my own, privy,” La Paiva smiled sadly.

“Oh, yes, right—the omniscience.” He rolled his eyes. “Or did you already know I was going to say that?”

La Paiva shrugged.

“I suppose,” Phil sighed, dumping himself on a chair and turning his side to his father, “there’s no point, then, to us having this conversation, as you’ll no doubt know everything I’d say to you, and what you’d say to me, and how it’d all turn out. So—do you think you could hold it yourself, in your room, while I try to get some sleep?”

His father moved into the room and sat down on an ottoman quite close to him, surprising him. “I suppose no one likes a know-it-all.”

“Well, I don’t, anyway.” He jumped up. “Like a drink?” Without waiting for an answer, he walked to the tray of bottles on a dresser and started pouring himself one. “You’d make a brilliant bartender, I’ll give you that. You could have everybody’s drinks ready for them before they’d even stepped into the bar.”

“Would you like to know what I see?” his father asked him softly.

Phil, his back still to him, stopped all movement. His head turned only a little. “...I don’t think I would.”

“I don’t blame you for that. In fact, I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. But I’d like to tell you just one thing...a rather big thing, I admit...if you’ll let me.”

Phil, standing, downed his drink, started to pour another—then stopped—lowered the bottle, came back to the chair, sat, and looked his father straight in the eye. “Tell me.”

“I can see...” He swallowed. “I can see a huge hole, of ultimate pointlessness, in the universe...”

Without wishing to, his son appeared appalled.

But his father went on: “...If you don’t know where to look. If you look right through space—through the invisible. But coupled with this, in tension with it, is the ultimate salvation.”

“Christ?”

“No...” He reached out and, awkwardly, placed his arm around his son’s neck. His face was in darkness, with only his tears ensnaring the shuddering glow of the little lamp. “I want...I would like...to give up everything...everything I have...just to try to make you understand...that I love you.”

His son was crying too. Gently, regretfully, he took hold of his father’s arm and removed it from him. “It’s too late, Father,” he whispered. “Go to sleep, now.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Marcel Lapin-Défunt, about this time, was wandering through the dim hotel corridors, unable to sleep and heedless of the prospect of meeting a murderer. Away from his mistress for several weeks, now, he was ravaged with an erotic ardour which, like a canary hurling itself suicidally against the bars of its cage, oblivious to the mat of moulted feathers on the floor beneath, had no place to go. Thus, he had turned, as a last resort, to his wife. His pride wounded by her obvious lack of interest, he was forced to formally instruct her, in writing, to fulfil her conjugal duties that evening, a missive she received with mockery and pointed refusal. He was left, therefore, to roam the empty hotel, until such time as he could safely return to his room, confident she had drunk herself to sleep, at which point he could please himself uninterrupted by her critical scorn.

He was pondering the wretched quagmire into which his life had descended, in glaring contrast to the fabulous dreams of his youth, when a noise, which he unhesitatingly identified as a woman crying, intruded upon his futile thoughts through the door of a broom cupboard. He put his ear to the door, to ensure he wasn't mistaken, then knocked. The crying stilled. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm very well, thanks! How are you?"

The wood of the door was unable to filter the sarcasm.

"May I be of some assistance?"

"Oh, well, if you boast the power to restructure the workings of the world so that all goes the way it should, Babel is reversed, and happiness comes out of the tap and has purpose, then, yes, please—go ahead."

Lapin-Défunt chuckled, and tried to imagine who this might be. "As a man with some honour, I'm forced to admit that I can't exactly do all that. My powers are significantly more modest, applying as they do to the gaming table and lawn bowls. But I do hope you'll open the door, and let me help you, if there's any way I can."

"How would you do that, then?"

He shrugged, knowing full well she couldn't see him do it. "Perhaps a game of bowls?"

The door opened a crack: a round eye in the darkness, beautiful and wavery with saltwater. "We haven't any pins."

He smiled. "Nor a lawn. But we've got charming conversation, already under way."

The eye shut, rendering everything beyond the door black, but the door opened, and Miss Deirdre Laoghaire stepped out.

Lapin-Défunt had noticed her around the hotel, of course, but had not until now been so struck by her beauty. "Forgive me, but...I don't think I've had the pleasure."

She was wiping her eyes on her forefinger. "What pleasure is that?"

"Of having made your acquaintance, of course."

"Oh."

"And so, to that end—my name is Marcel Lapin-Défunt." He handed her his handkerchief.

"You're the one with the beautiful wife."

He somewhat stiffened. "I have that honour."



She took his handkerchief, wiped her eyes, and returned it. It was sentimental of him, he knew, but, folding it and returning it to his pocket, he vowed not to wash it.

“Please tell me the matter,” he begged her.

She indicated around her.

“The broom cupboard?” he asked. “The mop?”

“I’d intended to indicate the whole world,” she explained.

“Oh! That is a problem, indeed.”

“Then why continue?”

“Why continue... what?”

“To live! Why?”

“Why—I don’t know. That’s an excellent question.”

She glared at him; at his smile. She had a feeling he was toying with her, but that was the least of her troubles.

“Why continue?” he threw back to her. “Why do you?”

She shrugged, and looked to the carpet. “Maybe I’m waiting for my standards to lower.”

He looked her over, and nodded. “Born into the wrong world. Yes?” he whispered. “Yes, I dare say you were.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

After Lapin-Défunct had escorted Deirdre to her room and, having extracted a promise not to take her life just yet—if for no other reason, he'd joked, than to spare him the suspicion of having had a hand in it—left her, he returned to his room and, barely registering the presence of his wife's immobile form in the bed, fell asleep. In the morning, he awoke without hope to another day in this hotel, rubbed his eyes, smelt his breath on the top of his fist, put on his socks and pulled on a right shoe, only to find it much too small. Cursing under his breath, under the assumption that his wife had idiotically left her shoes where his should be, he got up and strode around the suite in his socks, searching in vain for his own footwear.

"Petunia?" She was not in bed, nor in the toilet. She was probably down at breakfast. Had she taken his shoes? Hid them, out of malice? Or, out of plain stupidity, had she actually put on his (much larger and unladylike) shoes and worn them to breakfast without noticing? But hadn't she said she wished to refrain from leaving the room unnecessarily, now? So had she made a special trip just to dispose of his shoes?

Lapin-Défunct could not have known it, but his wife had left the room for none of those reasons, but, rather, to seek to recover her own shoes, which had likewise gone missing. In their place, she had found a pair of boots tailor-made to counterbalance a congenital gait impediment. In fact, overnight, many pairs of guests' shoes had been switched, from room to room, across floors and even between different wings of the hotel. The only people who found this funny, besides, presumably, the perpetrator him- or her-self, were the Drig children, who hugged each other laughing at the increasingly exasperated grownups scampering about.

Enid, having just got dressed, received a visit from Gangakanta, who had surmised, correctly, that his shoes had been switched with hers. As they sat in her sitting room, pulling on their respective footwear, she asked him, "How?"

"How what, please?"

"How did you know that I would have your shoes?"

"I found a pair of ladies' shoes in my room, and they reminded me of yours."

"But these are quite ordinary shoes. They could have been anyone's."

"I thought of that possibility too. Which is why I mapped out this." He produced (from a pocket, not from thin air) a piece of paper on which he'd diagrammed a complicated statistical formula which your narrator of course understands but feels would be far too undramatic and, frankly, boring for the reader to merit transcription, but suffice it to say, it traced all possible locations of all the guests' shoes and concluded with a high degree of probability that Gangakanta's were in Enid's room, and vice-versa.

"That's brilliant!" said Enid. "Could you apply this to murders?"

"What do you mean?"

"This statistical analysis, this maths—thing—couldn't you use the same principle for murders?"

Gangakanta sat up stiffly. "I...I might boast some talent with statistics, but I could never be tempted into using it to kill a fellow human being."

"I mean to *solve* the murders!"

“Do you mean—use this method to calculate the probabilities of different guests and members of staff being the murderer or murderers?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Yes.”

Gangakanta stared at a small crack in the wainscoting—it might have been anything, but that is where his glance chanced to fall—and whispered: “.. Yes...I might try it, at that.” He looked to her: she was standing, while he was still seated, and so his glance, carrying along at the same height from the floor, struck upon the portion of her anatomy where, had she not been clothed, her navel would be. He cleared his throat, readjusted his glance so that it rested on his knee, and continued: “But we will need to gather much more information about everyone.”

“I have my notes, from the interviews.”

He nodded. “Good. But we will need still more.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Enid didn't see why she should be afraid to move about the hotel, in the daytime, when, even if many of the guests elected to stay in their rooms, at least the staff were about. Thus it was that after reclaiming her shoes from Gangakanta, she made her way to the lunchroom for a drink. Aloysius was behind the bar, and Genevra Bergamaschi was drinking alone.

"Good morning, Miss Trojczakowski," she greeted, and raised her glass. "I'm glad I'm not the only one who doesn't find nine o'clock too early for a drink."

The Italian lady smiled. Her chin jutted so emphatically towards Enid that the latter feared it might leave a bruise.

"Good morning. I think I'll just have an orange juice, please."

"My regrets, mademoiselle, but we have run out of all fruit," the waiter replied.

"Have one of what I'm having," smiled Genevra. "I insist."

"Thanks," Enid said, leaning against the bar beside her. "I suppose I haven't any excuse not to, now."

"I hear," Genevra muttered out of the side of her mouth, a bit faux-conspiratorially, "you've resumed the investigation, now in the company of that Indian."

"That's right." Enid took a sip, and the alcohol immediately fleshed out all her insides.

"And have you made any progress?"

Enid smiled. "Everyone's a suspect. Until they're not."

Genevra nodded. "Until they themselves are killed, I suppose." She wore a man's jacket, which accentuated her already broad shoulders, and a Wild West-style string tie. "Would you do me the honour of walking with me, Miss Trojczakowski? Sometimes I require a feminine confessor, when I'm as tipsy as I am."

"What about your friend Rosa?" But Genevra had already taken her arm and was walking her through the empty lunchroom, out somewhere else.

"Rosa? I'll tell you about Rosa. She's a sculpture! A perfectly exquisite sculpture, from a better world. But have you ever tried to make love to a sculpture, Miss Trojczakowski?"

They were walking down a deserted corridor. Enid wasn't entirely sure what Genevra meant by that last question, but answered, truthfully, "No, Miss Bergamaschi, I can't say that I have."

She laughed. "That was a rhetorical question, my sweet. And please, Enid, call me 'Genevra'." They had found their way to a reading room. "I'll tell you what it's like: stone is cold. And, I hardly think I need say it: unreciprocating. You can chisel at it, denude it, break it to your will...but it's still not alive, you know."

Giggling, she threw herself down onto a sofa. Enid, arms around herself, remained standing, looking about.

"But that's the life of an artist, I guess," Genevra mused, closing her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Well—have you ever met a normal artist? I mean, if they were satisfied with the state of their life, and acclimatised to the world, well...why would they ever choose this path?"

"I don't know, I...I never really had a drive to do much of anything."

"You're a schoolteacher, aren't you?"

"Yes, but, as an unmarried woman, without a family of much means, that is...one must do something, to keep in clothes and under a roof and put food in your stomach."

"And you were never married? Never had a beau?"

"Well, not as is..." She raised her glass to her mouth, only to discover that she'd finished her drink.

"What was that?"

"I was just saying...um..." She felt a little woozy, unused to drinking much alcohol at all.

"You've had a beau?"

"Not as is worth mentioning', I think I was going to say." She sat down on the sofa next to Geneva.

"But, at least, you've had the fulfilment of—how do they say it?—'making a difference', I believe. Wouldn't you say?"

"How do you mean?"

"Your teaching, of course! Those charming blobs of clay, plopped in your schoolroom, ingratiatingly begging to be moulded into our parliamentarians and Knights Templar of tomorrow!"

Enid closed her eyes, steadying herself. "No, no, it's not quite like that. Rather, to tell you the truth, it's the very definition of tedium, cycling through the same seasons of identical brats you can't wait to be rid of, as I wilt into decrepitude at roughly the same rate as the desks and blackboard."

"Oh, now, it can't be as bad as that!"

"For every line Billy Bannister digs into his desktop with his penknife, I acquire two across my brow, just as unlikely to ever be smoothed out until, I guess, my embalmment."

Genevra laughed, slapping her knee, until she choked.

"Are you all right?"

Genevra nodded, coughing. "I don't mean to laugh at your life, Enid. Poor Enid! It's just that I've realised I needn't go on feeling guilty—or, at least, affecting to—over my, all things considered, more selfish choice to become an artist! For if I'd become a teacher, and had your life, I would have hanged myself long ago! And what good would that have done the world, hm? I ask you."

Enid, eyes still closed, nodded. She felt as if she'd fused with the sofa; she couldn't feel her body as a separate entity anymore. "And I've never known the touch of a man. Not in that way. For that matter, I've never met a man whose touch I would have wanted to feel—not until, well, latterly. Life has utterly, utterly passed me by, Geneva. And I've never found the time to mourn it. It's like I can't feel the pathos of my own tragedy; like I'm outside myself, watching some actress perform it, without realising that it's my life she's inhabiting. As if somewhere inside me, I'm expecting the performance to begin again—another birth—and I'll have a chance to do things right, next time. But there won't be a next time, will there? Will there?"

Some small sober corner of her brain realised she was babbling like a madwoman, but it was shouted down by the other regions which had got caught up in this thrilling self-abasement.

“But you have so much to offer,” Geneva was soothing her, whilst stroking Enid’s thigh through her dress. “So much to offer!”

The alcohol was bubbling in her blood, and Enid felt not just herself, but the sofa, the room, the whole world shimmering with electricity. The cushion beneath her, the air in her mouth, and Geneva’s fingers upon her leg all radiated sensual must. Muscles deep within her, long fossilised but of late reluctantly drawn from slumber and recalled to the land of the living, oiled themselves and began to contract, when she stood up, mumbled an incoherent goodbye, and ran out of the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Bartoff, too, was drunk. He had done little, since the guests had more or less agreed, telepathically, to cease socialising and remain in their rooms, but drink, stroke Sam and dress up in ladies' clothes he'd pilfered from other guests' rooms. Just now, he was arching his back, admiring his profile in the mirror, twirling his finger through a curl in his wig and readjusting his undergarments. He had made a botched job of shaving the top of one of his powerfully muscular thighs, so decided to leave them their tangled overgrowth. Likewise, his beard: he'd decided he didn't want a total transformation into a woman, but savoured, with a part of him he hadn't, before this holiday, ever known to exist, the tingling tension between the super-masculine, acid-clogged cactus and the heretofore submerged, feminine lily, which was finally poking its petals above water.

Viewing his image, he was half, he felt, himself, and half in love with himself. But, slowly, as the lily blossomed, the desire to ravish the image he viewed faded, and the desire to be ravished swelled.

There can't be many people about, just now, he reasoned. Why shouldn't I go for a stroll? And even if the whole scornful world were out there—why shouldn't I?

Sam yelped. "All right, my friend, you can come too," he promised.

And so, with a hat with a veil, parasol over his shoulder and Sam cradled against his blouse, he emerged from his room, taking a huge whiff of, as he imagined, spring air, and began to promenade down the corridor.

Gilda Hühnerbeinstein chose that moment to open her door, saw Bartoff, and fell back into her room.

Sashaying down the stairway into the lobby, Bartoff felt a freedom he'd never known: as if he'd thrown off a huge, weighted fishing net under which he'd been squirming all these years. His position at the firm, his standing among his contemporaries, his privilege as a wealthy scion—none of it was asked for, none of it sought, each a stave in the barrel into which he'd been hemmed. If he was now to be humiliated, he reasoned, then so be it: finally, a balancing of the scale, for the humiliation he had once, wilfully or no, visited on another.

Missus Drig, waddling to her room, stopped and stared. Aloysius, sweeping the lobby, rolled his eyes and muttered a joke to himself. Glen Stoupes, moping about, felt a switch thrown between his ears and the sudden urge to murder him. Deirdre, wandering around whilst internally debating suicide, actually smiled, wishing him well. But Mifkin...Mifkin, from his post behind the lobby desk, watched this desecration of the unchallenged binary foundation of humanity descend one impudent step after another, painted lips snarling obscenely through their beard (like a woman's nether lips through her nether beard, one might have remarked), jerking his posterior in a new random direction at every step, a choking stench of musk exhaling from his bodily pores, nostrils flaring elongatedly like two over-reaching singers tremoloing side by side—Mifkin, watching this, squeezed his ring of keys in his fist to the point that the tip of one chipped off, and knew what he must do.

"Sir!"

Bartoff halted on the last step of the staircase. His head turned. The glint in his eye indicated, among other things, that he was unafraid.

“Would you kindly come with me, sir!”

It did not sound like a request.

Bartoff shrugged, elegantly, and followed Mifkin down a corridor. They were both large men, and the soiled rug of the floor resounded with an embarrassing squishiness to their footfalls. Mifkin, hearing this as well as Bartoff, sought to somehow reduce the force of the impact, but couldn't figure out how. Bartoff, too, wished he could have lent his gait a more ladylike tread. Pish! Pish! Pish! Pish!—that is how it sounded, you see, as if the very furnishings of the hotel gloated over their ability to puncture the gravity of the situation. Mifkin cursed the rug—silently—and vowed, at the first available opportunity, to have it torn up.

He took an inordinately long time to find the right key on his ring, but once he had, he inserted it into the door's keyhole with a sense of self-possession and agility which impressed them both. With a gallantry which was not lost on his guest, Mifkin held the door open, and bowed. Bartoff entered the room; what else could he do—stand and stare into the room and prolong this pointless silence? No, he did what he was expected to do, as we are all, narrator and reader alike, expected to do, when a door is held open for us: namely—go through it.

Having gone through the door (as described), Bartoff found himself in an empty bedroom. The hotel not having been booked to full capacity, the room had lain unoccupied for some time. As the door was closed and locked behind him, Bartoff, standing erect in his dress, which wispily clung to his massive bottom like a limpet to a rock, pondered the possible residents who had once occupied his same physical space. Princes and peasants; lovers and assassins; men, women... But all of them were gone, now. For all it mattered—dead. What if the entire world had been annihilated, through some dreadful cosmic accident, or, on the other hand, divine justice? And the tenants of this hotel were all the sentient life which remained? That would mean that all the previous millennia of romantic pairing-off, state- and church-sanctioned matrimony, childrearing, and songs round the piano had been fossilised into a fairy tale, soon to be remembered but dimly, then as a nebulous, subliminal structure ready to crumble from rot, then not at all. And that would mean—

But by embracing him in a clinch whose tone could not be interpreted as anything other than erotic by even the chief dullard in a congress of dullards, and sustaining the expression of lust up to and including a spell of mutually satisfying sodomy, Mifkin finished his thought for him.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

Following the aforementioned sodomy, which honour prohibits me from describing, the two lovers cuddled in bed, each reflecting inwardly on the sensations—tactile, emotional and metaphysical—which had resulted from what was, for them, a revolutionary and unprecedented act. On Bartoff's part, upon the point of a prostate-instigated crescendo, he was brought back to his upbringing (so to speak): he had been raised (so to speak) to be, rather than a God-fearing member of a brotherhood of man (so to speak), a hypermasculine, no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoner, kick-the-shit-out-of-the-next-guy capitalist. The picture books his mother had bought him, and whose illustrations he would have loved, as a child left to his own devices, to have gazed at all day, were wrenched from his hands by his father, upon which he'd be drilled (so to speak) in hateful and unedifying competitive sports, according to the stated aim of entering (so to speak) the long familial history of guffawing financiers. When he was old enough, it was, of course, to boarding school he was banished, where he was bullied over his fatness and dim-wittedness, and made no friends. The single incident which broke up the monotony was when he, in the middle of the night, in stifled rapture, half-asleep in his bunkbed, allowed his foremost bully to masturbate him, following which, enraged at himself, he beat the lad (so to speak) almost to death. Too ashamed to admit the reason for his violence, when the now nose-less boy was whisked off to hospital, he was on the verge of being expelled, when he finally broke down and admitted the whole shameful tale to his father—not the part that he'd let the boy touch his penis, obviously, but wording it so that his father would infer that the perverted villain had tried to force himself upon poor lamb-like Bartoff. Bartoff could thus sleep easy that night, knowing that, according to the letter of the law, he had not lied. His father, promising his son, for whom there had suddenly been engendered, unbidden, a newfound sympathy, that he would deal with the matter with delicacy, had a quiet word with the headmaster, who excluded the perpetrator and communicated to the boy's family his recommendation that their son be enrolled in a seminary as soon as possible. Bartoff the younger, after being taught at home by a series of top-notch governesses who tactfully turned deaf ears to his occasionally effeminate disposition, duly rose in the ranks of moneymen, as surely as Jacob's angels scaled their way up the sky. It was only years later that he heard, through the most astounding coincidence, that that other boy—you know, the one who'd tossed him off and got kicked out of school—had never, lacking as he did a posh education, got a good job, but endured an arranged, loveless marriage and finally killed himself. These memories, marching past Bartoff's inner eye, now, as he lay in the arms of his beloved—marching past him for the last time—dissolved into vague and trivial sensations upon the termination of the parade, ordained to try, and fail, to push through to their master's consciousness in future like ghosts haunting the chambers of his skull, with their significance and power to cause pain duly sapped.

It had been a relief to divest himself of all that when he'd been so forcefully taken by Mifkin; it should be no wonder to either Bartoff or the reader that the orgasm which crept up on and finally overpowered him (Bartoff, not the reader) during the deputy manager's penetration of his rectum was, consequently, seismic.

As for Mifkin—the thoughts which not so much raced as sauntered through his mind were not the same as Bartoff's. How could they have been? They were different people, with different memories, occupying different clods of God's earth; duh! Mifkin was brought back to his earliest recollected sensations: visions of his mother entertaining a succession of lovers (Mifkin's father having left before his (Mifkin's) birth). The unaccountable laughs, eerie moans, earnest sheet-rustling and comical bedspring-squeaking looping through the half-opened door to her bedroom composed, for him, an early experiment in modernist found-object music. When his mother's looks—and presumably, the elasticity of her vagina—slackened, she resorted, for the love of her five sons, to selling herself in the street (by which is meant, prostitution; not, say, twenty marks an arm, with a pinky toe thrown in as a Tuesday special). Ashamed of her, though he'd never been to church or read a book or had any sense of pride instilled in him, so far as he knew, he fled the city to the countryside, in a kind of Dick Wittington in reverse, where he wandered about, starving, until he stumbled on this hotel. He hung around, making a nuisance of himself, perfecting the art of the pathetic expression which was usually rewarded with scraps of food, until they found him the odd job to do, then took him in, and he worked his way up. Along the way, for a little extra spending money, he'd occasionally allow older guests to bugger him, but gritted his teeth and could not pretend to enjoy it. All along, he knew, deep within his heart, that he wanted to be the bugger-er.

And now, here within his arms, this beefy woman of a man who'd strolled into his life! He would not, could not, let him go. Their naked legs pressed together, hair tangled with hair, he felt whole, like embracing halves of a stone statue. Bartoff slept, his breath piffing contentedly on Mifkin's chest. Mifkin kissed him gently on the brow, and dreamed of possible tomorrows.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Frau Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, at the same instant as Mifkin and Bartoff's rapture, had hidden her head beneath her pillow and was cursing her existence when a flash of light, variously attributable to biologically emitted phosphenes or divine communication, played patterns across the insides of her eyelids. This happens to us all. But in Gilda's case, at just this instant, in the context of the pointlessness of life which she'd finally found the courage to admit, the flash was so overwhelmingly intense that she could trace it to no other source than God, and so, at a stroke, her life up to that point was wiped out and a new Gilda Hühnerbeinstein was born. Not literally—for there was no womb, and if there had been, her present size would have caused in her mother vaginal ruptures of an appalling magnitude. I meant it spiritually. She cast aside, at once, her artistic, Bohemian leanings; the pendulum which had been wont to swing between experience and rectitude creaked to a halt on the latter side; the fluttering butterflies of possible truths dropped out of the air and breathed no more; the river-rapids dammed up and stilled into serenity. Many more metaphors crowded Gilda's brain, which the reader will thank me for sparing them, but I will relate the vision which visited her from her history, at this moment; the final breeze through the pages of her past before she shut the cover for good, and, for good measure, burnt the book: she'd been a cheeky child, always up for a laugh, always off for a game when studying called, but some unfulfilled dream of her parents made them push her into a puberty of brutal operatic training. From that day on, she knew nothing else. She rose, through no will of her own, to become the most acclaimed diva of her time, a pinnacle reached about a decade ago and from which she'd descended, owing to a combination of senescence, vocal cord rigidification and lapses in mental health, about two-thirds of the way down. *What about love?*, you ask, Reader? A series of affairs with leading baritones along the opera circuit, all of them devoid of meaning or pleasure, but morally satisfying in that she could tell herself that her body was being debased and irreparably spoilt, just as surely as was her talent, for the gratification of others, in tandem with the torture it exercised on herself, took the role of love, for which it was rather miscast. At some point along the way, she found herself in a room above a Chinese eatery on tour in Limehouse, east London, having an abortion, after which she was told by a doctor that she would never again be able to conceive; a piece of news she took with the barest shrug, the idea of wilfully visiting the desecration to the soul that was life on Earth upon another human creature who hadn't asked to be born having never troubled her mind.

Like an ancient papyrus midwived from the sand, uncorked, held up to the light and read, once, in the instant of its disintegration, these memories presented themselves to Gilda, then died, sunk out of the story of her life. Had they happened, at all? Perhaps—to another Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, who had done the best she could, at times, and made mistakes, at times, splashing around haphazardly in the chaotic, boiling cauldron of life into which she'd been tossed. The new, true Gilda Hühnerbeinstein wished that woman well, as she withered into myth. The new, true Gilda Hühnerbeinstein bade her rest in peace, and turned to tomorrow.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt, meanwhile, was sat up in bed, unable, once again, to sleep. The bed shook a little as Petunia rolled over, inducing in him the slightest twinge of seasickness. Wafting from her unconscious flesh was her unique bouquet, which had so inflamed his nostrils when first they courted, and which, even now, despite the insufferable damage they'd inflicted on each other's souls since then, aroused him. Her breathing, momentarily interrupted during her roll, resumed its languorous rhythm. She had, without intending to, presented her back to him. In the dimness, he contemplated her form. Her outline was as perfectly drawn as an ageless sculpture; her neck, exposed from her splashing trails of unbound hair, retained all the vulnerable innocence of her youth; and her total shape, moulded into the thin sheets, was as if ingeniously crafted to unmoor a man's reason from his skull.

He wanted her.

But he knew what would ensue had he tried to wake her.

He thought of Deirdre.

He dressed and set off, in the hope he might, once again, find her crying in some broom cupboard. A gambler by nature, he hadn't sought to compute the odds. But sure enough, in the cavernous emptiness of the ballroom, a theatrical weeping warbled through the dark.

"Say! What's all this about, then?" he chuckled, and came over to comfort her. She was splayed on the dancefloor, her dress fanned out like a cupcake wrapper, arms wilted bonelessly as if frozen in a photograph of a ballerina expired mid-performance.

"Go away..." she moaned without conviction.

"As you wish, mademoiselle." He backed away, but her swan's head suddenly rose.

"Don't go."

He stopped, and smiled. "As you wish."

Her face couldn't really be seen; only the glowing stalactites of tears on either side of her face, and the thinnest hint of her eyelashes above them. "I bet you never cry, do you, monsieur?"

He strolled closer. "I? Well...even the hardest of hearts, when confronted by a painting of merciless beauty...or a poem whose intimate, devastating wisdom chimes so exactly with your own that it shames you...or a—"

"A girl?"

"Well...I am French."

She exhaled a sad excuse for a laugh.

"That's more like it! Nobody can be miserable twenty-four hours a day. At least, I presume."

He'd reached her by now, and extended his hand, which she took, and he helped her rise.

"No, no. I do take breaks for lunch."

Anything if not a gentleman, he loosened the grip on her fingers, so that she might withdraw them at any time. To his surprise, she did not.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I followed the whiff of maudlin self-pity."

“That’s the fragrance of my life, I’m afraid.”

“But you do keep a sense of humour about it, I’ve observed.”

“There are rocks of mordant awareness somewhat stymying the rush along the rapids towards the fall, true. They really only serve to crank up the terror.” She yawned, and sat back down on the floor, this time folding her legs beneath her, the chalky moonlight through the window picking out a lonely bare ankle, which did not escape the gentleman’s notice.

“If I understand your metaphor correctly, that means you haven’t plummeted to the very bottom just yet. May I?”

She nodded, and, lowering himself awkwardly, he sat down beside her, then proceeded to pull at his shirt cuffs and adjust his trouser legs so as to retain some respectability.

He stared through the dark at her blank, white-less eyes. He spoke softly, and with total honesty: “I do wish I could get into your head. I feel it would be horrifying and sublime—like facing God Himself.”

“I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate the comfort you’re trying to give. But I’m afraid I’m something of a hopeless cause.”

“Hopeless causes carry the greatest honour. Didn’t you know?”

Her face turned, in some direction, and the moonlight found nothing to illuminate, so, although he could still hear her breathe, she had as well as disappeared. “How can I thank you?” she asked. “May I relieve you?”

“‘Relieve’ me? Whatever do you mean by that?”

“You know. Erotically.”

“I—I’m not sure I understand.”

“I could use my hand. Or, if you prefer, my mouth.”

Flustered and ashamed, offended at the effrontery and bluntness, he rose. “I am a gentleman, mademoiselle!”

“Does that mean you prefer to think and do these things, but not to discuss them?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what any of it means. Good night. I hope you feel better.”

He huffed back to his room, muttering to himself, undressed, and got into bed. His wife lay as he’d left her. He softly lowered the sheet from over her, and, seeking to rouse her, ran his palm up and down the back of her thigh. But she kicked at him, blindly striking his groin, in her sleep, like an annoyed mare. Wincing, he drew the sheet back over her and lay on his back. Strangely, and uncharacteristically, he felt a mild revulsion at the notion of touching himself, so stared at the ceiling till dawn.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

After breakfast, Enid and Gangakanta sat in a reading room, untroubled by other guests, all of whom were probably holed up in their suites like botfly larvae nestled in the epidermis of your scrotum.

“Could there be no motive?” Enid wondered.

“Everything has a motive,” Gangakanta answered, scribbling equations on a huge tapestry of stapled-together papers sprawled across a coffee table.

“It does?”

“Unless it’s random.”

“So could a murder be random?”

“If the perpetrator is a machine.”

“A machine?”

“Or manipulated by a machine.”

“How could that be?”

“I do not know.” After a pause, still concentrating primarily on his statistics, he added, “Perhaps we’re all machines.”

“Hm.” Sinking back into the couch, she stared at the window, which remained all white, like an unpupiled eye.

“Not necessarily in the sense of having been constructed, by a constructor,” he expanded. “But in the sense that each of us only follows the dictates of our design, with the capacity of our parts, to the potential of our role in history.”

“Hm. And what does that mean?”

“I really don’t know. Philosophy isn’t my field. I’m just blathering, if you want to know the truth.”

She thought for a moment, without saying anything, one leg over the other, rubbing the hem of her dress between her forefinger and thumb. “...I feel like that, sometimes. Like I’m a piston pumping up and down, built for some purpose I’m perfectly oblivious to. Do you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you ever feel like that?”

“I try not to feel. There!” He sat back in his armchair. “It’s done.”

“The whole thing?”

He shrugged. “Insofar as we have the data to include, and the parameters to meet.”

“So what have you concluded?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you have a conclusion?”

“Conclusion? No, no. This only yields probabilities.”

“As to which guest or member of staff might be a murderer?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And—that’s it. It won’t predict the weather, or parliamentary elections—”

“So what does it conclude?”

“It doesn’t—”

“I meant, who has the highest proba—”

“Oh, well, you see, that’s just it.”

“What?”

“That’s the thing.”

“What’s the thing?”

“About the probabilities of being a murderer. And all that.”

“I’m confused.”

“You needn’t be. It’s really quite simple.”

“Go on.”

“The model suggests that every guest or member of staff is equally likely to have done it.”

“Really.”

“Or to take it upon him- or her-self to do so in the future.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes. So”—he proceeded to fold up the papers—“our investigation may continue from this foundation.”

“Thanks for that, Aadi. Could you just predict one more thing?”

“It’s not a prediction—”

“Yes, I know, but could you tell me the probable likelihood of one more thing?”

“What’s that?”

“To what extent will our investigation benefit from your having spent so many hours on that analysis, compared to if you hadn’t done anything at all?”

“Well...” He looked at the table in front of him. “I’d have to make a new analysis. Do you wish me to?”

“No, no. I think we’ll be all right.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mister Sanns, walking down the corridor, encountered a man whose name has not been—and will not be—recorded in this chronicle. The man moved a little closer to the wall, to allow Mister Sanns to pass. But Mister Sanns, for reasons best known to himself, chose to push the man, hard, in the side, against the wall.

“Oof!” said the man.

“What was that, sir?” asked Sanns.

“I merely emitted an exhalation born of your thrust of my person against this wall, sir!” retorted the man.

“Ah! Very good,” expressed Sanns with approval.

The man looked upon Sanns with some surprise. Sanns had proved, insofar as he’d been noticed at all, to be a meek and tired-looking individual. What, now, accounted for this sudden, unprovoked aggressiveness?

“You must be wondering how to account for my sudden, unprovoked aggressiveness,” observed Sanns, almost as if he could read his narrator’s thoughts.

“Well—yes, in a word,” answered the man.

“Fuck you!” spat Sanns, and pushed him again—into *the very same wall*!

“Stop it! Stop it this instant, or I—I—I shall strike you back!” complained the man, whose physical description has not been revealed, and, I vow, shall never be.

This protestation was met with a slap, clean across the cheek.

Curtis/Thaddeus chose this moment to stroll by.

“Man! My good man!” the man hailed him. “This gentleman”—indicating the giggling Sanns—“has shoved me, three times, and slapped me once—for no earthly reason!”

“That’s a lie!” shouted Sanns. He turned to appeal to Curtis/Thaddeus: “I only shoved him twice, plus, honour compels me to admit, the slap.”

Curtis/Thaddeus, screwing up his face into a repugnant caricature of deformity, thrust said face into that of the man. “Is this true, sir? Do you deny that he shoved you only twice?”

The gentleman, whose unidentified face bore still the taint of offended pride, performed a rapid mental reckoning, then admitted, “No—the gentleman is perfectly correct. He shoved me but twice—though for no reason at all!”

“Then let that be a lesson to you,” smirked Curtis/Thaddeus, “and to us all!—that this world has not yet degenerated so far toward damnation that precision of thought no longer makes a difference to our apprehension of its workings.” And he strode off, happy to have been of some assistance.

The gentleman, whatever his name may have been, shook his head in frustration and set off, away from Sanns. Sanns, with some regret, watched him walk away; for he knew that some connection, however slight, however transitory, and however unpleasant for both parties, had been made between the two of them. And was it to dissolve so soon? So soon?

He sprinted up and, with all his might, shoved the man in the back, knocking him to the ground. From the dingy carpet, the gentleman made all the usual protestations you can imagine, until Herr Voot happened to come upon them.



“Manager!” cried the gentleman from the floor.

“Yes, sir, how may I help?” asked Voot, his mind, frankly, on other matters, including, but not limited to, the erotic sap with which he was brimming over, with no tapper on the horizon to drain him. Until he was interrupted by this inane scene before him, in fact, he’d been hip-deep in a fantasy of profaning the, he suspected, untrespassed holies of Annette Godefroi’s body.

“He hit me!” Sanns screamed to Voot. “This disreputable gentleman struck me about my face, twice, then shoved me, for no intelligible reason!”

“That’s a lie!” cried the gentleman, too offended to rise from the corridor floor. “It is precisely the other way round, although, I must confess, so as not to repeat my previous error, he struck me but once, amidst a total of three shoves. All of them without purpose!”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!” Voot sighed, the final cloudlet of Annette’s imagined shocked, ashamed but grateful snarl upon recognising she’d been completely undone by his unappeasable virility, which lengthened within her like the noontime shadow off a sundial, disintegrating before his eyes. “I have many issues of business to which to attend. I cannot be separating guests from each other like flies from cows’ rumps!”

“I object to that analogy!” declared Sanns.

“As do I!” agreed the man, who stood up, nodded at Sanns, and shook his hand. One took the other’s arm, and they proceeded down the lane, chatting amiably on all manner of topics; it turned out they were both enormous aficionados of cricket.

## Chapter Thirty

At the other end of the hotel, Enid wandered through a hallway, having intended to open her head to any inspiration the god of criminology might choose to bestow, unprepared for the substitution of Pluck's bemused face. Had he ever really cared for her, at all? Probably not, she was forced to admit. She wondered what probability one of Gangakanta's algorithms would assign. These thoughts led to musings on the vile nature of unrequited love, then more generally to desire, then more specifically to her self-image of a fish flopping about on the shore of a world whose air simply did not suit her. Does the fault lie with me?, she queried. Was I made too unadaptable to the world into which I was thrown? Are others' longings more aligned with the offerings this world markets, or are they just better equipped to swallow their desires and make do?

I'm alone. And I'll always be alone.

I wasn't made any other way.

As she turned a corner, the sight, far at the end of the corridor, by an overlooked stairwell, in front of a vase of long-departed bistort, greeted her of Geneva and Rosella in heated discussion. Enid, feeling a little ashamed at doing so, retreated behind the corner, and watched. Many words were too low to be heard, but the gist went something like this:

"Did you talk to that Frenchwoman?" Rosella asked.

"Which Frenchwoman?"

"The wife of that diplomat. The gorgeous one."

"I haven't said two words to her."

"What about Trojczakowski? I know you've been flirting with her."

"What rot!" Geneva laughed. "Where do you get these stories? And why don't you commit them to paper, and sell them to a magazine, and earn some money so I don't have to paint all day, every day?"

"You don't find her attractive?"

"Who?"

"Miss Trojczakowski!"

"Well—there is something about her..."

"What about her?"

Geneva looked to ensure no one was about—Enid retracted her head behind the wall like a chicken—and answered, "Well, she's quite bright. And cultured."

"And?"

"Those long legs...and she's clearly never had an orgasm, meaning one can't help but fantasise about giving her one, so there's that."

"You do it to drive me crazy! Don't you?! Admit that you do!"

Geneva laughed. Enid poked her head back out, to find Rosella pouting, wiping away tears, now stamping a foot.

"Tell me that you love me!" Rosella begged. "Tell me that you want only me!"

Geneva fingered the wilted petal of a flower, and examined it as if it might prove a suitable subject for a still life. "Oh, need we bother with all that?"

Rosella hugged herself, scrunching her shoulders, and stared at the carpet in shame. "...After all I've given you."

Genevra laughed. "What have you given me?"

Rosella looked up at her, pleadingly. "Myself! My youth! My honour—it's gone, all of it!"

"You pursued me, don't forget. You sacrificed yourself, without a word of encouragement. Now don't you deny it."

Rosella squeezed her eyes shut so tightly that she winced. "I don't attract you anymore."

"You know that's not true."

"Now that I'm not a mystery anymore. Now that you've mined the last jewel from my body, and I've nothing left to give."

"Please, *please*! Could you keep all this drama for a play script or something, and let me get back to work?"

"Am I to go the way of all the others? The jetsam you've scattered across the continent? All the young artists who nipped at your heels like puppies, only for you train to be whores, then discard once the glimmer's gone from our eyes?"

"That's a bit of a mixed metaphor, wouldn't you say?"

Rosella's voice warbled. Tears choked her throat. She managed to squeeze out: "What...do you want from me?"

Genevra turned to check for witnesses—Enid whisked back her head—then silence. Enid got down on her knees, and peeped around the wall: they were kissing; gently, at first, Rosella still with a backbone of pride, but as the kiss grew more intense, her posture softened into wax, and Genevra held her up, and Enid's breath caught, and some wall collapsed in her skull.

"Everything," Genevra whispered in her lover's ear.

## Chapter Thirty-One

The duchess, preceded by her footman, was making an uncommon (in both senses of the word) foray out of her room, to complain to the manager in person about the indecent scribbles left on little notes around her suite, as well as posted to the outside of her door, when she was accosted in the lobby by Mister Sanns, who took this opportunity to stoop down and light the hem of her dress with a candle. She screamed, out of all proportion to the actual degree of danger, eliciting the servile assistance of several members of staff, as well as guests, who grabbed any container of liquid at hand to douse it. The duchess's loyal footman gave chase, pursuing Sanns up the stairs and through winding halls, unoccupied rooms, seldom-trafficked passageways and servants' quarters, all the while enduring a ceaseless, unintelligible hailstorm of invective hurled over the shoulder of the villain ahead of him.

"Leave me alone! Just leave me alone!" Sanns, tiring, panted, as he stumbled down a staircase into the intestines of the hotel.

"I shall avenge her highness's honour!" the footman vowed, more, it has to be said, out of duty than legitimate enthusiasm.

"I didn't do anything!" Sanns, barrelling through dunes of soiled sheets, lied. "Her dress caught fire by itself! You were there—you must have seen it!"

"That's not true, sir. You are a cad!"

"Who're you calling a cad?!" Sanns, having reached, finally, a wall with no outlet, slumped exhausted to the floor. The footman, just as burnt out, dropped down beside him. The two comrades—so alike in so many ways—wheezed side by side.

"Oh, what's the point?" the footman wondered. "What's the point of any of it?"

Sanns turned to his new friend, and asked, with real curiosity: "Would you have cared, if she was burnt alive? Really?"

"Course not. I would have yelped like a spoilt dog and pranced around her charred corpse."

Sanns nodded, laughing. "I thought as much." He reached out his hand. "My name's Alan."

The footman took his hand, and—wait for it—shook it. "Everybody calls me 'Sniggly'," he said. "At least, the duchess does."

"She doesn't treat you decently, then?"

"She's ruined me," the footman sighed. "Do you really want to hear about it?"

"Go on," said Sanns, brightening. "I've got all the time in the world."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Enid could not kick that kiss out of her thoughts. It was everywhere: behind her eyelids, framed in windows, in the profiles of married couples she watched in the lunchroom. The haptic electricity that proceeded, as she still saw it, from the touch of those four lips contained within it all the potential hinted at between Michelangelo's fingers in the firmament. It was an earthquake, demolishing millennia of civilisation built up by families of men with women, and in the freedom of a rubble metropolis, where all was levelled to smouldering dirt, a whole new existence could be endeavoured. The dominant half of humanity, by which history had been for so long defined, could now be discarded like a torn glove that wasn't worth the time to darn. Enid's own body, as she considered it, now, in her mirror, when no longer the locus of the penetrative male gaze, yearned itself into a verdancy it had never known, or been allowed. It was Mother Earth, striving after itself, barring itself from the exploitative mining of men. The image absent the male was like a family suffocated by an abusive patriarch who'd finally been hauled off to jail; or a modest hamlet at the foot of a mountain so monstrously bloated as to have blocked out the sun for aeons, now, thanks to an unforeseen collapse in the earth, cleared away. Aesthetically, emotionally, psychologically, and, yes, she dared think it, spiritually, the image of the two women embracing offered an ouroboric wholeness the likes of which Enid had never known or even dreamt could exist. It was an image on which to meditate, to carry within her breast, to model herself upon, and with which to balm over her body.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Gangakanta, meditating on cosmic mysteries entirely unrelated to Enid's fixation, was interrupted mid-mantra by a papery rustle from his door. He opened the door, naturally, to find Sanns crouched in the corridor—Sanns quickly pulled back something rolled up in twine and hid it in his inner coat pocket.

"To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" Gangakanta asked.

Sanns looked around. "Whatever do you mean, sir?"

"Your visit, sir."

Sanns rose. "Do you mean to say that you weren't expecting me, sir?"

"I was not."

"But you did invite me—did you not?"

"I don't recall doing so, no."

"But—" And here Sanns smiled. "—I have your invitation in my pocket."

"Do you indeed?"

"Yes."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"Then may I see it?"

"No."

"No?"

"You may certainly not. No."

"Well then." Gangakanta took a deep breath, folded his arms across his chest, and exhaled. "Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"You are most welcome." Sanns bowed.

"I wish you a most pleasant evening." Gangakanta moved to close the door.

"But!"

Gangakanta halted, the door a quarter closed.

"...Can't I come in?" Sanns said it with such a pleading look that his host was genuinely moved, and opened the door, fully, so that his guest might enter.

Once inside, Sanns made himself at home, searching the place for alcohol, waving away Gangakanta's insistence that there was none to be found, and finally throwing himself onto the settee. Gangakanta sat down across from him, and waited for the purpose of the visit to be revealed.

He rather waited in vain.

"Nice place you've got here," Sanns nodded.

"Thank you. Is it different from your room?"

"Not at all. Just the same."

"Ah."

Sanns tapped a soft tattoo on his knees with his fingertips, then clapped his hands, once, loudly, and confronted his host: "Look here, sir!"

"Yes?"

"Well—it's just..."

"Go on. You needn't be hesitant with me."

"I'm not being hesitant!"

“Of course you’re not.”

“Well, you implied as much that I was!”

“I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’m going to accept that apology, you know!”

“Oh?”

“But I appreciate your being decent, and manly, enough to make it, anyhow.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“You’re welcome.”

They stared at each other, Gangakanta with curiosity, Sanns with suspicion, without speaking.

Obviously, this state could not subsist forever, and, as if to prove the validity of my contention, Sanns broke, like a blind, dumb ape a fistful of twigs to which he’d taken an irrational dislike, the silence:

“At what, precisely, are you staring, if I might ask, dear sir?”

“At you, dear sir.”

“Ah! I thought as much.”

More silence, until Sanns blurted out: “Do you want to know why I’ve done all these things or not, sir?!”

“What things?”

“My pranks! My tricks! My spitting in the eye of society!”

“Oh, well, certainly, if you like.”

“Fine! But only because you’ve dragged it out of me, you understand!”

“I understand.”

“Mmf!” The growl Sanns emitted was somewhat bestial, as if he’d been clawed, and wounded, and chased into a corner, and forced to submit lest he be sexually dishonoured in some fashion. “Very well! You have noticed that we are all, every one of us, trapped inside this hotel until the storm subsides, I presume?”

“I’ve noticed that, yes.”

“Very good. And you might have noticed that an increasing number of mores by which the behaviour of man and woman are ordinarily circumscribed have, shall we say, thawed, in place of the snow?”

“You might put it that way.”

“Very good. Well, then—I say to myself: ‘Why shouldn’t I, like the others, remake myself—sire myself—into something wholly other than the unmitigated failure I had heretofore dragged around as a carcass with my identifying attributes attached?’ By which I mean: ‘Why shouldn’t I fill the void atop the plinth with a monument fashioned from my own most intimate, unspoken hunger?’ Do you see what I mean?”

“Sort of.”

“I’ll try to be more clear. I am making a desperate grab for life, sir!”

“Life?”

“Life—just so!”

“Had not you life before this?”

“You call that a life?!”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Sanns scoffed at Gangakanta for his prurient curiosity, only saying, “When I was a boy, after once seeing a circus, I dreamt of being a clown. That is all that matters, that is all you need to know, and that is all you *will* know!”

“All right.”

“‘All right’, indeed! Now let me ask you: do you remember this Inspector Pluck?”

“But of course.”

“‘But of course’—bah! *He*, I see now, was the only one of us with any spirit! With any purpose, any appreciation of life! And if I, modest I, little I, can keep a little of his irreverence alive—well!”

“So your juvenile inanity is your way of honouring our departed inspector?”

“Ah, sir, ha-ha, very good! Yes, you can call it that—you can insult me all you want—I don’t care! Because I have become, if you can see clear enough to see it, something of your own opposite.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!”

“And what are you?”

“A—a metaphysical—prankster!”

“Ah.”

“Yes, ‘ah’! ‘Ah’ is right! ‘Ah’ is certainly right!”

“I’m not sure what that means, but very well.”

“Yes! ‘Very well’!”

“And so if you are a metaphysical prankster, would you be so very kind as to inform me, whom you’ve already nominated as your opposite, who exactly am I?”

“Without reservation, sir! For you are—a strip of desiccated bark snapped off a tree.”

“Hm!” Gangakanta appeared a little offended, despite himself.

“What have you to say to that, sir?”

“Well...it sounds rather...cut off from things, I suppose.”

Sanns leant forward and, unexpectedly, grabbed Gangakanta’s hand between his.

“But it’s not too late!”

“It isn’t?”

“No!”

“What...do you recommend I do?”

“Throw your life to the winds, as I’ve done!”

“I suppose that is an option.”

“Why, I regret I didn’t do this years ago!”

“I’m sure.”

“Because—now do you want to hear the truth?”

“Certainly.”

“The absolutely brutal truth?”

“That’s why I invited you to my room in the first place, if you’ll remember.”

“Well! It’s that—” And here, releasing his interlocutor’s hands, Sanns leant still more forward till he was whispering in Gangakanta’s ear: “...I fear I might be snuffed out, into non-existence, at any moment!”

“Why...why do you fear that?”

Sanns withdrew, leant back, straightened himself, shrugged, and said simply:

“Because it’s all too good to last!”



## Chapter Thirty-Four

Mifkin, returning to his room from his duties, found Bartoff inside, in an apron borrowed from a broom cupboard, his wig, and a delicate chemise, finishing his dusting.

“Where have you been?” Bartoff asked, in his new, gentle register.

Mifkin came over and gave him a peck. “Some idiot’s pulled out the furniture from several rooms and blocked the corridors with it.”

Bartoff laughed. “It sounds like a fun idea! Why don’t we all sit round in the corridor and chat about all the things back home we’re supposed to be missing, but really aren’t? Why not?”

Mifkin considered. “This is my home.” Bartoff went back to dusting, leaving the unspoken question—*What about your home, Bartoff?*—hanging, like a broken-necked parachutist tangled in a tree, in the air.

Mifkin cleared his throat. “Might I...?”

Bartoff turned to him. “Yes, dear?”

“Might I...you know.”

“Hm?” Bartoff’s smile spread open his beard.

“You know—fuck you.”

Bartoff chuckled. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Following this latest expression of love, Bartoff and Mifkin lay in bed, cuddling Sam, who had been allowed into the room following the finale, and, in exquisite silence, breathed in the residual aroma of their congress. Bartoff relished the surrender of his masculinity, as a balloonist, to trade in a second aeronautic simile in the span of just a few paragraphs, who found himself finally able to soar to the heavens once he’d dumped the ballast his fellow citizens had, unsolicited, tied to his basket. And Mifkin, in Bartoff, had finally found something which approximated, for him, a home: a cosy cabin, complete with lacy curtains, soft slipcovers and whistling kettle, to harbour his phallus—although, for various reasons, it could not accommodate it twenty-four hours a day. Why, so simple a task as walking about a room would prove comically difficult, with the two of them stuck together like that! Ha ha!

But that was not what they were thinking about. Though the content of their thoughts stretched placid as a windless sea, their musings mixed together like drowning sailors in a whirlpool. Muscles rippling like whitecaps endlessly across their bed, breathing synchronised as by metronome, their contentment was complete.

With only the one small strip of paint flaking off this masterpiece, revealing the canvas beneath—Bartoff’s shame, unsmotherable, when the long-decayed eyes of his father made themselves felt on him, and guilt, when memories of Pluck, his family, and the boy from the boarding school sneaked in through the unlocked window of his thoughts.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Gilda, meanwhile, marched down corridor after corridor, arms outspread, eyes shut in all-seeing rapture, singing hymns traditional and extemporised, as expression of the ineffable, in devotion to the divine, for the salvation of her fellow sinners.

Curtis/Thaddeus, encountering her, unhesitatingly brayed: “Aw, shut yer trap, ya windbag! No one wants to hear that shit!”

Ignoring him, she passed by, glissandoing with dignity, but he would not relent:

“You ain’t fooling nobody, ya tramp! You got about as much religious fervour in ya as my collie back home—and she’s dead and in the ground!” he railed from behind her. “Take off yer dress! Go on! Take off yer dress! Take off yer dress! Show us yer arse, ya bleedin’ whore!” he chanted whilst following in her wake.

They approached Gangakanta’s room, where he was discussing the case with Enid. Their conversation paused, while the competing, muffled world views passed outside, then resumed.

“Aren’t,” Gangakanta wondered, “almost all the guests and staff—present company excepted—murderers, for what was done to Inspector Pluck?”

“Hm? Oh yes.”

He narrowed his eyes, but not without amusement. “You act as if that incident had somewhat slipped from your memory.”

She had been meditating, you and I, Reader, know, on, of course, the kiss. “I suppose it had, rather. I don’t know. So much has changed, it seems. For everyone! It’s almost as if none of it is real—that it’s just a stupid dream, dreamt by a stupid dreamer, who may or may not be me. Do you ever feel like that?”

“Every moment of every day,” he answered seriously. “But, if we want to pursue the investigation, since it does, one must argue, exist within the dream, then we must act in accordance with the rules of the dream, even whilst we’re not, in our heart of hearts, taking them seriously.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Unless you would rather we abandoned the whole thing.”

“No...”

“It’s all the same to me.”

“No, no, that wouldn’t be right.”

“You mean—within the parameters of the dream.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what I mean. Maybe there’s no point to any of it. Maybe it’s a case that can’t be solved. Maybe, even if it were solved, it wouldn’t really, truly matter. Oh, Aadi, you tell me—you tell me what we should do!”

He chuckled, turned his head, noticed a piece of lint, and flicked it off the back of his chair. “If it’s answers you want, I fear you’ve come to the wrong fellow. I’ve always been much better at putting unanswerable questions than concocting untenable and unverifiable answers. I have, however, stumbled upon one possible approach to this problem.”

“‘Stumbled’? How?”

He shrugged. “Meditation. And my toilet. Come, please—I will show you.”

She followed him into his bathroom.

“Immaculate,” she observed with admiration.

“Thank you. But that wasn’t what I’d intended to exhibit.” He took a hand mirror off the washbasin and held it up, a distance away from the wall mirror. The effect, as the reader has no doubt experienced him- or her-self, was an unending reduplication of their weary faces. “Picture,” he said now, “our hotel—our beloved, one-of-a-kind hotel—between these mirrors.”

“An infinite collection of Aadi Gangakantas and Enid Trojczakowskis musing on their counterparts,” she affirmed.

“Would the murderer, or murderers, in one hotel necessarily be the same as in all the others?” he quizzed her.

“I suppose not.” She stopped to think. “Or would they?”

He put down the mirror, and led her back into the sitting room. “I can’t claim to know. Only this: this possibility—that if all of the hotels are exactly the same, and, well—linked—like the strands of a spider’s web—and we were to, let’s say—I don’t know—jump to our deaths off a cliff, or burn the place down, or plant a bomb in the centre of the earth that would blow every atom to bits—...”

“Yes?” Enid stood before him, watching his eyes dart from one end of the wallpaper to the other, as if he could view each of these possibilities projected before him.

“...Then all of them would also be—blown to bits.”

“...But if not?”

“If not?” he repeated. “If there are variations in the images? If subtle alterations by a shaky forger’s hand left hidden clues amongst the counterfeits, undetected even by the most obsessive art scholars in all the museums across all the worlds?”

“Yes—what then?”

He cleared his throat. He looked still at the wallpaper, as if reluctant, or afraid, to meet her eye. “Well. Then I guess that...in regretful refutation of aeons of religion...we may assume that the moderns have hit upon it: that we are alone in the universe, after all.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Senhor Eli La Paiva stood, hands cupped over his abdomen, studying the paintings slathered across the corridor wall, nodding. Gangakanta happened by, and stopped to look himself.

“Senhor. Do we know who has done us the honour of painting these symbols?” he asked the Iberian gentleman.

“Mister Alan Sanns,” answered La Paiva.

“Ah.” Gangakanta pursed his lips, eyeing the strange designs which sprawled in fresh paint all down the wall. “I’ve noticed that you have spent a significant amount of time studying them,” he observed.

“That is true.”

“To me,” Gangakanta opined, “they hold no meaning whatever.”

“Very good.”

“Yes. . . .Forgive my intrusion, senhor—but what do you see in them?”

La Paiva smiled, and, finally, turned to him. “Do you consider yourself a rational man, sir?”

Gangakanta was taken aback. “I don’t recall ever being asked that, senhor.”

“Perhaps,” La Paiva suggested, “no one has ever thought to ask it, seeing how you present yourself as so faultlessly rational.”

“Then I thank you for not taking the façade at face value.”

“So you would, in fact, tag a picture of your person with the label ‘rational’? You are a rational man?”

“I like to think so. At least—I try.”

“Ah.”

“May I ask why you ask?”

“Because you asked me what I see in these symbols.”

“Yes.”

“And I can only answer this: that only when the monocle of the rational is discarded may one see the world as it truly is.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Enid, having ignored the paintings completely, passed by Madame Tautphoeus's room, and stopped when she realised that she hadn't seen the elderly lady out for many days. She knocked. A confused stumbling sounded from within.

"Madame? Are you well? It's Enid Trojczakowski. I just wanted to see if you were all right."

The door opened, and the old woman, in a white robe, hair undone, face numbed by a blend of liquor and brutal self-reflection, opened her mouth to speak. A moth as much as fluttered out.

"Vanessa?" asked Enid.

The old woman's twig-like fingers closed over Enid's sleeve and drew her within.

In the dim brownness of the room, all curtain belts knotted fiercely, Madame Tautphoeus hobbled unconsciously through the motions of serving her guest some cold tea.

"Forgive me for saying so, Vanessa, but you don't look particularly well." Indeed, the lady looked to have somehow accumulated years in the span of weeks.

"Well, I'm still alive, aren't I?" Technically, she was correct. "That's more than I could say of some of the guests in this place, anyhow."

Her voice was now the aural equivalent of something scribed by monks and left unread and forgotten on a shelf in a bricked-up room of a cloister recently deconsecrated and standing, slightly slanted, in dignified expectation of the wrecking ball.

"But you must think me fatuously old-fashioned," she went on, as Enid couldn't think of anything to say, "if I still consider being alive a blessing, rather than, say, an accident, or albatross."

As Vanessa was being so blunt, Enid saw no reason not to be: "If you're that certain you really are alive, then you're one up on me, madame, at any rate."

Vanessa waved that remark away with her brittle hand. "Tell me: have you made much progress in your investigation?"

"Investigation?"

That managed to raise a chuckle in the old bat. "You are still investigating the murders? How many have there been, now—eight? Twelve?"

"Only two, I'm happy to say."

"You don't count Inspector Pluck?"

"No—no, of course, you're right."

"For that was murder too—was it not?"

"I don't really know." Enid scratched the back of her neck. "An awful lot of these things depend on definitions, you know."

"Yes, yes, I get you. If a bloodthirsty killing is committed by the community as a whole, it's an execution. It's justice. Is that right?"

She was smiling at Enid, as a gargoyle might, mocking and malevolent all at once. Enid tried to imagine her as a young woman. Would she have been attracted to a Vanessa Tautphoeus in her prime? If those eyes were clear, those cheeks smooth, that flesh taut and those breasts raised, Christlike, from the dead? Could the two of them, out in the normal world, ever have made a go of it? Giggling over handkerchiefs in the store,

strolling arm-in-arm to the café like sisters, then back to a flat they shared, shut the blinds, and the red-bulb steam as their flesh melts into each other, like the dissolved detritus of candles coalescing after Mass? Or would the intuited condemnation of men, and their own shame, have pre-empted it?

“Frankly, I’m surprised you’re not incapacitated by guilt.”

Enid blinked. What had she seen on her face? “Pardon?”

“Hadn’t you declared to us all that you loved Thaddeus Pluck?”

“Oh. Did I say that?”

Once again, Vanessa laughed. “I suppose that your generation finds it hard to keep track of all your love affairs.”

“No, no, I’m not like that, madame. Not at all. No, I’ve—” Why not come out and say it? “...I’ve never had a love affair.”

“No?”

“No.” Enid felt, suddenly, a trifle embarrassed.

“Well. I’ve had many,” Vanessa laughed.

Enid thought about Pluck. His face was faded, like a picture coated in decades of dust.

“I was a different person, a few weeks ago,” she finally explained.

“Yes, yes. You young people can be born many times, many times, before you die, can’t you?”

“No...I don’t know. Do you have anything to drink?”

Vanessa, pleased, found something and poured it in a dirty glass for her. Enid gulped it gratefully, then continued: “I know I’m not a looker. I know I’m not sweet or dainty. I know anyone would be disappointed with my...with my body, or anything I could do with it.” Her eyes were closed, and the smell of oldness encircled her like soldiers round a castle. “All I can give, is my heart. I have so much...”

But the feeling came over her that she was being ridiculous, embarrassing, cloying. It wasn’t the alcohol, she realised, but the dismantling of her façade that she’d been undergoing since the start of her holiday. What was left of her?, she wondered in a panic. She stood up and searched the room for a mirror. There, on the bureau: it was so grimy she had to rub it with her sleeve, then looked inside, and found the same face she’d known all her life. Only it wasn’t so ugly now, she thought. It was a face of warmth, and elegance—and passion. If she were a man, she told herself, she would be delighted to call it the face of her wife. It was a face that never sought to deceive you; it could be trusted with your life. There was no reason, she understood now, to hide it away. If it were lathered in honey, and all the bears of the world were on her trail—so what? She would grasp her thumping heart in her hand, hold it out to the jungle and, if the jungle wished to devour it—she would let it. Better a devoured heart, she decided, than a withered one.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

That evening, neither Larry, Mifkin, nor any member of staff slept, obligated as they were to race around to guests' rooms, master keys at the ready, to free them from their beds.

Perhaps an explanation is in order.

Some incorrigible prankster—suspected by everyone to be Sanns—had broken into rooms and, whilst their occupants slept, tied them to their beds with their sheets. No molestation, it must be stressed, took place; but the indignity of having been spied in one's nightclothes, and pinioned to what is meant, after all, to be a place of safety for the frolic of one's subconscious, was felony enough.

So, for example, Mister Glen Stoupes, sinking out of a dream of going fishing with his brother, found his wrists and ankles inexplicably fastened to the bedposts. Warring within his brain were the reluctance to shout for help, with the humiliation he felt sure to have to suffer, and the prospect of dying from thirst in this uncomfortable position. Self-preservation carried the day, and Aloysius was gifted the honour of liberating the American. Glen's first move was to find his wallet and offer the man some bills, which Aloysius, not wishing to insult the guest, accepted. His second was the toilet.

Frau Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, who, no matter how often she fell asleep with Hypnos embracing her from behind, yet still so choreographed as to allow that pagan deity's fingers to reach around and fondle her intimate organs—that is to say, lying on her side—invariably woke to find herself on her stomach—her voluminous bosom and expansive belly providing supplemental cushioning, almost to the hyperbolic height of “Princess and the Pea” fame—now, discovering herself strapped down with her mouth pressed against her pillow, trusted in Providence to supply, if not a logical explanation, at least her deliverance from so unchaste a pose. As Providence, she acknowledged, did not always roll up of its own accord, but at times required a little push, she screamed hyperfortissimo till several members of staff arrived.

Likewise Gangakanta, who for almost an hour refused to believe he wasn't dreaming, until he, like Glen, really had to go to the loo, at which point he tried to solve the problem through logical convolution, then, having failed, called for help.

Miss Deirdre Laoghair barely bothered to lift an eyebrow at the discovery, but sighed and began to beg Death, whom she strongly suspected to be the culprit, to finish the job. She saw no need to call for help, and it was only when Mifkin, who ultimately had to knock on everyone's door to ensure their welfare this morning, demanded from without to know whether or not she was tied up, and she, not wishing to lie, admitted her situation, that she accepted her freedom to suffer yet another day.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Lapin-Défunts were spared the indignity of being tied up, but as both of them had felt pointlessly shackled to one another for many years, they wordlessly agreed to forgo any congratulations. Marcel spent the day reading an old novel for the third time, occasionally staring out their window at the snowdrifts, while Petunia fantasised about the perfectly crafted witticisms with which she'd regale the firing squad in the moments before her execution for the murder of her husband.

In the middle of the night, monsieur awoke, but this time, resolved to stay in bed. He might have been influenced by the book he'd been reading—some tosh about knights and damsels and honour—but he elected to endure his lot, and to respect the sanctity of marriage. After meditating proudly on his unsuspected capacity for integrity, he started to drift back off on that tar-black sea—which imbibes so completely even the drip-drip light of the moon—which we call “sleep”, when a very faint scratching from the vicinity of the door to his room insinuated itself into his incipient dream. Murderers, odious inspectors, perverts tying people up in their bedclothes, and now mice—in short, he couldn't wait to recommend this place to all his enemies in Zurich.

“Marcel!” whispered the mouse. But hang on—that couldn't be right!

He cinched his robe in full expectation of an imminent confrontation with a giant rodent. But, he was elated to find upon opening the door with a growl and a ready fist, it was quite the opposite: it was Miss Deirdre Laoghaire.

“Why, you're not a rat at all!” he cried, albeit it in a whisper, so that his wife would not awake and wonder with which class of animal, if not rodent, her husband was tempted to commit adultery.

“What do you mean?” she asked, rising from her knees.

He closed the door behind him and, taking her arm, started walking down the hall. “I should think it was obvious. I mean, just look at you! No one could mistake you for a rat! Not even a blind man. Not even a blind man who was dead!”

Despite herself, her mouth curled into what could almost, if viewed by someone who didn't know her, be read as a smile.

“You must forgive me, Miss Laoghaire, for you've woken me from my slumber and thrust me into something of a giddy mood.”

“It won't last.”

She led him to her room, where she tugged off all her clothes, with the attitude of one who held them in contempt, then attempted to debase herself—for him, and for the satisfaction she would reap from her own debasement—but he held her gently away from him, by the arm, and proceeded to conjoin with her in a manner that could only have been described, as any observers tasked with the job of describing it, had any been present, would have agreed, as romantic.

He wished her to reach culmination as well as he; just as, if they'd been reading a newspaper together, and he, the faster reader—such was his talent—finished a page before she, he would have waited till she reached the end before turning to the next—for why should the fulfilment of reaching the satisfying conclusion of the article, in which the editor tidily sums up the state of the world into level-headed, reassuring, unambiguous simplicities which could be smugly understood by even a stupid child, be



savoured by him, but not her? It was on this principle that he now acted, although, it must be said, the analogy was not present in the forefront of his mind. But she smiled, such as it was, sadly, and whispered that she couldn't; that she wasn't, in her words, "built for pleasure". Ever French, he gallantly insisted, but it was not to be, and her delicate sinews squeezed all protestation out of him.

His life flashed by him: his gilded childhood; rising through the ranks of the civil service; the endless disposable girlfriends through which he flipped like the pages of a thick tome whose continuing chapters the author was still dashing off and couriering in faster than he, Marcel, could read them; meeting Petunia, then so exquisite that he would have sawn off his left arm to savour her body (though the chances of her wanting to gift her body to a man with a bloody stump in place of a left arm would have been, he had to admit, difficult to calculate); his flagrantly dishonourable wooing, and wholly accidental impregnation, of her; the marriage coerced by both their fathers; the speedy realisation that they despised each other; her possibly wilful, possibly inherent, inability to satisfy him sexually; the tiresome string of mistresses; and stasis.

And now: this very minute: an unbearable feeling of being young.

He blinked at her, and whispered, in shock: "I think I'm falling in love with you!"

She shrugged. "It would have no meaning either way."

## Chapter Forty

Bartoff was standing, bemusedly, in the corridor, watching Enid and Gangakanta race past. The room was locked, so they shouted for a porter. Another guest or two strolled by, but didn't appear terribly interested. A yawny porter was produced, who laboriously searched through his thick set of keys, not at all put out by Enid's curses to hurry. The two investigators were the first to burst in, once the door was opened, followed by the porter, who felt, somewhere in the back of his skull, that it was sort of his duty.

Sure enough, there was the body, curled up on the rug, hands and feet smashed to a marrowy pulp, fist-sized hole in his throat still disgorging big-pulped globs of blood.

"I'll call a cleaner," sighed the porter.

"No. Please wait until we examine him," Gangakanta instructed him.

The porter shrugged. The dream he had been enjoying mere minutes ago, in his creaky cot, of regressing to boyhood on the farm where he'd grown up, patting cows and chewing hay, searching the many-acred sky for a glimpse of his glorious future, had been obliterated—as his past, he supposed, had been obliterated from history, now that it was now longer being lived—when he was awoken and dispatched to help these two clowns and their precious investigation. Now, when he returned to bed, would the Fate which ruled his unconsciousness bless him with a return to that tender reverie? Or would it inflict on him one of his other, darker dreams, involving, as they usual did, public, indecent, ritual humiliation?

"Have a ball," he muttered, and left. It was no business of his, and he is now out of this saga.

Enid, a little concerned she would lose some respect in the eyes of her partner if she turned away, forced herself to watch as Gangakanta unrolled Sanns' body and searched for further signs of trauma, of which there was none. While Gangakanta was consumed with this grisly endeavour, Enid could not but notice a trail of sparse but definite footprints, consisting of blood, leading away from the body and out the door.

She pointed them out.

"The porter's?" he asked.

She shook her head. "He barely made it past the doorframe," she reminded him.

"Yes, of course."

"Someone's idea of mockery," she reasoned.

"Why do you say that?"

She turned to him. "This is exactly what one would expect from a crime story. Isn't it?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think I've ever read a crime story."

"Well, I have, so you'll have to trust me on this."

"I do trust you. But just because it might feature in stories...why does it follow that it can't be true?"

"Of course it could be true, but it seems a little...you know."

From the way he was looking at her, she guessed that he didn't.

"Too...pat," she continued.

He remained crouching there, looking up at her.

“As if someone were toying with us. By...by leading us by our noses through a labyrinth, or storyline, constructed especially for us,” she sought to explain.

“By our noses?”

She sighed. “Not that it matters, I suppose.”

“But...just because it doesn’t happen...”

“It does happen, sometimes, of course.”

“But if it didn’t—where would the author get his ideas from?”

“From his imagination, I presume.”

“You make a clear-cut distinction between the two?”

“Shouldn’t we be following the footprints?” She tilted her head in their direction.

“But you said they’re not real.”

“They’re *real*, obviously.”

Sanns’ blood gurgled over Gangakanta’s fingers, though the latter did not seem to notice (nor, come to think of it, did the former). He would not let it go: “Their actuality, but not their intent—is that what you’re saying?”

Enid, sighing, looked down at Sanns’ face, as if in appeal; its unnatural rictus reminded her of the stage mask of an ancient Greek comedian.

“Either way,” she shrugged, “shouldn’t we follow them?”

Gangakanta looked down at the annihilated body, but did not seem to process the sight; the wheels of his brainworks were whirring over the subject of what Enid had said; while his physical eyes were trained on Sanns, the feed they conveyed to his attention was short-circuited by the concentration of his inner eye on the blackboard of probabilities.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It’s our best guess.”

The footprints marched down corridors, through doors, back onto themselves, across the ceiling, and finally culminated in a pile of poo in the scullery; Modeste was huddled up in a corner nearby, flashing them a positively baleful eye.

“Examine her feet,” Gangakanta ordered. Enid moved to do so, but he stopped her with a gentle hand on her arm. “Pardon me,” he whispered. “I did not mean to order you about.”

“That’s all right,” she smiled back.

“It’s only because...” Here he looked a trifle embarrassed, and couldn’t look her in the eye. “I would find it both socially improper and, to be frank, aesthetically repugnant, to touch a woman’s foot myself.”

“That’s very honourable of you,” she said, just to get him to shut up, really, and proceeded to seize Modeste’s ankle and lift up her foot.

“Unhand me or I’ll shit all over you!” screamed the cleaner.

“Shut up!” Enid shouted back in her face, and the poor old woman cowered into herself. Her shoe was shrivelled and torn and long unwashed, and emitted an unpleasant odour the reader can well imagine for him- or her-self. Enid checked the other one (shoe, not reader), too, just in case, before reporting: “There’s no blood.”

“I know there’s no blood!” Modeste protested.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Enid clarified, dropping the foot.

“Then who the bloody hell were you talking to?” Modeste demanded. “There ain’t nobody here but you and me!”

“I’m here,” Gangakanta disagreed.

“Ah, aye,” admitted Modeste. “I suppose it was you she was talking to, just now, then, weren’t it?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Gangakanta said.

“That’s right,” Enid averred.

Modeste was beaten—there was no more she could say to that.

“What are you doing here, madame?” Gangakanta asked her.

The latter was silent.

“Answer him, please,” Enid said to her.

Modeste looked up. “I’m sorry, were you talking to me? I assumed you two was talking to each other once again.”

“What are you doing here?” Gangakanta repeated, this time pointing towards Modeste’s face.

“Are you pointing at me?” she asked, for purposes of clarification.

“I am, yes,” he assured her.

“Well, then, I’ll tell you: relaxing after taking a shit,” she answered. “But forgive me for interrupting your conversation.” She got up to go.

“Just a minute, please,” said Enid. “Did you see who left these footprints?”

“What footprints?”

“These bloody ones, here.” When Modeste looked all over, Enid pointed. “These.”

“Aren’t they yours? I just assumed they was yours.”

“Were they here before or after you...relieved yourself?” asked Gangakanta.

“I what meself?”

“Before you emptied your bowels,” Enid clarified.

“My what?”

“Before you took a shit,” Enid sighed.

Modeste stared at her. “I think so,” she said. She stared at Enid as if watching the last hours of the earth—chaos, devastation and the extermination of humanity. “There was a letter of some kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“At the end of the world,” she nodded.

“What?”

Modeste blinked back to the present. “Under there,” she nodded, indicating her excrement. “A letter.”

“To whom?” asked Enid.

“I dunno.”

“What did it say?” asked Gangakanta.

“Dunno. Didn’t read it. Can’t read, if you really want to know.”

“We need to get it,” said Gangakanta, circling the pile and squinting his eyes, trying to make out a corner of paper but concluding it was a piece of corn.

“You could teach me to read, sometime, maybe!” Modeste suggested, but Gangakanta ignored her.

He stood stiffly and turned, a bit hesitantly, to Enid. “I propose, Miss Trojczakowski, that, in future, each of us grants the other three ‘passes’—as I believe they say.”

“What do you mean by ‘passes?’” asked Enid.

“He means that you can pass on doing something you don’t want to do,” Modeste explained, excited to be able to contribute to the conversation.

“Precisely,” Gangakanta affirmed. “And then, by necessity, and default, the other person must do it.”

“I see,” said Enid.

“Am I included in this proposition, monsieur?” asked Modeste.

“Certainly not,” he replied. Addressing himself once more to Enid, he asked: “So what do you think of my proposition?”

“I’m totally in favour,” she answered, “as long as we can begin with my passing on poking into these faeces.”

Gangakanta snapped his fingers in indication of his having just been bested; if he had been a swearing man, he would, trust me, have found this occasion one on which to swear.

“What’s the matter?” asked Modeste.

“It’s just that I’d wanted to claim this as my first pass,” he explained.

“Perhaps if we had a cleaning lady in the vicinity...” Enid hinted.

“I’m a cleaning lady!” Modeste realised.

“Ah!” said Enid. “In that case, madame, would you be so good as to...”

“As to what?” She looked from one to the other in bafflement.

“As to clean up this mess, and recover the letter,” she specified.

“Ah!” exclaimed Modeste, finally understanding. “Certainly.”

Enid and Gangakanta shared a sigh of relief, smiling to each other.

“Just as soon as my break’s over,” Modeste agreed.

“When is your break over?” asked Gangakanta.

“I’m sorry?”

“When is your break over?” he repeated.

“Pass.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I choose to use one of my passes on that question,” she announced.

“We need to hurry,” said Enid. “Every second we wait, it’ll get more stained.”

“What will get more stained?” asked Gangakanta.

“The letter!”

“Well...”

“What is it?”

“Maybe the letter wouldn’t turn out to be so important.”

“Why do you say that?”

He shrugged. “It’s probably nothing. Just a misplaced shopping list from the kitchen, or some such.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Well, according to the laws of probability.”

“Do you want to perform a calculation?”

“I just did.”

“When?”

“Just now. While we were talking.”

“I disagree!” Modeste piped up. “I think it’s probably very important!” She looked to Enid. “For the investigation.”

“Aadi, please,” Enid beseeched. “It’s our only clue.”

Gritting his teeth, then immediately feeling ashamed at his brutish display of emotion, he looked around the room. “I need a stick, or something,” he said.

“What for?” asked Modeste.

“To poke around with.”

“Poke around where?”

“In your excrement, woman!”

All three scrambled around in vain for a stick.

“I could ask the cook for his stirring spoon!” Modeste suggested. “He’s using it just now, but he won’t mind.”

“I could run outside and break off a branch,” he suggested.

“You’ve got to hurry! The note might be unreadable by now!” Enid panicked.

“They have good sticks in India,” Gangakanta recalled. “I could sail back home, and grab one, just as soon as the snow thaws.”

“Hurry!”

Gangakanta watched himself grab Modeste’s arm and sweep the shit across the floor with her broom-fingers. Modeste protested outwardly, while inside her, she was most aroused.

The pen ink on the now-brown note stood out in white:

*Go fuck yourself—arsehole.*

“How rude!” Modeste opined, and the others were inclined to agree.

## Chapter Forty-One

Once the content of the note was made public, as was only just, other guests debated its significance with all the passion they might muster when considering the chance it would rain on the morrow. Herra Brotherus, for example, maintained that the “fuck” was intended to be taken literally, while Glen Stoupes plumped for a more figurative reading. Philip La Paiva read the dash preceding the “arsehole” as a typographic pause, interpreting the note’s intended recipient (whomever that might have been) as the putative anus, whereas a watery-eyed Swede named Leksén contended that the dash indicated “from”, as a sign-off, meaning that the name of the note’s writer was “Arsehole”. The indignity of bearing such a scandalous handle might be enough, this Leksén ventured, in his capacity of armchair psychologist, to submit, to push Arsehole over the thin line which divides socially constructed sanity from socially constructed insanity, with potentially murderous results. On Leksén’s insistence, the hotel’s register was brought over, and ruthlessly scanned by all present, only to disappoint them with no such record of a “Monsieur Arsehole” to be found.

With unnoted irony, then, the modest ripple of excitement caused by the enigmatic note served to draw more guests out of their rooms, and back into social contact, rather than the perhaps more expected effect of, given the news of yet another murder, scaring them further away. Aside from the intriguing note, however, the reaction to the actual death of Alan Brigeiboit Sanns was little more than a collective shrug, and a—to share the rude diction of our mysterious note-maker—half-arsed one at that.

Enid had more or less forgot the note. Gangakanta had nothing meaningful to say about it, and didn’t seem terribly interested in discussing it—perhaps finding himself unable to shake off the undignified circumstances in which it had been discovered—and withdrew to his chambers for a nap, so Enid jumped at Genevra’s invitation to drinks in the latter’s room. Her mind wilfully trained on other matters, including times table chants and potted biographies of great artists of the Renaissance, she left herself no mental headroom for explaining to herself why she was bathing herself so thoroughly beforehand. Her younger self—even the Enid Trojczakowski of a month ago—would have been, if asked to explain the actions and mindset of the Enid Trojczakowski of this moment, positively stumped. It was not just that she had never been, at least consciously, drawn to a woman before, but that the possibility of such a thing, outside vague allusions to continental decadence in some of the saucier novels unobtainable from the town’s library but which she’d righteously confiscated from behind the textbooks of a certain number of her adolescent female scholars, had never set foot into her skull. If she’d been asked to explain such a phenomenon—and she had never been asked; for who would have asked her?—the best she might have come up with was an evasive smattering of scientific jargon on the subject of unnatural mutation; and if challenged on who, if not nature, had instigated said mutation, she would have attempted a clumsy segue to another topic entirely, such as the weather or an anodyne compliment towards the baby in the passing pram of Parson Shimmy’s niece.

Many minutes were spent, hardly of their own accord, on grooming and dress-choosing. Facing herself with ruthless honesty in her mirror, Enid concluded that, while the finished product was undeniably several fathoms from perfection, all such

appearances could never be anything other than works-in-progress, and, besides, who was perfect? In short, she, Enid, would not have found the image in the mirror attractive. But who was to question the taste of a great artist like Genevra?

And then, the doubts leapt like termites from the woodwork, scurried round her feet, tickled their way up her legs and bored into her skull: What if she was misreading the whole situation disastrously? What if Genevra intended their friendship to be a picture of innocence, or was maliciously mocking her? Either way, Enid was exposing herself to ridicule, shame and dishonour.

“Ridicule”—this word still held some meaning, Enid supposed. But “shame”? “Dishonour”? These words were fish, these days, slipping from the hands of a pernickety fishmonger who insisted on their dissection and wrapping before being handed simperingly to his customer.

She knocked on the door. Someone said “Come in”. She took a deep breath, entered, closed the door, and proceeded to the sitting room, where she found Rosella, lying on the settee, bereft of clothes, on display for her, though clearly, judging from the look on her face which combined contempt for Enid with contempt for herself, not by choice.

We talk of “first instincts”. Enid’s first instinct, in this scenario, was to look away. To avoid meeting Rosella’s eyes and, certainly, her body. But this impulse was really, she was half-aware, her second instinct, lowered upon her like an upturned glass over a captive bug. But, to use an unrelated metaphor, the public notice placard plastered on a pole disintegrated in the elements, peeling away to reveal last season’s; so did Enid’s natural impulse revive out of hibernation, and she looked into Rosella’s eyes, savoured the hatred which flashed there, and took in, in long, deep, ocular draughts, her body. It was the first female form, unclad, she’d beheld, saving her own; the sight, by replicating the attributes of her own body, albeit with significant variation in size, shape and quality, heartened her, and made her feel, for once, yoked to the wider world.

Here was the female form, unencumbered by clothes, those men-woven sails cinched around masts which choked women’s flesh; here were the parts of the body which go unpainted, never troubling the top-hatted gentlemen cane-strolling through the academy, opened like oysters, half-ashamed, half-proud of their pearls—the seaweedy hairs, the eerie tree bark folds gathering in waves like a Jovian storm, the crinkled nether navel, constricted fist-tight, palpitating with anticipatory beads of sweat, all guarded by the glaring, red snake eyes quivering above. A snake: Rosella, writhing under Enid’s gaze, coiled up like a snake; while a yearning to, like a snake, swallow Rosella in her entirety overwhelmed her.

She sank her fangs in the flesh like a vulture tearing the skin from a bone, and ravenously, feverishly, strove to consume it all.

Rosella thrashed under her, a bird with a broken wing, a sacrificial lamb. Enid burrowed into her, trawled her tongue along her as if dragging a river, clasped at her for dear life as she would at the handholds and finger pockets of a mountain face off which she were plummeting. Something elemental in her demanded to possess the pure, unaffected beauty of Rosella’s body; ordained in her was the need to give pleasure to that body, bring it to consummation, which could only be achieved by ingesting it entirely.

Rosella’s undisguised disdain for her, the disgust at herself for the pleasure she nevertheless suffered, and the shame she tried but failed to conceal, only urged Enid to attempt fusion with her all the more. Is this how a hunter feels, Enid might, if she’d



retained rational sovereignty at this moment, have asked herself, when it sees a bear it wants to slay, and relishes the slaying, before skinning it and wearing its hide over his own skin? All her earlier visions of ineffable transcendence between women dribbled away, and in their place was the singular vicious lust of the wolf for the lamb.

Rosella's cries and moans and obscene curses were smothered beneath Enid's mouth; Rosella's fingers scratched and pulled and pinched at her, merely whipping the boiling brew into more of an overflowing lather. Enid thought nothing; her brain had thrown its reins to her lust, which drove her deeper and deeper into Rosella's convulsing body.

The whole field of her vision was awash with the particular tint of Rosella's skin, every mark and mole rich with import, her tongue coated with Rosella's sweat and nectar like a leaf trembling under the weight of dawn's dew, and she could smell, in Rosella's flesh, Rosella's past, her identity, the core secrets of who she was, uncloakable, reeking overpoweringly about them both.

The wave crept up over Rosella—she fought against it, not wanting it, not wishing to give Enid the satisfaction of having given it to her, but her deer-like legs, exhausted from sprinting across the steppe, finally buckled, and the tiger pounced, and cleaved her with its claws.

Rosella's past foamed up over her, and over Enid, who intuited it too: a past she divulged to no one, of a shack in the country, of brothers who beat her, of the saving grace of art she found in her one safe haven, the museum; of running off to Europe, and years of losing herself in its fathomlessly loamy culture, so delicately intertwined with decadence; until she fell in with Genevra, and slowly came to stand out amongst all her toady disciples, and she was picked, at last, to be her consort. She gifted everything, body, mind and soul, to her, casting her own dandelion tuft far from the family she'd once known. In thanks, Genevra squeezed and twisted and crushed her like a tube of paint. Now, she woke up after each night's lovemaking sore and humiliated, but with no sense of there being anything else out there in the world which could fulfil her.

Enid knelt before the settee, watching Rosella, curled up, sobbing into her palms. Behind them came Genevra's voice: "Oh, stop your bloody blubbing, will you?!" The artist then proceeded to command the model, as surely as she would pose a wooden manikin, to rise and remove each piece of Enid's clothing, while Enid stood, abashed but dutiful. As each portion of her body was exposed, she was at once ashamed at its agedness, sagginess and manifest imperfection—in contrast to the youth, tautness and refinement of that corresponding part to be found on Rosella—and luxuriated in the aesthetic strength with which it was endowed, by Genevra, who was, behind the scenes, placing it on the same pedestal as Rosella's. When Rosella had finished, Enid's clothes lay like husks on the rug, unbuttoned, unlatched, unlaced, gaping in awareness at their insignificance when they lacked a body to enshroud. Enid felt light, shorn of her vestments, as if she might at any moment start to float. There was a sense of terrifying liberation, in being totally naked in front of another person, and in the sensation she felt in the eyes of that person gazing upon her—as if the gaze itself were, like a fingered thing, stroking and exploring and penetrating her. Even before Rosella, in compliance with Genevra's bidding, began to touch her, Enid was forced, through no conscious intent, to touch herself.

Whisper after whisper, snaking through the heady air from Genevra like a stage manager's prompts, pulled, like invisible strings, Rosella's hands and head, as she lay Enid down on the rug and played her unwanted role. Enid could feel Rosella's hot tears against her cheeks as they kissed, cognizant of Rosella's saliva dripping off Enid's crooked, yellowing teeth. In every act, Rosella's repugnance was evident. The more Enid sensed how her body disgusted Rosella, the more satisfaction she reaped in Rosella being forced to engage with it. She thrust herself into her, wishing to defile her perfection with the contaminating impurities of real life. Every action commissioned by Genevra seemed calculated to inflict the maximum pleasure on Enid, and the maximum dishonour on Rosella. Through all of this, Enid was sensible of Genevra's eyes upon her, smearing up her legs like paint, scorching down the sweat of her back like flame over oil, tickling round her navel like a paintbrush's bristles, splashing over her buttocks like a chamber pot's innermost essence dumped from a window onto the caps and bonnets of unsuspecting passers-by below, seeping into her crevices like rain into cracked earth. Enid was a predator conscious that it, too, is prey.

With the stifling blanket of pride, which had been lain over her since first she was aware of her body as a possibly desirable object, thrown finally off, Enid could enjoy the electrification of her nerve endings without inconvenient reference to a Judeo-Christian code of ethics: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and company flushed swirlingly down into the sand, not a judgemental peep retained by the suddenly, thrillingly empty air they'd vacated. When her first-ever "little death" arrived, she as it were disembarked from her body and, floating above herself, looked down on the scene with a detached curiosity, wincing at the existential cry which erupted out of her body's throat and resonated round the hotel, waking guests, interrupting card games and threatening to unstitch space from time. The scene of her and Rosella's nude bodies fizzled out, and was replaced with the public square of the village where she'd grown up, the one-room schoolhouse in which she excelled, helping the younger pupils, idolising her mistress, and beaming with the answer to every question. The teacher, along with everyone else in the village, assumed she'd end up travelling the world and making of herself, within the accepted parameters for her sex, something to be admired—a modern, independent, flourishing woman, yet one who knew her place and would be far too timid ever to contemplate any course which might border on scandal; in short, the kind of woman of whom the village could decently approve. For her part, she dreamt of impossible romances with chivalrous men, fierce-browed yet unexpectedly chaste, as in the novels she wolfed down like a starved, mad-eyed dog slurping puddles of vomit behind a bar. In reality, she had neither the nerve, nor the money, once her father died, to make good on the promise of such adventures. Rather, she replaced the adored teacher, who finally retired to spend her few residual years nursing what was left of her nerves; her new life as a pedagogue procured, the grooves to arid spinsterhood laid, she had little to look forward to, save when, once a year, she made the drudging trek with her mother and sisters to the seaside, where she sat, costumed from neck to ankle, upon a bumpy towel astride the inconsequential pebbles of a doleful English beach; such was the extent of her global domination, up until this trip, for which she'd spent years breaking the wills of innocent children by coercing them to diagram sentences in order to save up, a trip she had never found the nerve to attempt until the death, earlier this year, of her mother suddenly uprooted the boundless hedgerows which had hemmed in her horizons. As for romance? There was none, unless you counted the

few chaste kisses she bestowed on the village haberdasher, a widower she despised but felt obligated to thank, given the number of meals and dresses to which he'd publicly treated her. As well, we may feel safe in assuming that neither the young reader of romance novels she once was, nor the gnarled village elders who'd thought so much of her, would ever have imagined she would one day be lying on the rug of a hotel room with another woman, exploring each other's most private orifices.

"I hate you," whispered Rosella, without malice, without passion.

"I think you're wonderful," Enid whispered back.

Their limbs, boughs drained of sap, lolled across each other. Genevra, a shape in the shadows, looked down on them, with love.

## **Chapter Forty-Two**

At that moment, Eli La Paiva lay in bed, processing the ribbons of ever-replenishing data which spooled into his mind from all corners of the universe. Given the subjects which vied for his attention, from the merging and annihilation of galaxies, the births and deaths of religions, the inauguration and toppling of false gods, and the acclaim and unmasking of false messiahs, to the slimmest crink in a blade of grass on an uninhabited moon—the sexual congress between Enid and Rosella, while noted, hardly merited grave consideration.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Neither guests nor staff, similarly, paid much heed to the most recent murder, and the murders before that had rather washed out with the tide and sunk before the hem of the sea swished back towards shore. This despite the fact that, as Gangakanta, with his sheets of papers bearing scrawled numbers could tell you, if the population of the hotel had dwindled, and there was still present, one might assume, a murderer harbouring murderous intent, then the chances of each guest ending up on the receiving end of a blunt instrument could only have risen. Enid and Gangakanta, when they chanced to meet, did, out of duty, conjure up theories, hold them up on the wall to see how they would look amongst the furnishings, then discard them.

"I bumped into Herra Brotherus," Enid informed him.

"Oh?" Gangakanta was trying, out of courtesy, to appear interested, but was at the same time devoting the best part of his brainpower to a secret calculation which had become something of an obsession for him: the probability that the universe would implode within his own lifetime. Try as he might to compute this, he came up against the fact, time and again, that he lacked utterly the required amount of data. Still, he made his best guesses, and the tentative results were encouraging: that is, that the universe would, indeed, end, within, he felt modestly confident in predicting, the week.

"Yes," continued Enid, staring at the wall, recalling the taste of Rosella's underarm. "I asked him a few questions about the murders."

"And?"

"He could barely recall there had been any."

"Ah." *What could it possibly matter, when the universe will soon be kaput?*, he wanted to add, but did not.

"Then I had a few words with Monsieur Bartoff, in the corridor."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. He had his own theory about them."

"And what was that?"

"That there was no murderer as active agent, but that, rather, we have been visited by a disease—a strange, mutating disease, the symptoms of which are severed heads, smashed bones, and so on."

Gangakanta nodded, wondering if this would be the last time he and Enid would meet. "An interesting idea."

Enid sat back in her chair and recalled the almost balletic elegance with which Rosella had extended her feet, in line with her shins, on either side of her, Enid's, head.

"What do the four victims have in common?" she felt the need to ask.

"Four?" queried Gangakanta.

"Well—Snede, Pluck, Sanns...who was the fourth?" She couldn't remember.

"You are including Inspector Pluck amongst the victims? When we know very well who was responsible for his death?"

"Do you think we should not? There might be a connection."

Gangakanta shrugged. "If you wish."

"No, no, you're right. Three murders, then—setting the inspector to the side, for the time being."

“So who are the three?”

“Snede, Sanns...dash it, I can't remember!”

They both thought for some time, visions of cosmic disaster and female flesh somewhat forestalling their success.

“The coronel!” Gangakanta eurekaed.

“Yes! Of course. I'm a little ashamed I so soon forgot.”

“Never mind. He's not here to take offence, after all.”

“So...what was I saying, before?”

“Before what?”

“I was asking some question about the victims...the three victims...remember?”

Gangakanta thought. “Yes...yes, yes, I do recall you asked something, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was.”

They sat in silence.

*Should I try to kiss her? Gangakanta thought. Will I allow myself to be wiped from existence without ever having kissed a woman? Even when I find the idea repellent? When all womanhood is a sickly, slimy thing? What would she think of me, if I tried to put it in these terms? Oh, what's the point, anyway...?!*

Enid wanted to be disrobed before Geneva again. She wanted to be touched by her. *What am I doing here in this mathematician's room? she asked herself. When will she call for me? Will she call for me? I don't think I'd want to go on living if she didn't. I feel like...I'm in love. This must be love—that thing with Thaddeus, that was just...some stupid—I don't know—some stupid romanticisation of pity? But this—can this be love? I've never felt love before, I realise now...after so many years of believing—perhaps foreordaining—that I never would. Is this love? Or just an inflammation of the flesh? I want to find out. I want to push on through this tunnel to the end, and see just what colour of light, if any, shines on the other side.*

“You were asking what these three victims have in common,” Gangakanta remembered.

“Ah...yes. So, then: what do these three victims have in common?”

“You mean, aside from their all being dead?”

“Yes.”

“Because, that much is obvious.”

“True.”

“And, therefore, falls rather under the rubric of hardly needing to be said.”

“That's right. Thank you, Aadi.”

He shrugged. “I hardly think it a profitable contribution. But, you're welcome.”

## Chapter Forty-Four

Shortly after this discussion, Gangakanta was walking down a corridor, when Curtis/Thaddeus approached him, shouted in his face, "There's no investigation, cretin!", and shoved him against the wall. Flustered, and not the sort of gentleman to retaliate, Gangakanta merely brushed himself off and mumbled, "You are a very rude man." At this retort, the porter stuck out his tongue, then turned and went on his way.

The next time Gangakanta saw Enid, he informed her of the porter's incivility; and the next time Enid saw Curtis/Thaddeus, she stopped him and demanded an explanation.

"I'm a perfectly well-behaved gentleman, I am," he protested.

"That's not what I hear," she countered. "You leave poor Sri Gangakanta alone, do you hear me?"

The porter looked down at the floor. He kicked at a tumbleweed of dust. "Aw, gee, miss!"

"You know you've done wrong, haven't you?"

Curtis/Thaddeus nodded.

"And I know you're a much better boy than that, really. Aren't you?"

He nodded, but would not meet her eye.

She considered him. "You intrigue me, young man. Where do you come from? I'd like to hear your story."

"None of your business!" he spat. "I'm my own man, I tell you!"

"Yes, yes, I understand that. I'd just like to try to get to know you."

"I hate you!" he screamed. "You're a whore and a villain! You're all whores and villains, all of you!" And he ran off, deaf to her demands to return and say sorry.

## Chapter Forty-Five

As Gangakanta passed by Madame Tautphoeus's room, the door suddenly opened and out popped her head.

"Forgive me, monsieur, but may I see you for a moment?"

He stopped, looked at the old lady, and sighed.

"I'm rather busy at the moment, madame. You must pardon me." In truth, he was intending to return to his room and cry.

"It's vitally important to your investigation, or else I wouldn't have bothered you," she insisted.

"Investigation?" He looked at her—thought that in a few more days, she would cease to exist, crumbling into less than atoms, then nothingness—and pitied her.

"The murder investigation. Are you and Miss Trojczakowski not still investigating the series of murders that have taken place here?"

He could not, as a gentleman, deny this to her face, so followed her into her room.

"Sit down," she instructed him, as they entered her sitting room, "and remove your trousers."

He sat and proceeded to do so, when, upon reaching the last button, he considered what he was doing. "Wait a moment," he begged. "Say that again, please, madame?"

"I want you to remove your trousers." She knelt down in front of him, and stared appealingly into his eyes. "I am a lonely old woman, monsieur. I have never known love. It is only that bastard, ersatz son of love, which we call 'sexual intercourse', with which I can salve my untouched heart."

"That's all very tragic, madame, but I still don't see—"

She spoke as she would to one whose command of the language was slack, or who was hard of hearing, or simply stupid: "I want you to put your manhood in my mouth and let me render you satisfaction."

He crawled up on the chair, stood, and leapt over her kneeling form.

"Pardon me, madame, but I am not the man you need!" He stumbled to the door and away. He would return to his room, cry sharp tears of self-reproach, and condemn both himself and the world for the way each was made.

Vanessa Tautphoeus, meanwhile, felt a new spice of shame mixed in with the roiling groundwater which lapped up desperately against the underside of her skin, seeking an opportunity to geyser forth. She disgusted him; she disgusted everyone. And why? Because she was old, and shameless. She hated herself for being old, and she hated the world for holding it against her. She felt compelled to satisfy herself, but could never get past her early girlhood lessons in church that such things were despicable. When her urges to be violated by men swelled up, like this, with no outlet—she felt she was capable of doing anything.



## Chapter Forty-Six

Mifkin had just finished sodomising Bartoff again, and the gentleman placed his head on the deputy manager's chest and allowed the latter to stroke his hair.

"You've so much tension in you," Bartoff observed. "Deep wells of hatred."

"Not towards you," Mifkin said. "I hope you know that."

"Towards whom, then?"

Mifkin breathed in the musk that had congealed in his beard from his investigation into his lover's buttocks; it was the smell, for him, now, of home.

"Your class," he finally answered.

Bartoff chuckled, the palpitations of his throat rumbling tremors over Mifkin's breast. "What rot!"

"Put yourself in my position," Mifkin countered. "These moneyed clowns are the curse on my head. I only exist insofar as I can cater to their, usually disreputable, needs. Then there's Voot, that grovelling cave dweller!"

"Why do you dislike him so?"

At this, Mifkin disgorged a sound of disgust which would try the most proficient onomatopoeist to render into graphemes, following it up with: "He treats me with disdain. With contempt. With..." He nodded, settling, in his head, on a suitable phrase. "I'll tell you how he treats me. He treats me as if I were a hollow automaton built in accordance with his wishes. In a word: he treats me as if I had no soul."

Bartoff thought, breathing silently, staring at a vaguely flower-like design on the wallpaper, ignoring the residual pain from his anus. "If you could have anything," he asked softly, his beard tickling, unconsciously, Mifkin's nipple, "anything in the world—what would it be? *Who* would *you* be?"

Mifkin considered his answer, regarding their hypothetical game with surprising solemnity. "...I wouldn't ask for much. Lord knows I'm not a covetous man. Simply this: I would be manager of this hotel. With you, and Sam, here forever. And Voot's demolished body lain twisted at my feet."

"Then why not do it?" Bartoff asked. "If that's what you want...I feel, deep within me, that we're now living in an age where there's nothing to stop us from getting what we want. Only the possible competing obstacles of other people seeking what *they* want—and the spoils must needs go, then, to the stronger. And you—and I—are the strongest, my love."

"Do you realise what you're proposing?" Mifkin asked. "Do you understand what that would mean?"

"I do indeed. Civil war."

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Hands behind his head, Gangakanta stretched out across the sofa in Enid's sitting room. She placed a cup of tea on a saucer on the low table in front of him, then went to sit down in a chair and took a sip from her own cup.

"I've read all manner of explanations of the phenomenon we call 'love'," she said. "Chemical. Psychological. Evolutionary. Literary construction in the gardens of the medieval court. So if I were ever to feel it—feel something that seemed to suggest to me that the appellation 'love' ought to be attached to it—how would I ever know what it really was?"

"I wouldn't know. I fear there's no statistical calculation which would help us with this topic."

"And if I did feel such an emotion, how could I distinguish it from pure lust for another person's flesh? Perhaps if I were one disembodied spirit falling in love with another, such questions would be, well...immaterial."

"Emotions have always been a little unsynchronised with me," he confided. "Interacting with people...understanding their feelings...even understanding my own—not an easy, or, I've often wondered, worthwhile, pursuit. Feelings—they've always seemed like literary symbols planted to be decoded in a huge, worthy novel I've been assigned by my teacher but honestly have no desire to read. But that's just me, isn't it? I've never felt myself a part of everybody else. I've always felt at least as affiliated with a wall, or a desk, or a tree, as with a fellow human being. Such is my life: an overpeopled party to which I was never invited, among whose guests I have no place, into whose corners I bashfully slink, for no discernible purpose, and yet—here I am."

"I know feelings from the books I've read," she added. "And sometimes...sometimes I feel like my feelings match. And that feels like a sacred thing."

He considered whether to say what was next, but then remembered the probable death of reality, and concluded that nothing would be lost, so said: "I've never known physical love." He looked up, half-expecting an expression of mockery, but when he found, instead, sympathy, he went on: "The idea of physical love—in essence, a chimp poking around an anthill with a stick—with a woman, or with anyone, has always repelled me. I never indulged. No offence intended."

She smiled, and he went on:

"I reserve the notion of true love, if I may, for a communion with that which is beyond me."

"God?"

He shrugged.

"Nature?"

He shook his head. "I do not know. I feel it might finally be...with oblivion."

## Chapter Forty-Eight

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt's head fit perfectly into the concavity of Deirdre's belly. She stroked his hair. He wished for nothing else in life; he begged God, in Whom he only occasionally believed, to raze the outside world from existence and allow him the blessing of remaining like this for all time.

He winced when she broke the silence: "I've decided something," she said.

"Yes?" He was sure she was going to return the sentiments of love he'd been constantly expressing to her; or, perhaps, finally allow him to attempt to render her erotic satisfaction, something for which he'd been petitioning since they'd started their intimate acquaintance.

"I will never find my father. It was just not meant to be."

She'd told him about her search for her father. She'd treated it as the reason for her being bothered to keep alive, the excuse of which she'd had to consistently remind herself in order to justify, or at least withstand, the indignities of her earthly existence.

"So...what does that mean—in a practical sense?" he asked.

"That there's no point in going on."

He sat up. "But I disagree! Deirdre..." He seized her hand, which was, as always, cold. "*I* saw no point in going on, but I did, and now I've found you! Now I've found purpose in *my* life! So you wouldn't rob me of that, would you?"

"Something would happen. I would anger you, you would annoy me, one of us would die, or become incapacitated, or we'd both grow old and ugly..."

"That's all perfect nonsense. Do you think I haven't felt love before? I have—crude children's crayon renderings of love, many times. Which is why, when I come up against an authentic masterpiece in oil, I know it! I know it!"

"What a clumsy analogy."

"Then let me put it this way: I've been like a single-minded fish swimming up and down the same river..." He saw the ridicule glowing in her face. "No? Then how about this: I the hunter, womanhood the stag; which is admittedly slightly contradictory, but hear me out!"

"Why don't you just make it a doe?"

"All right, then, a doe! A herd of does! And I, chasing after one after another, momentary pleasure after momentary pleasure, ad infinitum, to the point of mutual revulsion, the original motivation, whatever it had been, long lost—as the only way, a deluded way, of outrunning death."

"So what am I?"

"What are you?"

"In this extended metaphor?"

"Ah...I've got it—Diana, the Huntress! And I, the hunter become the hunted!"

She shook her head. "Diana is pure."

"And what are you, my dear?"

"I'm all too mortal. For which I'm grateful. If I couldn't die, I would be in agony."

"Are you not in agony?"

"I don't want to be a goddess. Pick another analogy."

“All right, then, if you insist—I will rely on an unequivocal cliché, and compare myself to a rider on a carousel.”

An eyebrow raised. “And I the wooden horse?”

“No.”

“Let me guess: the golden ring?”

“No. Each turn of the carousel is another cycle in my life: a new mistress, discovery by Petunia, angry scenes, mercantile reconciliation, then on to the next mistress. In amongst all that are the loathing of ourselves and one another, the guilt of failing to sire children, the pointlessness of my career, and what have you. But now, you!”

“Me! What am I?”

“You, my dear, are the clear field outside the carousel—into which I must jump!”

She considered. “A field...devoid of body...a subtle consciousness, expressed through the growth of grass...”

“Permanence.”

“The cycles of the seasons...no conversation...”

“Peace.”

“I suppose there are worse things one can wake up in the morning to find oneself being.”

## Chapter Forty-Nine

Poor Larry, per Manager Voot's insistence, despite the breathless dramatics our characters were currently undergoing, continued with his duties at the hotel, and during one trek down a corridor, a door opened and Madame Tautphoeus practically wrenched him inside her room.

"May I help you, madame?" he mumbled.

"Yes you may, young man: you may make passionate love to me. It would be a kindness to an old woman, and I would remunerate you handsomely."

"I beg your pardon, madame?"

"Do you require it to be spelt out, you tease?" She grabbed his crotch. "You insert *this*, into (grabbing his hand and placing it onto the corresponding feature of her own person) *this*!"

With apologies, Larry politely removed both their hands and declined: "I am sorry, madame, but there is a professional code my job imposes on me—I have perused this code many times; it basically consists of doing what Herr Voot tells me and not asking questions—and yet, where concrete duties are itemised, I can assure you that nothing involving either of our genitals is included. If you like, I could consult Herr Voot—"

"Hang Herr Voot! Remove your trousers, at once!"

"Pardon me, madame, but I really must be off."

"Oh! Oh, I see—you're a virgin, aren't you?" She rubbed the back of his thigh with sympathy. "You're uncertain of yourself. You're afraid you would invite the scorn of the initiated onto the head of the ignoramus, is that it?"

"Pardon, madame." He turned to leave. Falling to her knees, she seized him by his leg.

"Can't you see I'm desperate?! How low need I debase myself in the quest for a little tenderness?!"

"I will send you a sherry, madame."

"I don't want a sherry! I want a cock, God damn it!"

But Poor Larry escaped her clutches and went off to his room to still his thoughts via the magic of dance.

## Chapter Fifty

Does the reader remember the unnamed gentleman who had an altercation with Sanns in the corridor a while back? You do? Very good. But, sad to say, he plays no further role here.

Let's move on.

A note was discovered, in different handwriting from that of the notorious "Arsehole" epistle, in a cupboard, beneath a pile of towels, and was reported to Herr Voot by the cleaning lady named Janice (who was herself, due to her character and reputation, placed above all suspicion). Voot read the note—which was, he was thankful to observe, free of faeces—before requesting the presence of Enid and Gangakanta in his office. Both arrived, somewhat sullen, clearly wishing to be elsewhere, and barely able to summon the requisite enthusiasm to think about such matters so early in the morning.

Still, they were too polite to openly refuse to read the note, once they had been apprised of its origins, so read it they did. It said:

*I killed Snede, Pluck, Feosalma, Sanns, and Larry. I had no help.  
I had no reason, save the confidence that these acts would serve to illustrate  
the randomness of the universe. I confess all.*

*Do with me what you will.*

*Warm regards,  
Kivi Brotherus*

Voot leant his elbows on his desk, laced his fingers, and looked on the investigators expectantly, as if to ask, "Well?" When no answer was forthcoming, he was forced to ask, in actuality: "Well?"

"It's absurd," judged Enid. "A joke. Nothing more. What's further, I fail to see why you felt it necessary to waste our time with it."

"You don't think Brotherus had anything to do with the murders?"

"He's a feeble little rodent. He might very well have written this letter, in an effort to gain attention for who knows what mad purpose. But I can't see him as being capable of any active deed like murder."

Voot turned to Gangakanta. The latter said nothing; he was focussed on the phrase "the randomness of the universe".

"Sri Gangakanta?" Voot prompted him.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Your thoughts, monsieur?"

"Thoughts about what, please, sir?"

Voot indicated the letter.

"Ah. Well, Brotherus might have written it. Brotherus might have killed one, or more, of these people. Who can say, really?" He turned to Enid. "Who can say anything?"

Enid shrugged.

Voot looked at them both curiously.

"What about this inclusion of Larry in the list of victims?" he asked.

Enid shrugged. Gangakanta yawned.

“You don’t see it as a threat? That Larry might be the next victim?”

“We’ve all got to die,” opined Gangakanta. “Do you think the corpse of a murder victim is any more aggrieved at his fate than the corpse of a man who died in his sleep, surrounded by loved ones, at a ripe old age? Why don’t you ask them? Go on—find a couple of corpses and ask them.” He shrugged. “I doubt you’ll hear many complaints.”

Voot sucked his teeth—a most displeasing sound. “I must admit, Miss Trojczakowski, Sri Gangakanta, that I was expecting a little more interest from the two of you.”

“If you’d like to take over the investigation...” Enid suggested.

“No, no, I quite have my hands full with the dwindling supplies of food, disappearing firewood, general unrest and slow breakdown in order that seem to be afflicting the hotel.”

“Perhaps we should have a word with Herra Brotherus,” Gangakanta, reluctantly, proposed.

“And with Larry,” added Enid, “to make sure he’s not yet dead.”

## Chapter Fifty-One

The three made their way to the stockroom, where Larry was supposed to be on duty. No one was there. Then they tried his room. After several bouts of knocking and shouting from Voot, the young man opened the door, looking a little woozy.

“Why aren’t you on duty?” Voot demanded.

Larry looked behind him, to see who was being addressed.

“I’m talking to you!” Voot specified.

“What was the question, monsieur?” Larry asked.

“Why aren’t you on duty?”

Larry looked behind him again.

“Are you drunk, boy?!”

Larry looked around his room for a drunk person.

“Is there anybody else in your room?!” Voot wished to know.

“No, sir,” answered the boy truthfully.

“Then whom do you think I’m asking, precisely?”

Larry considered the question, before guessing: “Me?”

“Very good!”

Larry smiled; he felt like he was back in school, and, for once, top of his class.

“Wipe that smile off your face, you idiot!”

Larry did so. Now he was sad.

Enid’s maternal instinct, so long suppressed, burst the surface, like a diver whose lungs had exhausted themselves of air: “Leave the poor child alone, you scoundrel!” This was addressed, there should be no room for doubt, to Herr Voot.

That gentleman bowed to Enid. “Forgive me, mademoiselle.”

“Kindly frame your future remarks towards me in a respectful manner,” Larry, a little smugly, demanded.

Voot’s glare was full of promised revenge. “Monsieur”—that word fairly dripped, like a thawing icicle, with sarcasm—“are you intoxicated?”

“Only with life!” the boy returned in a shrill, sing-song tone.

“At least we’ve established that he’s still alive,” remarked Gangakanta, returning to the purpose of their visit.

“Yes, that’s true,” Voot admitted. “We just wanted to check you were still alive,” he explained to Larry. “Seeing as that appears to be the case, I’ll deal with you later.”

“I’m still alive,” Larry confirmed. “Goodbye, all.”

“Goodbye!” said Enid pleasantly, and Larry closed the door, took a moment to pat his chest, legs and sexual organ, to ensure that his assertion of life had been genuine, then went back to bed.



## Chapter Fifty-Two

They next dragged themselves to Herra Brotherus's room. Voot knocked on the door—what else could he do; stand there in silence, attempting to telepathically will the room's occupant over to open it?—and they were at once treated from within to solicitous promises of the door shortly being opened. Brotherus being, if nothing else, a man of his word, the door was, duly, soon opened, and there he stood, in a rumpled suit, smiling complaisantly.

"I'm sorry I took so long to answer the door, mademoiselle, monsieur, monsieur." He bowed to each. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We wanted to ask if you were the murderer," said Enid. Voot looked on her a little disapprovingly, having hoped they might have gone about the matter with a little more slyness and tact.

"M-m-murderer?" He looked from one to the other.

"Perhaps we should explain," said Voot. "May we come in?"

"Oh! Of course, of course, how rude of me, heh-heh!" Here Brotherus slapped himself violently on his cheek in self-reproach. "Please do!"

He sat them down round his coffee table and made quite a fuss over them, offering tea (declined) and slices of cake (accepted by Gangakanta, only to be hastily retracted with a sheepish smile and admission that there was no actual cake to be had; Brotherus, you see, had only been trying to be polite).

Finally, he sat down across from them, and began: "Do any of you follow the horses?"

"Horses?" asked Enid.

Brotherus nodded, eagerly. "Racing horses. Betting! Do you?"

"The reason we've come," Voot interrupted him, "is because of this." He handed Brotherus the letter, which was folded in half.

Brotherus took it, thanking him profusely, held it delicately in his hands, and stared at it.

"You'll have to open it up," Voot explained.

Brotherus looked at him blankly.

"The note. It's folded. You'll have to open it up, in order to read it."

Brotherus returned his gaze to the note in his hands, stared at it, then back to Voot.

"Why don't you help him?" asked Enid, of Voot. "After all, it would be the gentlemanly thing to do."

Shamed into action, Voot leant forward, in order to retrieve the note from Brotherus, and either open it for him, or educate the gentleman in how to do so himself (this latter option, Voot reasoned, being preferable, in that in future, similar scenarios, when confronted with a folded note, and Voot nowhere in the vicinity, Brotherus might put to good use that which he was now on the verge of learning, and be able to read that future note successfully, to the satisfaction of all). But Brotherus sprang back from him, shielding the note in his cupped palms, a look of primal distrust disfiguring his face, like an early man whose half-gnawed bison bone had been snatched at by a Neanderthalic rival.

"Here," Enid soothed him. "Why not let me?"

Brotherus chirped frightened little peeps as Enid slowly and encouragingly drew open his fingers and unfolded the note—at seeing this revelation of text, and on a page twice the size as it had been, shining up at him, he emitted a cry of wonderment.

“Now you know how to unfold a piece of paper,” said Enid with pedagogical pride.

Brotherus looked to Voot. “What would you have me do now, sir? I have opened the letter—have I not?”

“Be so kind as to read the letter, now, sir,” requested Voot.

The little man closed his eyes and appeared to wince.

“It will be fine,” Enid promised him, patting his hand. “Just do your best.”

“Then can we have sex?” he asked with hope.

“Certainly not.” She sat back. “You’re a revolting worm. Just concentrate on the task at hand.”

He snapped his fingers with a good-natured *aw shucks, but I tried my best!* expression and began to read the letter. Voot nodded approvingly at the manner in which he was following instructions. Gangakanta stared at the wall, finding it far more enriching an object for his perusal than the scene before him. When Brotherus had finished reading the note—twice, to make sure he’d gleaned every iota of implication—he carefully folded it back along the same crease, and announced: “I’m awfully sorry, but I’m afraid I did not write this letter, and don’t know who did.”

“Are you sure?” asked Voot, for neither Enid nor Gangakanta seemed especially interested in the proceedings. “Perhaps as a jest? Or to help the investigation, in your own unique way?”

“I’m afraid not, monsieur. I truly wish that I had, for in that case, I supposed I’d be better placed to assist you.”

“Then can you speculate, perhaps, as to why the writer of this letter, whoever he may be, chose to sign it with your name?”

“Whose name?” Brotherus asked, seeking clarification.

“Yours, monsieur.”

“My name?”

“That is right, monsieur.”

Brotherus stared at an unlit lamp. “I did notice that, yes...”

“I must admit to you, monsieur,” said Voot, when the content of his conversational partner’s speech had trailed off, “that I am not a detective. I am only the lowly manager of a hotel.” The other three began to protest at the low esteem in which he appeared to hold his position, but he cut them off: “But if I *were* a detective, then I imagine that—and you must forgive me for any perceived yet, I assure you, unintended slight to your honour—I would not be able to simply take you at your word that you did not write this note, when the very presence of your name thereupon, although, I admit, perfectly capable of having been there inscribed by a third, malicious party—the presence of your name means that you must remain, at least tangentially, a suspect.”

“Pardon?” asked Brotherus.

Voot took a breath. “I will not repeat myself, monsieur. I have every confidence that you heard what I said to you.”

“Just now?”

“Yes.”

“You mean, what you said to me just now?”

“That is what I mean.”

“But—and pardon my rudeness in seeking to point out to you what you no doubt already know so well, and which is, after all, your business and not mine—but when you compared the handwriting of this note to the samples of my handwriting you already possess—on the hotel register, the letters I sent to the hotel in advance of my visit, etcetera, etcetera—did you find them, monsieur, to be the same?”

Enid, Gangakanta and Voot looked to each other in embarrassment.

“If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion?” Brotherus went on.

“You may be so bold,” answered Voot, relieved to be off the hook.

“Well. Do you think—now, please tell me to just shut up at any time, if I’m being absurd, because I know that I can be!” Here he uttered an irksome little bark of a laugh. “But, do you think there could be any possibility of Larry the bellhop having written the note, and having made a mistake?”

“What mistake?” asked Voot.

“Perhaps—forgive me if I’m not making any sense—but perhaps he meant to list ‘Brotherus’”—here he patted himself on the chest, in mock-arrogance, as if to modestly excuse himself from any accusation of pride—“in the list of victims, and to sign the note as ‘Larry’.”

“Meaning that you’re intended to be the next victim?” asked Enid.

“And that Larry is too stupid to sign his name in the right place, at the bottom of a letter?” asked Gangakanta.

“Precisely!” Brotherus sat back, clasping his hands on his knees, more than a little pleased with his theory, and the ardency with which it was already being taken up.

“Larry *is* an idiot,” Voot agreed, “but I’d not have thought to that extent.”

“Perhaps he craves the company of men,” Brotherus proposed.

“Why do you say that?” asked Voot.

Brotherus shrugged. “Just a thought.”

Voot looked to Enid—lost in daydreams—and to Gangakanta—who was trying to pierce through the solid object of the coffee table, with his eyes, with, so far, no success—and rose.

“Thank you for your time, Herr Brotherus,” he said. “I hope we haven’t wasted too much of it.”

“Oh, don’t go—please!” The last word, “please”, he fairly shouted.

“No, no, work calls!”

Enid and Gangakanta, realising that they were leaving, stood up too.

“I’ve really enjoyed our conversation!” cried Brotherus. “Please come again soon. Say—at five o’clock?” Appealing to Gangakanta: “I promise to have acquired some cake by then!”

Voot made their excuses, and the three left the suite. At the door, Brotherus looked to Enid: “I do wish I could have been of more help.”

“That’s quite all right. I wish you a good day,” she said.

“And I do hope we can still have sex, of one sort or another, together, someday.”

“No, that’s not going to happen. But have a lovely afternoon nonetheless.”

## Chapter Fifty-Three

Mifkin met up with Aloysius in a cramped space in the dark beneath the service stairs.

“Let us say,” whispered Mifkin, “what we are not supposed to say.”

“I certainly don’t fancy you, if that’s what you mean,” Aloysius replied.

“No. That is most certainly not what I meant.” Mifkin cleared his throat. “I know you hate Voot, and have hated him for always. Now go on. Admit it.”

“I admit it,” Aloysius answered. “What of it?”

“Very good. We’re being honest with each other, don’t you see? That’s the first step to getting things done!”

“Get on with it. What do you want, Mifkin?”

“I’m getting to that. Just, you know, hold your horses, will you? Without patience, how can we ever get anything done?”

“Cut the claptrap, will you, you buffoon?”

Mifkin stiffened. “May I remind you that I am still deputy manager of this hotel?”

“I’m sorry, are we still in a hotel? I’d been under the impression we were now in a prison. No, strike that—a looney-bin!”

Consciously refraining from mentioning the precise subject of his speech, Mifkin countered: “On the contrary. I feel more free than ever before.”

“That’s just fine. And if I liked the taste of dick, I might be swooning over the moon right along with you. But as it so happens, in case you haven’t noticed, the guests are going gaga, we’re running out of food and there’s a killer on the loose. So you’ll have to forgive me, Deputy Manager Mifkin, if I’m somewhat lacking in patience just now. And if you think you could see your way to hurrying up and explaining why you and I are chattering here in the dark under the stairs, why, I’d be the most grateful waiter in the hotel.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re implying.”

“By what?”

“By that—you know.”

“What?”

“That reference you made...about the taste of...”

“Dick?”

“Richard, yes. I mean, I hardly know any Richard. In fact, now that I’ve had the leisure to count, I can tell you quite definitively that I’ve never known any man named ‘Richard’ at all! Ever! At all!”

“Look, Mifkin—”

“Not even by hearsay! In fact, I’m sure I wouldn’t even be able to sound out the letters, if you presented the name in question, if you handed me a card on which it were very neatly and formally embossed, yet sparse and with a real sense of ornamental self-restraint, with merely the most casual upturned letter-tails to recall a more elegant time, and if you demanded, even by gunpoint, that I render that word into sounds of which a fellow human being with a pair of tolerably working ears could make head or tails, I fear that I’d just have to lie down and die, right there, in the street, in the middle of the God-damned road—”

“Mifkin!”

“I want to know if you’ll join me in a coup to overthrow Voot.”  
Aloysius shrugged, though Mifkin couldn’t see it. “Sure. Why not?”  
“Very good. Now let’s go find others.”

## Chapter Fifty-Four

Mifkin and Aloysius proceeded to the laundry room, where they found Annette sitting in a chair, reading.

“We’re revolting against Voot,” Mifkin began.

“Why?”

“Tell her why, Aloysius.”

“Because we don’t like him.”

“You’re going along with this?” she asked him.

Aloysius shrugged. “He asked me first.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if Voot had asked me first to join a counter-insurgency against Mifkin, I wouldn’t have cared to rebuff him.”

She scoff-laughed and went back to her book.

“So...can we count on your support?” Mifkin asked her.

She ignored the question.

Next they found Modeste, sat on the floor in the corner of an empty room, staring at nothingness.

“Modeste,” Mifkin hailed her. “We’re revolting against Voot. Join us?”

She grunted—and a well-known stench puffed out from her dress.

Next they found Larry in his room. He danced, gloriously, heedlessly, within the tiny chamber while they asked him. He would not answer; he probably hadn’t even heard them, their corporally petty voices unable to travel to the realm to which he was transported.

Some other, frankly nameless, members of staff agreed to join them, while others, for various reasons, refused. The last, Curtis/Thaddeus, who had never had any love for Voot, nevertheless chose to act indignant.

“You are traitors to the hotel, gentlemen! Both of you!”

“Come off it, Curtis,” said Aloysius.

“My name is ‘Thaddeus’, damn you!”

“We’ll call you ‘Thaddeus’ if you join our coup. How about that?” offered Mifkin.

Curtis/Thaddeus adopted a wide stance and knuckled his fists into his hips. “I compliment myself that I retain sufficient honour to deafen myself to disreputable pleas. Instead, I vow to inform Herr Voot of your treachery!”

He ran off. Panicking, Mifkin asked: “What do we do?!”

“It’s simple,” Aloysius shrugged. “We make a move. Tonight.”

## Chapter Fifty-Five

Meanwhile, Charlotte and Arthur Drig—remember them?—were having a good, old-fashioned, throw-the-crockery-about row. Arthur had happened to come across their children—who, the reader will remember (if perhaps requiring a little nudge), were last seen coping in their various ways with the death of Betsy's beloved Inspector Pluck—running about the hotel, smashing things and bellowing like savages (the boys were, anyhow; Betsy had found a reading room to herself and was contemplating profounder concerns).

"Don't you care what they're doing?!" Arthur asked.

Charlotte, sat in a corner of the sitting room, drinking a cocktail, whose composition she'd misjudged but about which she was too drunk to notice, shook her head. "No."

Arthur didn't have much hair, but he pulled at what remained. "Can you even remember their names?" he finally asked, in exasperation.

"Of course I can. Don't be a fucking moron."

"Go on, then."

"What?"

"List 'em."

"List the names of our children?"

"Yes."

"You want me to list the names of our children?"

"That's right."

"I won't stoop to your level."

"I'll start you off: Betsy."

"Of course I remember Betsy. She's the only girl, and the only one with any dignity or self-control."

"So who's next?"

"Well—I don't know why I'm doing this, but..."

"Yes?"

"Well, there's Dougie."

"You mean 'Doobie'."

"Of course that's what I meant; it's what I said, weren't it?"

"No."

"What did I say then?"

"'Dougie'."

"Liar. Go fuck yourself."

"Then who?"

"I won't play your games."

"I insist."

"If you're so obsessed with our children's names, why don't *you* list 'em?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you! Go on, genius! Tell me another name!"

"But it goes without saying that *I* know 'em!"

"Then tell me! Go on! Let's see just how bright and dependable is our patriarch!"

Arthur stared at her, then at the ceiling. Sweat spontaneously generated from beneath his sideburns. His mouth hung open. "...It's a disgrace," was all he could finally observe.

"There, you see?"

"Both of us. I can't even picture their faces."

"It don't matter, y'know." She drained her glass, and got up, walking with the dexterity of a giraffe with two broken legs, to pour another. "You and I will die. They'll take over, whether they want to or not, till they, too, pass. And so it goes: on, and on, and on and on, deeper into nothing. Just, nothing. A bloody hole, in the mud, our species has been digging since the first day. What more can we do? That's what God wants, apparently. So I say we give God what He wants, and drink ourselves into an early grave."

Arthur took the glass from her hands on its way to her mouth; she smiled, faintly, at the thought that he cared enough to save her from making good on her whimsical reference to a liquid suicide; until he drained it himself in one whalish gulp. He paced about the room, avoiding her glance. She finally said: "I want a divorce."

"Don't be an arse."

"If I'm gonna die in this hotel, frozen and starved, I don't want it to be by your side."

"By whose side, then?"

She grabbed the glass back from him, and cat-hissed: "Whoever'll have me."



## Chapter Fifty-Six

The number of guests who frequented the dining room these evenings could be counted on one hand, or perhaps on two hands, if both of the hands had lost several fingers in an industrial accident. But it was the closest that could be called “a public scene”, and so, during supper, Mifkin, flanked by Bartoff and Aloysius, and supported by the rest of his small band of plotters positioned strategically about the room, strode up to Voot, who was just pulling out a chair in which to sit and enjoy his meal, and punched him in the face. Curtis/Thaddeus and several nameless employees immediately ran up and threw themselves onto the rebels. A vicious brawl ensued. The diners, who were well past the stage of caring about such things, continued to dine, looking up now and then to see who was gaining the upper hand, with not one pea seen to tremble on one fork. The rebels boasted the two strongest men in the hotel, namely, Bartoff and Mifkin, and so had soon dispatched most of the royalists with bloody noses and ringing ears, while several foot soldiers from each side had fled. Mifkin, bright blood dripping from three claw marks on his cheek, then turned to the diners to announce: “I hereby appoint myself the new general manager. Anyone who disagrees will receive the same punch to the nose. Now, does anybody disagree?”

The few diners, who were mildly aware that something had been said, moved on to their next course. Voot, hobbling away whilst leaning on the crumpled Curtis/Thaddeus, coughed out, through a latterly strangled throat, “Thou art an antimanager!”

“*Herr Voot* is the antimanager!” Bartoff counter-denounced.

Voot’s battered crew exited the dining room. Redoubts were now to be fashioned, and plots to be laid.

Murder was in the air.

## Chapter Fifty-Seven

In the wing of the hotel furthest from Voot, Mifkin set up his own office in a storage room whose contents he ordered be removed elsewhere. He obtained a comfortable chair and writing-desk from a reading room, and now turned his attention to the sign he required for the door.

"It should say *Directeur de l'hôtel*," he ordered. "I want it to look exactly like that of the antimanager."

"Even with Voot's name underneath?" asked Aloysius.

"No. With my name underneath."

"That makes more sense," Aloysius agreed. "I'll find Larry. He's the one who puts up signs."

"Very good. I..."

"Yes?"

Mifkin turned around to ensure no one else was listening. "I want to thank you, Aloysius, for your support."

Aloysius shrugged. "There's not much else around to do."

Mifkin nodded at his friend; he'd always respected him, but then, at the same time, resented his unimpeachable heterosexuality. "We must do more than simply defeat Voot," he whispered.

"What do you mean by that? And why are you whispering?"

"We must seize control of the hotel..."

"Yes, of course...and then...?"

"I want him humiliated," Mifkin growled. "I want him exposed—all his vanities—before staff and guests!"

Aloysius nodded, his gaze fixed on a lampshade. "You know...we might do even more than that."

"What do you mean?"

Aloysius shrugged. "What would he do to us, do you think? What do you think he and Curtis—"

"You mean, 'Thaddeus'."

"Do you really want to call him 'Thaddeus'?"

"No. Well, I mean, that is what he likes to be called, these days. Why? Don't you think people have an innate human right to be called what they wish?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm just saying."

"He's our mortal foe, you realise."

"Yes, yes, of course. 'Curtis'. We must call him 'Curtis', and to hell with what he or anyone thinks of it!"

"Right. That's the spirit, General Manager."

Mifkin beamed at being so called. "Now, what were you going to say?" he eventually asked.

"When?"

"Just now. Er, before we had that whole debate about what to call Thaddeus."

"You mean 'Curtis'."

“What did I say?”

“‘Thaddeus’.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am.”

“Sorry. Even after all we’d just talked about?”

“I’m afraid so. But let’s move on.”

“Please, let’s.”

“I was going to say, what do you think he and Voot are plotting to do to us, right now?”

“Right now?”

“Certainly.”

“I—I can’t imagine. Dock our wages, perhaps?”

“No-o-o...I’m thinking more along the lines of: murder.”

Mifkin gasped.

“What’s wrong?”

“That’s really serious!”

“I’ll say.”

“We must plot as well, then!”

“You said it.”

“Stratagems!”

“Yes.”

“Machinations!”

“Right.”

“Intrigues!”

“All that.”

“When shall we begin?”

“After tea. I’m famished.”

## Chapter Fifty-Eight

Herr Voot was doing nothing of the kind. Rather, he was sitting in his office, staring at the back of his hand, while Curtis/Thaddeus pranced about like a mentally disturbed monkey.

“These are the hands of an aging man,” Voot said aloud, to himself. “A man who has wasted his years in a hotel in the middle of nowhere, appreciated by none, productive of nothing. My staff and guests have jointly held me in contempt, and, if the truth be told, my sentiments towards them correspond utterly. If I had a bomb...if I only had some huge bomb, which could blow this hotel to dust, then the mountains bury it into oblivion, myself included—to behold the pain on all their faces, as they’re finally forced to admit that which they’ve spent so long sweeping under the carpet: their own mortality...! To peer into their eyes as they peer into Death’s! Oh, how I wish I’d been a painter, and could paint that scene, just in an hour, to render it immortal, before I, too, were wiped away...”

He looked up over his hand to the piteous scene of Curtis/Thaddeus humping his desk like a rutting skunk.

## Chapter Fifty-Nine

That evening, Charles Bartoff and General Manager Claimant Mifkin strolled through the lobby, arm-in-arm—because they could. Reactions to this spectacle varied: Monsieur Lapin-Défunct found it aesthetically unappealing but existentially legitimate; Glen Stoupes felt sick to his stomach; Aloysius felt dismayed at his superior's decision to, apparently, jettison the teeming masculinity which he'd always respected in him; Annette suffered a searing envy; Enid closed her eyes and imagined how their lovemaking must look, and felt instantly aroused; and Arthur Drig admired their courage, seeming indifference to convention and apparent absence of a guilty conscience.

The lovers sealed their display with a lick up Bartoff's cheek from Mifkin's tongue, and retired to their room.

## Chapter Sixty

The next morning, Frau Hühnerbeinstein made clear to Bartoff her reaction. She knocked on his door, bearing a glass of milk. Though surprised, he let her in; Mifkin was off with Aloysius, plotting Voot's downfall.

Bartoff offered Gilda a seat (just to sit in for the duration of the visit; not to keep).

"I would rather stand, thank you." Her bearing and sense of righteousness were formidable: she stood, tall and stock-still, holding the glass to her chest in both hands, as if she were a nun and it, her candle.

"You're quite welcome; don't mention it." As should be obvious by that last remark, he felt a tad uncomfortable and didn't know what to say.

"Would you like a glass of milk?" she asked.

Bartoff had been wondering about this prop. "No, thank you, frau," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Are you quite certain?"

She could see he was wavering. "It's very nice of you to think of bringing me some milk, Frau Hühnerbeinstein, but no, thank you, I think I will pass."

"Sure?"

"Oh all right then!" He grabbed the glass and dried it in one gulp, then burped.

"Excuse me, madame." He bowed.

"Milk is a pure thing, don't you think?" she asked, motionless.

"Well," he answered, taking the question, for some reason, seriously, "not if you're the cow, it's not." He swayed on his feet and began stepping here and there in nervousness.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked.

"Pardon?" He turned around, having, for the briefest of moments, forgotten she was there.

"I asked what you meant."

"What—you, still here?" he asked, then realised that it might have come off as rude.

"I haven't gone anywhere."

"Of course not! Ha! I was just...making a little joke, madame. For your amusement; for no reason other than that." Here he bowed. How best to expel her from the room?, he wondered. With simple, brute force—no warning, no mercy?

"So about the milk—"

Bartoff now seized the opportunity to display to the discerning lady the elocutionary agility of which he was truly capable: "When I was but a boy, I witnessed the most revolting scene of a surly beggar-man forcibly drowned in a vat of rank milk, curds big as horse scrota, by leading members of the chamber of commerce—"

"That is a story I rather would not hear."

"You've heard it before?!" The man was thunderstruck!

"I would rather get back to the cow—"

"Ha ha, but madame, if I may say, without guiding your ladyship on an undignified anatomical tour of the baser creatures, a cow, by definition, lacks scrota utterly."

"You're being ridiculous."

“Madame—I assure you—”

“May we return to the point, I beg you?”

“Frau Diva,” he began darkly, “shall I regale you with a tale of woe in which, as a brainless adolescent, goaded on by wayward friends, I sought to determine, once and for all, by crawling beneath a shamelessly flatulent heifer in the dead of night, the exact specification of its reproductive organs? Or,” he added, a mite sarcastically, “have you heard that one too?”

“We were referring to the purity of milk, as a means of comparison, but if the subject of milk carries with it too many foul memories of animals’ genitalia for you, we might just as easily employ another.”

“Milk! Pure! By God, that’s wrong—brazenly wrong, and dumb!” he cried, suddenly remembering.

She eyed him with faltering patience. “How so?”

“Oh!” He thought. “Well—if it comes to that, I’m not sure.”

She nodded, expecting as much. But she was mistaken; he went on:

“Do you mean, with respect to the cow?”

“I don’t know—you babbled something earlier about milk’s impurity in relation to the cow, but that’s not really what I came to speak to you about.”

“Well, I suppose I meant...” Here he came up dry.

“The reason I came,” she began.

“Wait, wait, let me think! Let me think!” He racked his brain, fingernails piercing his scalp. Gilda watched thin trickles of blood run down his forehead.

“It’s not important,” she said. “Please stop that, you’re—”

“Wait, damn you, please! I’ve got it! I’ve almost got it!”

“Take your hands off your head, my good man! You’re bleeding!”

“What?!” He pulled his hands away, and stared at the blood which coated them. He then looked to her with a gape of betrayal. “What have you done to me?!”

“I haven’t done anything, you silly man. You’ve done it yourself.” Sighing, she looked around the tidy room for a napkin, found one (subtly scented with sperm), sat him down in a chair and pressed the cloth tenderly to the top of his head.

“Ouch! That hurts!” he complained.

“Just sit still and stop acting like a baby.”

“Yes miss...”

She dipped the napkin in a glass of water and pressed it through his hair. He tried his best, but, despite his manful efforts at self-control, tears began dribbling from his eyes.

“Water,” he chuckled, and pointed to his cheeks. “It must’ve dripped down from the napkin—don’t you think?”

“Hush.”

He felt humiliated. “...I remembered what I was going to say,” he whimpered.

“What about?”

“The cow.”

“All right.”

“Would you—would you like me to tell you?”

“If you like.”

“Cows probably don’t like milk.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Pardon?”  
 “What makes you say that?”  
 “Um... They probably don’t like being, ah, manhandled—so to speak. At least—if it’s by someone they don’t truly love.”  
 “Cows aren’t people, you know.”  
 “‘Cowhandled’?”  
 “I mean—”  
 “‘Cowhoofled’?”  
 “*I mean*, we shouldn’t impute human emotions to animals.”  
 “No?”  
 “No.”  
 “Why not?”  
 “Because—God gifted us special attributes He denied the lower creatures.”  
 “Oh.”  
 “Mm-hm.”  
 “By ‘us’, do you mean—humans?”  
 “That’s right. For example, boy animals don’t indulge in erotic pleasures with other boy animals.”  
 “They don’t?”  
 “No.”  
 “Are you sure?”  
 “Well, no, not exactly. But if they did, then they would go to Hell.”  
 “Do animals go to Hell?”  
 “Well, no. I mean, that is, I can’t be sure.”  
 “So if you’re naughty, and your dog’s naughty, you could stay friends for all time amidst the flames and torture?” Here he looked, with something akin to joy, at Sam, who slept on a frilly pillow pilfered from the bedroom of his erstwhile mistress, dreaming of defecating.  
 “That’s not what I meant. Perhaps they have their own Hell. Perhaps God has created a special, smaller Hell for sodomitic creatures.”  
 “With fire?”  
 “I suppose.”  
 “And no treats.”  
 “What’s that?”  
 “If it’s Hell, there won’t be treats for the animals to enjoy. You know, milk for cats and bones for dogs, and all that.”  
 “I suppose not.”  
 “At least, not very many.”  
 “No.”  
 “At any rate, fewer than usual.”  
 She dabbed at him in silence for a bit, until he asked:  
 “What does Animal Heaven look like?”  
 “I really wouldn’t know.”  
 “Have you ever been there?”  
 “Of course not.”  
 “Would you like to visit, someday?”



"What a lot of silly questions you ask!"

"I was just wondering."

More silence, until he broke it with:

"Don't bulls ever make love?"

"Really!" She stepped away from him, and dangled the scarlet napkin before his eyes. "Do you see what happens when you act without thinking?"

"But I'm no actor."

"You know perfectly well what I meant."

He nodded, to pretend that he did.

She pulled over a stool and sat down across from him. "Now, to say what I've come to talk to you about."

"Can one take a taxi from Human Hell to Animal Hell, then back again?"

"Stop interrupting." Her unnaturally large frame, which had so entranced the late Inspector Pluck, and threatened to vaginally, or perhaps anally, inhale the stool, disgusted him in its suffocatingly overpowering womanliness. "What I want to ask you, is: Don't *you* fear punishment in the next world?"

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?"

"That's right."

"Ah...punishment for what?"

"For your sins."

"But I haven't got any sins."

"Of course you have. We all have."

"We have?"

"Of course."

"Even you?"

"Of course."

"What are they?"

"They're none of your concern, is what they are."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry about mine. Just concentrate on yours."

"On my what? Are we speaking about genitalia again?"

"On your sins, my good man!"

"But I'm clearly not a good man, if what you're saying is true!"

"Oh, don't try to misunderstand me!"

"I'd rather talk about your sins."

"I've no doubt that you would, but that's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here?"

"To save you."

"To save me?"

"From yourself."

"I promise I won't tear open my head again."

"That's not what I meant."

"Are you certain?"

"As certain as the word of God."

“Which word is that?”

“‘Hell’.”

“‘Hell’?”

“You’re going to go to Hell.”

“Where?”

“Hell.”

“Animal Hell or Human Hell?”

“I’m not so sure.”

“When?”

“When you die.”

“When will that be?”

“How should I know?”

“How should you know where I’ll go when I die, then?”

“Ugh!”

“Pardon?”

“It has been revealed to us.”

“What has?”

“The truth of eternal punishment and salvation.”

“It has?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“In Holy Writ, and in personal revelation.”

“Personal what?”

“Revelation.”

“Oh.”

“But there’s still time.”

“Time for what? More homosexual relations?”

“No! Time to save yourself!”

“From whom?”

“From yourself!”

“What?”

Exasperated, she plunged her face into her palms.

“Be careful you don’t scratch yourself!” he warned her. “I should know.”

Infuriated by her burden—the ability granted to her to see so plainly what others squinted at, if at all, in queasy befuddlement—she began to weep. Bartoff, moved, began to (unintentionally roughly) stroke her hair.

“It’s all right,” he murmured. “You just have to accept that I can see things plainly that you squint at, if at all, in queasy befuddlement.”

She looked up, struck by the conjunction of her own thoughts with those of Bartoff and their narrator. “What do you mean by that?”

“Why, exactly what I said! I can see things, that have been made for me to see, which you, for whom they have not, cannot.”

“What sort of things? Do you refer to visions? Ethical shapes reifying in the air?”

“Not exactly. Only the love I feel for my lover. Of course you can’t see it. It hasn’t been granted to you. And of course you can’t understand it. It’s writ in a language you were never taught to read. But it’s real, nonetheless. And—you’ll just have to take my

word for it—after all these years in my life which I’ve wasted, for others, for nothing—  
this is my only salvation.”

## Chapter Sixty-One

Madame Tautphoeus had taken to wandering round the hotel in pursuit of potential erotic partners. This morning, she chanced upon Aloysius nailing up anti-Vootian placards along a corridor. (Larry, to whom this task had originally been entrusted, was recuperating in bed from an unhappy accident involving a nail casually self-misdirected into his shoulder.)

“Boy! How much do they pay you?”

“Good morning, madame.”

“How much do they pay you, I asked.”

“At the moment, madame, not a sou. I’m dismayed to report that the ancient business model of paying employees for services rendered has broken down; at least within the confines of this establishment.”

“What are you babbling about?! Do you need money, or don’t you?”

Aloysius hammered in a nail, then finally turned to the elderly lady. “Has madame come to make me an offer?”

“Indeed I have. But first tell me: shall we indulge in the usual peregrinations round the bush, or shall I simply come out with it in all its blunt obscenity?”

“I’ve always been more of a blunt obscenity sort of fellow myself, madame.”

“Very well. I wish to hire you to service me sexually.”

He turned back to the wall and resumed his hammering. “Don’t be an idiot, madame, I beg you.”

“Your impudence only arouses me the more, young man. I thank you for that.”

“You’re most welcome. I wish you a good morning, madame.”

“How much do you require?”

“I’m afraid my cock is not for sale, madame.”

“Don’t be a fool. Everybody has a price, I’ve found—and everybody’s cock. I can pay you in cash or by cheque.”

“I’m sorry, madame.”

“Or jewelry. You may come to my room this minute and peruse my collection.”

“Thank you, no, madame.”

“All I require is that you fuck me. I don’t care which hole or holes you violate. You may close your eyes and imagine whomever you choose.”

“Look, you’re an ugly old bat and I’ve no time for you.”

“I have no husband. I have no lover. Even my precious Millicent has been stolen from me. I need a smidge of compassion! Please, sir! I will call you ‘sir’, ‘master’, what you wish! Do you wish me to condescend to beg you on my knees?!”

“How much would you pay me to sodomise you with a broomstick with such force that you are ripped to pieces?”

“Anything! Even that, I would savour! Just some attention to my naked person, for God’s sake! I don’t mind what is left of me after!”

“You pathetic whore—stay away from me.” Shaking his head, he took the rest of his placards and stalked down the corridor, wishing her out of his sight at once. She sank to her knees and wept.

## Chapter Sixty-Two

Monsieur Lapin-Défunt lay in his bath. His lover Deirdre had demanded some time for herself; he suspected she was beginning to be happy, a condition which repulsed her—she did not know how to handle it—and so needed to roll about in the swamp of gloominess to feel more at home. As for himself, he had never felt so certain that he had found his soul-mate. And yet, a gloominess had, like an inflating, malevolent tapeworm, invaded his body, coiled round his heart, and transformed him, to his bewilderment, into a blind mole thrashing about in the light, simultaneously reeking with life and desirous of death.

The knocking on the door ricocheted round the bathroom like gunshots in a barrel: “When will you be out?” Needless to say, there was no love to be detected in the timbre of his wife’s query.

“Just a minute, my dear.” It did not matter, he told himself, what Petunia thought of him, or he of her. He could feel doom seeping through the room, through the hotel, like tar, above the ceiling, behind the walls, under the floorboards. Since he’d met Deirdre, he came to know this doom, which, he assumed, had always been there, but which he’d always been too preoccupied, with his unapologetic pursuit of shallow pleasures, to sense. Only now, when this doom was calling to him, like a whirlpool to a foundering ship, did he see its beauty, did he love it, and did he realise that the sensual pleasures of his past were so short-lived as to be measurable in seconds—seconds which counted for nought when counted against eternity. The profounder pleasure, it had been revealed to him, to whose exclusion he had chased those shallow ones, was this very doom-love. It was a love the likes of Petunia, with her materialist provincialism, could never comprehend. Each time he had reached orgasm with Petunia—back when she had actually submitted to her conjugal duties—the tone was of a sense of mechanical functionality on his part, and compliant debasement on hers. Each time he reached orgasm with Deirdre, however, the cosmos cracked open and he could foresee, in a glimpse, if not the content, or particulars, then the tenor of his own demise.

“Hurry up! I need to piss.”

He closed his eyes. His doom, he told himself, could not come too soon.

## Chapter Sixty-Three

The duchess's footman, Sniggly, came out of her room, well calloused, by this time, to the degradations to which she subjected him. Just turning the bend of the corridor could be seen Rosella's ankle, before it vanished. When he saw it, blossoms burst forth in his heart. If only he were a knight, and not a pawn. If only she could see him, and he were somebody to be seen. If that ankle boiled him in such ecstasy, what, he wondered, would the totality of her naked body do to him? Besides being struck permanently blind, he would disintegrate into steam, he figured, but wouldn't it be worth it!

Rosella was walking and laughing with Enid and Genevra. They reached their door, and while Genevra unlocked it, Glen, walking to his room, saw them. Enid's neck turned and their eyes collided—without a word being spoken, he read what was happening, what those three women were intent on doing with each other once they'd closed that door behind them, and Enid did nothing to disguise the twisted snarl of lust on her lips. They disappeared, the door closed with a fateful click, and Glen was shorn clear through with a scimitar of envy.

## Chapter Sixty-Four

As they entered their room—Enid had moved the last of her things into Geneva and Rosella's suite, and her old room in the hotel, just like her life before this holiday, ceased to exist for her—Geneva made some art-historical small talk, but Enid, all of whose scruples had dropped away like the last leaves of autumn in a sudden gust, covered her mouth with her own. Rosella, an upending yin-yang of jealousy and titillation, watched Enid remove her own clothes using Geneva's hands, as one might grab a pastry from a grocer's using a small sheet of waxed paper offered for that purpose. Once denuded, Enid continued to manipulate the artist's hands over her own body for her own pleasure, as if collaborating on the sculpting of herself out of clay. Rosella witnessed the love of her life allow herself to caress and penetrate this middle-aged interloper, and could stand it no longer, but leapt onto Enid herself, and, this time of her own volition, attack her from the other side.

Enid was carried to bed, and, without any of them conscious as to how, all three were soon divested of their clothes, Enid throbbing slippery-fish-like between their bodies. Her feet were wrinkled and hooked, against Geneva's big blocks and Rosella's creamy, dainty ones; her thighs bony and saggy, against Geneva's muscled and Rosella's firm, smooth ones; her stomach plump and flaccid against Geneva's tough, wide one; her buttocks flabby and pimply against Rosella's young, hard pelvis; her back crumpled against Rosella's tiny, pointy breasts; her own breasts dilapidated and inflamed against Geneva's mammoth, heaving ones; the back of her neck hyper-sensitive against Rosella's lips, and her own lips sphinctered around Geneva's tongue.

The pleasure they inflicted on her was a martial thing, to which she left herself open to attack, surrendered, and awaited the impending obliteration. But then the tangle of their limbs shifted and recombined, alignments were renegotiated, and Enid and Rosella had joined forces to charge on Geneva, who basked in the assault from her two acolytes. With matronly benevolence, she cradled both their heads to her, as her ancestor the she-wolf had those of Remus and Romulus millennia before. After the three had shifted yet again, Enid's mouth was thrust so deeply into her that she felt the call of the vortex—far from recoiling, resisting, retreating, she plunged deeper, she gave her body to be swallowed up whole within her. Behind her, now, she was distantly aware of Rosella violating her, but as the actions she felt mirrored the actions she performed, she might have been doing them to herself, curled around the entire world and back onto her own tail. Geneva, she sensed, was in some manner violating Rosella, and a sense of a completed circle overtook her, in which all their flesh was one, all their moans originated in the same throat, all their thoughts were shared—she was pressed in on all sides by feminine sensations, haptic and olfactory and gustatory. Squishing, and moistness, and primeval smell, and the catch of hair between teeth: they no longer knew whose body was whose, whose mouth was where, whose mouth was whose; the fleshy soup into which their constituent parts had all decomposed vibrated with the dinosaur's stomp in a rainforest puddle, a beetle's wing a flap in the air, the delicate branch of a sapling in the breeze, the first inhalation of the first creature to crawl out of the sea—and all three saw Geneva's vision when it came:

As a girl, she'd been close to her mum, especially after her dad started taking up with other women. He finally left them, to seek a new life with his current mistress somewhere in the Far East. Genevra did not mourn him; rather, the period of just her and her mother, against the world, was the happiest for her—until her mother began to miss the basest attributes that could be recommended of her father, so started taking in a succession of lovers. Little Genevra, during these sordid goings-on, took refuge in their attic, under its skylight, where, cotton wool jabbed in her ears, she could paint and draw loftier worlds, worlds devoid of males, where generations of gleeful women spring into life, seemingly, purely by dint of their own will. Her mother had always encouraged her artistic tendencies, paid for drawing tutors and bought her plenty of supplies from the funds her male acquaintances gave her, and even dreamt that Genevra might, when she grew up, avoid her mother's mistakes and pursue the independent life of an artist, with her own purse filled through her own efforts, and her hungers quenched by artistic, rather than masculine, gratification. When her mum grew pregnant from a lover, Genevra, enraged, painted a picture of the child dead at birth. To her horror, both the child and her mother died on the birth-bed. Alone in the world, and stunned by this manifestation of her own power, she vowed never to draw or paint again, and, now thirteen, joined a nunnery, as atonement, and as a conscious act of rebellion against the discredited idea of being an artist. Once enshrouded within those Gothic walls, it didn't take her long to grow bored out of her mind, and resentful of authority, and unable to keep her thoughts on God instead of on the girls around her, so she scaled the stone wall, found her way to Paris and became a starving artist after all. All the clichés of unwashed limbs cramming filthy garrets, hours caricaturing tourists in shady squares, drunken debates in sleazy cafes, and lifestyles free from the strictures prescribed for non-artists were hers for the taking. Her bold subjects arranged in novel compositions, unflinchingly refusing prettification to cater to American tourists' sensibilities, apathetically marketed by this unfeminine, flinty-eyed Italian, began, against all odds, to sell, and she gradually, almost despite her best attempts to forestall it, built up a reputation as a genius, or at least as someone talented enough to convincingly counterfeit genius, to the point where she was now quite well known, in discerning modern circles, and able to pick and choose from a fathomless pool of young female acolytes for seduction.

Now, however, she was feeling the one sensation which had been hitherto bricked off to her: romantic love. And it was a feeling voluminous enough to encompass both the ladies who at this moment lay beside her, stroking her hair.



## **Chapter Sixty-Five**

Lying post-coitally on the bed, entwined with the naked limbs of her lovers, Enid savoured the sensation as the scum of pointlessness, which had accreted over the course of her life, fizzled out to reveal a still pond of peacefulness beneath. Her feeling was shared by Rosella and Genevra, both of whom, to their shock, found themselves in love with her. It was yet another transgression in their well-notched histories of transgressions, but it was profound enough to render the other ones insignificant. The rivers of their individual pasts had dried up, but it did not matter, and did not bear thinking about, for they floated serenely in the basin into which those three rivers had led them. Since the close of their lovemaking, their flesh had reconstituted into three discrete bodies, but their hearts remained fused. There was nothing more to contemplate, and, in fact, their thoughts sputtered to a stop; they simply existed for one another, and nothing more.

## Chapter Sixty-Six

Glen Stoupes sat in his room, slumped in a soiled armchair, drinking the liquor he'd found whilst snooping through a storeroom. His face had grown puffy; he felt he could prick his cheek with a pin and pop it. Yes, he was jealous of the erotic gratification Enid had found with her lovers, and yes, he wished he could sexually possess her himself with no little ferocity, but he was not in love with her, and the real envy, it took him half a crate of the hotel's finest whisky to realise, was of the fact that those three women could experience a fulfilment of which he could only dream. "Why was I not a lesbian born?!" he hollered at the ceiling. "Why is that pleasure—surely, the chief pleasure bestowed on Earth's creatures—the one least possible for me to attain?! All my professional accomplishments, all my material acquisitions, all the experiences I've accumulated—I would burn them, gladly, on the altar of Artemis, to be moulded anew into a lesbian! Take my johnson! Cut it, burn it off! I don't care! I don't want it! I don't believe I, now that I really, for the first time, think about it, ever did!" Rising clumsily out of his chair, he tottered about his rooms, searching vainly for a knife with which to remould his word into deed, then, failing, he reached toward the ceiling, stumbled, and crashed to the rug, on which he rolled up and bawled himself to sleep.

## Chapter Sixty-Seven

Now that the murder investigation was as good as forgot, Gangakanta spent most of his time locked away in his room, meditating. At the moment Enid lay in her lovers' arms, and Glen lay on the floor, Gangakanta sat cross-legged, eyes closed, pores admitting the ineffable. At the height of his disembodiment, the memory of his one, unrealised, attempt at love revisited him:

He grew up happily enough, on a family farm in India, until it was razed, along with all those in the district, by the civilising British occupiers, as punishment against a reputed band of insurrectionists (among whom his family was definitely not to be counted). What little chance there had been to earn money was now unravelled, so he was forced, as a young man, to move to London, where he hoped to send back some wages for the care of his aged parents. In that noisy, filthy, debauched metropolis, he never had the time or money for love; even if the very notion of love hadn't felt so out of place there. He despised London, he despised city life, and felt distinctly untethered to time in its unhalting rush into modernity. There was only that one person, that one time, that one unsnatched chance...

The pain of the memory whisked him back to his hotel room before he'd even dwelt on it. He sought to compose himself. He contemplated another day in his back-float through being; another half-hearted attempt to exist outside the impulses and temptations of his flesh, and arrive at a rational-based meaning in life, with which to replace the emotional one he'd forsworn; when a passionate, gut-hacking love, which would wrench him out of his rationality for good, was all he'd secretly prayed for all along.

## Chapter Sixty-Eight

Eli La Paiva, who the reader will remember was omniscient—decidedly more so even than your trusty narrator (me)—wandered through the corridors of the hotel, as he wandered through the corridors of wisdom, slowly and painfully and without volition. Where there was a window to look through and contemplate the whiteness outside, he did so; where there was a scurrying rat to smile upon benevolently, he did that too. Any guest he happened to encounter he shrugged off as petty and uninteresting; now, just now, was he accosted by one, whose name he well knew, but whose personality he could not be bothered to distinguish from anyone else's, so he looked askew at them with nothing but contemptuous pity while passing on.

This trek was a painful slog through a wisdom after which he'd never hankered, and which caused him unending suffering, although he understood, of course, the reasons for all this, and the reasons it was not otherwise. Insofar as he could still have an active will in the midst of knowing all, he wished to be rid of this gift; but knew that he never could. Even to be released from his corporal shell, he had no choice but to admit, would not lessen his consciousness by one microscopic thimble of stardust. As in "life", where he was forced to bear his unmanageable overload of information, so in "death", if one wished to amuse oneself by using these nominal distinctions, would his curse of fusion with all knowledge remain.

The one who called himself "Gangakanta" now stood before him. This man was begging him, shamelessly, for a conversation in which the former might skim some shallow cream of wisdom off the latter. La Paiva shoved him away, knowing, while Gangakanta did not, that such a rebuff was the kindest favour he could grant him.

Then the one who called herself "Gilda" appeared, and tried to engage him in some metaphysical debate, the pointlessness of which was unavoidably obvious to him, but entirely missed by her. He laughed her off.

La Paiva found his son Philip, and tried to talk to him, tried to share a tiny fraction of the relevant mysteries, at least those that pertained to paternal love, but Phil interrupted him with claims of being bored and not in the mood for a chat. The son having stalked off, the infinite misery of the father's existence did something he could hardly believe possible: it deepened.

While he could have no secrets from himself, his personal memories failed to suggest themselves to his perusal. They were remembered, but judged transparent and of no admissible import. He could have no climactic vision beyond the continuous, time o'er-leaping immersion of his consciousness into all Being; thus did the prospect of eternal torture realise itself for him.

His hands were placed on a window frame. His earthly gaze shifted from the oblivion of snow outside to his finger; in particular, his forefinger; specifically, its nail; to be absolutely exact, to the massed particles of filth beneath it. Only he could appreciate, in the same breath, the same thought, both the categorical insignificance of it, and the paramount sentience it possessed.

Whilst he was thus ruminating, Modeste ambled by, wiping a shit-caked hand upon his sleeve. La Paiva, his equilibrium shattered, cursed her wildly, and begged God, with Whom he tended to confuse himself, to damn her for all time.

## Chapter Sixty-Nine

Genevra, head atilt, lips tucked in, was painting the naked forms of her lovers, who lay in each other's arms in the bed before her. The piece was almost abstract, with palpably fleshy connotations. While the gender of the sitters was unpindownable, it was somehow unswervingly feminine, and teeth-gnashingly erotic.

Enid, whilst she felt her flesh, as it existed on this single afternoon, be chiselled into something closer to perpetuity, a profound love for both these women, and an urge to give not just her body, but her soul, and her future, to them, melted over her. Although all three were content to stretch this minute into eternity, and prayed the hotel be never unshackled from its snow-bounds, they also dreamt up giddy plans for cohabitation and artistic collaboration in the future: Enid would write the text on a feminist theme for prints of Genevra's erotic sketches of Rosella; Rosella would insert a bundle of paintbrushes up Enid's rectum so that Genevra could paint her unconstrained facial expression, the resulting picture to be titled *Shame of a Bourgeois Spinster Alchemised into Art* (all three laughed at this) and exhibited in Enid's old village, where her friends, colleagues and kin could not fail to view it; they would adopt a waif child from the streets of some African colony and rear her in an atmosphere of deep maternal love; they would grow old under the caressing sun by Mediterranean waters.

For the moment, Rosella's finger traced along Enid's skin in tandem, in inexplicable sympathy, with Genevra's brush across the canvas, and she desired nothing.

## Chapter Seventy

Herr Voot woke in the middle of the night, compelled by an irresistible need to urinate. He sat up, dangled his legs over the side of his bed—nothing so interesting so far, I grant you, but wait—uncurled the toes of his left foot into his slipper, and screamed in pain. Once he had fumbled with the weapon that had wounded him, and switched on his lamp, the mystery resolved itself: some villain, somehow, had stuck a mousetrap in his slipper.

He hobbled along the corridor, invective frothing from his mouth, fantasies of Mikfin's impaled torso commandeering his thoughts. The moribund lamplight in the corridor at this time of the night swathed everything in a sickly yellow, the shade of an expiring animal whose flesh was already seeking its fated place of rest in the soil. The whole hotel, Voot thought—indeed, all existence—might have the same said of it. The loss of sensation in his toes, to which he'd only moments ago been devoting so much of his attention, rather paled in comparison with the death of the universe, he couldn't help but admit. But he agreed that the world had grown old, perhaps before its time; all the human history which had had any right to be wrought, had been; and the only decent thing to do would be to treat our species as you would a horse with a shattered thigh. Would he be so unmanly as to deny the world its dignified expiration simply on account of his own selfish propensity to thrash about in instinctive hope of happening upon a broken ship's beam to which to cling?

Filing past him down an intersection in the corridors, at that moment, could be seen the duchess, followed by her footman, to imperially demand from some sleepy sous-chef a quarter-wheel of cheese. He desired her at once—all apocalyptic fancies having vanished—but sighed in admission of the impossibility of her condescension to the steerage of society, where he was destined to dwell.

## Chapter Seventy-One

Charlotte Drig drank at the bar, Aloysius serving her. She'd had no training in this sort of thing, but assumed, correctly, that if it were as difficult as all that, our species would never have propagated to the extent that we have, to the tyranny over every continent and the subjugation of the more ingenuous life forms, today. She decided not to speak, merely pointed to the drink she desired, squinted smirkingly at his eyes, made a point of shifting her bosom when shifting her position on the stool, and let him feel her stare on the back of his neck. When the sole other customer had left to go cry himself to sleep, Aloysius did not even ask her to accompany him to his room, but merely locked up, took her gently by the arm, and led her off.

Within seconds of entering his room, she was face-down on his bed, all her clothes removed. Gas crept up from her stomach, on account of the alcohol, to which she was hardly used, she'd imbibed, scraping its way up her throat. She stared into the stains on his pillow, left there from the hair cream he used, but, close-up, terrifying ovals mawing toward her. She heard him unhurriedly unbuttoning his clothes, and she regretted the whole thing, before it had begun, but her loathing of her husband swelled up in her, a workable substitute for lust.

No one had ever seen her naked except Arthur—and then, in occasional snatches of mouldy moonlight leaking through the curtains while the children slept—and now, this stranger was staring leisurely at her unveiled backside. What must he be thinking? What flaws must he be registering about her body? How disgusted he must be—by her body, and by her brazenness! She tried to compact herself, squeeze herself together, close her orifices so as to preserve a crumb of dignity, but now his hands were spreading her, and all she could imagine was Arthur in the room, so she might distil a drop of pleasure from the pain she would behold on his face.

Fluttering stars of pain danced behind her eyelids as he entered her, and she heard herself moan profanely, and he pushed through her—she felt he would break through her ribs, puncture her organs and exit through her mouth. Impaled humiliatingly, she strove to raise herself on her elbows and knees, to somehow lessen the agony, but found her limbs paralysed, as if her body had shut itself down from shock. Spit dribbled from her lips into the pillow, then soaked back into her forehead and cheeks. Every muscle in her body tightened and held its breath in protest at being allowed to be so besieged.

No one had possessed her, save for Arthur, and the ruthless ferocity she was currently enduring was a world away from her husband's tender solicitude. Aloysius's impersonal grunting from above her ears left her in no doubt that his heart, if he had one, was elsewhere, and she was but a day-old hunk of meat left in a desert for instinctual picking by vulture's beak. His fingernails clawed into her haunches like spurs into a nag's flank; she felt a perforation in the skin, and wondered if there was blood, and worried if Arthur would see, but then remembered that he would not.

Aloysius's groan was utterly self-involved, and its bestial tinge revolted her, and yet, despite herself, she contracted around him, and echoed his groan, the commiserating face of Arthur graven indelibly on the pillow before her till it dissolved.

She'd dreamt as a girl of becoming an acrobat and travelling the world, gazing down on the assembled masses from her bird's-eye vantage, imagining all to be peaceful and

still, frozen, even in the midst of fleeting motion, up there; but when, as an adolescent, the time came to don those rosy tights, her parents refused, presenting her with the consolation prize of a job in a fish shop with as many haddock lunches as she could stand. She could have run off on her own, but something wilted within her, so she took the job, married a timid boyfriend, filled the house with ungrateful kids, and ended up with this stranger's manhood fully up her rectum. She would have to go back to Arthur, she told herself. Now that she'd cuckolded him and re-established her pre-eminence in the household, she would go back. And yet, now, Arthur, her children, their life before this holiday—it was all receding from her like the facial features of waving well-wishers below an ascending hot-air balloon. Who was this man, lying atop her? Why did she wish he would never roll off?

Aloysius's vision embraced the death of his mother, at the moment of his birth; the love with which his father raised him, until the last financial crash, when he broke down and was hustled off to an asylum, raving passionately in the language of stock market abbreviations, the sole tongue he would henceforth boast; his aunt and uncle, childless, and undesirous of children, raising him out of stoical duty; his first fumbings with the female sex, seduced by an older cousin whose ugliness and deficient hygiene were legendary in the family; learning the ropes properly from prostitutes, with his earnings from working in a shop, and liberty to indulge every perverted whim which might present itself to his inquiring mind; and the infuriating cul-de-sac of his position at the hotel. Yet now, in the quiet aftermath of his lust, the anonymous hunk of meat onto which he'd, once drained, flopped, seemed to be gifting him a new sensation; one he'd never found amongst all the trollops of his youth. Instead of the disgust for the flesh he'd ritually feel the moment after completion, and the violent shove away of his co-fornicator, he felt no less at peace lying atop this woman than would a fatigued frog belly-down upon a lily pad. What was this? What was this he was feeling? His first impulse was to treat it as a joke, and yet...



## Chapter Seventy-Two

The younger La Paiva, Philip, was at that moment wooing Annette in a stockroom.

“Get away from me before I beat you,” was her response.

“If you would only let me show you what kind of man I am,” he protested, palms out, as if to show he had nothing to hide. “I know what you must think of me—privileged young cad flirting with the help. But it’s not like that. I noticed you my first day at the hotel. ‘There’s a different spirit about her,’ I told myself. ‘She’s not your everyday servant, that’s for sure.’”

“You’re annoying. Get away from me before I beat you,” she repeated. She’d had to hide her book and pretend to be actually washing linen when he came in, and earnestly desired him to go.

“It’s true I can’t offer you marriage,” he went on. “You see? I’m being perfectly honest. You can’t say I’m trying to pull wool over anybody’s eyes.”

She held up a fresh bedsheet as a fluttering wall between them, then proceeded to fold it. “Get away from me before I beat you.”

“Look—I’ll understand if you’re too modest to actually engage in full carnal relations with me. But will you at least consent to my watching you defecate?”

“This is your last warning.”

“I can see you’re a blunt sort of girl, so I’ll put it bluntly: How much do I need to pay you to take a shit in front of me whilst I pleasure myself?”

Having completed the folding of the sheet, she lay it neatly on a pile, then proceeded to thrash him to within, as they say, an inch of his life (no ruler being nearby with which to ascertain the exact veracity of this expression). Suffice it to say that the cries he emitted would have alerted a passing ornithologist to the possible presence of an undiscovered bird in distress, and the tears he shed would not have shamed a young shepherdess in torment over a lamb lost on her watch. A thick blackish blood spewing from his decartilaged nose, like the sluggish, unlit tide of the Styx; his welted eyes temporarily blind beneath mushroomed, wine-dark lids; he fumbled his way out of the stockroom, too ashamed to tell a soul.

Annette, pleased with the upshot of their chat, returned to her book and thoroughly enjoyed the rest of her afternoon.

## Chapter Seventy-Three

Where before, the murders—remember those?—had tended to rather put off the enthusiasm of guests for leaving their rooms when not absolutely necessary, the increasingly prevailing mood of insouciance led them to wander about, heedless of just about everything, wherever their fancies steered them. Thus, the clatter of cutlery in the dining room had practically resumed its earlier volume, and this evening, in addition to Enid, Genevra and Rosella at one table, many of our beloved characters could be found enjoying what little food remained to be served. Enid, in between giggles with her girlfriends, noticed, while raising a brown, rather shrivelled green bean to her lips on a fork, a somewhat despondent Bartoff, sat by himself, his food lain uneaten. Aloysius passed by his table, and Bartoff pulled him down for a word, and Aloysius went off. Bartoff sat sullenly some more, until Poor Larry happened by, and Bartoff had a word with him, too, then waited again. Finally, Mifkin exited the kitchen and strode up to his lover's table, whereupon Bartoff rose and proceeded to subject him to a profane harangue the substance of which was lost on the bystanders, but the tone of which was not in doubt. Evidently dissatisfied with Mifkin's reply, Bartoff struck him once on the left cheek, once on the right, and stalked out. Mifkin stood, physically unhurt, but emotionally distraught. After a mere moment, Bartoff came running back, weeping, sank to his knees, begged forgiveness, received it, and embraced his love. Both were in tears, and their ecstatic relief was shared by every onlooker that day.

Only Gangakanta, sitting at a table by the wall, noted Bartoff's temper and immense physical strength, and wondered at its possible applications, but soon returned to his favourite topic of late—the frivolousness of a logical life—and thought no more about it.

## Chapter Seventy-Four

In fact, it was later that night, when Gangakanta stood in a smoking room, not smoking, willing, without success, his demise to come soon, that Bartoff entered, nodded curtly in greeting, and sat down to light his cigar. No one else was present, and Gangakanta, not being one for chat, started to withdraw, when Bartoff stopped him with:

“Are you having a pleasant stay, monsieur?”

Gangakanta reluctantly halted his departure and replied, “Pardon, monsieur?”

“I asked if you were having a pleasant holiday.”

“Oh. No, monsieur, I’m afraid I am not.”

“That’s too bad.” He sucked on his cigar, then held it out. “Would you like a puff?”

“No thank you, monsieur.” All he could picture was Bartoff naked with Mifkin; and while the physical act disgusted him, as did any physical act of love between any combination of genders, he could not help envying the flagrancy with which Bartoff was conducting his affair, with not a thought for the opinions of others.

“You don’t indulge, hm?”

“Never, monsieur.”

“A pity.” Bartoff took a deep draught himself.

Gangakanta didn’t know why, but he volunteered: “I meditate.”

“Mm? Indeed? Well, that sounds most peaceful. I’ve never tried it myself, mind you, but I imagine it would be.”

“Oh, it is, it is. It steadies one’s storm-slung thoughts, you might say, and imposes a measure of self-control on what might otherwise be a basket of seething snakes.”

“And self-control is, I can see, a keystone in your edifice—would you agree?”

“I dare say it must needs be, if I am to enjoy a purposeful life.”

Bartoff blew some ash off his beard, and continued: “I submit, sir, that your vaunted self-control is deserving of nothing but scathing mockery.”

Gangakanta was less sure than ever that any of this conversation was real. “Oh? And why would you say that, sir?”

“Because, sir,” Bartoff went on, relaxing in his chair, “your self-control is demonstrably a sham.”

Gangakanta’s jaw shuddered. “A sham, sir?”

“A miserable façade poorly composed to cloak your true self.”

Gangakanta could not stop his leg from shaking. Spraying droplets of spit escaped his mouth as he spoke: “And what is my ‘true self’, pray tell, sir?”

Bartoff shrugged. “A fellow sodomite, of course.”

Gangakanta stammered random sounds.

“Of course, you have no reply. Unless you wish to waste your breath and my audience with some tepid lie. And you wouldn’t insult either of our intelligences with so hollow a show, would you, Sri Gangakanta?”

Spouting some mild protestations of indecency, to which neither of them paid attention, Gangakanta excused himself from the room and ran back to his suite to meditate himself back to some semblance of calm.

## Chapter Seventy-Five

Marcel Lapin-Défunt, having left Deirdre to sleep off their passion, stood in the patio, his exaggerated reflection in the glass reminding him of a satirical caricature by a particularly spiteful political cartoonist.

*One day, he told himself, death will overtake me, as the world shows no sign of halting its course around the sun in order to forestall it. And what may be said of me then? Away from the hagiographic eulogies at my funeral, the honest thoughts of my friends and family will be that I achieved not a whit. And any last thought I enjoyed before my expiration would have no doubt agreed: that all my momentary, impressionistic pleasures will soon vaporise from every memory, and count for nought. Save, of course, for the ruination of my wife—just as surely as she's ruined me—and the contempt I've shown for the beautiful, innocent things of this world, and for the transcendent.*

*It rather makes a mockery of life, he went on, to keep on living, to insist on side-stepping death, which might, in contrast, boast some meaning—to keep on breathing and willing it not to come, when I'm accomplishing nothing of value in the meantime. So why go on?*

Then he thought of Deirdre. *She* was worth living for. If he could only convince her to go on living, and to love life, then both their lives, he reasoned, would prove worthwhile.

He looked around. There were no flowers to buy her, or chocolates. No: a poem—he would compose a poem for her. He knew nothing about such things, but his naiveté would make it all the more endearing, he wagered.

So off he went to pen his masterpiece.

## Chapter Seventy-Six

Gangakanta chased after Eli La Paiva when he spotted the all-knowing one leaving the lunchroom after breakfast.

“Senhor! Senhor, forgive me, but I must ask you something!”

La Paiva’s fist curled, but did not yet strike.

“Senhor!” Gangakanta had reached him, and stood there panting pathetically.

“Yes, yes, what is it?!” He’d felt the need to preserve the common structure of conversation, although all his questions were, in reality, rhetorical.

“I had a dream, last night, of a great war! A war which will sweep away whole cities, whole peoples, and every social convention we know! Tell me, please, I beg of you—is it true?”

La Paiva did not comment on the homoerotic impulses he clearly saw buried beneath Gangakanta’s fetish for theatrics. “You refer to Earth, specifically?” he asked, knowing full well the answer.

“Earth, yes!”

La Paiva shrugged. “Of course. Many times. I would have thought that would be obvious—no, actually, I realise that it was not.”

“But is all not to end, soon, anyway? The universe—God—is the curtain not about to fall on all of it?”

“Don’t be such an ass,” La Paiva dismissed him, and walked away.

Gangakanta stood, wondering. “No,” he told himself. “No, I don’t believe him. He, too, will be blown into nothingness by the squall of a cosmic breath—impersonal, yet reeking with apocalyptic halitosis. He, too, will wisp away, like vapour off a lake. I’m sure of it.”

## Chapter Seventy-Seven

Annette dumped the bars of soap, each wrapped in wax paper with twine, onto the floor of the stockroom, and carried the crate into a meeting room. She put it down, stood atop it, performed some half-remembered vocal exercises, and began to rant:

“The masculine attitude has proven not only inferior to the feminine, but incontrovertibly toxic to the health of every population round the world! As patriarchy has been imposed on the world by force, it stands to reason that, given men’s refusal, or ethical inability, to parley, it must be torn down by force! The penis, in particular, is an ugly, in both the aesthetic and the political sense, token of violence! Thus, as Moses knocked the rod from the hand of the Egyptian and slew him, the sole possible way to secure equitable justice on this earth is for each and every penis to be lopped off! Without trial! Without mercy! Without exception! So that a time may come when humankind has evolved a smooth, unburdened, uncarbuncled space on our pelvises where the penis had once been, like the restoration of a clear, soft field, centuries after a tyrannical citadel, its unholy king long since slaughtered in an uprising, is swallowed by the earth. This curious space below our belts: a second tailbone, an appendix, at whose purpose anthropologists can only guess—the penis a distant, risible memory, as stupid and irrelevant as a Neanderthal’s jutting chin!” (Etcetera, etcetera.)

Various passers-by stopped to listen to this fulmination, before walking off. The men’s reactions ranged: Monsieur Lapin-Défunct saw it as offensive; Aloysius, hilarious; Glen Stoupes, incoherent; Gangakanta, bewildering; Bartoff, annoying. Women’s reactions were more thoughtful: Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, outrageous; the duchess, erotic; Charlotte, tantalising; Enid, utopian; and Petunia Lapin-Défunct, wearisome, dismissing Annette as an insubordinate plebeian, on whom no further thought should be wasted.

## Chapter Seventy-Eight

Gangakanta, who had taken to strolling aimlessly about the hotel, chanced upon Gilda. They greeted each other with politeness, and carried on their own way.

Gangakanta admired her renunciation of the flesh, and said so to himself. He watched her shift her heft down the corridor: she had so very much flesh—how could she renounce it all? Her achievement was, he realised, still greater than he'd appreciated. But he had to chastise her for what he saw as an irrational infatuation: namely, her religion. He himself lacked her skeleton with which to maintain a cohesive structure to his ethics. But without that, what, then, did he have? If he lacked the engine of belief—say, a four-handed Vishnu—to keep levitated his ethical juggling balls, he could only, he argued, rely on reason; but reason, citing Newton, could only tell him that those balls could not stay floating up there indefinitely.

Watching Janice, the cleaning lady, thoughtlessly scrub a floor—her mind evidently on other matters, far off from here—he began to wish he had been raised to follow blindly a religion. Then he, too, could march about, praising  $x$  and condemning  $y$  with as much conviction as the others. His hand, being so steady, would never accidentally write  $y$  when he meant  $x$ , in so doing overturning millennia-old values. He would not be carrying on this internal soliloquy at all, he said to himself, but would instead, at this moment, probably be chatting amiably about the weather with his mother-in-law whilst she dried the dishes in some distant village.

He returned to his room to meditate.

## Chapter Seventy-Nine

Enid, Genevra and Rosella were only dimly aware, when they kissed, groped and fondled one another in the dining room, reading rooms, corridors, and so on, that others were watching—as you might acknowledge the curious deer and birds watch you strip naked in a forest, but feel not at all concerned. (Why are you stripping naked in a forest, you ask? Reader, I will let you answer your own question yourself.) As might be expected, the likes of Gilda and Petunia were disgusted by their exhibition, whilst certain male guests and staff were stirred. Curtis, however, sneered openly and made puerile remarks, while Stoupes was enraged and unmanned by his impotent wish to metamorphose into a woman and join them.

Gangakanta, also jealous, felt disappointed in Enid for giving in so completely to lust. He watched the three of them stroke each other's hair, whisper things, close their eyes, smile, and simply exist for one another, and he could not understand why Fate had decreed so much happiness for them, and none for him. He had long dismissed the notion that contentment was somehow tied to, by way of reward, good deeds. So what was it? Pure chance? Would these three vaporise, heads resting contentedly on each other's bosoms, whilst he burnt in resentment, when the final hour arrived?

He tried to mentally calculate a few probabilities, but found the data wanting, and even his basic maths skills failed him. *Two and two make four*, he kept telling himself. *Two and two make four*. It made sense. But just to be sure, he searched around for four objects to work it out.



## Chapter Eighty

Eric Drig was having a splendid time. He thought the hotel wonderful. Just now, he was hiding in a cupboard that could only be accessed through a bent panel in the back wall of an out-of-the-way cellar whilst his brothers and sister sought him. He tried to keep his giggling down, but he couldn't help himself, and when they found him, he laughed all the louder.

This hotel was full of secret places like that, and now that their mother was off fucking a waiter, and their father incapacitated with despondency, they could practically do as they pleased. Nick cocoa from the larder? Sure. Stay up all night? Okay. Make a fort in the ballroom out of mattresses? Then set it aflame? Why not?

The group ran down the corridor, shouting whatever came into their heads, when they saw Aloysius pushing a cart of dirty dishes. They hid in a broom closet, but their collective evil eye was not lost on him, and later that night, while holding their mother in his arms, after making the tenderest love to her he'd ever made, he would not sleep for fear that the eldest, Danny, would break in and stab him.

Danny, watching the waiter retreat, swore he would not rest till he (Aloysius) died, and his mother, after due punishment, was safely back with her spouse. Their family had been wonky, but reliable, with his brash father kowtowing to his brasher mother as a means of resolving most arguments. As it stood now—what would happen, once the holiday finally gasped its last breath? Would the siblings be broken up, and cast adrift, like the planks of a storm-smashed ship?

The younger ones thought it all a game, save for Betsy, who kept her thoughts to herself.

*Why shouldn't I kill him?*, Danny asked himself. *What possible consequence, in this unpoliced place, could there be?*

He owed it to his father, he concluded. His father was a kind man, but weak. His father should be the one to slay Aloysius, but since that was a deed of which he was incapable, then he, Danny, had to do it. To preserve the family. To redeem his father. And to save his mother.

## Chapter Eighty-One

Annette stood on her soapbox, haranguing the heinous sex, i.e., men, with her sole auditor, Herra Brotherus, off in a darkened corner, nodding and smiling creepily. For hours, he listened whilst she cycled through her themes, encouraging passers-by to come pay heed to the irrefutable logic she was pleased to dispense. When she finally packed up for the night, he mustered the courage to approach her, and, unceasingly washing his hands with an invisible bar of soap, began to mutter: “Forgive me, mademoiselle, but I find your arguments most convincing, and utterly tasteful.”

“Convincing, eh? So I’ve convinced you to cut off your own penis?”

He giggled delightedly. “Almost, mademoiselle! Almost!”

She knocked past him, but he followed her. “Might I trouble you for your signature on a bit of paper? I would be so honoured, you see.”

“Fuck off.”

“Ha ha! Mademoiselle, you enchant me!”

She stopped and looked him up and down. Her expression did not signal that she was terribly impressed with what she saw. “What are you after, anyway?”

“Pardon me, mademoiselle, but is it not obvious?” He sighed, looked to the ceiling, and closed his eyes. “I am hopelessly in love with you. And I ask nothing more from life than to offer myself up completely to you, as a sacrifice, if you would have me.”

She nodded. “All right then. Come with me.”

Within minutes, he was in her small chamber, stripped naked, on his knees, tied with a strap by an ankle to the leg of a bureau, bleeding from his anus following intercourse with an empty wine bottle. One of her rules was that he must not ejaculate, but he was in ecstasy nonetheless. Annette, fully clothed, sat on her bed, reading her book.

## Chapter Eighty-Two

Philip La Paiva was drawn by the smell, and, coming upon Modeste asleep in her own excrement, he knew that he, like Brotherus, had found his soulmate at last. He woke her, took her to the pantry, plied her with beans, negotiated a fair rate, went back to her little chamber, and watched whilst she exploded faeces across everything in the room, including the self-abusing closet copromaniac.

Philip's memories, too, exploded over his consciousness: He had been raised by a father largely absent, off amassing a fortune about which his young son cared not a jot. It was boarding school for him, of course, where, forced to forge an identity for himself, his parents having failed to endow one, he made many friends and won grudging respect from the faculty, none of whom gave a second thought to Philip's puzzling propensity to spend unjustifiable amounts of time staring at his fellows' forgotten deposits into the latrines. Weeks into pubescence, he impregnated the daughter of the village baker; Philip's father sighed and paid to set her up for life, in exchange for not naming Philip as the culprit. The episode soon forgot, Philip swanned off to uni, where he studied zoology, for want of anything better, and, having scraped together a degree, was now loafing about. His mother, whom he barely knew, had recently recovered from a near-fatal disease of some sort, and, because he couldn't bear a sickroom, he now tagged along with his father on this trip; the first real time they'd spent together since Eli had once half-heartedly taught him to kick a ball around the garden. While all along, Philip had harboured, in the most private, cherished chamber of his soul, a rather inexplicable preoccupation with the refuse our overly critical bodies expel as unworthy of further consideration, refuse which wholly outweighed, for him, any interest in the persons who unthinkingly produced it.

Philip's eyelids rose to reveal the hellish scene: a little world drowned in sludge, the cleaner's white eyes blinking dumbly through the thick blackish muck. The smell tore at his nostrils like tiger's claws, and he vomited over her.

She did not move; she did not complain.

He had finally achieved his dream, but instead of a surge of triumph, all he felt was regretful degradation.

"You must think me a beast," he murmured.

"Who?" she asked.

"Me, of course!"

"Oh."

"Well? Don't you?"

"Don't I what?"

"Think me a beast! Weren't you listening?!"

"Listening to who?"

He nodded, accepting that what he valued in her wasn't her intellect, nor conversational aptitude, but her ability to shit on command. "Do you think...do you think you could ever see yourself building a life with me?"

"Building a what?"

"Trudging through the tedium of this world, by my side. In short—become my wife."

“Your wife?”

“That’s right.”

She considered. “Would I have to give up my job at the hotel?”

“You wouldn’t have to work anymore. Don’t you see? My father’s quite well off, you know.”

“What would I do with all that money?”

“Well, live, of course. Pay for shelter, and clothes, and food.”

“What would I do with any of those things?”

“We need them to live. Wouldn’t you say?”

She considered, then shrugged. “Well, I suppose so, when you explain it like that. Still, I have my dignity, you know. I have my pride.”

“I know you do.”

“I wouldn’t want to take something for nothing.”

“Of course not.”

“I’ve always made it a point to work for my bread.”

“But of course: by submitting to erotic relations with me, involving as it necessarily would the expulsion of your excrement, you would, in a manner of speaking, be working for your bread.”

“Aw, what’dya want an old girl like me for?”

“I find—I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“‘Modeste’.”

“Modeste, I find you utterly enchanting!”

“Aw, go on!” But she could not hide, even amongst her layers of gunk, a bashful smile.

“If it would make you feel better, we could always pimp you out.”

“You don’t say?”

“Indeed. I’ve heard tales of an underground market in shit-fetishism.”

“That’s bloomin’ interesting, now!”

“I knew you would find it so!” He sloshed over to her, and she held him, and slathered shit over his hair sympathetically.

“I’ve had me a good life,” she philosophised. “I’ve been given my own share of triumphs. But this one’s bound to crown ’em all!”

They kissed, and their compact was sealed.

## Chapter Eighty-Three

A new note was discovered, in the same handwriting as the last, and it read like so:

*I killed Snede, Pluck, Feosalma, Sanns, and Brotherus. I had no help.  
I had no reason, save the confidence that these acts would serve to illustrate  
the randomness of the universe. I confess all.*

*Do with me what you will.*

*Warm regards,  
(Poor) Larry*

But Brotherus was not dead; he was at that minute shrieking with delight whilst Annette used his penis for a pincushion. Voot went round first to Enid, who would not open the door to the room she shared with her partners—Voot heard only giggling and mocking remarks from inside—then to Gangakanta, who at least maintained sufficient civility to open the door, but then looked up at him with such sad, hopeless eyes that the manager couldn't bear to ask him for assistance. So it was that Voot alone visited Poor Larry's little cell, doubting very much that the shy lad possessed either the mindset or the competence for murder.

Larry was not there. He was on duty, and Voot eventually found him in a corner of the dining room, staring at the wall.

"Larry! Whatever are you doing?"

Larry turned about. "Pardon, Herr Manager?"

"What are you doing, standing in the corner, staring at the wall?"

"I...I don't rightly know, sir. I just sort of found myself here, doing it."

"Well, never mind that, just now. I have something I want to show you."

"Is it a pornographic drawing, sir?"

"It's most certainly not! Why do you ask that?!"

Larry shrugged. "Lousy guess, I guess."

Shaking his head at the stupidity of youth, Voot handed him the note ostensibly signed by the dumb bellhop. Larry took a quick glance, then returned it unread.

"Well?" asked Voot.

"Did you wish me to read it, sir?"

"I did, yes!"

Larry took the note again, and this time read it.

"Did you write this note, sir?"

"No I did not."

"Why not?"

"What do you mean?"

"Pardon?"

"Why do you ask whether I wrote the note?"

As if to acknowledge the limits of his own intelligence, Larry smiled sadly and said, "I'm afraid I don't really know what I'm saying, sir."

"Are you drunk, boy?!"

"I never drink, sir."

“Then have you any idea why your name is signed at the bottom of this note?”

“What note, sir?”

“Don’t be an idiot! You know perfectly well what note.”

“I’m afraid I’m feeling a bit unwell, sir. May I be excused?”

“You may not! I ask you to explain this note.”

“It’s a crude drawing of a penis, sir—nothing more.”

“It most certainly is not. It’s a note claiming to confess to the murders, signed ‘Larry’. You can read, can’t you, boy?”

“Oh yes, sir. I like a good novel.”

“Very good. Then—”

“Particularly gothic literature.” He smiled, remembering. “Anything that gives a little fright; a little shiver up my spine!”

“Yes, yes, very good—”

“Which makes the downy hair on my thighs bristle—”

“All right, all right, enough of that! Just tell me if you wrote this note or not—”

“I would never so disgrace myself as to commit the image of a penis to paper, sir; much less to circulate it where it might fall under the untarnished gaze of a lady.”

“Don’t be absurd. I’m asking about this note here.” He shook it before Larry’s eyes, lest the lad find some further excuse for misunderstanding.

“That’s the note I mean, sir.”

“Look, you idiot! This note—” And here he held the note between them, where both could look upon it: and sure enough, where a moment before there had been a list of victims, now were no words at all, but an infantile sketch of, yes, a penis.

“What have you done?!” the manager cried.

“Not I,” Larry insisted. “I might have sketched a breast or two in my day, but never that.”

“How did this happen?!” Voot exclaimed.

“I’d tell a lie if I claimed never to have drawn a hairless vulva,” Larry admitted, pondering, “but a cock? No.”

“What happened to the other note?!” Voot persisted, searching about the floor and vicinity.

“That’s the only note I’ve seen today, sir. And, I fear, an image I’ll never be able to banish from my head.”

Unable to find the note, on the floor, in his pockets, in Larry’s pockets, Voot retreated, convinced that someone—perhaps the killer himself—was playing games with him.

## Chapter Eighty-Four

Not long after, Mifkin sat down to lunch, where he hoped, as does each of us in the same circumstance, to enjoy a quiet repast without his sexuality being insulted. However, he was disappointed to find on his plate the word *Somdomite* (thus misspelt) in carrots and potato slices. Not being acquainted with this word, he was obliged to consult several adjacent diners as to its meaning, until he was apprised of the obfuscating *m*, after which, all became clear.

“A little strange,” he chuckled to the others. “I mean, to advertise one’s inclinations, which, one must remember, are technically illegal, in that way.”

“What do you mean?” asked Frau Hühnerbeinstein, who sat nearby.

“Well—the chef, or perhaps the waiter, chose to proclaim his proclivities via the life-sustaining medium of food.”

“I think they intended the message with respect to some other person.”

“Is that right? Then—whom?”

Popping a carrot in his mouth, it finally made sense.

“I’m very sorry, madame,” he bowed to Gilda. “I will personally redress this insult to your reputation.”

“But the plate was not served to me, monsieur.”

Mifkin blushed; there was now no further ambiguity.

He rushed into the kitchen to find the back of a balding man of middle height scurrying out; Mifkin gave chase, but Aloysius chose that moment to carry a large plate of a trifling number of oysters under a cloche across the room, colliding with the deputy manager and causing an almighty fuss. Mifkin disposed of Aloysius by tossing him bodily (as opposed to soulfully) across the room, then resumed his pursuit of the scoundrel, who had by now faded into the wallpaper. Mifkin was left with no choice but to corral a group of witnesses to his oath: he would revenge himself for the insult—to the death, by God, if it came to that!

## Chapter Eighty-Five

Arthur Drig, at that moment, was not swearing revenge on anyone, but was, rather, weeping into his untucked shirttail. He wasn't the sort of man for duelling, was Arthur. No, in the face of his wife's abandonment, stewing in his own misery was really the only practical option which sprang to mind. Having surrendered his own dreams for the noble pursuit of raising a loving family, he couldn't comprehend how Fate had granted him this particular reward for such selflessness.

In his unlit bedroom, in the stench of his unwashed person, he lay on his bed and proceeded to make a pathetic, snivelling display of himself. In the absence of orgasm, his past presented itself to his teary eyes here: His parents had had little money, and, one son among a pack of siblings, he was easily lost. As a boy, he'd dreamt of being a soldier and travelling the world, but when he'd reached the age where the enlistment sheet beckoned, he chickened out and learnt bookkeeping instead. His sexual experience no greater than a handful of visits to a brothel, he met Charlotte at the bar of a music hall. She flirted shamelessly, he did not resist, and within half a year they were married. The house was run, and their children reared, according to her say-so, and he came to love and admire her, and to adore their kids. His passion for his wife, it was true, had settled over the years from the roar of an orchestra to the hushed wheeze of a bent flute, but they were always civil to each other, when she wasn't bawling him out in public, and he could get by perfectly sedately on intercourse once a year. He certainly couldn't have told anyone, even if anyone, not counting himself, had been in the room, why he deserved *all this*. His pride, such as it had ever been, was a tattered thing; his sole achievement, a loving family, was wrecked; the life whose halfway point he'd already passed was a shed snakeskin crackling in a shallow breeze.

A knock at the door. Thank God—he'd forgive her everything!

But it was Betsy.

"Daddy...are you all right?"

"Don't turn on the light!" He wiped his eyes. "It would only hurt me head."

"All right, Daddy." She stepped in and quietly closed the door. He could barely make her out: a liquidy black shape cast by the thin light from the corridor from under the door.

"Daddy's going to be just fine, sweetheart. I'm a strong man. You know that."

"I know it, Daddy." She came closer and rested her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her. "Mummy's been naughty, hasn't she?"

"You mustn't talk that way about your mother."

"Of course not. But Daddy..."

"What is it?"

"You know you can win her back."

"I don't know who's put such ridiculous thoughts in your head, child! You know perfectly well that Mummy's staying with a male nurse because she hasn't been feeling well."

"It's not too late. That's all I was saying."

"Well...thank you, sweetheart. It's kind of you to say."

"We can all be a family again...if that's what you really want."

"What do you mean by that?"



“I’m only saying...” She wandered around the dim room, picking things up and examining them. “If I were a husband, whose wife had humiliated him—”

“Now hold on! Betsy, you—”

“And shamed her children—”

“That’s not at all—”

“I’d want to humiliate *her*—before I took her back.”

“Well...” He considered her. She’d grown, and he wasn’t sure where along the line she’d acquired the impressive bearing of—well, of her mother. “How exactly would you recommend I do that?”

## Chapter Eighty-Six

"I did what you asked, guv'nor!"

Curtis/Thaddeus strutted into Voot's office and sat himself, daintily, on his desk. Voot shuffled some papers as if he'd been working, fooling neither of them, and tried to imagine what the porter could be on about. Having failed, he asked: "What do you mean?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said that you've done something?"

"You heard right!" He made an exhalatory sound, as if having just enjoyed a delectable beverage; but, Voot could only sit in silence and note, no such beverage was present.

"And what is it that you've done?"

"Beg pardon?" Curtis/Thaddeus seemed to be admiring the ceiling, although, when Voot followed his gaze—with his eyes, that is; he did not attempt to climb up the wall or anything—he found nothing particularly admirable about it.

"What did you do?"

"What you asked me to." Curtis/Thaddeus picked between his (Curtis/Thaddeus's) teeth with a fingernail (also his), then pulled out and examined his discovery (which was too diminutive for Voot's gaze to quite catch, but about whose qualities he declined to inquire).

Voot folded his arms, and sighed; he could see this might take a while. Fortunately for him, he had little else to do. "I can't remember specifically asking you to do anything," he proceeded. "Perhaps you might remind me."

"You mean—in detail?"

He shrugged, and, summoning the didactic counsel he'd once read in a remedial book on grammar in a break from paperwork, instructed him: "In however much detail you feel is required to adequately communicate your meaning."

Curtis/Thaddeus rolled his (Curtis/Thaddeus's) eyes. "Beating around the bush a little, aren't we, now, Herr Manager?"

"Look, we're really not getting anywhere."

"I agree."

"We're just going round and round in circles."

"Round and round!"

"So perhaps you might start again and tell me, very simply, what it is that you've done."

"You don't..."

"Yes?"

"You don't want me to go out and come back in?"

"No, that won't be necessary."

"Well—what, then?"

"Just tell me what you've done!"

At Voot's harsh tone, Curtis/Thaddeus slipped off the desk and made a histrionic shake of his hand, as if he'd just jerked it back from a hot saucepan's handle. "I was gettin' to that, guv'nor! Ouch!"

Voot looked on him with a new hatred. The murder of such a weasel would, he was certain, redeem his own (Voot's) worthless life; for whatever happened later in consequence, he could at least point, with unassailable sincerity, to a single pure deed he had done.

Curtis/Thaddeus smiled angelically. "I wrote the message in Mifkin's food."

"What are you talking about?"

"The message you asked me to write."

"I asked no such thing. What are you talking about?"

"The message you asked me to write."

"You've said that, yes, but I'm still no clearer to understanding."

"*Somdomite*."

"Pardon?"

"*Somdomite*—it means a bloke who buggers another bloke's bum."

"You mean *sodomite*."

"Say again?"

"*Sodomite*."

Curtis/Thaddeus shrugged. "I don't see that it greatly matters how you order the letters, if the meaning in what you're trying to say is pure of heart."

"So you wrote that to Mifkin?"

"With his food, aye."

"You spelt it out in his food?"

"Carrots. And potatoes. It were most cleverly done, if you'll forgive my immodesty, monsieur."

"But I never asked you to do such a thing."

"But you did—just this morning."

"When?"

"In the lobby."

"I asked you to hide the remaining casks of wine."

Curtis/Thaddeus shrugged. "I see I misunderstood."

Myriad possibilities stampeded through Voot's mind: Was he a daemonic jester? A double agent? A triple agent? Quadruple? Whatever comes after that? A subversive intruder bent on inciting conflict? Or simply, the most logical explanation, an idiot?

"Excellent work, Curtis."

"Begging Herr Manager's pardon, but my name is 'Thaddeus'."

"Yes, very well, then, 'Thaddeus'. Keep up the good work. Goodbye now."

Curtis/Thaddeus bowed, very deeply—Voot noted the tip of his (Curtis/Thaddeus's) nose brushing the carpet—and went out.

Herr Voot dreamt, that night, that two identical-looking agents, one Curtis, the other Thaddeus, crept into his bedroom and slit his throat, then took charge of the hotel. He woke up, relieved to be alive but disappointed not to have entered Heaven.

## **Chapter Eighty-Seven**

While Genevra combed Enid's hair in the bedroom, opining offhandedly about the latter's resemblance to a Botticelli, Rosella excused herself, then strolled into the sitting room, then sneaked out the door and sprinted down the hall, to an empty reading room, wherein she took, from behind a copy of a never-read, semi-fictitious guide to flora in the Dutch East Indies, a small sheaf of twine-bound papers, sat down at a writing-desk, inked a pen, and proceeded to add to the composition.

## Chapter Eighty-Eight

After coming gently in her mouth, Aloysius lay down and held Charlotte lovingly to him. He stroked her hair whilst she gagged it down, and kissed her shoulder when her hacking had ceased.

"It's so peaceful," he observed. The air in his room was thick with after-love. A mist took on the scarlet hue of the sunset outside. "This is what life is meant to be, isn't it?"

"Do you love me?" she asked.

He squeezed a buttock (hers) to convey that he did indeed. But his thoughts quickly returned to himself. His life at the hotel had been an unending exercise in tedium, seasoned with the occasional, unsatisfying fling with a guest or maid. When he added it all up, the sum was zero; even if he checked and re-checked his maths, the answer was the same. And he knew what would be the terminal station on this track: a life lost to the hotel, as Voot's had been. No idea could have been more torturous to him.

But if he could find a place to escape to, escape from having to think about things at all...someplace safe and simple in which to vegetate, where he would be asked to serve no one, where all his erotic requirements could be reliably met by one without a contrary voice with which to obstruct them.

He decided to risk it; he decided to trust her.

"I've got a lot of savings," he whispered.

"Have you?"

He nodded. "I've been working here for years, saving up...I never need to buy anything. My bed, my food...I don't gamble, don't need to hire whores." He fiddled with her nipple while he deliberated. "I had this dream, a while back...but I couldn't do it by myself."

"What's the dream?"

"To open my own little bed and breakfast. Somewhere by the sea. Something small, not fancy, but pretty, and tidy."

She brushed the hair on his chest with her eyelash. "That sounds lovely." Despite herself, as he twisted her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, she became aroused once more.

"I'd need you to cook. You *can* cook?"

"A little."

He nodded; it seemed enough to satisfy him. "And supervise the maid—I wouldn't want my girl to do the cleaning herself, you understand."

"Course not." *My girl*—Arthur had never called her that, not even when courting. Her thighs rubbed in rhythm against each other.

"And of course, all your kids would live there."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "I imagine you'd miss them terribly, otherwise. Am I right?"

The last impediment crumbled. Her disgust at herself didn't matter, now. All the shame she'd been feeling—at her abandonment of her honour, her betrayal of her children, her unburied love for Arthur, and, most recently, her own climax experienced whilst swallowing her lover's seed—became so many false idols to be smashed with an axe in light of the blinding beam of True Love come out of the clouds overhead. She

moved to kiss him, forgetting the seminal sap still glistening on her lips, and he laughingly pushed her away.

“Not so soon, love! I’m only one man, you know.”

But, like the gentleman he aspired in his heart to become, he penetrated her vigorously with the leg of a stool.

## Chapter Eighty-Nine

Betsy cleared her throat. "All right, everybody. I've figured it out."

Her brothers, accustomed to respecting the air of authority she'd cultivated through being their intellectual superior, downed their playthings and looked up. She paced around the empty cellar they'd found, nodding to herself, putting the final touches to her plan before their eyes.

"You guys were really impressed when I designed the treehouse, right?"

They made affirmative noises.

"I built it," Danny grumbled.

"Yes, but if Betsy hadn't designed it, what would you have built?" Doobie pointed out, always ready to defend his sister.

Danny shrugged and looked to the trapezoid of floor between his crossed legs, silently acknowledging the cogency of a point with which he could not argue.

"And you couldn't sing enough praises about the cave I found by the beach, yes?" Betsy went on (as if the intervening psychological mini-drama just described had never occurred, but was, rather, a figment of the shared author-reader's imagination).

It was a truth no one could deny.

"Well then. I've got an idea that'll top all those, and then some."

"What is it, Betsy?" asked Eric, awe-eyed.

"Good question, Eric. I'm glad you asked it." To all the assembled, she announced: "We're going to found our own country."

They looked to one another—after all, to whom else could they look?—their natural scepticism held in check by their sister's stellar track record.

"Right here, in this hotel, we've got everything we need: land—all the cellars and secret passages and lost rooms we've already charted; government—I nominate myself queen, and you're all princes, naturally—"

"Wow!" said Eric. "Me, a prince!"

"Food—we've pinched so much, I'll bet we've got more than they've got; money—who needs money?; and a flag. Eric can make that."

"Wow!" said Eric. "Me, a flag-maker!"

"What about an army?" asked Danny.

"You can be general," she appointed.

"But who'll be me soldiers?" he, rationally enough, inquired.

"All of the princes."

"Wow!" said Eric. "Me, a soldier!"

"Can I be in charge of demolition?" asked Charlie.

Their queen's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Demolition of what?"

Charlie shrugged. "Whatever needs to be demolished."

"Is that to help our fledgling nation, or just because you like to smash stuff?"

Charlie grinned with a candour redolent of all the greatest demolition officers. "Bit of both, I guess."

The queen nodded. "I anoint you Chief Demolisher, with a royal patent, charter and warrant to distinguish you from all the unofficial ones."

"I thank you, your grace."

The children got to work organising their new kingdom. Betsy, holding up several tablecloths and drapes to her neck for purposes of gown design, noticed little Bo staring at her from where he sat in the corner.

“What is it, Bo? Don’t you want to help?”

He stared, his soulful eyes suggesting hidden depths of understanding. Though she wasn’t sure of what.

“You can be Chief Horse-Master, if you like.”

He shook his head.

“Chief Horse-Rider?”

He shook his head.

“Chief Horse?”

He shook his head.

“Do you need to make a pee?”

He shook his head.

“Well, suit yourself then.”



## Chapter Ninety

Genevra had painted bright designs on every spare wall and ceiling of their suite: wide, swirling bands of colours, shapes reminiscent of shimmering jellyfish, interpenetrating orbs of cosmic vapour, and strange conglomerations of colour and line, the words for whose description refused to slide down from the tip of Enid's tongue; all abstract, yet familiar. Rosella was the most naturally gifted at keeping house—whereas Genevra, left to her own devices, would have been satisfied in a sty—but they all pitched in with the domestic necessities, with the result that one might think it, from the inside, a hyperbolically idyllic cottage miraculously concretised out of a children's picture book. All that was absent was birdsong, talking animals, and of course a blunt dose of moral instruction.

In the bedroom, the three ladies had managed to array their bodies so that while each one was having her genitals stimulated by at least one of the others, she was, simultaneously, stimulating the genitals of at least one other participant. The exact configuration isn't important for the purposes of this narrative, and can, I trust, be readily diagrammed in the lascivious imagination of the reader, but, to turn to the higher plane to which their souls had ascended, it might be said that, if each of them bore a blossom, which was presently undergoing the process of pollination, then the three of them, grafted into a single flower, which was unfolding its petals to the heavens, at once projected their spores skywards, and basked in the reciprocal sunlight. It was a phenomenon, they were sure, insofar as they retained any sentient consciousness with which to contemplate it, unattainable by any other formation of lovers; certainly not by the pairing of a biologically facile man and woman in matrimony. No, theirs was a spiritual adventure they couldn't believe had ever been realised before, in all human history; but, then again, what history? What past? What future? These terms, and the concepts to which they were purportedly attached, were meaningless, clunked together by barbarians in a long-lost tongue, and went unperceived for the duration of their holy ecstasy.

## Chapter Ninety-One

A knock on La Paiva's door, and he didn't have to ask who it was.

"Thank you for seeing me." Gangakanta looked wretched, his traditionally pristine grooming abandoned in favour of a torn, sullied suit, a face which, with the exception of his own tears, hadn't seen water for days, and encrustation of his own semen over his fingers. "I don't know where else to turn."

"You might turn into the nearest bathroom," La Paiva suggested, with perhaps less sagacious grandeur than Gangakanta might have hoped for. Although the all-seeing one had countless ideas available to him of how to dispose of this nuisance, he chose, for reasons only he knew, not to make use of them. "Take a seat."

Gangakanta sat, ember-eyed, clawing at his hair and generally making a display of himself. "I feel like I'm going to die! I feel like I've wasted my whole life, which has led, in any event, only up to now—to my imminent death! The path of rationality, don't you see?! It's led me, all right, straight, and true, to here! Whereas the slightest instinctive deviation therefrom would have saved me! Do you hear?! Saved me! And another! Who knows how many others I was destined to save?! Every minute handed me, from the finite bag of my allotment, I spent on numbers! Ha! Numbers! Can you believe it?! As if I could touch them, kiss them, fornicate with them! As if my penis could penetrate either of the loops of an eight, like a wanton woman arse-up offering both her nether holes, and through intimate relations with a Platonic form discover meaning! As if every failed attempt to use numbers to sift to the pith of truth—to calculate the formula for happiness—to decode the construction of our species—to journey to the boundary of the universe—to assess the probability of the existence of, and solve the equation which would reveal the Mind of, God—as if it weren't dragging me further and further away from that very essence to which I'd been so close the day before I learnt to count! It's a sham! The whole thing! A sham!"

La Paiva shrugged. "What of it?" Although he knew the answer to his own question, just as he knew that Gangakanta did not.

Gangakanta collapsed to the floor. He twisted and flipped like a fish being fried in a pan; he screamed, like a fish being fried in a pan whom they'd forgot to kill first and who'd been whimsically endowed by his Creator with an eleventh-hour aptitude for speech.

La Paiva rolled his eyes.

"I've lost all hope!" Gangakanta finally concluded.

"That is a rational conclusion to make."

Gangakanta knelt on the floor, almost spent of life. "So what...do I do..?"

"You start again. Right now. This very moment. Go on—start."

## Chapter Ninety-Two

Charlotte Drig had sneaked back to her room, to collect a dress, having been notified by Aloysius that her husband had been spotted moping through the other wing of the hotel, only to be surprised by his startled entry just on her way back out.

They stood and stared—at each other, obviously—any accusation or justification that came to their minds seeming too flimsy to emit.

“Oh, Artie,” Charlotte finally sighed.

“What should I do?” he asked. “What has he got that I haven’t?”

He looked so much older to her, even in the short time since she’d taken up with Aloysius, with the chassis of his visage, his cheeks and jaw, corroded away, leaving his face a formless mess of irresolution.

“It’s nothing like that,” she said.

“I know I’m nothing special. I’m not young. I’m not virile. I know me bone might not have as much meat on it as you’d like.”

“Please, Artie.”

“When we make love, I only last a minute and you’re unsatisfied—I understand all that.”

“It’s not about that.”

“I can change! I’ve heard tell—a fellow in the office was talking—there’s this sort of ring, which you place round your manhood, see—”

“Artie—”

“I don’t mean *your* manhood, I mean, you know, *one’s manhood*—on the assumption that the person being talked about has a manhood. That is, a penis.”

“Arthur, it’s nothing to do with penises. You’ll just have to take me word on that.”

“Well, if it ain’t about penises, then what’s it about?”

She couldn’t meet his eyes, but she knew well what they looked like, so she wasn’t missing much. “It’s like we’ve all been doused in a vat of acid, and all the ties what bound us to things have burnt away.”

“Wouldn’t we burn away, too?”

“What?”

“In a vat of acid.”

“Well, maybe I’m not describing it very well.”

“Try again. Please.”

She sighed. “All right: It’s like we’d all been stuck on various points of a spider’s web, all our lives, and now, finally, with an almighty gust, all the strands have come apart, and we’re free.”

“Are we flies?”

“You can be whatever insect you like, Artie.”

“Because if we’re, say, ants, then we’re bound to fall to the ground and crush our legs and, in any event, be trampled to death by the next creature of any significant size which happens to come along.”

“Would you rather I pretended it was about penises?! Would that be easier for you to take in?!”

“Don’t you even believe in God anymore?”

Then there was silence. She looked at him with a little girl's fear, and whispered, with a little girl's honesty: "I haven't thought about Him. He's—He's gone away from me."

He nodded, sadly. "Said the sailor of the shore: 'It's gone away from me.'"

"Artie, please—I'm not in control of meself anymore. Or, I meant to say, I've finally won control of meself, for the first time. Or maybe it only feels like I have. How to describe it? I'm on a ship, all right, and the pilot's gone and croaked and willed me the wheel, and after spinning it this way and that, screaming and panicking 'cause I don't swerve from the waterfall, I find that it's not affixed to the ship, after all. I don't expect any of this to make sense. I don't expect you to understand..."

He nodded. "I do understand. But *you* understand *this*: so long as you and the waiter violate the sanctity of marriage, neither one of you is safe; by a hand mortal or divine, judgement must ensue."

## Chapter Ninety-Three

Petunia Lapin-Défunt noticed the sadness in Deirdre's eyes, the resignation of one treading half in the shadow of the dead. But it was through the dining hall, not the underworld, she now strolled, her hand in Marcel's, leaning into him, her cheek against his shoulder. Petunia, from her seat, a triangle of lettuce half-chewed, half-stuck out of her mouth, locked eyes with her—but Deirdre's gaze was not one of triumph, or audacity, or obscenity, or apology; rather, it was so glazed that Petunia felt she was being looked through. Deirdre looked half-dead; she reminded Petunia of the piece of lettuce she was just now getting around to swallowing.

Her lunch being light, Petunia gorged on regret. If only she'd never met him. If only she could go back in time and buckle a chastity belt on her younger self. Or should she have tried harder to please him? Could she have moulded him into the prince of her dreams? No, no, it was all wrong, all fated to wrongness from the moment she fell for the pompous snarl of his lip.

She looked around the room. Frau Hühnerbeinstein, an entire loaf of bread on the plate before her, frowned on the undisguised infidelity being paraded before them. Gangakanta, sitting by himself, no plate in front of him and apparently wasting away, shot Marcel a look of contempt, at the way he was treating women; or was it envy? Or something else; whatever it was, it went entirely unregistered by the intended recipient, who had now sat down with Deirdre and was speaking softly to her, the rest of the world having, for all they cared, burnt to a crisp.

Petunia's first instinct was to scoff at this newest affair, and tell herself he'd soon grow weary of this mistress, as he had all the others, and his reason, what there was of that to begin with, would return. But the flagrancy of this—it was unprecedented. Which made her suspect that all the lessons from history had petered out and could no longer apply, like the rules to a long-lost game whose board and pieces had never been unearthed from the sand.

So why didn't she find someone and cuckold him? Why couldn't she bring herself to give the man the punishment, the proportionate and symmetrical punishment, he deserved?

She looked around at the men in the room: fat, old, belching, dribbling, stupid men. Even the younger ones, staring at nothing, their thoughts far away; stubbly, snide, conceited, hairy, acrid-breathed, gristle-skinned...there was nothing pleasing about them. She was too cowardly to leave him, she acknowledged, for the shame it would cause her family. And other men were as loathsome as he.

She felt her skin harden. She turned to see if someone had opened a window, but they had not. She felt a new strength armouring over her, but at the expense of much else.

*I will grow old and die without ever having felt love*, she realised.

And the glazed look over Deirdre's face suddenly began to make sense.

## Chapter Ninety-Four

Petunia stood watching the fiery cleaning lady spit her venomous tirade against all men. She stood as cold and rigid as a statue, whose paint had weathered away across millennia, but whose undeviating, frozen-souled beauty was eternal. She stood ignoring the only other auditor, the annoying, giggly Brotherus, who was rubbing himself in a corner. She disregarded the woman's plebeian drone and concentrated on her words, her gesticulation, and her spirit.

"Woman and man were placed in timeless opposition! There can be no rapprochement! There can be no peace! A penis is either stuck where God put it, or cut off—there is no in between! The notion that a woman should be intimidated by, or attracted to, the penis is a ludicrous one! The innate disdain we all hold, man and woman alike, for the penis—this ridiculous, floppy, wrinkly, ugly, repugnant, uncultured eyesore—is evident! It has no dignity, and causes far more trouble than a simple instrument for the excretion of urine and dissemination of sperm calls for! Women would be better off without it, society would be better off without it, and, yes, even men would be better off without it! The testicles too—rip them out and stomp on them till they pop, I say! Till they pop! And when we excise these, so do we excise war, rape, capitalism, competition—in short, all evil! *Then*, and only then, can we evolve as a species!"

Annette's face shone, celestially, from the lamplight in her sweat. Her hands sliced the air with moral authority. Underneath her dress, the insides of her thighs were soaked with the thick, gushing syrup of her excitement. This woman, who had never felt a kind hand on her, whose mental palette was too meagre to even imagine love—not for lack of intellect, but for lack of experience of its rays—preached with a fury to drive away her greatest, most secret fear: that she might go to the grave unavenged.

"Aw, go on! Yer just saying that 'cause you really wish you had a penis yourself!" This heckling came courtesy of Curtis/Thaddeus, who had somehow slipped in.

"If I did, I would cut it off!" Annette retorted.

"Aw, you wouldn't have the balls!"

"Neither do you," Petunia joined in, "and yet you're living, splendid testimony of how a man can walk and talk and almost perform his job adequately whilst no longer possessing the phallus with which he was presumably born. Or tell me: did you lose it upon egress from your mother's womb? In which case, perhaps the microscopic manhood floats still in the belly of your mater, tiny smile across its face for having been so luckily rid of an oaf like you."

At this, Brotherus giggled, Curtis/Thaddeus scowled and fled, and Annette squinted her eyes at her, as if to say "thanks". Now that she had her attention, Petunia summoned up the nerve to ask, "What about children?"

"What about children?" echoed Annette. "The earlier a boy's penis is struck off, the better."

"No, I mean—how would there be a new generation, if the prior one lacked all penises?"

"Let me ask you, madame: Are you really content for your children to grow up in a world like ours?"

Petunia blinked. "I don't have children."

“Well, let me tell you—and I’m convinced of this—we shall invent new ways of making children, new ways, which do not rely on the contagion of the male character! We shall make the world anew, a circumcised world, a castrated world, a penis-free world where children are free to run and play and reap wisdom and help the flowers grow and rivers run! Clean, and peaceful, and feminine, and pure! That’s the world I want my child to be born into! That’s the only world I’ll feel happy in myself!”

Petunia felt herself converted. She half-wished she’d been a man, so she could chop off her manhood this minute and hand it to Annette as a bloody, sacrificial offering—as one would have aeons ago, bearing the burnt flesh of some unlucky creature in a temple, in the time of stillness and silence and shadows which stretched across marble floors, to raise to a mute goddess upon a pedestal—and thus discover what she looked like with a smile.

## Chapter Ninety-Five

The motive for holding a dance was uncertain (to all but La Paiva, who wasn't saying): A sudden burst of magnanimity on Voot's part? An earnest attempt to re-evoke conviviality at this late stage? A roguish gambit to provoke violence? An unconscious admixture of the above? Or, really, no reason at all?

Whatever the reason, Voot announced that night's entertainment by way of leaflets pushed under guests' doors. The guests having been slumping around the hotel as, not to mince words, slob, it was left to them to search out and dust down the formal attire they were requested to wear. In they trooped, then, bristling with splendour, a ghostly palimpsest of a more civilised time overlying the futile floundering of late, until, before Voot and his fellow musicians had time to uncase their instruments to kick off the first dance, Mifkin and his gang charged in and began to punch Voot's crew. Oaths, oofs, rude recriminations, blood and dislocated cartilage issued from the staff, whilst the guests stood on the dance floor with overwhelming indifference. The faintest intimation of a threat to the substructure of society—it could be expressed as, more or less, “Who will clean the hotel and serve us food if these underlings beat each other to death?”—troubled the more sensitive souls present among the upper classes, but the others hardly noticed, and the next morning, when they awoke to another day promising a relentless bombardment of tedium, they really couldn't say how they'd found their way back to their beds.



## Chapter Ninety-Six

Poor Larry, wholly uninterested in bloodshed, was meanwhile spending his time in his room, evolving his iconoclastic form of dance. His arms were tensed, his fingers, rigid and beak-like, shot out as if pecking at unseen daemons in the air, whilst his feet kicked spasmodically, as if subject to a malevolent doctor's continuous hammering upon his knees. Whilst his limbs were thus occupied, his torso swayed, twisted at the waist, puffed in and out like a choking bellows; his buttocks clenched and unclenched and clenched again, as if someone had inserted a walnut between them, which he had it in mind to crack before serving on a salad; and his head bent back, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, his eyes rolled up, strange pre-linguistic utterances bubbling up from his throat.

Passing through his mind, albeit unobserved by a consciousness temporarily dormant, were snippets of his past: the unbearably strict sanitary standards of the orphanage, where an undusted bedframe was as certain to earn you a paddling as a raised lip or manifestation of emotion; then his tireless striving to please, with the confidence that by prospering within the senseless bounds of the orphanage rules, he would prune the tangled weeds from his character, thereby revealing the flawlessly upright young man, ripe for adoption by a discriminating couple with a surfeit of love to bestow, he was sure he really was. In due time, no potential step-parent having expressed an interest in rescuing him, he was apprenticed to the hotel, where, likewise, he did as bidden, convinced that uncomplaining conformity could only succeed in moulding a man, in time, into his best, purest self; and, anxious to discover this true self, whatever it might turn out to be, he stifled any deviating impulse he did not perceive to align with the ostensible conduct of his fellow men. Each month, each year, he felt closer and closer—false *façades* fell away after he'd tried them on and found they didn't fit—but his true countenance, like a mask beneath a thousand other masks, refused to reveal itself. Grasping, as at a bird who will not land, he could never reach, could never seem to grow into himself. Like an arrow, shot by the strongest archer, he hurtles higher, higher, higher, but when he reaches the apogee of his arc, he hangs in the air...

"Bravo! Bravo, Larry-m'-boy, bravo!"

His eyes opened. His body curled up like a tulip at dusk.

"Encore!"

It was Curtis/Thaddeus, who had somehow slipped in to watch him dance. The intruder moved further into the room; Larry noted a gash on the porter's forehead, obscenely scarlet, but said nothing about it.

"How long have you been doing this...this..."

"Dancing'?"

"Yes, you've got it—dancing!"

Larry shrugged. "Since I left the orphanage."

"Superlative, I tell you. You must put on a show for the guests sometime."

"No, I wouldn't want that."

"Nonsense!" Curtis/Thaddeus clapped him on the back. "Why, with their discerning cultural barometers, you'd be an unstoppable success! Flowers would be thrown! Reviews posted to the press! Dressing-room ingenues vying for the right to fellate you!"

Larry shook his head vigorously. "I wouldn't want that."

“Ah, but you’ll have no choice, my young virgin! It’s your duty, as an artist, to the world! And, for the going rate of twelve per cent, rising to a maximum of fifteen in the event of an international tour before royalty, I am pleased to offer my services as manager.”

“No, no, I only dance for myself.”

All the bonhomie drained from Curtis/Thaddeus’s eyes. “Oh, so you’re a celebrity all of a sudden, is that it? All right: ten per cent. My final offer.”

“I really wouldn’t want to dance for royalty. I’m sure I’d be most frightfully nervous. I might even split my tights, ha-ha!”

Larry, it can be ascertained, had attempted to defuse the rising animosity in his aspiring agent through his little joke, but soon found it to have had the opposite effect when Curtis/Thaddeus struck him across the face. Larry went down, and, though making a vulgar display of his emotion was the last thing he’d wish to do before an enemy, he could not stop himself from blubbing pathetically.

“Joke about exposing your genitals to royalty, will you?” Curtis/Thaddeus nodded, as though, secretly, all along, he’d expected no better from such a reprobate. “Keep dancing, my boy. Go on with your dancing. But don’t come crying to me when you find it rather difficult to do so after someone’s sawn off your legs.”

And with that, Curtis/Thaddeus left Poor Larry to snivel in his puddle of drool.

## Chapter Ninety-Seven

Speaking of bodily fluids, Genevra was at that very minute standing before her easel, painting a picture of Rosella perched upon Enid's mouth, with Enid's open legs welcoming the complementary attentions of Rosella's tongue. (Both were undressed, I think it hardly needs to be said.)

What was Genevra thinking, at this moment in time?

It consisted of inarticulate emotion, untranslatable, in a strict sense, into words; but the general drift would go something like, *In the past, I was content to revel in the flesh, and justify it as a form of requisite content for my art. All my acolytes, those malleable maidens studying art back in Florence, in their unquestioning submission to my fancies, of whom I had no qualms in making extensive use, as models and to quench my, as it turns out, unquenchable lust—as they were attracted to me not for my physical attributes, but on account of my talent and prestige, there seemed no natural end to the queue of them I would enjoy; not, at least, until my death (if, indeed, such a thing will really come). But now—now I have discovered a new plane of existence: one in which the tripartite variables of erotic titillation, artistic sublimity and romantic love depend like apples from a bending bough: each pull on one pulls also on the others; no, because they are not discrete. Rather, three colours in a mix; three notes in a chord; three shapes in a gestalt; three persons in a trinity, all of which reconfigure unholy reality into a blessing, begging for transmutation into art, to then be sacrificed to the deities of art—Enid's tongue, Rosella's fanny, and my paintbrush shall consecrate that bed, this air, and our time, into something to justify the continued existence of our species on this earth.*

All right. But what about Rosella? What were her thoughts?

They might read something like: *Finally, finally, I feel on the verge of losing myself. After running from myself for so long, across this continent, out of the clutches of family and faith, escaping the claws of the iron maiden of gender, now, here, with these two, the world outside no doubt by now a melted icicle, I can let all that slide away, like juice from my vagina. Through the triple valves of art, eroticism and love, all the air which filled me has sputtered out, and my melted self is free to dribble into Enid's holes, stain Genevra's canvas, evaporate to Heaven. No one may look at me anymore. For there is no me at which to look.*

And her tongue pushed through the origami-folds of Enid's pudendum, like it was diligently, tenderly and unyieldingly teasing out the meaning of a poem.

"And what about Enid?" you ask. "Might we not eavesdrop on her thoughts too?"

Indeed, Reader, we might. But I shall condense, and paraphrase, else this already bloated tome will balloon out of all plausible proportion, given her proliferating cornucopia of sensations.

Enid, with Rosella's rear depressed daintily upon her face, felt a profound comingling of the same aesthetic, romantic and erotic pleasures. Her tongue penetrating impudently into the fleshy ruffles of space-time—reflecting mournfully on the human condition, as no matter how hard she pushed her tongue inside, she could never reach all the way, into an apotheosis she intuited to be just another few millimetres further—Enid gazed into Rosella's tiny, lemon-puckered anus and imagined it a contracted fist clenching the infinite sands of cosmic wisdom, and if it would only have opened, camera

shutter-like, as if in answer to prayer, all the meaning of the universe would have plopped down upon her contemplative brow. She would have gladly remained locked in this epistemological grapple with this erotic mystery for all eternity, flipping noiselessly, end over end, through space, until the universe should have tired of itself and finally faded away.

When they were done—the consummating brushstroke in sympathetic co-ordination with the two orgasmic exhalations of fleeing spirit—Rosella dismounted, and Enid gazed at her lover’s ghost-white skin shiver from her orgasm’s aftershocks, and marvelled at how nature could mould so ethereal a vessel for such an equally beauteous inhabiting apparition. While Rosella extended her gazelle-like limbs elegantly into her nightgown, Enid remained naked, melting into the bedsheet. Rosella could not remember her own name; it floated somewhere nearby, like an annoying fly, but she chose not to look, and prayed it would not bite. Genevra had tears in her eyes, for her painting was the best she’d ever done. “How long can this possibly last?” she asked, not in reference to her painting, but to the miracle they shared.

## **Chapter Ninety-Eight**

In a reading room by himself—although not reading, as every word on every page of every book was known to him, none of which he found particularly interesting—Eli La Paiva was suddenly struck by some disturbance in the space-time continuum, a phrase and concept he knew to be ridiculously reductive, and the disturbance itself anything but unforeseen; but it was, more or less, this: that Enid had been somehow allowed to stumble a mite too close to the end secret of all things, but fortunately, for the integrity, and modesty, of the weave of existence, she had stopped and uncoupled before the lock could be broken and the contents of Pandora's Box re-spilt.

## Chapter Ninety-Nine

In another reading room, shortly thereafter, Rosella could be found scratching her impressions onto her sheaf of paper. What would she do with this, should the snowstorm finally cease, the clocks start ticking, reality resume, and they all fall from paradise? Would her old jealousies resurface, impelling her to publish her fictionalised memoir as a way of throwing Genevra over—using her, as she had been used? Or could they somehow lasso the impossible, preserving their fragile three-headed love out there in the fires of the real world? In which case, she could publish her thoughts as a beacon for shipwrecked souls—a bible for a new century.

She read over what she'd just written, then inscribed another word, feeling, in the depression of the pen nib into the rough paper, an existential mark-making in the history of the future.

## Chapter One Hundred

After several requests, Genevra instituted a little painting class in the patio. With the sympathetic whitewash of snow as backdrop, the students filed in, stood each before an easel, facing the windows, and took up brushes in cloddish hands.

“A very kind porter found these easels,” began the master, who paced back and forth in splattered smock. “Apparently there were such classes long ago, in the hotel’s early years. There was even a stash of paints, as you can see. Now, I thought we would start with a still life. I asked at the kitchen for fruit, but that’s all gone, it would appear. There are no sculptures to speak of, so we’ll have to make do with this rather ordinary-looking lamp. But, of course, what we’re focussing on isn’t any quality present or lacking in the object, but in the vision of the one beholding it. The lamp might be commonplace and replicable, but your approach to it is not.”

The students nodded. Arthur Drig looked at the lamp, and tried to picture it in a new, even revolutionary, way. And yet, try as he might, it remained, he feared, merely a lamp.

“You might not know anything about painting. You might not know anything about art. That’s quite all right. Because you’ve all lived in this world, you’ve all seen things, felt things, and secretly wondered if you were a little bit crazy, since nobody else saw what you saw, or maybe, even, for that brief snatch of time, it was just you and the thing you saw which were together the only two objects in the universe.”

Arthur considered this. He was sure he had never felt any such thing.

“So, pick up your brush, dip it in a colour—it really doesn’t matter at this point which one—and move it around on the canvas until you feel you’ve made the initial offering to the genie in this lamp. Go on. I’ll come round and see how you’re getting on.”

Marcel Lapin-Défunt frowned at the lamp, scratched himself through the napkin strung around his neck and over his front, and slashed a bold line down the canvas. Deirdre, next to him, looked over at what he’d done, and nodded. She loaded her brush with black and dabbed limply at her own canvas, hinting at the form of the lamp. Looking at what she’d done, he wanted to weep, though he couldn’t have said why.

“Remember,” quoth the instructor, “there’s no such thing as a mistake. Unless, that is, you’re untrue to yourself.”

Arthur didn’t know what that meant, but was far too bashful to say so.

Seamus O’Herlihy, an effeminate, curly-headed young man with a working-class Irish accent and an air of secret amusement in his relations with the world, stood next to Arthur, rendering the parts of the lamp into exaggeratedly phallic shapes. Arthur watched him, and suddenly, this whole art thing seemed like it was finally starting to make some sense.

Voot stared at the lamp, unproductively, while at the same time taking in, from the corner of his left eye, Mifkin, who had somehow ended up at the next easel over. Mifkin, from his vantage point, cocked his right eye over to peripherally check out Voot. A triangulated observer from in front of them might have wondered at the strange magnetic attraction of these two eye-pupils. For every line of Voot’s, Mifkin would retaliate with one of his own; every time Mifkin’s line wobbled, Voot would snigger, and every time paint splashed from the palette onto Voot’s moustache, Mifkin would chortle.

Enid deprecated her own attempts with knowing jollity, and mocked Rosella's insistent praise. Rosella, on the other hand, infused her lamp with feeling via a minimum of dextrous strokes, delighting Enid thoroughly. In fact, she hadn't painted the lamp at all; it was as if she'd painted the world around it, a world consisting entirely of a substance known as "not-lamp", leaving, in the vacuum at its centre, an absence that could only, by default, become a "lamp".

Rounding out the group was the duchess, painting in, absurdly, a fine white gown, seeking to dredge up from the turbid memories of her girlhood education the painting skills with which she'd once so proudly amused her governess. But she couldn't call them back; that had been another time, and she, another person, and as such, she could not know this lamp, wasn't meant to know a thing about it, and as a consequence, had no right to paint it.

Lapin-Défunct's lamp was impossible, ludicrous, and he knew it. But he did not care: he felt his bumbling travesty of a painting contained within its execution a thousand times more meaning than had his entire diplomatic career, and so promised himself, then and there, that when he returned to the outside, he would swear off politics, resign from his post, and become an artist, starving or otherwise, with Deirdre as his muse. He whispered this ambition to her, while she jabbed gashes in her canvas, leading her to shrug and suggest that, romantic as it might sound, it would never measure up to, say, a good old-fashioned suicide.



## Chapter One Hundred and One

It was Curtis/Thaddeus who conveyed the rumour to Aloysius, who, being sensible enough not to trust this particular source, quizzed other members of staff, pondered their hints, and concluded that even were there a kernel of truth to it—that Charlotte Drig was cheating on him with Monsieur Bartoff—a kernel was more than he, in his infatuated state, could stand, and so provoked a showdown with his nemesis in the men’s toilet by the lunchroom, when no one else was about. He thought he would hit Bartoff where it hurt, so to speak; the locus of male pride; i.e., his cock.

While Bartoff stood at the pissoir, minding nobody’s business but his own—whose business could the expulsion of his urine be, after all, but his?; it was a matter between him and his pissoir, and perhaps his God, and no one else—pissing in the pissoir, I say, Bartoff fought to depose the image of his lover’s member from his mind, in order that his own member remain unclogged with lust, and thereby able to perform its function of emitting waste water from his person. Virile knight of excretion as he was, his stream slackened by not one drop as Aloysius stormed in, greeted him casually, and opined, “Pardon me, monsieur, but I couldn’t help noticing you’ve got quite a small penis there. How did this happen?”

Bartoff, ashamed of bearing such an appendage on his front, wishing as he did for a vulva in its stead, tapped out the final drops and turned round. He took no offence. But when Aloysius came face-to-face, as it were, with the actual dick in question, he was shocked to discover that “small” was not a word to be properly applied to this organ. “Titanic”, “monumental”—even “monstrous”—yes, but never “small”. Even a blind man, had one been present in that loo at that moment—there was not, but, I’m saying, if there were—even he could have sensed its gravitational pull and been forced to congratulate its bearer on his genetic bounty.

“Er...” was all Aloysius could say, wholly mesmerised by the sight.

“Let’s see yours, then, big boy,” Bartoff suggested. “I invite you to shame me by comparison.”

Aloysius gathered his bearings, such as they were. “Sir, you have insulted me.”

“Have I? I certainly hadn’t intended to, I assure you.”

Gulping, Aloysius stared above Bartoff’s head, at the ceiling. “Please stuff that, er, thing back into your trousers so we might fight like men.”

“Are we to fight, then? Over what, exactly?”

“Pardon, monsieur?”

“What are we to fight over?”

“Over your seduction of a married woman.”

“I’m sorry to have to contradict you, monsieur.”

“You can deny it?”

“That Monsieur Mifkin is a married woman? I do.”

“You mock me, sir!”

“If not of Monsieur Mifkin, then of whom do you speak, sir?”

“Pardon?”

“Did you not hear me?”

“I beg you to repeat your question.”

“You may look down from the ceiling, now, monsieur. I have buttoned up my trousers.”

Aloysius, indeed, now looked down, cleared his throat, and thanked his adversary.

“Pray don’t mention it.”

“And now, sir—your question, again, if you please.”

“Of whom do you speak?”

“When?”

“I believe you accused me of seducing a married man?”

“Woman, monsieur.”

“Ah yes—whom precisely?”

“Besides Missus Drig? None I know of, sir; but if there are others, that is between your conscience, their consciences, their husbands’ consciences, and, of course, God’s Conscience.”

“Of course. But I believe you mentioned Missus Drig?”

“Pardon?”

“I believe you mentioned Missus Drig?”

“Oh, come off it, man!” Aloysius was tired of the formal language. “Of course we both know you’re shagging Charlotte! But she’s my girl, now—do you follow?”

“I’ve never touched the woman.”

“Oh, but you’ve wanted to, haven’t you?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, that’s not what people are saying.”

“Which people?”

“Do you want a list?”

“Have you got one?”

“Not, you know, written out or anything. But I could have one made, if it would speed things up.”

“Very good. Shall we reconvene, here, in a week, once you’ve got it?”

“No, sir, for I demand satisfaction at once!” And with that noble call to arms, he launched himself at Bartoff, who struck him down with one heavy hand, leaving Aloysius curled up, humiliated, on the toilet floor. Bartoff leant down to stroke his hair, murmuring: “I know what it is to love. But believe me: I’m not your enemy. Your only enemy...is time.” And he left.

Ashamed, Aloysius defected from Mifkin’s team to Voot’s. Although he reserved for himself the right to change his mind again.

## Chapter One Hundred and Two

"I don't want to be a muse."

Lapin-Défunt and Deirdre were strolling around the dark, empty ballroom.

"But you're already my muse, you see. You can't help it. There's nothing you could do to change it."

"I don't want to be anything."

He held her to him. "Let's try again," he whispered.

"I'll do it to you."

"No. I mean, I want *you* to."

She shook her head. "I can't. I never will."

"You've just got to clear your head."

"Of what?"

"Of whatever it is you're always thinking. Your father, or whatever."

"You can do whatever you want to me. In my throat, in my rear; you can hit me, you can—"

"But I don't want that."

"You can strip me in front of all the guests, at supper, and do it on the table. Humiliate me! I don't care."

"But I don't want to do any of that. I just want to make you happy. I'd just like to see you smile, once, before I die."

She thought about it seriously. "I can't see that happening," she concluded.

Later, in her room, between thin bars of moonlight on the bed, he entered her tenderly, but tenderness was not what she wanted.

"What's your greatest wish?" he asked, while she pulled him deeper in.

"Never to have been born."

"Barring that?"

"Obliteration."

"Why?"

"There are no victories to be had on Earth. That's the only victory I could bring off."

"What if you don't?"

"Then this life will drag on endlessly."

"You're not afraid?"

"Of course. There's always that tiny chance."

"Of what?"

"Of finding something in life. Something worthwhile. Something I haven't been lucky enough to find—or somehow worthy enough to be granted."

"Nothing else?"

"Or that there's something after this life—some torture, like in the storybooks, which would make the torture on this side a walk in the park."

"Nothing else?"

"Only..."

"What?"

"That it would somehow...invalidate...this."

"What?"

“My love for you.”

He burst ecstatically inside her. She wept.

“Are you happy?” he asked, uncertain how to interpret her tears.

“No!” She shook her head as if she were shackled from the waist down, and all she could do was thrust her head from side to side in despair. “I feel as if you’ve given me life!”

“Do you mean—metaphorically, or..?”

“A baby.”

“Really?”

“I feel it.”

“Uh—already?”

“Don’t you know what this means?”

“That—that you’ve found purpose in life and want to marry me?”

“No! That we have to do it now! Now! Before we doom another!”

## Chapter One Hundred and Three

In the middle of the night, Enid was woken by a noise. Her first impression was that it was coming from an alien who had bored into her brain, but, upon further reflection, she concluded that a more likely explanation was that someone was blubbing like a fucking baby outside their front door.

Sure enough, after disentangling herself from her lovers' limbs and investigating, she found Gangakanta snivelling on the carpet in the corridor, whining like a maltreated dog. Pity warred with contempt in her heart, pity won, and she took him to her old room to try and calm him down.

Dust had settled over everything like snow. The loneliness which had once been the musical motif of her existence hovered still, here, in her footsteps across the sitting room, in the depression in the chair cushion as she sat, in the silence from the bedroom, but distantly, and, she hoped, soon to be forgotten.

Shrivelled up on the desk, buried in dust amongst the other scraps of her former life, was a small piece of paper, autographed *Insp. T. Pluck*. She glanced at it. For all its personal resonance, and pertinence to her present life, it might have been an ancient document, under glass, lying airless, unread and inert, buried alive in the British Museum. Was this my life?, she asked herself. It did not seem so.

Gangakanta sat in silence, his head in his hands. Enid flitted between the epochs in her life, and came down on the side of this one. Thus, she concentrated all her attention on how to most efficiently eject her co-investigator from her room without openly insulting him, and return to the paradisaical embrace of her four favourite bosoms on this earth (not including her own).

"What is it?" she asked, in reference to his irritating depression, for she was still too tired to craft a better way to begin.

"It's all hopeless," he replied.

"What is?"

"Life." He looked at her as if she'd asked a stupid question. "My life, in particular."

"Oh." She observed him. The skin stretched thinly across his skull like a broken man upon a rack; like the skull was wearing the thinnest gossamer garment only out of an outmoded sense of decency. "Have you been eating?"

He shook his head.

"Don't you think you'd ought to?"

"Ought to what?"

"Eat?"

"What—food?"

"That would make a nice start, yes. Shall I get you some biscuits? I think there's a box of them somewhere."

He shook his head and waved the idea away. He held up his hand before his eyes and looked at it with curiosity, as if the bony thing were somebody else's hand, perhaps a strange fossil unearthed in a dig, but whose evolutionary link to man could shed some light on his own, excruciatingly modern tragedy.

"I pursued logic, to the end, you see. And I left romance—I left chaos—to the barbarians I pitied. And what have I got to show for it?"

Enid considered the notion that she was herself a romantic barbarian, flailing trying to tread water in a sea of chaos. The idea did not repel her.

"Where will it lead me?" he persisted.

"To death?" she suggested.

"To death," he agreed.

"Won't all our paths lead there?" she asked.

"I'm not so sure," he moaned. "A month ago, I would have declared the suggestion that any of us won't die to be the pinnacle of irrationality! But right now, I have no evidence that I'll ever die. That I'll ever be rid of myself. Why must we die, after all, and not be entombed in this hotel, frozen in a bubble of time floating through the universe, for eternity?"

"Do you ever feel like you've already lived and died, and that your every conscious moment is simply your older self thinking back over what you've done? Perhaps on your deathbed?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe somebody else, remembering, or inventing, what you've done."

"I feel no connection to the Enid Trojczakowski who carried her bags into this hotel. I bear love for her in my heart—a sad, pitying love—but she's as if a child I've disowned. Or a mother who's passed away. Or a sister who's turned out a fraud. Or an identical twin I'd never much cared for. Or a role I once played every night in a show since closed."

He waited. "Any other similes?" he finally asked.

She smiled. "No, I think that's all."

He nodded. "My biggest failure is that I am still the man I've always been. I cannot evolve. All my life, I've fought to conquer my emotions and find peace. And, in a way, I have. But now I see that peace as a sad, soundproofed, isolated cell around which the living dance, as round a maypole, singing glorious ridicule toward the poor prisoner oblivious of his own incarceration."

"I'm not sure I've ever known peace," she said. "Have I found it now? I don't know." A membranous sheen of wavery introspection glazed across her eyes, which darted to and fro like two befuddled fish trapped inside a plastic bag at a carnival. "I'm feeling something, all right, unlike anything I used to know. And it's not something I've always been searching for, like a home I've instinctively suspected lies somewhere in a dark forest, forever out of reach, of which I've never caught a glimpse. Rather, it's a new kind of place, of a nature I could never have conceived, and would have been terrified, had I known, of passing within sight of; a house which would appear lopsided, incapable of standing, grotesquely deformed to anyone with eyes uncalibrated to see it truly. And yet, it feels right. It's too contrary to everything I was before not to feel right—only a 'right' which can only be so if everything I've ever been taught, by chastising look or by example, since girlhood, is inverted. But is it peace? No, it's too exciting to be peace. Too active, a continuous eddy of every-yielding, ever-renewing meaning to dub 'peace', such that any state of stasis would pale. But then afterwards, in the stillness of the bedroom, when all thought is superfluous—if that's not peace, what could peace be?"

He would not look at her. "I spent some years in London. I was mathematical advisor to the National Geographic Society. Cartography, new methods of navigation, that sort of thing. Well, my life was lonely, as you can imagine, not just because of the reluctance of

my colleagues to socialise with someone hailing from another continent, which was ironic enough, but because I am, naturally, by all accounts, a boring man.” Enid made a move to protest this—it would have been rather rude to have said nothing, or to have enthusiastically agreed—but he ignored her and went on: “But then, over the space of a week, through a series of, in retrospect, unbelievable coincidences, I met Peter. . . . He was a civil servant. Anglo-Saxon. Ruddy-headed. Skin like polished piano keys. Eyes like you’re looking through the wrong end of a telescope. And so on. We became great friends. I acted the eccentric Indian mathematician, to a T. He unbosomed himself of his great unrequited love for a waitress in the cheap lunchroom we frequented. We had great fun, and not a word I ever said to him was true; not in the sense of what I felt.”

“He never knew?”

“When my time in London was done, we had a merry goodbye, and I sailed back to India and loneliness. I’d wished him the best of luck with the waitress. I still read *The Times*, back home, cover to cover, and sure enough, a couple of months later, in a tiny report towards the back, his name was mentioned: arrested for soliciting sodomy, sent for a year in prison. When I was back in London the next year, I found the waitress, at the same place. She told me she’d always fancied Peter, and sat down with him once, after her shift, but found he clearly didn’t go for girls. From what she said, Peter had, once I’d left, taken to opium. I could never picture that, but I’d no reason to suspect she was wrong. When she saw him some while later, he was straggling, in a daze, starved, deaf to the shouts of coachmen rearing their horses so as not to trample this soul-deadened angel in the street. Anyway, I never heard from him again.”

Enid, teary-eyed, had by this time moved closer and taken his hand. “You should go back! To London! Once we leave here! You can find him! I’m sure of it!”

He shook his head. “That was many years ago, now. I’m certain he’s dead. Just as I’m certain that, if I’d told him the truth, I could have saved him. Even if he didn’t love me, I could have cared for him, kept him from the opium, kept him from prison. I could have done something. I could have saved him, and me.”

## Chapter One Hundred and Four

Petunia Lapin-Défunct couldn't sleep, so lay in bed, sheets scrunched between chafing thighs, fingers encircling her derelict, unmilked mammaries, the stirring words of Annette's sermons blaring in her ears like a trumpet's call to arms. Just as the orchestra, as it were, swelled, she knocked the baton from the conductor's startled hand, leapt out of bed, her intoxicating vigour unspent, grabbed the knife she'd been wont to keep under her pillow, and raced off to Deirdre's room, the vision of divorcing her husband's adulterous dick from the rest of his body pleading to be realised.

Their door was unlocked—she hurtled in, to find the bed bare. She charged through the hotel, screeching for justice, found the open window, crawled out through the lately burrowed tunnel, reached the surface of the packed snow, and, her moon-drenched nightgown thrashing like a febrile ghost in the wind, followed the resolute footsteps, to the cliff.

The moonlight had enchanted the snow in all directions, as Deirdre and Marcel strode, hand-in-hand, from the hotel. It snowed still, lightly, gracefully, flakes pirouetting like little glowing fairies called to Earth.

They spoke not a word. He could have begged her to reconsider, tried to persuade her of the beauty the world held in reserve for true lovers, etcetera; but he knew that the greatest act of love he could show her was to join her in this.

Standing at the edge, they took one last look at each other, their phosphorescent exhalations embracing and waltzing through the air. She smiled—it was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen—and they jumped.

Their hands froze together as they fell. The iced wind penetrated her as she crashed down to meet it, and, finally, she knew true pleasure, which galloped up her torso, along her arm and into Marcel, who shared her vision: An undergrown, sickly child, she could never, despite the absolute love of her parents, be happy. Happiness was a foreign emotion others claimed to possess, but, like a bird's wings, a fish's fin or a tiger's tail, she had not been born with it, and it would not have occurred to her to ask why not. She lay in her darkened room, assuming it was death, until, through no desire of her own, the door would eventually open, a light turn on, and she found herself still alive. Her adoring parents worked multiple menial jobs to afford the best doctors and psychiatrists, but nothing could ever be done for her. The experts shrugged their shoulders and put it down to an untreatable, congenital world-weariness to be expected in an old woman who's lived past her allotted span. School was a bad dream, whose curriculum confirmed her innate conviction that this world was not for her, and she spent her adolescence in asylums. Her parents had died, heartbroken, and she floated through seamstress jobs and hospitals, ignoring romantic proposals from all manner of men, all of whom bored her profoundly. She had recently allowed herself to be confined in another asylum, where she was abused by a doctor, whom she calmly strangled almost to death before she was wrenched off him; she'd thought she was doing him a favour by killing him. She was held in isolation at the asylum until her trial, but summoned enough will to blackmail the head of the clinic with all she knew he'd done, and he allowed her to escape. Without expending much effort, she charmed strangers out of money with which she crisscrossed the continent on trains, to no conscious purpose. She ended up here,



because of an advertisement in a scrap of newspaper which the wind had blown upon her lap while she lay on the grass in a park, having nothing other to do.

All that balderdash she liked to sprinkle around about looking for her father—it was not a corporeal father she'd been seeking.

And now, the eyelid of life closed, definitively and tenderly, over Deirdre and Marcel. They'd found the peace of which Gangakanta knew nothing.

## Chapter One Hundred and Five

Petunia rifled through her husband's valise, then, using a series of implements she gathered from a tool chest in a storeroom, broke open his trunk. His bank accounts and properties would necessarily pass to her, and she wished to spend the remaining days of her confinement in the hotel planning how to shore up his (financial) affairs. She'd fantasised over his death for so long—although in none of her imagined scenarios, she had to admit, had his exit from this life been by his own volition—and pictured herself free of him in so many ways, that she felt an astonishing thrill at it all coming, finally, true: an understudy giddily pushing through the curtain on the night her rival's impenetrable constitution had suddenly broken down.

But the two most popular scenarios in her fantasies now presented themselves to her: Shall she move back home to live with her sister and aged aunt, welcome widowhood with open arms and spend Marcel's money without regret? Or shall she seek another shot at love, with someone, somewhere? Either way, the nightmare that had begun with her regrettably hospitable reception of Marcel's penis into her vagina, now so very long ago, had ended, or proven to be merely a protracted interlude in her life, an interlude whose duration felt endless to the sleeper, but was understood as merely a moment to the woken woman.

Too excited to sit, she skipped about the room, then forced herself into a chair, raised up a foot and massaged it, lovingly, as Marcel had never done: she had run unshod, with the knife, outside, in the snow, then stood for she didn't know how long staring over the precipice, in shock at her stroke of luck, in so doing acquiring some sort of frostbite, or near relation, which shrivelled up her toes and pained her every step.

*The best years of my life have gone, she admitted to herself. He took them. He took them with him, down over the cliff, into oblivion. Still, somewhere, somewhere inside of me, there must be love. The love I was born with—has it all rotted away? Did he poison every last cell of it? Or is it sleeping, waiting to be summoned back to life?*

*Am I still capable of being loved?*

She let her foot fall to the carpet, and cursed him anew. Then she vowed never to utter his name again—to the lawyers, to her family, she would euphemise, she would scrawl his initials—so as to bury him still further in his frozen grave.

## Chapter One Hundred and Six

Voot followed the duchess's footman down the corridor. The duchess, he'd been told, wished to complain about some aspect of the service in the establishment; it could be anything, Voot realised, as there was little left to break down which had not already broken. He hadn't seen much of her, about the hotel, but figured she either preferred to avoid the hoi polloi, or else desired to cultivate an air of mystery, despite all the evidence that nobody cared.

The footman showed him into her room, then tactfully withdrew. And there she stood: in her early fifties, he guessed, though a lifetime of expensive lotions might have meant she was older. Tall—a foot taller than he—plump—from the grandest delicacies served without stint, but not fat, which she would have been had the blood which flowed through her veins been of a less aristocratic variety—and small-breasted, an attribute her dresses were tailored to put to the maximum advantage. Beneath the hair dye, and under the makeup, he intuited a beauty, a natural beauty, of which she herself seemed, he felt for some reason, unaware.

“Well? Why are you staring at me like that? Have you heard what I said?”

He bowed, although it was not required for a duchess, but his experience had taught him it was better to err on the side of obsequiousness.

“Forgive me, madame, but I was entranced by your beauty.”

“Don't be an idiot. I asked you if you knew there were mice running about the place.”

“It would not surprise me to hear it, madame. To speak frankly, I am surprised they have not launched an insurrection, slaughtered us all and seized control of the hotel.”

She chuckled. “I like you, Herr Direktor.”

“I thank you, your highness.” He bowed again; it could only help. “I humbly beg you to inform me if there is any action I can take to increase your enjoyment during your stay.”

“Very good—join me for a drink here this evening.”

“Madame?”

“At eleven, on the dot. You heard me. Now go.”

## Chapter One Hundred and Seven

Not having anything better to do at eleven o'clock that night, Voot returned to the duchess's room, with a bottle of champagne he'd stashed away for such an occasion, and submitted to her seduction. She insisted her footman be present throughout the act of intercourse, in case they should need anything; when Voot queried what they might need, she grew impatient with his questioning. In the event, the footman remained, stood at attention, off to the side, sneaking a little champagne when the actors' backs were to him.

Voot clenched the duchess's upper arms and groaned existentially as his penis, as if with a mind of its own, sought to fertilise this noble womb with a speck of new, guiltless life; all the heavens shook within Voot, as they would for the nurtured birth of a star in space, celebratory bells rang between his ears, and in so doing, he felt himself reach out to the past, link with the history of his species, and gain both youth and incalculable age; during which, the footman, had one's ears been so sensitively attuned, might have been heard to chuckle.

Voot had come from a rich bourgeois family, grown up with every gratuitous privilege, until they fell on hard times. He'd had to pull out of university—as one might pull out from a woman for whose body one had the greatest respect, but whose potential as a wife and mother left something to be desired—and get a position managing this hotel, a job for which he was innately unqualified, and only secured through strings his father pulled. He'd been here ever since, his capacity for boredom increasing in proportion with the inflation of his managerial competence and the shrivelling of his soul. He'd achieved a morsel of respect, at least from his staff—at least when they weren't staging a coup—which vanished as soon as the next guest treated him with patronising contempt. As for love, he had a lady friend, a widow, plain and unsmiling, who visited the hotel each summer, when they would fornicate in her room. She was relatively well-to-do, but reliably rejected his repeated offers of marriage. Though she was coy on the subject, he suspected she had a series of such lovers managing various hotels around Europe, and intended to continue on her circuit until she should finally die, an outcome she in no manner dreaded, finding the whole thing pointless in the extreme.

He meditated on this, then slumped alongside the duchess on the bed and covered his eyes. The duchess, alas, could not reach sexual apex that evening, but secured from Voot a promise to return. She stroked his buttocks, until, disgusted at himself, he pushed her hand away. Remembering the presence of the footman, he hastily drew the bedcovers over his (Voot's) dwindling masculinity. Before he left, she gifted him some little bauble, made of glass and precious stone, which he guessed he was supposed to wear somewhere on his person. After protesting that it was too generous of her, he accepted, out of politeness, made his way to his own room, fell immediately asleep, and dreamt of mounted knights chopping off peasants' heads for sport.

## Chapter One Hundred and Eight

Madame Vanessa Tautphoeus, elderly and alone, had found Curtis/Thaddeus—she wasn't at all sure what to call him, so referred to him simply as "Boy"—surprisingly receptive to her offer of sex for cash. He'd readily agreed, only insisted that they transact the deal on the stage of the hotel's theatre, due to a longstanding sexual mania he murmured something about.

The stage was dark, the curtains closed. She arrived in her robe, stage left, having scrubbed her skin, plucked unsightly hairs, covered moles with cream, and perfumed the more pungent parts of her naked person. Curtis/Thaddeus appeared stage right, wearing his usual uniform, no less sloppy than normal, unshaven, swinging a lantern, the saffron light of which suddenly protracted several times the porter's length, then contracted to a bulb, then protracted, waving back and forth across the dusty floor like a sedated dog's tail.

She stopped in the centre of the stage. He stopped a pace before her. He stood, only his face illumined by the still glow of the lamp, with a curious snarl. The fleeting supposition that he might be the murderer they had all used to worry so much about registered somewhere in the back of her mind, but then he barked: "Your robe, please, madame!" She unfastened the belt and let the robe fall to the floor, thrilling at the exposure. Likewise, he struggled to remove his shirt, trousers and undergarments. She appraised him: he was hairy, dirty and overweight, and his penis, on the presumption that he had one, was so small as to have been swallowed up entirely in his nether hair.

"Do I arouse you, madame?"

"Pardon?"

"I asked if I aroused you."

She shrugged. "I'm in desperate need of coitus, Boy. I suppose you'll have to do."

Dissatisfied with her answer, he gestured to several of his bodily parts with a sweeping hand, asking, "Do I not suggest a heroic statue of antiquity?"

"Not at all. And yet, I long to lose myself in passion, and you are the only man I have found in the hotel to agree to my terms. Therefore, kindly embrace me."

"Just one moment, madame, and I will." He stepped over and pulled on a rope and raised the curtain: the theatre was filled with paying guests.

Curtis/Thaddeus screamed: "Get away from me, you old bag! You hear me?! Clear off!"

She grabbed her robe and ran off backstage.

"You had your day!" her tormentor continued. "Leave this new world to the young!"

Huddling in a corner of her room, scalds across her skin where her spectators' eyes had burnt her, weeping in humiliation, she vowed revenge—her honour, wobbly though it may have been, demanded no less than the death of Curtis/Thaddeus.

## Chapter One Hundred and Nine

The footman arrived at Voot's office, and Voot was required to follow him to the duchess's room and service her, lovelessly. Still did the duchess travel merely halfway to her destination, but the journey was enjoyable, and she had company. While it lasted, images of Mifkin and Bartoff arrived, uninvited, in his mind. He wondered what that must be like. Could it be any less moving, any more pointless, than what he was doing now? Furthermore, why did Mifkin fancy Bartoff so, when he had always held Voot in such low regard? Not that he would have wanted to be subject to such attentions, you understand—but it would have been nice to have been made the object of a repulsed seduction attempt, at the very least.

The duchess, for her part, while Voot was exhausting his soul into her vagina, fought back the suggestion, coming from somewhere within her, that none of her emotions was real, but rather a smear of cleverly applied face paint.

When it was over, she offered him a bauble, which he politely declined, until she insisted, and he accepted. He had no opinion one way or the other over his being thus used for sport, but was growing increasingly sensitive to her insistence that her footman watch their goings-on, be allowed to make occasional, needlessly snide, comments, and even serve her drinks, tipping the glass's rim to her lips whilst he, Voot, sweated overhead. Voot wondered if the footman secretly held him, Voot, in contempt for prostituting himself, as he supposed it could be interpreted, to her highness for trinkets. When the footman was off taking the soiled sheets to be laundered, Voot had a word with her:

"I really think you ought to discharge him," he advised.

"Whom?" She took Voot's hand and replaced it on her stomach, from where it had fallen; this post-coital embrace was all part of the bargain, and had to be observed.

"Your footman, of course. I certainly wouldn't employ such an impudent person on my staff."

"Sniggly's a dear, and you treat him far too harshly. He's seen me through many a bad time in my life."

"Well, I don't know. I still don't see why he has to always be hovering about us, even in the most delicate, private moments."

"Oh, he doesn't mind."

"I wasn't particularly concerned about *him* minding, you know!"

"I've always seen Sniggly like he's part of the family."

Voot grunted. "That just makes the whole thing more strange, not less, if you ask me."

She giggled, thinking of something. He turned her head to him, gently, with his fingertip, and she batted her eyelash mischievously.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Well...he'd hate me for telling you this."

"What?"

"It's just that...Sniggly mentioned once that he quite admires your manhood."

"Do you mean—my masculinity?"

"No, your penis—silly man!"

“Well, it’s no matter to me if he does. I can’t see how it’s any of his business, any way you look at it.”

She giggled again. “What will you do when the snow clears?”

He thought. “...I suppose the same old thing, you know. I haven’t much else to do, really.”

“Would you consider...” She’d turned her face back away from him. She shifted a little in the bed, so his limpness could snuggle comfortably along the cleft of her aristocratic backside.

“Yes?”

“Coming along with Sniggly and me?”

“Really? Where?”

“Wherever we might go. I don’t usually plan that far ahead. I come across the name of a town in a novel, like its sound in my mouth when I say it, mention it to Sniggly, he books passage and—*voilà!*”

“It sounds lovely.”

“So come with us.”

“I really don’t know. I...this hotel is all I’ve known, for so long. I don’t know if I could cope anyplace else. I don’t know if I could function! It’s pathetic, I know. But I’m a weak man, your highness.”

“Please...no more ‘your highness’, or ‘duchess’.”

“What is—pardon me, but—what is your name?”

“Call me ‘Marie’.”

“Very good. I would be honoured to go with you, Marie. I pray I can prove worthy of your trust.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll tell Sniggly as soon as he gets back.”

“Yes. Sniggly.”

“Don’t you worry about him. You two will become fast friends, I have every confidence. You’ll see.”

*Give up the hotel? Voot was thinking. Why not? Indeed, why not? Leave it to Mifkin, turn my back and think on it no more.*

*Indeed—why not?*

## Chapter One Hundred and Ten

Glen Stoupes had raided the hotel's liquor reserves and taken to spending his days sprawled on his bed, drinking himself into a (he was fully aware of the pun) stupor, and predicting, as a sort of scientific experiment, how much of this punishment his body could withstand before giving up.

He'd quite fancied Enid, for some reason, more to do with her personality and wit than any physical attributes, when he first arrived at the hotel, and felt some jealousy over her, and envy over Geneva and Rosella's capacity to be lesbians, but he couldn't kid himself it was love. He'd never been in love, insofar as he thought he understood the term. It appeared to exist, by hearsay, at least, because people talked so much about it in novels and songs, but he'd managed to avoid it, through no intention of his own, so far. He'd felt puppy love, or something like that, for a couple of girls, back home. And he'd felt lust—the bleeding anuses of many a prostitute in the brothels of Little Rock could attest to that. But what had that accomplished, aside from a thin wallet and a rash that took six months' rubbing with iodine to vanish?

He was miserable, but no more so than back home. He was just tired of faking a smile. A good-old American smile. Well, America, he decided, held nothing for him anymore. It could stick all their goody-good girls' pinafores and bleeding whores' assholes—it could stick them, well, they knew where. Up their assholes, he supposed, if he were required to be explicit about it. Pinafores up assholes, and assholes up assholes. *Who cares?*, he asked himself, then answered: *Not I*.

"As soon as the snow clears," he announced aloud, to the apathetic Fates, "I'm going to change my life! I swear it! I'll adopt a solitary life, of contemplation, away from the vapidness of mankind, in the frozen wasteland of...why not?—the Yukon!"



## Chapter One Hundred and Eleven

They'd begun by discussing Petunia's plans for the future, then Annette offered her thoughts on the importance of maintaining a cohesive womanhood in the historical battle against men, and before they knew it, they were naked and applying their fingertips and tongues to various loci on each other's bodies. Now, Reader, don't you go projecting your filthy porn-conditioned fantasies onto the innocent agents of this chaste narrative; this was long ago, generations ago, with Petunia, at least, enduring still the Victorian, Judeo-Christian conventions, instilled in her from girlhood, against allowing another to view one in the mildest state of dishabille, even when that other is one's husband, even when in the act of attempted procreation; unless the other is a doctor, in which case he is free, nay, positively encouraged, to strip one of one's last bashful stitch of dress and ogle one's genitalia shamelessly. So you can imagine the gauntlet of spectres through which she had to run in order to climb out of her cave to the freedom of fresh air and sunshine, which, in this case, took the form of long, slow, exploratory caresses by a fellow female. All Annette's virulence was transformed into tenderness; her hands pawed Petunia's flesh like a cheesemaker's fingers deep amongst the sticky curds, while Petunia, overcome by the first gentle touches ever to stroke her skin, cast off all the ballast of her marriage, her mores, and her modesty, and lit up, as if a shrivelled wick which had subsisted inside a darkened lampshade were for the first time kissed with flame. Neither of them had touched, or been touched by, a woman before; Annette had not even known a man, and Petunia found it charming to see Annette's usual truculent confidence wiped away. To both of them, nothing had ever felt so right as this; indeed, the very notion of what could be termed "right" expanded to fill all the sky. Never, it seemed, had there been warmth, had there been softness; henceforth, "warmth" could only mean this, "soft" could only mean this; this new language onto which they'd stumbled through the fusion of their forms was so undefined and yet so properly composed, like a pair of undulating, merging jellyfish floating as one through the sea. It was as if a childhood riddle, which had stumped them long ago, and on which they had long since given up, barged back suddenly into their psyches, and proceeded to solve itself, unveiling double meanings to old words which had seemed so stone-hewn, such that the content of the intervening years of their lives had been based on a laughably false premise. Like a cunningly crafted design, which, when turned upside-down, reveals another, opposite yet equally enchanting image it had been impossible to detect, Petunia's lifelong notion of immorality, thus flipped, turned to morality: pleasuring Annette, and inviting Annette to pleasure her, overturned every Commandment, punctured each illusion, and reified, enacted, apotheosised the Golden Rule. *There's so little one has to do, in this world, to be good*, Petunia thought; *just move one's hand like this, over that part of someone's body, and the world's suddenly that tiny bit better for everyone.*

Pleasure drowned them, simultaneously, in a flower-shower of beauteousness:

Petunia had grown up rich, knowing no cares. When a shy debutante, she met Marcel at her ball, danced with him, and was charmed by him, especially by his respectful restraint. After the dance, he bowed, kissed her gloved fingers, hoped he would see her again someday, and left. Over the months that followed, he was nowhere to be seen; a mystery, a dream which had refused to vaporise. She thought on him, pictured him, to the

exclusion of her living, present suitors, who paled in comparison as a string of lame ponies pales against a prizewinning thoroughbred. Then, impossibly, he bumped into her coming out of a tailor's. Of course he remembered her. He'd been thinking of her, writing every acquaintance in the frustrated hope he might track her down. He took her for a drink and plied her with sherry; she knew what he was doing, and tried to play coy—in her head, though rapidly retreating further into a dark, outer orbit, were her unchanged intentions to, like a good girl of her class, wait until marriage to the man she loved—but she was intoxicated by his charm, as much as by the wine. She let him help her to his hotel, let him persuade her to disrobe and to demean herself before him; then, after she'd soaked herself in shame, he took her, crudely and quickly, and left her sobbing in a heap on the floor. Disgusted by her womanly emotion, he left, giving her detailed instructions for returning the key to the desk when she checked out. Sickened with herself, she vowed to become a nun, and, against her parents' will, took holy orders. It soon became obvious, however, that she'd fallen pregnant, which, it transpired, fell somewhat afoul of the sisterhood's protocol, so her parents took her back, until they, in league with his parents, forced her to marry Marcel. After all that, the child was lost, and, despite his occasional selfish, oafish discharges inside her, she never fell pregnant again.

Annette had been treated viciously by her father and brothers when growing up, but found solace in church, until the pastor made a pass at her. Religion was, from that day, dead for her, and the icons of the saints spelt for her nought but the most ludicrous hypocrisy. School, too, held no appeal: science and maths were but men's brutal ventures to subjugate the natural world, whilst literature was at best a polite sham; behind the romantic ravings of the dead males she was required to idolise, she could very well imagine the revolting lusts they wished to discharge upon the milky flesh of their muses. As her kin could not care less where she spent her days, she roamed the streets, joining her fellow truants in their troublemaking, in which she saw no point, for lack of any better thing to do. She beat up boys, but liked girls—she'd known it from the paintings of princesses in her picture books—and, when she was thirteen, she shyly kissed the neck of her best friend, who instantly denounced her before their neighbourhood, shaming her into exile. She fled into a life of tramps, fending off the wolves, stealing the food for which she was too proud to beg, before landing a series of domestic jobs in country manors, where she would be invariably harassed by male members of staff, as well as, usually, the patriarch and his adult and adolescent sons. All the while, she dreamt of eventual revenge, against the whole male gender, none of whose constituents had ever behaved other than boorishly towards her. Love, touch, concern—these, she had never known.

Until now: feeling her lover trace a juice-dripping finger across her lips, realising that she's smiling. Smiling! She couldn't ever remember smiling. She hadn't known her lips could twist in that direction. What could this mean? Could there be hope for her, even in a swamp infested with men-frogs, after all?

## Chapter One Hundred and Twelve

Today in the art class, Maestra Bergamaschi asked her students to paint from imagination. "This is a whole other enterprise," she explained. "We have in each of us an eyeglass to another world. Once, in our ignorance, we assumed that each eyeglass opened onto the same world—a heaven obtainable by all. But now, now that our race is more mature, we can see, clearly, that each of our worlds is a separate, different thing. Hence, the majesty of art. Show us, now, your world, and don't for a moment regret if it looks nothing like this one, or like anybody else's."

Arthur chatted amiably with Seamus while they painted.

"What do you think so far?" Arthur asked.

Seamus leant over and took a gander. "I'm trying to interpret what you're saying."

"I'm not saying anything. It's, you know—a vision from my other world."

"It looks like a bunch of happy families."

"That's right."

"Being destroyed."

"That's right."

"By fire."

"And that's brimstone, there. See?"

"I thought that was that lady's hat."

"It's her hat, but it's been engulfed by brimstone."

"Ah. I like it. It's got a sort of...killing-families motif running throughout."

"Really? That's fine! That's exactly what I was going for."

"Well, what do you think of mine?"

Arthur leant over to peer through Seamus's inner eyeglass.

"That's on a rather different theme to mine."

"Mm."

"What's it called?"

"*Naked Men Kissing*."

"I see."

"I wanted to avoid any ambiguity."

"Yes, that's—that's unambiguous, all right."

Despite Genevra's injunction, Enid's and Rosella's paintings turned out to be, without either having looked at the other's, remarkably similar, with the qualification that Rosella's paint had been far more expertly applied: floral, near-abstract designs floating over an unearthly, unrecognisable landscape.

The duchess's renderings were unmistakeably phallic, but only quasi-identifiable with known objects on Earth. The only obvious resemblance was of the tiaraed princess in the centre, bearing a remarkable likeness to her highness herself, gaping at the flotilla of encroaching phalli, as if she were a harbour offering refuge and succour to the whole sea-weary fleet.

Petunia and Annette were the newest members of the group. Annette did her best to depict, in clumpy and haphazard strokes, a series of men being whipped, castrated and otherwise tortured. Petunia, taking a different tack, expressed a semisolid blend of two kissing faces fused at the mouth. All the while she painted, Petunia, though she wore a

thin gingham dress, felt, through the memory of her skin, Annette's caresses upon her. When she closed her eyes, and listened to the scraping of brushes against canvas, the squeaking of shoe soles on the floor, the murmur of casual conversation, and the humble coughs of the students in recognition of the divergence between their mental intent and its physical translation via paint, Annette's palms still ran up her thighs and over her backside, her lips still closed upon her clavicle, her thigh still pressed between her legs.

Voot and Mifkin joked back and forth, here and there remembering their purpose in the class, so adding a dab or two to their respective tours de force, then resuming their laughter. Voot began by painting a peaceful farm—totally Terran, with nothing the slightest bit otherworldly about it—while Mifkin portrayed some sort of magical castle that had crumbled into beautiful ruins. But each grew bored with that, and so decided between themselves to paint synchronised portraits of each other, each generously depicted.

"I'd always wanted to be an artist," Voot confided in his number two (i.e., deputy manager; not excrement). "Only the vicissitudes of life, and my manifest lack of talent, got in the way."

"I'd always wanted to manage this hotel," Mifkin admitted, absent resentment. "But not anymore. I've discovered so many, many more important things."

"It's as if you've read my mind," Voot smiled.

And the class carried on, to the pleasure of all.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirteen

Betsy struggled to help her father with his tie. “You’ve got to hold still, Daddy.”

“Oh, what’s the use?” He was in his black suit, his best, which he hardly ever wore, but Charlotte had insisted he pack it, just in case, and Betsy had insisted just as forcefully that he wear it now, and submit to the hair styling, manicure, and other grooming she performed, so that he might either win back his wife, or destroy her in the trying.

“Hold on...just a second...there!” She stepped down off the stool and appraised him. “You look very, very handsome, Daddy.”

“Do I? Where’s the mirror?”

“Don’t you worry about a mirror. You just do as I say, and we’ll be one big happy family again. You’ll see.” She grabbed his sleeve and yanked down his arm, popping his finger out of his mouth, where he’d been biting a nail. “Do you remember the script?”

“I think so.”

“You’ll be fine. Just remember: no prisoners.”

She reached up to brush the last, imaginary particles of dust from his shoulder, then smacked him twice on the back of his leg to send him on his way.

Aloysius—or “Barbarian Swine”, as the Drig brood liked to call him—had been dispatched to the other end of the hotel via a letter Betsy had forged, from a sample of Voot’s handwriting, purloined by Eric from the front desk right under Curtis/Thaddeus’s nose, summoning him to wait for a fatally important message in a cubbyhole under a set of stairs. Thus was Charlotte left on her own in their love nest of iniquity. Arthur walked in, without knocking, to find her at a desk, in a nightdress, gripping her jaws in thought.

“Artie!”

“Charlotte.”

“You’ve got the wrong room!”

“No—I came to see you.”

“Oh...I see.”

He sat down on the desk, looking down at her, at such a height that she was forced to confront his (admittedly trousered) crotch, although this configuration was unintentional and one of which he remained unconscious.

“Why, Charlotte?”

“Pardon?”

“Why?”

“Do you mean, ‘Why am I cheating on you with Aloysius?’”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. You must admit we’re still on the same plane of communication—the way you inferred what I meant, I mean. Don’t you see we belong together?”

“Oh, Artie.” She rubbed his knee consolingly, while, in so doing, gently pressing it back to meet its brother knee.

“By ‘Oh, Artie’, do you mean, ‘It’s too late for that now, and besides, we was never really in love with each other, anyway’?”

“Well, yes, that’s exactly it.”

“See?” Arthur exclaimed. “This! *This* is what I mean! It’s like we share the same mind! Except, of course, that my mind doesn’t lust after the waiter, and doesn’t concern

itself with shallow trifles of fashion, isn't regularly debilitated by a tangle of certifiable neuroses, and so forth. But aside from those few things, we're basically the same!"

"Aloysius might be back any minute."

"By that, you mean, 'I'm sorry, Arthur—we had some good times, I sacrificed my youth to you and you sired some wonderful children by me, but people change, people grow, for better or for worse, as it were, there's no going back to the past, the past is merely a dead echo of today, the past is a dead man unlucky to have lived after the epoch of miracles which might have visited upon him a resurrection, and so, in summation, I thank you for the mildly diverting years in which I fulfilled my soulless debt to society, but now, for the first time since I were a girl, I'd like to live me life for me own pleasure, and me own pleasure alone, and to hell with the damage sustained by me reputation, to hell with biblical injunction, and to hell with you, Arthur'? Is that what you meant?"

"It's uncanny!" she admitted. "You've got it precisely!"

"Well," he sighed, standing down from the desk, readjusting his penis within his trousers, and pulling out a folded piece of paper from his pocket, "Betsy warned me that an appeal to your better nature wouldn't work, but I felt I had to try."

"What's that?" she asked, indicating the paper.

"This paper?"

"Yes—the paper I'm pointing to and asking 'What's that' about."

"Oh—this paper. Yes. Well, perhaps the best way to explain it would be, rather than taking up any more of your precious time with a longwinded explanation, simply to show you."

"I agree."

"So we agree—good."

She nodded. Silence.

"So..."

"Yes?"

"Are you going to show me?"

"You mean—the paper?"

"The paper, yes."

"Oh! Yes, right, I'd nearly forgot! Ha! For some reason, some strange reason, I'd got it into my head that I'd already shown it to you!"

"But you hadn't."

"No! I hadn't! But I thought I had!"

"But you hadn't."

"No! Ha!"

She snatched the paper out of his hand and opened it up. On it was a crude but discernible sketch of her, naked, engaged in illicit congress with Aloysius (also naked).

"This is me," she realised.

"Yes—that one, there; the woman." He pointed, to clarify.

"Who drew this?" she asked.

With not a little pride, he admitted it had been he. "I've been taking drawing lessons, you see. With some of the others. I've drawn this, and many, many others, of you, from my memory of your naked body and erotic preferences in the bedchamber."

"How did you render Aloysius so—exactly?" she wondered.

“Ah. Impressed, hm? Well—a small bribe to one of his colleagues, who had bathed naked with him in a local pond on summer nights, and was more than forthcoming with the salacious details.”

“But the act you represent here—it’s revolting.”

“But, I believe, none the less true.”

“And what do you intend to do with this?”

“With what—the picture?”

“Obviously, the picture, yes.”

“I’d intended to present it to the two of you, framed, as a wedding present.”

She stared at him.

“No. That was a joke. In reality, this and all the others will, I’m afraid, find their way to periodicals, family members, trees around our town, church notice boards, and anywhere else I can paste them, once we get out of here.”

A faint ripple of girlhood shame reached out its beseeching fingers to her from far back in her memory, but she drowned it out by cackling, “You may do what you like. I’ve discarded all pride like last season’s ugly stole.” She stood up, and, while she had traditionally been at best two-thirds her husband’s height, she suddenly seemed as tall as he. “What’s more, I shall positively revel in universal knowledge of my debauch. I demand the world know, and pay heed! I wish to stain the history books of tomorrow with reports of the most shameless harlotry the world has ever known! Yes, Arthur, draw, draw away, print, publish, and tell the world how your wife has ruined her body by its brazen crucifixion on her lover’s cross!”

Realising that he had well and truly lost what, it turned out, he did not really want to have, Arthur bowed and withdrew.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Fourteen**

He made his way to his new friend Seamus's room. Seamus, pink-skinned after a bath, greeted Arthur with sympathy, coffee and fellatio.

Arthur moved in the next day.



## Chapter One Hundred and Fifteen

Voot and Sniggly were sharing a cigarette in a small alcove in the duchess's suite, the duchess herself asleep in the bedroom. Voot's hand, holding the cigarette, shook from time to time. He couldn't look Sniggly in the eye, for the shame.

"Cold weather we're having, eh?" he began.

"Do not worry about it, monsieur," the footman said by way of solace.

"The weather, you mean?" asked Voot. "You refer to the weather?"

"I refer to the physical act in which you and I just partook, for her highness's pleasure, monsieur," Sniggly clarified.

"Oh. That."

"Please do not feel ashamed."

"I'd very little dignity to begin with, living here for all these years, managing this place," Voot admitted, staring at a painting of ecstatic, claret-jacketed huntsman atop unnaturally leaping steeds closing in on a scrawny fox who, as the painter would have it, well deserved its fate. "And now I'm afraid I have none."

"Well, to look at dignity the way society does, I guess I lost my little crumb long ago," Sniggly opined. "So I haven't any more to lose."

To be specific, their comments were in reference to a deed the duchess had instigated, namely, persuading Voot to fuck the footman while she watched. Voot had initially recoiled, but her highness's enticement had been so eloquent, her deep well of lechery so contagiously manifest in her eye, that he could have said to have lost sight of his own proclivities in the fever of the moment, rather, he suspected, in the manner of the blood-braying hunters now frozen before him. At the close of the performance, when Sniggly's innermost ring constricted rhythmically around Voot's member, causing his sacred secretion to gush deep into the footman's plebeian orifice, Voot endured an eruption of self-disgust, unhelped by the observation, as evidenced from Sniggly's drenched, pearlescent hand, that the footman, too, had sacrificed his essential masculine identity for a few spurting moments of physical pleasure.

"I've long come to see the course of a man's life as one intermittent parcelling-out of the mediocre stock of dignity with which he was born," philosophised the footman.

"Hm. There might be something to that." Voot passed him the cigarette. "What happens when you've none left?"

"You have the likes of me, monsieur—whatever that may be. Monsieur."

"Please—I think you might call me 'Erasmus', after all this."

"Why 'Erasmus'?"

"That's my Christian name."

"Oh. I understand. Thank you—Erasmus. And I hope you will consent to call me 'Sniggly'."

"Very good."

"Thank you."

"You were saying?"

"Well, while I'm fairly certain I have no dignity left myself, I couldn't tell you whether the result is that I'm a thoroughly ruined man, in the eyes of God and society; or whether, because of it, I've finally found a kind of peace. In any case, you can't very well

live life, at all, without sacrificing the better balance of your dignity. I mean, even a monk—well, maybe a monk, but even they piss and shit, peek at each other's cocks, masturbate in the latrines, and so on."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you come into the duchess's employ?"

Here Sniggly recounted his backstory, which had come flashing back to him, just minutes before, upon the discharge of his semen into his hand (as occasioned by the systematic violation of his anus by Voot's penis): The son of a righteous preacher who'd been imprisoned for allegedly treasonous sermons, young Sniggly was compelled to enter a workhouse at a tender age. Following years of unrelenting misery, the misery relented, when he was plucked from hell by the duchess, a patroness of the workhouse, who had arrived, on a whim, on an inspection. She took a liking to the dirty, roguish-looking lad who stared up at her without a whit of respect. She taught him his trade as footman; having little but life in the workhouse with which to compare it, he supposed he'd had a bit of luck. In addition to his traditional duties, he found upon the stroke of midnight on the morning he came of age, he was required to submit to ritual sexual humiliation for her highness's amusement.

"It became rather tedious rather quickly," he related to Voot. "I am required to satisfy her at certain times, in certain ways, according to a strict timetable posted on the door of the kitchen, for all the servants to see and snicker over."

"What kind of ways—if I'm not being too inquisitive?"

"The traditional ways, sometimes—on Mondays—then the week sees a steady increase in degradation, from allowing myself to be penetrated by certain implements she enjoys wielding, on Wednesday afternoons, to Saturday night trawls through town for tramps to hire off the street, whom the stable grooms clean up so as to be in a fit state for carnal relations with myself, while her highness watches and is pleased by a chambermaid. Naturally, we have Sundays off for church and rest. So you see, I'm something of a pioneer in the evolution of mankind: I've been shorn of all the trappings of morality and shame, and subsist merely as a shoulder-shrugging automaton, content with his abuse and ever aware it could be worse."

"Do you take any pleasure in all this?"

"Well..." He drew the last fume from the cigarette, stubbed it out, and produced another. Voot lit it for him. Sniggly took a draught, then handed it over. "Well," he said again, "not really. But then, who ever said we were put here on this Earth to have a good time?"

"Quite right," Voot nodded.

"Only, I fear her highness has somewhat tired of me, of late. Hence her frenzied search for, you must forgive the term, new meat."

"You mean, me."

"Yes." Sniggly smiled. "Buck up, Erasmus," he advised, clapping him on the back. "You're a new man, like me, now. We're the future, you and I. Where others plan the progress of our species to ever greater heights of honour, we see the truth."

## **Chapter One Hundred and Sixteen**

Around this time, a rumour spread through the hotel that Voot had ordered a cleaner to steal pairs of Charlotte Drig's undergarments, which, once Voot had got hold of them, he used as delicate receptacles for his erotic milk upon self-induced discharge. As a consequence of this rumour, Aloysius was won back to Mifkin's side.

Upon receiving the news, Mifkin elected not to admit that he had not noticed that Aloysius had ever left.

## Chapter One Hundred and Seventeen

"We need a clean break," Aloysius insisted.

"Y'mean, his legs?" Charlotte sought to clarify.

"No. A divorce."

She looked at him dubiously. "But we're not married. And besides, I love you."

"I mean that you and Arthur, to whom you are, if I'm not mistaken, still married, should get a divorce."

"Ah!"

He lay heavily on her back, in bed, having just completed a mutually beneficial erotic transaction, his manhood slowly deflating inside her like a once-proud balloon now fatally punctured on the point of a fence.

"I couldn't leave me children," she said with finality. "A judge would give 'em to him. I'm sure that's what they'd want—a free and easy life, without their mother hectoring 'em left and right—but that would be the end for me."

"But you've left him. In all but name. Let's face facts."

"Let's face what?"

"Facts."

"Oh. But then, I'm still afraid of him."

He laughed.

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I laughed."

"Oh."

"Don't you believe, if it came to it, I could best him in a fight?"

"But he's sneaky, Arthur is. I know him—don't forget that I been married to him for twenty years."

"I haven't forgotten. Does it sound like I've forgotten? Would we be having this conversation if I had?"

"Betsy's advising him, and she's the master of tricks up sleeves. A bull-headed angel, who fights for what she thinks right, by any means she can, absolutely heedless of any authority which might say otherwise. She's probably taken his sketches and stashed 'em round the hotel, in case something should happen to him."

"Something should happen to him"? What do you mean by that?"

"If you killed him. He might have found a way to disseminate the drawings from beyond the grave."

"Nobody's said anything about killing the bloke!"

"What's that?"

"Nobody's said anything about killing the bloke!"

"Saying what about what?"

"Are you having trouble hearing me?"

"Well, me face is shoved into this pillow, you know. You're pressing down on me pretty hard, you know."

"Sorry." He gently withdrew and rolled over beside her. Sighing with relief, she took the opportunity to pull the covers over her, thereby restoring a scintilla of dignity to herself.

“I’d just said that I had no intention of killing the man.”  
“No?”  
“No! Why would you think that?”  
She shrugged, but it was dark, so he couldn’t see.  
“Are you going to answer my question?”  
“I did. I shrugged.”  
“Oh. Well, I couldn’t see.”  
“Shall I turn on the light?”  
“Why?”  
“So you can see me shrug.”  
“No. It’s not necessary. Now that you’ve told me you have, I can picture it.”  
“To be fair, I admit that it weren’t much of an answer, in any case. And yet—at that moment, in my life, it was the only answer I had to give.”  
“Do you want me to kill him?”  
“Heavens no.”  
“Good.”  
“Even though it would solve the problem.”  
“Of course.”  
“But it would be wrong.”  
“And would no doubt create many more problems in its place.”  
“Perhaps.”  
“So let’s say no more about it.”  
“Fine.”  
“...Although, I must say...”  
“What?”  
“No, nothing. You know, those kids of yours—I’ve come across a few of them.”  
“Where?”  
“Lurking about, behind things, in cupboards, hiding. I’ve seen their evil eyes. That Danny—is that his name?”  
“Danny.”  
“I wouldn’t be too surprised if he stabbed me in my sleep. I wouldn’t be too surprised to one day wake up dead.”

## Chapter One Hundred and Eighteen

During the same stretch of time in which Aloysius was violating Missus Drig, Mister Drig was violating Mister O'Herlihy. Arthur was rather ruthless in the vigour with which he lay siege with his battering ram against Seamus's castle door, breaching it almost past the possibility of repair. All the violence he had always longed, but never dared try, to invest in his lovemaking with Charlotte was administered to Seamus, who received it with thanks. But, in contrast to the violence of, say, a street brawl, or the battlefield, this violence bound the two men together, effacing the sheen of civility as they reverted to savage dogs gnashing and clawing each other in competition over a small tract of land both simultaneously wished, for reasons of its own, to occupy. Like a maniacal lumberjack hacking at an oak till it breaks, the tree shuddering under each blow until the crack, and, in the sudden rupture, killer and victim are one.

The two men's grunts would have reminded any auditor of two tugboats suddenly discovering they were headed straight for each other down a narrow, foggy pass, frantically sounding their horns in futile cacophony. But then, without warning, Mister Drig halted his lustful strokes, although his seminal pressure had not yet reached the critical, perilous point, as an idea struck him, which he proceeded to vocalise, so that his lover might hear it, too:

"I say—what do you say to the idea of killing the waiter?"

Beneath him, Mister O'Herlihy squirmed in frustrated interruption of his proctological stimulation. "What do you mean?"

"I consider my proposal to be perfectly clear: kill Aloysius, and seize back my wife."

"But what about me?"

"Hm. Well, I see no reason why you couldn't stay with us. Charlotte's a very attractive woman, y'know."

"I'm sure that she is, but I don't much fancy women, you know."

"Not at all?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Well, perhaps I could see you on alternating days—say, two days a week—no, three days a week..."

"Personally, I don't think you should kill anybody."

"No?"

"Nah. Life's too short. Don't you think?"

From his vantage above Mister O'Herlihy's buttocks, Mister Drig considered this hypothesis. "Perhaps you're right."

"Let's keep on going. You'll feel better after. More peaceful."

"I daresay you're right." And Mister Drig took his friend's advice, withdrawing only upon Seamus's insistence that he be allowed to unburden Mister Drig of his sperm through the application of his mouth.

## Chapter One Hundred and Nineteen

Madame Lapin-Défunt kissed Mademoiselle Godefroi on the top of her head while the latter sat at the desk in her little room, sewing.

“They’ll be neither one nor the other,” Annette explained. “They’ll be something new.”

The ladies had shorn their hair; Annette had binned all of Petunia’s cosmetics; and they had taken to refraining from shaving any part of their bodies. Now, Annette held up the first fruits of her new career as an avant-garde designer: two unclassifiable suits, lacking clear reference to either masculine or feminine convention.

“Promise me,” Annette beseeched, taking her lover’s hand, “we’ll never be gendered again.”

“Genderless,” spake Petunia, “forever. I vow.”

They closed their eyes, and kissed, and were transplanted back to Eden, the snake trod underfoot, the apple rotting uneaten in the grass, Adam tumbled somewhere below. The river of humanity had forked into two, an unreconstituted Babel, in our sorry corner of the multiverse; but here, in their new beginning, all such difference would be forsworn.

## Chapter One Hundred and Twenty

Their first outing in their new attire was to the art group. Annette had been used to painting various degradations of the male species, so today's object, which Master Bergamaschi had arranged to be rendered, posed something of a challenge: a woman, and a living, unmutated one at that.

Genevra, the night before, had, after exasperating negotiations with Sniggly, succeeded in extracting the duchess from her suite long enough to buy her a drink, and another, get her drunk, and persuade her to pose nude for the art group the following day.

So it was, when the students arrived, they came across the sight of Marie-Adélaïde, Duchess of Loon and scion of noble antiquity, stood on a plinth, naked and masturbating.

O! Reader! The shame! And yet—the duchess revelled in the aristocratic indignity of her lewdness. This unprecedented transgression of all bounds of propriety thrilled her more than all the gazebo buffets, shuttlecocks and Danubian cruises in the world. She relished the exhibition of the commonness of the imperfections of her flesh: her humble breasts; her drooping belly; her large, unpretentious rear; her unshaven, unostentatious pudendum; and her rather large feet. If in doing this, she soiled her pristine aristocratic reputation, so be it; if the closely kept secret of her insatiable vices had now breached the wall of her estate, so much the better. If she were a walnut, who had been trapped her whole life within the confines of expected patrician behaviour, then she was now a walnut who'd broken through her shell. If her life had been hermetically sealed for the prevention of noxious air seeping through, she now danced serenely through the miasma. As her humiliation swelled through her veins, her past came roaring back, deafening her to all else:

Born to a debauched father and debauched mother, neither of whom was sober enough to have any real hand in her rearing, Marie-Adélaïde was raised by her governess, who was the only person she ever loved. While her parents destroyed their bodies on their dissolute escapades, their daughter read books and envied the commoners their freedoms. Her parents died; her governess died; she grew up on her estate, and never sought, nor found, love, contenting herself with momentarily satisfying her congenital, inordinate sensual cravings through the exploitation of her servants. She travelled around the Continent, now, with her footman, receiving with politeness, then refusing out of hand, offers of marriage from high-ranking members of the noblest families in Europe, none of whom bothered to try to get to know her. Through it all, she had no regrets, save never having experienced a loving family, nor, indeed, love in any form, save the most sordid; but, having long ago concluded that her existence was pointless, she saw no blame to be attached, and stifled any suggestion from within that a point might have been found had she tried looking for it.

Now, wobbling atop her plinth, upon the crowning of her ecstasy, she resolved to take her degradation, which had heretofore been restricted to her small circle of servants at her estate, on the road, to the big time, on tour to the most prestigious opera houses of the world—a Godiva for the modern era, reliving this humiliation nightly, unpicking the armour of her reputation scale by scale, until she should grow so inured that she would no longer know honour from dishonour, and could die a famous whore, her rotting teeth retaining a saucy grin when her only spectators would be worms.



## Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-One

Herra Brotherus, too, publicly relished his humiliation, having taken to whinging, on his knees, outside Mademoiselle Godefroi's door like a dog. Curtis/Thaddeus, among others, found this unmanly behaviour to be disgraceful, but some, such as Betsy Drig, took pity on the wretch. Betsy liked to take him food, and stroke his hair, and taught him to play fetch. When Betsy asked Brotherus what he wanted, the gentleman replied, "Further debasement at the hands of Mademoiselle Godefroi," but Betsy wasn't entirely sure what that meant. Sometimes, when he was alone outside Annette's door, he would hump it. The rest of the time, he would roll around on the corridor's carpet, moaning and making an idiot out of himself. He admitted his worthlessness—he was the first to admit it—but did not know what else to do. He had nothing else to do. At least, he reasoned, this was something to keep him occupied.

At times, he would push his ear against the door, and could make out faint snatches of Annette's dialogues with Madame Lapin-Défun. In this way, he could at least enjoy Annette's castigations against the male sex. At other times, he could interpret various sounds as emanating from their lovemaking, which made him howl with envy and long for death.

In the raptures of self-pity, his backstory rose up before him: He had had a normal upbringing, joined the family banking business straight out of university, was too diffident in his physical unattractiveness and acknowledged want of wit to speak a word to a lady off the topic of interest rates, and thus led a chaste social life until, at the age of nineteen, his father arranged his marriage to a daughter of a rival banking clan. She was sweet and coy, significantly less aesthetically repugnant than he, and boasted all the intelligence he lacked. On the first night of their honeymoon, when she finally lured him out of the bathroom, she proceeded to viciously abuse him with straps, a whip and a spiked cudgel—he took to it immediately, as if, having wandered through a purposeless desert all his life, he'd finally stumbled upon a horde of treasure of whose existence he'd had no inkling; or, as if he'd sailed through a shallow romance borrowed half-heartedly from the library, only to discover, at its climax, that there had been a philosophical undercurrent all along which now, on the point of its discovery, reoriented his whole life. Any way you want to look at it, he had found the purpose for which he had been put on this earth: to be sexually humiliated by his wife, for the pleasure of them both. They were soulmates, completely symbiotic, until she died of a fever two years ago, collapsing the cornerstone of his existence, and leaving him a lost soul wandering the world.

Just as he was reliving this past, Annette and Petunia opened their door. He looked up, but failed to recognise either of them in their new, ungended forms. He dropped his head into his paws and whinged some more.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Two**

That night, Brotherus retreated to his own room, where he took a bread knife, sawed away at his penis, discovered that this particular implement was unsuited to the job, borrowed a steak knife from his neighbour, Frau Hühnerbeinstein (who averted her eyes from his untrousered lower half), cleaned it responsibly, and used it to cut off the source of his distraction, becoming at once pure of heart.

## Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Three

But Herr Voot's penis had not been cut off; nor, for that matter, had Sniggly's. On the contrary, both their penises were emphatically attached to their respective pelvises, and as such, they were being used, right at that moment, to simultaneously satisfy the duchess, who had contrived this new, exponentially satisfying configuration. Reader, trust me that the details are not important and could never be, in any event, as titillating as your salacious imaginations could render them. At the close of the evening, Voot was offered, and accepted, a promotion to tour manager and co-star of the forthcoming *Bavarian Duchess Live, Nude, on Stage, Scandalously Fornicating with Her Harem, plus Beasts from Undiscovered Lands and Juggler* show, to be assumed just as soon as that detested snow would finally decide to stop falling and let the real world resume its course around the sun.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Four**

Mister O'Herlihy brought Mister Drig his pipe, wiped a smattering of dandruff off his shoulder, and left him to relax in his comfy chair. Mister Drig thumbed through a book of poems, but became drowsy. Mister O'Herlihy, coming in from tidying up the bedroom, asked him softly if he would like a cup of tea, but Mister Drig shook his head (to indicate that he did not). Mister O'Herlihy proceeded to sit on his lap, kiss his cheek, and hold him. Once Mister Drig had drifted off to sleep—for where else would he drift to, at that time of night? Buenos Aires?—Mister O'Herlihy quietly took the pipe from his mouth and set it on the table. Then Mister O'Herlihy, cuddling into him, fell to sleep, and dreamt of locomotives.

## Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Five

Through a peep-hole they'd bored in the floor, Queen Betsy and her princes stared down, from the disused loft space they'd commandeered, at the old, divested father-king, Arthur, walking down the corridor hand-in-hand with the interloper O'Herlihy. Something snapped in Prince Danny—it was, he wasn't quite mature enough to recognise, his last tether to his parents and all his forebears. Prince Charlie felt an irrepressible urge to smash things. Prince Doobie stared and nurtured his own mysterious thoughts. Eric renewed his vow to serve his queen. Prince Bo slept, off in a corner. And Queen Betsy accepted that her family would never reform, and that adults were hopeless, and must be forcibly civilised, for their own good.

“Our utopia is perfected,” she announced. “All that's left now is to expand our Empire.”

“The army is ready,” Prince Charlie declared. “Our weapons are built. All we await is the word from your majesty.”

“The time is nearly ripe,” judged the queen. “Any day now, and their own degeneration will have practically wiped them out—then we may move in and finish the job.”

“Total slaughter!” Prince Charlie screamed.

“Will you read us a story first?” Prince Eric asked the queen.

“Yes, I'll read you a story first.”

“Hooray!”

## Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Six

That afternoon, the duchess was passed from Genevra, Enid and Rosella—who inflicted on her their harshest fantasies—to Misters Drig and O’Herlihy—Seamus watching ambivalently whilst his lover subjected her highness to excruciating sexual humiliation, imagining Charlotte all the while—then, evening having arrived, that time when the dimming of the light betokens the curtailment of men’s hopes, and the onset of the concession that the heroes of ancient tales lived lives of a fullness our era could not countenance, our fates will not brook; and all the while, the honeyed call of obsolescence sounds more sweet, less horrific, with each passing year—evening having arrived, the duchess was passed to Curtis/Thaddeus, who happened to be strolling by, and duly took her to the servants’ quarters and summoned his fellows, who, en masse, extracted from her body, with her passionate consent, a settlement of millennia-old debt, all the unrealised promises of her class to theirs, bespoken by the multiple insemination of her womb with their seed, portending the birth of a classless monster who would, if carried to term, level civilisation as they knew it—before she finally, exhausted, the dignity of herself and her royal house dismantled beyond repair, returned to her suite, where Voot and Sniggly bathed her, fed her and cradled her to sleep.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Seven**

While the duchess slept the sleep of the unfailingly absolved, Signora Bergamaschi stood alone before her easel, dark in the patio, trying, but failing, to capture her impressions of the white glow of snow upon the glass, the moonlight which seemed to reach out to her through it, and the unremitting blackness beyond. The signs were there, uncloaked, as naked as the duchess, but Genevra fought the urge to recognise them. She felt, but would not think, she was on the verge of a revelation which would immerse her whole person in meaning, soak her through, stain her irreversibly, but which would in the same swoop annihilate all else she'd ever known.

She looked to the blank canvas. It was already white.

She put down her brush.

She prayed; she couldn't help herself.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Eight**

Rosella hadn't said two words to Annette the whole of her stay, and yet, something told her it was she, the cleaning lady-cum-adulteress-cum-provocateur, who could, in the midst of overturning the old regime, preserve a piece of its past. She did not try to understand the feeling, but followed it: she knocked on her door, in the middle of the night, while Enid slept and Genevra pondered the infinite on the patio. Annette, half-dressed, half her soul suspended in a dream, opened the door, Petunia stirring on the bed. Rosella implored her, without words, and handed her her manuscript—with both hands, as a young, doomed mother would hand over her child, her only love from a short lifetime's woe in this world, to a well-to-do, unanointed, would-be saviour. Annette, with unwonted tenderness, clutched the book to her bosom, and nodded her promise. Rosella blessed her with mouthed thanks, and withdrew.



## **Chapter One Hundred and Twenty-Nine**

Before dawn, Annette and Petunia, helping one another wade through the thick, rock-like continent of snow, which reached to their shoulders, bearing little but two small bags and Rosella's memoir, shut their eyes to the dark wind, which tried to pry open their lids, cackled in their ears, cracked apart their lips, and stabbed up their nostrils. They'd thought it all through: they might very well die, today, but, even then, to die in protest at their world would at least signal their derision. Even if no one knew; if they were presumed to have followed Marcel and Deirdre off the precipice; even then, their protest would have registered, they believed, somewhere, somehow. But if they survived—then they'd find shelter, be taken in by a farmwife, in defiance of her husband, whose guests would castrate him for his ill humour, absorb his wife into their ranks, and press onward, onward, to Petunia's sister's house in Picardy, then to Paris, to London, to all the capital cities, their numbers swelling with sisterhood, unreconstructed cocks falling to the gutters of Westminster in their thousands.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Thirty**

The soft depression in the mattress where the duchess had slept, between the slumbering forms of Herr Voot and Sniggly, always with a dense, dreamy silence, formerly fragranced with her rose-petal lotion, now with the mongrel admixture of many men's sperm, was bare. The cleaner Janice found her highness, stomach hacked open and entrails strewn about the cupboard, and made the necessary report to her higher-ups. Voot was bewildered; Sniggly inconsolable; Curtis/Thaddeus mildly amused; while everybody else took it as they would the death of a favourite character in a novel they were reading: unfortunate, but ultimately unreal.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-One

Even the most callous-souled reader—yes, you—will be forced to spare a wandering thought for Sniggly, a footman without a mistress—as useless, it could be argued, as a foot without a brain. There had been a time when this was all he longed for—not his mistress’s death, by any means, but freedom—to escape the disgrace, as he’d judged it, to win re-baptism in the lagoons of the community, and evolve to become a righteous man, like his father had been—and to find his father, who must surely still be alive, and join him in dignified penury. He had never felt himself brave enough to leave her, or capable of reforming himself sufficiently to be worthy of his saintly begetter. And it was only lately that it became clear to him that he had grown to relish his debasement at his mistress’s hands; and that he did not wish, truly in his heart, to become deserving of his father. Earlier that year, he and the duchess, on their never-ending travels, had bumped into his father, who did not recognise his son, while Sniggly, recognising him, could not bear to admit to him—an old, wrecked man, slumping along the street in hole-worn shoes, failing to sell to contemptuous passers-by the pamphlets he’d penned—that it was he. Should he search for him now—now that his mistress was no more, and his sole purpose in life had been pulled out from beneath his feet? No. For Sniggly had become another man; for better or for worse, another man, unrelated to those who had once been his kin.

He allowed himself to be consoled by Voot. The manager offered to fellate him, but Sniggly replied that he wasn’t in the mood. Sniggly stared straight ahead, from the bed on which they sat, at the white, unadorned wall, and felt, for no particular reason, that if he could summon up the will to try, he’d be able to see right through it. When he mentioned this curious sensation to Voot, in an attempt to lighten the mood, Voot chuckled, but then pointed out that, in fact, there happened to be a hidden recess in some of the suites, as a place to secrete assets. Sniggly, who had had no notion of such a thing, got up and, with Voot’s help, felt around the wall until the invisible cavity revealed itself. Inside, in addition to some of her highness’s most sentimentally cherished jewels, was a document: her will, amended that week, signed by two guests as witnesses, leaving everything, jointly, to Herr Erasmus Voot and Mijnheer Kamiel Snijder (alias, “Sniggly”).

There was nothing for it, then, but for the two to vow to move back to her highness’s estate, free her servants, parcel out disused rooms of her manor for the subsistence of stray dogs, and found a museum through which to preserve her memory forever.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Two

Miss Trojczakowski happened upon Sri Gangakanta moping around the lobby the next morning, so invited him for a coffee. Aloysius rudely dumped a couple cups on their table: the drinks were more yellow than brown, as, by order of the management, the dwindling supply of coffee beans had to be rationed to a few scattered smithereens, mixed in with an untraceable number of dead insects, per cup.

After some muttered comments from Gangakanta on the futility of existence and the impossibility that someone could ever find it in their heart to love him—two conclusions with which Enid, if she were going to be authentic to herself, could not truthfully disagree—and some monosyllabic grunts about the weather, the subject of the duchess's recent transplantation from Earth to another, posited realm reared its head, occasioning the last time the murder investigation would be discussed.

"Perhaps the footman," Gangakanta threw out. "Perhaps he was jealous."

"Or Herr Voot?"

"It could not have been a frustrated suitor; her highness made herself available, as I understand it, to anyone who wanted her."

"But would the footman have had anything against any of the previous victims? Or is it a stream of isolated murderers we're talking about?"

Gangakanta had long since lost the manners which would have compelled him to refrain from yawning in a lady's presence, or even to cover his mouth whilst so doing. "Who knows?" he concluded.

"Who would want Sanns, or the coronel, or Snede, or the duchess, dead?" Enid persisted, not because the answer, if there were one, mattered to her greatly, but because she dreaded the thought of returning their conversation to the thoroughly depleted topic of the weather.

"Surely it would be an impossibility to spend any time of consequence on this earth without brushing against a slew of fellow human beings who would rather see you painfully destroyed," submitted Gangakanta.

Enid tried the tea, spat it out, pushed the cup away, and went on: "Four people have now been murdered."

"Five," corrected Gangakanta, without enthusiasm. "We musn't omit Inspector Pluck."

"Inspector Pluck...!" Enid stopped, and stared into the air. She'd forgotten all about him. His name breathed out from her lips like a character in a fairy tale read and assimilated long ago, but never consciously dwelt upon since girlhood. "You're right. Five."

"But we know who killed him." Gangakanta was sure they'd had this conversation before—or had he dreamt it?

"Can we take it for granted that whoever killed the others would not have been too faint-hearted to partake in the death of the inspector?"

"We cannot, I think."

"All right." Enid wished she had some real coffee. She closed her eyes for a moment, imagined it, then opened them and continued. "Is there one man who has motives—"

"Or woman."

“—I grant you—who has motives for killing them all?”

Gangakanta had stopped listening. Their discussion had taken on the tone of two sad old men in a gentleman’s club, fat and sated with cigars, hypothesising over what would have happened had cricketer B been to bat in place of cricketer A. Instead, he stared into the shafts of sickly light which floundered through the windows and onto the tables; at the anonymous motes fluttering between columns of nothingness. How much better to have been incarnated as one of those, he thought. How much less painful. How much more peaceful.

“I can’t see why it shouldn’t be two separate persons—or even a different killer for each victim,” Enid mused. Gangakanta looked over, surprised and a little annoyed to discover that the conversation was still going. “Or a pack! A cabal! Or, entirely disconnected phenomena. Directly, I mean; indirectly, all linked: after each murder, a new person took heart—that is to say, courage—from the example, and applied it to their own ends.”

“The act of murder,” Gangakanta thought aloud, “normalised. Simply one tool in the toolbox for resolving disputes.”

“The chain connecting man sympathetically to man—you understand that by the word ‘man’, I refer to all mankind—by which I mean, ‘humankind’—the chain breaking, link by link, till civilisation has collapsed!”

“Or...” Gangakanta began to posit, hazily, “there was only one murderer, all along, who sought to inject the germ of chaos into the population, by framing suspect after suspect, then picking them off.”

“Until...what? Only he is left?”

“The last man,” Gangakanta nodded, somewhat in awe. “Who, through the elimination of all other sentient life, has sired himself God.”

It was all too confusing for Enid; she wanted to shake it from her mind, grasp at the receding images of Rosella and Genevra, and cleave them to her breast forevermore, notions of murder mysteries be damned.

It was as if Gangakanta had read her thoughts (he had not): “What does any of it matter, really? Come on. You know it’s true. A handful of people, dead today instead of tomorrow? It’s not as if any of these particular specimens of humanity had ever stopped in the tracks of their meaningless pursuits to consider what any of it was for, you’ve got to admit. And even the survivors—to the extent that any of us still alive is not properly so called—has the recognition of their proximity to violent death changed how they live their lives? How they perceive reality? Has it, for lack of a better phrase, penetrated their skulls at all? Or has it just reinforced what they’ve secretly known in their hearts all along: that all is for nought?”

Enid watched him close his eyes and rest his forehead against his fingertips. *He’s given up*, she thought. *He might pass away right now. And who could blame him?* There were only a few others in the dining room just then. A light clinking of spoons sprinkled itself around them. Enid watched the others. She felt no connection to them. They could kill each other, and, so long as she and her loved ones were spared, she couldn’t honestly pretend to mind. They were a rotten bunch, all of them, she decided. And if they said the same of her? Well, fair enough.

The chair was cold under her buttocks. She imagined the chair were replaced by Rosella’s lips, and she became warm all over.

But then, as if writ on a paper carried this way and that on the wind, finally, circuitously, arrived in her hand, came Gangakanta's last words, delayed, to her ear. His was an insouciance of vast profundity; a detachment far grander than hers. What if he—he—had been the murderer? Who had done it all as some cold-hearted, stoical, moral experiment? Which had resulted in the complete corruption of his psyche, leaving him... like this?

But he was still talking: "It might be less corporal than that," he was suggesting, his brow unmoved from his hand. "It might be a sort of karmic chain of death, in which each victim was really the murderer of the previous victim. Through their own will, or not. It might be that, after all, we are far more closely linked than we've ever realised—to our own profound damnation."

The encircling murmur of the other diners' conversation, and its unflaggingly casual tone, seemed to swirl closer and closer round Enid, until she could practically feel it clenching her neck. A vision of the deep inside of Rosella's vagina flashed before her eyes, like a mercifully beckoning angel at the point of one's death. As the sounds tightened their hold on her, so did the remembered sensation of Genevra's and Rosella's lips tightening their embouchure around her nipples. Dimly, amidst all this, Gangakanta's words tumbled, their intended meaning slippery-handled, to Enid's ear:

"...many people sharing the same dream? Or one dreamer, who is none of us?"

She had to lower her head and hold herself in both hands before she could block out the extraneous sensations and recover herself. She took another sip of coffee, spat it out and blinked herself back to the present.

"Anyway," Gangakanta was saying, "do you think this snow will ever stop?"

The upshot of their conversation, when it concluded, was their joint decision to close the investigation. In summary, they agreed, the identity, motives, and particulars of the murderer or murderers simply did not matter.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Three

Frau Hühnerbeinstein had lost weight; this is what happens when one ceases to eat. (Go on, Reader—try it and see.) When she grabbed our morose friend Sri Gangakanta by his elbow, not long after he'd concluded his conversation with Miss Trojczakowski, and pinched until he deigned to turn round and face her, he was struck by her saggy, wattle-like stalactites of skin hanging from her bones where sturdy, ample flesh had once rosily bloomed.

"I must speak with you, monsieur."

"What?"

"I said that I must speak with you."

"Another conversation—so soon? Madame, I implore you...my mind, you see...is so very weak..."

"Oh, don't be such an idiot." She dragged him to her room, threw him into an armchair, shoved a cup of tea into his hands and ignored all his mumbled protestations.

"Monsieur," she began, sitting on the settee and fixing him with a humourless eye, "given Senhor La Paiva's refusal to entertain my concerns with any seriousness, I turn to you, as the only other feeling occupant of this hotel."

He would rather die, he realised; rather die, than sit listening to this.

She leant closer: "None of us can be blind, monsieur, to the deluge of depravity with which we have been inundated! I trust you won't deny that. I trust you won't require an enumeration of sins I have witnessed or heard speak of."

He stared at his tea. The particles swirled according to a dynamic which he couldn't begin to calculate. And yet, it was just tea. It was hot. He could dump it over his head and scald himself. What was the calculation for that?

"Very well then: adultery, sodomy, assault, murder, theft, neglect, and covetousness. And probably many more of which I'm ignorant, or whose names I've never encountered, or whose iniquity is so unparalleled that words have not yet been invented which would satisfactorily describe them."

*How much longer until the end?*, he thought (in tandem, very likely, with my loyal reader). *This world cannot be allowed to go on like this, can it? Every farce must face its end. We must all burn, and I with them, and it cannot come too soon.*

"But you—you, monsieur, are an apostate, I think? You once felt the sun on your brow, but now only a chill? Hm? I had taken you, when first I saw you, for a man of faith. A worshipper of God—perhaps not the same God I worship, but close enough. And now, I beg you to face God once more—to renew your allegiance, in whatever form it takes—and help me save us all, before it's too late!"

"It's too late," he averred. "You've said it. You've hit the nail on the head, madame. It's too, too late."

"I must disagree, monsieur. I believe it will never be too late until we're all goggling terror-eyed at one another in the fires of Hell!"

With an inarticulate scream, Gangakanta seized his teacup and smashed it against the side of his head. Pain, blood, scalding hair and a look of bewilderment from the direction of Gilda were the immediate results.

"You are such an ass!" she declared. "What did you do that for?!"

He answered with a wordless wail which obliged Frau Hühnerbeinstein to cover her ears with her hands.

“Get out of here, you cretin! I can see my hopes in you were tragically misplaced.”

He left her room and skipped down the corridor, raving about a universal end which would shortly consume them all.



## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Four

Of course Eli La Paiva knew where he could find his son, but he also knew better than to accost him when Philip wouldn't be in a suitable mood to talk to him. Then again, he knew what his son would say, and so had no need to ask him anything; he knew that any advice, admonition or plea would fall on deaf ears and reap, in fact, scowling scorn. But he also knew that the conversation he now sought was something the two of them had to undergo, as a ritual, if nothing else. This was the moment—he knocked on the door which communicated between their rooms, aware that his son would be woken, but be just the right amount of dazed to prove receptive to what he had to say.

Sure enough, a yawning, frazzled Philip opened the door. “Yes, Father?”

“We need to finish the conversation we started.”

“I thought it was finished.”

“No.”

Philip sighed, and retreated into his room for a drink. He didn't bother to offer his father one, knowing, in his own limited way, it would be declined.

“I just want to tell you I love you,” Eli said.

“Thanks.” Philip was scraping around in the ice bucket; only tiny shark-tooth shavings could be dredged up.

“I just needed to say that.”

The smell of tiny drops of sweat soaked into shirtsleeves; the exact number of particles of dead skin which constituted the dust on the dresser; the complete circumstances surrounding the production of every painting in history whose hue corresponded with the shade of umber now hovering around them; the lives and deaths of each occupant of this room, with all their sins and virtues, including their final terrors whilst Death stroked their cheeks, and what came after—all this, and much more, Eli perceived, though he had no wish to do so.

He took a deep breath, and continued: “You see, I won't be around much longer.”

Philip finally looked straight at him. “Are you foretelling your own death, then?”

“Death? Well, yes...but that doesn't matter.”

“Oh, it doesn't? Can you see that, too?”

“Of course. But...” He moved closer.

“Yes?”

He knew his son would recoil, he knew the reasons why, he knew Philip wouldn't want to recoil, and he knew that he couldn't help it—he hugged him, and there, each chin projecting past the other's shoulder like a conflicted, ambivalent Janus, he whispered, “When I am wiped out, when you are wiped out, when all life is wiped off the earth—for all of the minutes we've already existed under the sun, flitting befuddledly, ants along a log, we will still exist—we will still exist—in those snapshots of time. No one can ever take those away. They are imprinted on the scroll of eternity, inexpungeably. Therefore are all of us immortal; therefore are our victories undying; and therefore are our mistakes forever unrecoverable.”

He felt the pain in his son, from the solitude, the freedom, which he'd so long sought, and had finally, just this moment, achieved. But he knew that his words would ring through his son's ears for the rest of his life.

He'd needed to say it, before he went away.

He'd said it, because he knew it was the sort of thing his son would have wished to hear.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Five

There comes a time in each man's life when he looks about him and wonders if he might somehow give back what he has taken; render, rather than grab; push his balance book into the black. So it was with Mister Drig, who, having ejaculated across Mister O'Herlihy's hairless chest, noted that his companion's penis, like a maple in a meadow untrammelled by man, was regularly left untapped. And so he, with the grace and benevolence of a descending deity, wanked him off. Mister O'Herlihy tried to object that this action was unnecessary, neither solicited nor expected, but Mister Drig's fist wanked true, and, at the moment of climactic mushrooming; or, if you prefer, the time-lapsed fanning-out of branches into a flickering sky; or, if you don't like that one, how about the phlegmy cough of a chair-confined superannuate; or might I suggest, the cataclysmic rupture of a decayed dam? Now, if you don't fancy any of them—what can I do?

Let's move on.

At his point of eruption, Mister O'Herlihy was treated to a neat precis of his life up to that moment: his penurious upbringing as the ragged son of a coal miner, loved but lacking sufficient regular meals to prevent his stunted growth. His father, having survived a cave-in but lost the use of one leg, had his petition for compensation from the company rudely refused, and retaliated by breaking into the owner's house and executing him, his wife and his children, only to be burnt alive in the conflagration which ensued during the siege by the soldiers dispatched to put it down. Before his incineration, however, he'd had his wits enough about him to toss from an upper window a brooch, which his wife caught down below and passed to young Seamus to run off and pawn. What young Seamus did was gamble it in a game of cards, win, use his profit to buy his mother and himself a mansion in London, and care for her until her death, after which, with nowhere to go, and his neighbours increasingly annoyed with his inclination to shrilly whinge at the slightest mishap, he took off on a trip round the world, ending up here, with his semen waxing over Mister Drig's decelerating hand.

Flush with contentment, he slept.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Six

Madame Tautphoeus grabbed Enid coming out of the lunchroom and begged a minute of her time, upon which Enid, after spending at least a minute and a half failing to conjure up, on the spot, a convincing argument for why she could not spare that minute, sighed and accompanied her into a reading room, where they found themselves alone.

"I've had an epiphany!" the wild-eyed old lady announced. Enid took it as read that Vanessa would proceed to detail said epiphany without having to be asked; she found it unlikely that, on the contrary, Madame Tautphoeus would openly refuse, or change the subject, or look at her quizzically and deny having made any reference to an epiphany; even in a holiday as crammed with idiocies as this one, Enid considered such a dialogic sequel to be an idiom too far, and if she did not wish to waste her thoughts on it, then why, dear Reader, should we?

"My epiphany," the grand dame proceeded, as expected, "was that Inspector Pluck's vengeful ghost has done all the murdering!"

Enid considered this new theory. "What about Snede?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Snede. The first victim."

"Pluck's ghost, I tell you."

"But the inspector was alive."

"When?"

"At the time of Snede's death."

Madame Tautphoeus's counterargument consisted of a forceful shrug of her shoulders ("of her shoulders", I say; for what else had she on her person she might have alternatively shrugged? (If you counter, "her breasts, of course", then you'll agree that, in that case, we might very well have expected to have spied her performing this rousing trick to the accompaniment of a grumbling accordionist in circuses from here to Chicualacuala (a.k.a. St. Hugginsville))). "Perhaps that was somebody else. Or, perhaps Pluck's ghost, existing, as we know, on a plane unencumbered by the fetters of time, moves freely between past and future. How should I know, after all?! I'm only telling you my epiphany, I beg you to remember!"

"I thank you for your theory, madame. I find it most intriguing."

"So will you proceed to attempt to arrest the inspector's ghost?"

"I'm afraid I'm unlicensed to arrest anybody in this world or the next, madame. And in any case, the investigation is closed."

"Closed?"

"Closed. For after all—we're all going to die. Don't you agree? It's Fate. And therefore, what justification can we have for judging and punishing an instrument of Fate? I ask you that, madame. Pray inform me when your next epiphany has answered it."

## **Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Seven**

The report came not from an individual, but anonymously, out of the collective air; no one could be sure where they'd heard it, how they'd been informed, or even that they hadn't deciphered it, unconsciously, from a gathering mood, like an armada of dark clouds encroaching with questionable intent over the mountains. All the guests seemed to intuit it, simultaneously, somehow or other, with an eschatological exactitude:

There'd been another murder.

Enid and Gangakanta met, by accident, by the ballroom door, each coming from another direction. They entered, without knowing why, to be greeted by the residue of a primal, erotic cry of consummated wisdom—the tail end of a cut-off, verily, circumcised, scream. There, casual in a chair by the dance floor, sat Senhor Eli La Paiva, his skull smashed open, his brain torn out and mashed up upon the floor before him like an apple premasticated for a baby. No trace of another person could be found.

“Surely,” Gangakanta reasoned, “he must have seen it coming?”

“Maybe he did nothing to prevent it,” Enid replied. “Maybe he'd foreseen all along he would welcome it with open arms.”

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Eight

That evening's scheduled entertainment was an orgy, held in the ballroom, after the raspberry strudel with cream. It was conducted amidst the smeared entrails, ankle-deep in the blood, of Senhor La Paiva, whose unsurprised eyes peeped at the spontaneous outpouring of undifferentiating lust. Some of our main characters were not participating: Miss Trojczakowski, Mademoiselle Rosella, and Signora Bergamaschi were in their room, hotly debating the validity of needlepoint as a fine art; Mister Stoupes was passed out in a puddle of vomit in his room, a puddle which, dispersed about his head, would have resembled to a conscious and knowledgeable observer the shape of the principal islands constituting the Philippines; Monsieurs Mifkin and Bartoff were telling Sam off for peeing in the room; Sri Gangakanta was weeping in his bath; Herr Voot and Sniggly were cuddling in bed, gigglingly planning their future; Misters Drig and O'Herlihy watched from behind a pillar; the Drig children had free rein of the kitchen, and impounded all they could lay hold of; Frau Hühnerbeinstein knelt on the rug in her room, appealing to an unresponsive God; and Poor Larry slept.

But Curtis/Thaddeus took part, stumbling about, his trousers round his ankles, barking senseless bursts of profanity whilst choking every aperture in sight with his manhood, which had inexplicably ballooned to monstrous and wholly unwieldy dimensions, to the shock of its bearer as much as to his variously appreciative recipients; as did Missus Drig, who gave herself freely to whoever would have her; Aloysius might have exploded with jealousy had he not been preoccupied with sodomising several wives according to the strict sequence of a ticketing system he'd set up for that purpose; Herra Brotherus, boasting a large infected clot of blood where his penis had once proudly hung, skipped about shamelessly begging ladies and gentlemen to injure him through violent sexual humiliation; a hermaphrodite from Siam, after exposing zherself to the applause of all, proceeded to pleasure small groups of participants at a time (an orderly queue having been established, unconsciously, testifying to the innate sense of fair play ensconced within the hearts of all peoples from all parts of the world); Janice, the cleaning lady, fellated the men and fingered the ladies; Mister Johnson urinated on the men and offered to serve as a receptacle for the ladies to urinate into him; Signor Gridenko stood on a table and ejaculated over a large number of guests whilst roaring "Finch'han dal vino"; Missus Minette used the faces of guests as seats with an asphyxiating, nearly fatal force; Madame Tautphoeus, who would have been voted "Belle of the Bacchanal" had there been such a title, and had there been such a vote, revelled in her disgrace, brandishing her orifices like hideous weapons; and so on.

I have provided the barest outlines of the goings-on owing to my moral responsibilities as narrator—as set out minutely in *Statutory Duties of the Author of Parodic Murder Mysteries, 1867*, available as a print publication from the British Library (see their website, or walk in and loudly demand answers, for details)—but, Reader, I'm telling you straight: I implore you to curb your obviously salacious appetite for explicit images. If you must, imagine for yourself the deplorable scene which honour, it by this point should go without saying, forbids me to envisage.

## Chapter One Hundred and Thirty-Nine

Philip La Paiva cared, if nobody else seemed to. A day ago, his most pressing desire in the world had been to make his own way through it, free from any affiliation to his father. And now that his wish had come true, all his bearings had been lost, and, without his father somewhere in the background with which to define himself by contrast, he had no idea who he was.

“All I wanted was love from him,” he realised aloud, bent awkwardly at the waist, clasping the edge of his writing-desk, “and all he wanted was love from me!”

He wept, standing like that, as Adam must have, filliped from on high. Modeste, loitering against the wall, didn’t know what to make of this explicit display of emotion. Philip had always been so straightforward in his scatological compulsion. Why bring concepts like love and filial devotion into it? What the fuck was the matter with him?

Overcome with remorse, Philip broke down, collapsing to the floor, still clinging to the tabletop for some reason Modeste couldn’t fathom. Hoping her excrement might salve him, she approached him for a caress, but he shoved her away. Without anything else to do—this was in the days before TV or the Internet, remember—she moped off into his wardrobe, sat down amidst the coats, took a shit, and in so doing, achieved orgasm and exposed her backstory to any who happened to be in her vicinity:

From a very young age, she’d learnt to shit on the floor, and in various other inappropriate places, in order to attract attention from her large, poor family who lived in one room. She couldn’t compete with her frankly savage siblings through volume of noise, fisticuffs or traditional notions of virtue, but she overcame her handicap through her power to summon up and expel a seemingly bottomless (as it were) supply of faeces at will. (One of her brothers, in fact, happened to be named “Will”, and, at times, when he was being annoying, she did expel her excrement at Will.) Her parents, for some reason, failed to understand or appreciate her gift, choosing instead to dispatch her to an uncle in the countryside, where, it was felt, there would be more room, and more tolerance, for such an outpouring of foul-smelling bowel product. Coming face-to-face/-snout/-beak with animals for the first time, Modeste was fascinated by their capacity for waste; foolishly, she tried to compete with the livestock in the quantity and frequency of dung production, but was defeated handily. After years of mockery from the farm animals, who openly squawked at her failure, she finally, now a young woman, retreated to the city in shame. A series of cleaning jobs ensued, invariably ending in indignant dismissal, before she wandered to the hotel, where her peculiarity met with an overarching tolerance by Herr Voot’s predecessor, and when Voot assumed the directorship, he could not bear to think of getting rid of the stupid old cow, meaning that, barring a tussle here and there with the excessively sanitary Mifkin, her position was assured for the rest of her days. Until she met Philip.

“I’m sorry,” that young man now warbled into his bicep. “I love you. I won’t push you away as I did my father. Everything I said before, I mean now, a hundredfold. Let us flee this place, and all we’ve ever known. Let us found a new continent of the heart, free from history, free from our past. In the manure of yesteryear, let us plant our future.”

Tears bubbled in her eyes. “All my victories, sir, I dedicate to you. I give you all I have. My shit, is your shit, as they say. I will make you happy, sir. If God should grant me that power, I swear, I’ll make you happy.”



## **Chapter One Hundred and Forty**

Recovering from the orgy, the guests found little to do until their lusts should sufficiently revive to embark upon a new one. They stared into space. They rubbed lotion on their aching organs. They sopped up the blood from their holes. They envied animals, who needn't bother filling time with thought.

## **Chapter One Hundred and Forty-One**

Racing down the corridor, screaming about the end of the world, spraying random jets of shit behind her, Modeste sought to conquer death through an immortal act, bathe herself in a purgative glory, engrave an instance of meaning in the flaccid clay of a purposeless world. Monsieur Bartoff happened to be around the bend; he steered well clear, but was overcome by the fumes, fought to mutter a feeble curse, then fainted, causing her to cackle. She overleapt the prone poltroon and picked up speed, oblivion on her tail.

## Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Two

Gangakanta stood alone in the patio, staring outside. He was thin, thinner than he'd ever been, his suit was torn and soiled, his eyes were ringed with black, like a swirl of scum round an ankle emerged from a swamp, and his mouth hung open, stupidly. He was wrong, he realised, about the end of the world. It would not come; it would not ever come; and that, far more than an apocalypse, would be man's tragedy. And what did that make him? More of the same: a total failure who knows nothing.

"And yet," he soliloquised, feeling somehow as if he'd been written, "with this cruel reprieve, I may now accept Senhor La Paiva's advice. I vow to start my life again. However short, however long, however glorious, however debased, my new life is to be, it will be mine, and proceed solely from my impulses, not from the gnarled, meddlesome, sculpting fingers of society, nor from so-called rational deliberation. I shall find myself, I shall know myself, the only way man can: by watching myself act, and wondering why I did."

He turned round and strode out of the patio, into the proving ground, the jousting lists, of the hotel, like a knight of old in quest of no greater treasure than himself.

Only something caught his attention, out of the corner of his eye.

Was he seeing things, or had the snow outside begun to clear?

## Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Three

*O Lord, forgive me my sins, which are legion, Gilda prayed, and lift my soul out of this vortex into which I've been thrown as, I understand, just punishment for my wickedness. I did not know You, in my previous life. I was blinded by praise, applause, and luxury. I never knew love, for I thought I could never find a man worthy of my eminence. And now, my arrogance has exiled me to this island of sin. Only now do I look back on my life and judge the worthlessness of my art. The music which meant so much to me—I see, now, what it really was: enchanting blinders so the horse will not see the true state of her stable.*

*My parents foisted this life on me. Musicians, whose own parents squandered their youths, they did the same to me. So that I've known nothing but exercises, exhaustion, diction, languages, rib-splintering girdles, strangulating shoes, hoarse throats, rehearsal swoons and bedsit tears. The men I met, as ethically stunted and wanting in love as I, chests puffed with glamour on the stage, appeared from the stalls to possess all the heroic qualities of their roles. But once the librettos were ripped from their hands, O Lord, these men reverted to beasts, and disgorged their vicious lusts upon me. Then by one, only You know whom, O Lord, I was befouled with a baby, whom I cast out, so I might not miss a single performance, and as reward for my evil, I was told I would never conceive again. But to what end would I wish to bring life into this dungeon of a world, O Lord? Freeing me from that guilt was truly, O Lord, the sweetest blessing You have given me.*

*So am I left with my art, and this prayer. My art...my art has been worthless to my soul. My soul...I put my trust in You, O Lord, that I do have a soul. And if my end must be tragic, operatic, then so be it. I trust you, Lord. I love You. I offer myself up for You to do with as You will.*

## Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Four

Suddenly, it had been fated that Frau Hühnerbeinstein, as representative of Old Religion, and Miss Trojczakowski, as avatar of the New Morality, should meet in epic combat as a means of proving the validity of their respective positions; and so, each found her feet plodding, for reasons neither understood, toward the theatre.

But another “battle” was already underway in that very venue: Herr Voot and Monsieur Mifkin, with their ragtag bands of merry men, had wandered to the theatre, bent on a final battle to end all battles. Mysterious letters had begun popping up, affixed to various walls and furniture around the hotel; then, confusing, contradictory rumours were whispered from ear to ear (because that part of the anatomy was judged the most appropriate for the conveyance of audio-based information); and finally, the manager, the deputy manager, and their soldiers were all called, wordlessly, to the clash. The rest of the occupants of the hotel, guests and staff alike, followed, as along the stations of the Cross.

The lamps had all been lit. The arch loomed above them like a maw. The footsteps of the participants echoed far out from the theatre, as if the import of their actions would reverberate round the world, if not, notwithstanding the absence of sound in the vacuum of space, the cosmos. Voot and Mifkin, the leaders, stepped up onto the proscenium, crossed to the middle, and stopped before one another. Their disciples, and the audience, respectfully taking their seats, awaited the commencement of hostilities. Herr Mifkin, seizing the initiative like a crocodile a frog, cleared his throat and confessed: “I have many regrets.” He nodded to Voot, then turned to face the audience more generally. “You see, when a young man, I abandoned my mother and my siblings. Out on the streets, I prostituted myself, with little sense of shame, and less pleasure. Then to the countryside I fled, where the goats eyed me curiously, sniffing my dishonour, then turned their noble backs upon my darkened brow. Years later, when, flush with funds from renting my arse, I went back home, my family had vanished. I never saw them again. And what had I won? Freedom? Cash? A rectum torn to ribbons? That was but the first stone in an unending trek cross a stream, each stone a regret. I step upon them still.”

He bowed to Herr Voot, who returned the bow, and, seeing it must now be his turn, addressed both his adversary and the stalls: “I have come to realise, deep within myself, that respect of any kind—certainly for something as temporal as the directorship of a hotel—is, ultimately, devoid of worth. There is a far profounder life to be led in humility: the deep, simple sleep in your lover’s arms, competing for nothing with no one, each person content with a tiny garden and the same shared sun overhead.”

He bowed to Mifkin, and Mifkin to him, then they clasped hands, turned to face the crowd, and bowed as one. The audience were too weary to offer applause, but mumbled modest approval. Voot and Mifkin shook hands, and called each other “friend”.

Now Frau Hühnerbeinstein and Miss Trojczakowski climbed to the stage and met in the centre. Voot and Mifkin gave them space for their confrontation. Those audience members who had not fallen asleep held their breath.

“Shall we fight?” asked Gilda of Enid.

Enid shrugged. “What about?”

Now it was Gilda's turn to shrug (so she did). "I'm not sure. I guess I'm supposed to defend traditional morality, and you're supposed to fight for the freedom to wrench from God, Prometheus-like, the right to self-determination."

"Is that what I'm doing?" asked Enid with a wry smile. "I hadn't realised."

"I think so," said Gilda, before admitting, "I'm not really sure myself."

"It's a lovely theatre," Enid observed, looking around.

"Yes, isn't it?"

"I imagine you've played far posher ones, in your trade."

"Well, yes, but never before so select and appreciative a gathering."

They both giggled. They proceeded to chat about costumes and plays they'd both seen, while nearby, Voot and Mifkin clowned around, their teams milling together into one joshing group, and the audience chatted unconcernedly, when the stage cracked open and lava inexplicably began to boil out of it, followed by the ascension of a glimmering woman in a white gown, with a horned tiara, what appeared to be ears of mouldy grain stuck thereupon, unfurled hair rippling, with her gown, like a jellyfish in a peaceful sea, unpupiled eyes, and a crescent moon burnt upon her brow.

"Who the fuck are *you*?!" Gilda wanted to know.

"A sensible question," the goddess judged, in an admirably well-enunciated voice which sounded inside each observer's head. "You may call me 'Nisaba'. You might also know me as 'Seshat'. Or 'Trixie the Rainbow Pony', in a few obscure myths designed more, to be fair, for children."

Gilda was a little envious of her costumier, whoever it might have been, but thought the time unsuited to inquiry. Instead, she turned to the others and declared, "She's come to avenge righteousness and punish the debauched!"

"No, not really," Nisaba demurred. "It's not quite as clear-cut as all that. You stupid humans are always misproportioning things."

"What do you mean?" someone called out.

"I was starting to tell you, before that pointless interruption," Nisaba sighed, then went on: "What you don't see is that you don't see things. You *can't* see things—because you're just stupid humans, as I've already mentioned. Am I making any sense?"

Some people looked to each other in befuddlement. A couple tentatively nodded. One man slept, imagining himself a mayfly.

"Look," she continued, "you're not smart enough—as individuals or as a species—to know what's right or wrong. Or even to be certain that there are such things as right and wrong. Or to know if what's right and wrong, if such concepts legitimately apply, varies from place to place, time to time and person to person. And if you concluded that they did, then if you were crass enough to choose to ride atop a moral pendulum, you wouldn't be at a vantage from which to see where it swings. *Capisce*?"

She surveyed her audience to assess whether she'd gotten through to them. She concluded she had not.

"It's all a little hazy," Enid admitted.

"All right. Look. I'm going to put it one way, but don't be fooled into thinking it's necessarily the right way, or the only way. All right? Every deed you do damns you. Every ant you don't bother to perceive before setting down your foot—damns you. Every feeling you hurt—damns you. Every thing you covet—damns you. Every thought you hoard for yourself rather than devote to others—damns you. Even the impudence to cling

to a threadbare hope of salvation in this your hopeless existence—yes, even this damns you.”

Her auditors did not exactly welcome this concept with open arms, but appeared, rather, a trifle downcast.

“And as for sex?” Nisaba went on. “As you can imagine, all sex—any sex—damns you. But then, you’re pretty much damned anyway, aren’t you? So go on—you’re damned if you do, and, hey, damned if you don’t.”

The spectators who had arrived in the theatre in good faith in order to witness a wholesome and edifying duel were a little irked to be confronted with so much damnation. It was enough to put one off one’s lunch.

“Why have you come?” asked Sri Gangakanta, who, shaking like a suicidal engineer on a runaway locomotive, climbed onto the stage.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Nisaba, though many present privately felt it unlikely she had not heard.

“Why have you come?” Gangakanta repeated. “Was it just to snap the last fragile flower-stalk of hope in our lives?”

“Not at all. At first I came to kill that idiot Snede,” she explained.

“Why?” asked Enid.

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Nisaba.

“Not really,” Enid answered, truthfully.

Nisaba shrugged a glorious shrug. “Basically, he gave up a very respectable position as a clerk for a well-run grain exporter. He retired, and came out here to go hiking in the mountains, of all things. I mean, can you imagine a bigger waste of time? I can’t.”

“And that’s it?” Enid asked.

“Well, it was the turning from me in his heart, you know.”

“Did he deserve death?” Gangakanta demanded.

“Well, do any of you deserve death?” she replied. “Given the fact that all of you end up dead, I’d say—yes.”

“So what about the others?” asked Enid. “What did they do, precisely, to annoy you? They were never clerks, so far as I know.”

“You’ll have to remind me,” Nisaba replied. “I can’t remember the names of all the people I kill, you know.”

Enid racked her thoughts. Who had they been, again? She turned to the others in the audience—a few people looked on, stunned, while others were chatting about other things, and a few still snored. “Hey, somebody! Who else died?”

“Snede!” someone shouted out.

Enid shook her head. “No, we’ve already accounted for him. Who else?”

“Snede?” someone asked.

“They just said that,” someone else answered.

“Oh,” said the person who’d just volunteered “Snede” again, then was silent.

“Snede!” somebody else, who had been half-paying attention, called out, but they ignored him.

“Wasn’t there that general fellow?” somebody asked.

“Do you mean, ‘a general fellow’, like, a regular person?” Voot asked.

“No, no—I mean, in the military. A general, or whatever.”

“The coronel!” Enid cried. “That’s right! We had a coronel here, a—what’s-his-name. From Italy.”

“I think it was Spain,” Gangakanta, nitpicking at the end of the world, corrected.

Enid scoffed, “Whatever!”

Nisaba seemed to remember. “That rings a bell. Old fellow? Never smiled?”

“That’s right!” said Voot. “That’s the man.”

“Oh, well, he harboured angry thoughts about other countries. When he was a soldier. Idolatry of his nation, deification of dirt into a fatherland, and so on. He’d had it coming.”

“What about Sanns?” someone called out from the peanut gallery.

“Sanns?” Enid looked to Gilda, then to Voot, Mifkin, and Nisaba. “Who was Sanns?”

“Wasn’t he the annoying one?” asked Mifkin.

“That’s right,” Voot agreed. “He played stupid tricks on people.”

“Oh-h-h-h-h,” Enid recalled. She turned to Nisaba, and asked: “What about him?”

“That’s right. He had really bad taste in music.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Just rubbishy music hall stuff. He’d go to the loo whenever a trained singer came on, or hang out in the bar till someone started a comedy song.”

“What about her highness?” Sniggly called out.

Nisaba looked offended. “Aren’t I my highness?”

“He means the duchess,” Voot explained.

“What’s a duchess?”

“Marie-Adélaïde,” Sniggly called out.

“Who the hell was that?” Nisaba asked.

“She was a guest here.” Enid tried to describe her: “Tall, a little plump. Mid-fifties, I should think.”

“Her highness never surpassed the age of twenty-nine!” Sniggly lied.

Enid whispered to Nisaba, “Mid-fifties.”

“Oh, yes, right. I gotcha.” Nisaba chuckled. “The one who put on airs?”

“That’s right.”

“To which she was entirely entitled!” Sniggly hastened to add.

“She kept thinking about clothes all the time,” Nisaba yawned. “I couldn’t stand it.”

“And Senhor La Paiva?” demanded Philip, who had gotten out of his seat and walked round to stand in front of the stage. “My father? The kindest man in the world?”

“Well, I know you’re upset, dear boy, seeing how he’s your father and all, and don’t blame me, but we had a kind of little survey amongst all the gods, just last year, and your father didn’t even come up in the top five hundred million kindest people—and that’s just Earth!”

“Regardless—why did he have to die?”

“Oh, well, he didn’t *have* to, I suppose. But then again, it was much better both for the universe and for him that he did.”

“He knew too much,” Gangakanta guessed.

Nisaba turned to him. “Clever boy!”

“So what’s going to happen now?” Gilda inquired. “Have you come to save us?”

“Save you? From what? From your earthly vessels?”



"I meant, this hotel," Gilda specified.

"Oh! No, no, I'm afraid I'm going to have to kill you all, too."

There were some muted exclamations of disagreement.

"I'm sorry, I really am, but there's nothing for it but to punish you all."

"Why?" someone asked.

"All right, look—just forget everything I've said. Your human words are too imprecise, even the simplest of them too clogged with ambivalence, to keep the truth from sloshing over the brim. I'll try to put it another way, a completely contradictory way: use your brains, and look into your hearts. If you look into your hearts, I think you're smart enough to see. In fact, if you try hard enough—if you strain your li'l ol' noggins to breaking point—I can pretty much guarantee that every man and woman has been granted just the right amount of brains to see their own iniquity. Otherwise, it would hardly be fair, would it?"

"Is none of us worthy of being saved?" asked someone from the audience—someone who had, it must be said, a pretty high opinion of himself.

Nisaba held her chin and tried to think. "Well, there was Pluck. He was the best among you."

"Really?" Enid asked.

Nisaba nodded. "Yeah. He really tried hard. He was a good detective, I think. I mean, he didn't figure *me* out, of course, but that would have been pretty hard. Don't you think?"

All agreed that it would have been.

"Anyway, if anybody deserved to be spared my wrath, it would have been him. But, look: you lot killed him yourselves. That wasn't very nice, now was it?"

No one could say with any sincerity that it was. Only one anonymous guest, toward the back, called out that in his opinion, it actually was a fairly nice thing to do, but he was roundly ignored.

Then no one spoke, for a time. Everybody waited patiently. People looked from Nisaba to each other, then back again. Nobody was really sure what to do.

"...So, ah..." That was Frau Hühnerbeinstein sticking her toe into the water—conversationally speaking—again.

"Yes?" asked Nisaba.

"What happens now?"

"Oh! Good of you to remind me. I was enjoying this old theatre so much that I almost forgot why I'd come. So, then, without further ado—" Nisaba pointed at Frau Hühnerbeinstein, who shrieked maniacally, hopelessly, and burst into flame.

Some people panicked, some watched it as a good bit of fun, and some droopily blinked their eyes.

Nisaba pointed left and right, annihilating guests and staff. Limbs burnt to a crisp, skulls erupted into flame, chests cracked open and boiling eyes peered down at their own hearts melting away.

Aloysius and Missus Drig made an attempt to flee the goddess, but were both struck down.

Herra Brotherus, on the other hand, sprinted directly toward Nisaba, pleading for the ultimate pain of annihilation. This was he granted. He ejaculated when he died, some of it spraying onto Nisaba's gown, who snatched the theatre curtain and wiped it away in

revulsion, barking, “You disgusting little pig! I ought to bring you back to life so I might kill you again!” , then resumed her slaughter.

Mister Stoupes, stood in the centre of the stalls, watching men and women be destroyed by the goddess, was hit by an epiphany:

*All men aspire to the condition of lesbian; therefore do all men fail.*

He was drunk, but he was certain he’d hit upon the truth. He turned to Nisaba, and begged her: “Glorious goddess—use your might to metamorphose me into a woman, then bed me, I beg you!”

She killed him instead.

But in his death, his past came racing back: an All-American prep school type whose heart was shredded by his college love. Daphne, her name was. He never forgot her. Any other girl he met, he searched in her for echoes of Daphne. Even the whores, of whom there were many, and on whom he frittered away his allowance, were ranked by him according to the sole criterion of resemblance, in appearance, voice, or personality, to her. He was absorbed into the family business, but, though it could hardly be said he expended much effort, he burnt out, so was packed off on a tour of Europe. He’d been due back a year ago, but, reluctant to settle into the groove which led through soul-killing tedium into retirement and finally to a death steeped in regret, kept extending his trip. He didn’t know why he’d fallen for Enid—she was much too old and unattractive, but there was something, on which he couldn’t put his finger, of Daphne within her.

He was already on the precipice of death due to a drowned liver before the goddess cut him down. And he’d been miserable—he hadn’t found a substitute for Daphne, he hadn’t got over her and, while through every other area of his life he’d slid aimlessly, prosperously, on vacuity and charm, he’d feared that he’d peaked. He’d feared he was too weak for this world. The hint that his weakness could be a strength hadn’t landed on him, his being just a tad too dull-witted. Thus, his death was not wholly unwelcome.

Monsieurs Bartoff and Mifkin died clinging to one another, barking profanity as one. Madame Tautphoeus, witnessing this, ran off into the stalls—packed now as they were with flaming corpses—to reclaim Millicent, her beloved Pekingese who was suddenly fatherless. She was there—she grabbed her, hugged her to her breast, and soaked her lovely one’s fur with her tears.

Herr Voot and Sniggly died in each other’s arms.

As did Misters Drig and O’Herlihy.

When it was her turn—when the goddess turned to her—Modeste turned round, bent over and shat a huge, repellent stream of shit which knocked Nisaba down. Nisaba popped right back up and destroyed Modeste and Philip with two fiery blasts from her palms, screaming curses over the state of her gown.

All the guests and staff your author has been negligent in mentioning died too, you may rest assured, Reader. Some were chatting about the weather, on point of death; some were mentally itemising which of their socks had gone missing; and some merely shrugged resignedly.

When Madame Tautphoeus perceived her death was calling her, she dropped Millicent to the floor and shooed her away, then turned to face her fate with stoical brow. Forever stifled and frustrated, she finally orgasmed upon her annihilation, at which point, her backstory was revealed:

She'd led a pampered life, inheriting her parents' wealth after their early deaths. She chose never to marry; she rejected all suitors as beneath her. Instead, throwing her governess's moral instruction to the wind, she paid gigolos to attend to her rough sexual cravings. But while her body could withstand such brutal dealing, her emotions were moth-wing-fragile. She locked herself in her mansion, which was run without interference from her by her dedicated, lightly thieving staff. Often debilitated by panics and regrets, she didn't leave her bedroom for weeks at a time. She kept a menagerie of usual and unusual creatures, on whom she showered all her affection. When the devilish urge struck her, she would rouse her coachman from his drunken slumber, trek to town and, though she hardly needed the money, allow herself to be photographed in the nude for limited circulation amongst discerning gentlemen collectors for small change. Immediately shamed, she would blubber all the way back to her estate, scream at the gardener for the slightest misalignment of barrenwort, and brick herself up even tighter in her cloister. Only now, in the twilight years of her life, had she made a last effort to break free from her fear of the world, and her ungovernable compulsions, and set off on this holiday, only to have been overcome with despair at how it had turned out. And still, one regret loomed paramount over all the rest in her dying thoughts: she had never paid back Curtis/Thaddeus for his ill-treatment of her. With her final thought, she begged the goddess to rectify this.

Sri Gangakanta watched the violent death of all these people around him. The logician in him dismissed it as preposterous; the statistician in him scoffed at calculating the odds. But the Hindu in him, whom he had sought to smother into non-existence for so long, nodded with understanding. He decided, in any event, that he was too old for this world—not his body, being only in his mid-thirties, but his soul—so he strode up to the goddess and embraced his death.

Whoever said “There's nothing sadder than an empty theatre” would have no doubt rescinded his comment had he ever been in a full theatre with an avenging deity slaughtering everyone about her.

Curtis/Thaddeus, that rascally porter, meanwhile, had run out into the lobby to grab a sabre from the wall, sprinted back into the theatre, and charged the angry goddess, just as she had turned to Enid and was about to slay her. Only at the last instant before he reached the wrathful deity did he realise, with a coarse mutter of self-reproach, that he had missed the sabre and instead seized the dried fish which had been mounted next to it. Having little choice, the plucky porter slapped Nisaba with the herring, which did no damage whatsoever, but distracted and offended her long enough for Enid to clutch Rosella's and Genevra's hands and flee. Nisaba turned to Curtis/Thaddeus and slew him with relish—but before so doing, taking the time to burn off his trousers, burn off his undergarments, and incinerate his tiny penis, allowing him to watch it burn as his last sight upon the earth.

Somewhere, Vanessa Tautphoeus smiled.

Nisaba snuffed out her flaming fists and looked about her. Everyone in the theatre was dead. The walls had collapsed, the ceiling caved in, and she felt rather at home, in the ruins of antiquity.

*There's another hotel, in another galaxy, whose occupants have been even more idiotic than in this one, she realised. Then she sighed, in recognition of the limitless number of conscious creatures who deserved elimination. And more are being born, on*

*every sentient planet across the universe, every second of every day. When will it stop, O God? When will it ever stop?*

## Chapter One Hundred and Forty-Five

Orell Tschäppät was getting himself drunk in the tavern. A brawny, no-nonsense sort of fellow, he sat, hunching his huge torso over his drink, enjoying the spuming beer-head tickle his beard. On the floor, his pickaxe and bag leant against his chair, minding their own business. His yellowy eyes picked out all the weak points in the bodies of his fellow men around the room. He'd killed before, sure, but he'd never enjoyed it. And he'd kill again, if provoked. The regulars here knew enough not to provoke him.

He paid his bill and walked outside. The sun was gloating in its victory over the snow, which had almost entirely cleared away. Orell even took off his heavy coat and slung it over his shoulder. It was actually tolerable, being out here, away from others. Alone, with the mountains. All he'd ever dreamt of was such peace. Now that he was confident they'd never find him, never trace him back to those two knifed sailors in Lyon, both of whom, it should in fairness be pointed out, had definitely had it coming, he felt he could relax, subsist on meagre earnings, grow old, and die.

There was noise up ahead. Laughter. Inane giggling. He gripped his pickaxe handle and moved toward the sound: a group of chipper tourists, from some far-off land, were evidently discussing how best to ascend that mountain. Completely unprepared for it.

One of them, brandishing a truly revolting smile, approached Orell, and asked him something in some unknown tongue.

"I don't know what you're saying," Orell replied. "But that mountain's much too dangerous. You'll never make it up and back by dusk. And you haven't enough supplies. I can see that."

The man laughed and said something else that held no meaning for Orell.

"Do you speak English?" Orell asked, in English. "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Parla l'Italiano?*"

The man turned to his companions and shared some joke, looking over to Orell now and again. Everyone guffawed.

Orell smiled back. "Glad to have been able to help." He nodded, and went on his way. They laughed behind his back. He needn't kill them, he thought. God would do that for him.

*Let them die, he thought. Let the morons die, laughing.*

Orell would go on to have many exciting adventures, none of which I'm going to bother you about.

As for the troupe of would-be mountaineers: they would, as Orell predicted, die that night, a quarter the way up the mountain. In anguish, and in crushing self-realisation.

But before that, just as they were preparing their ascent, they noticed a small man approach, limping, wheezing. This man had fled across the snowy expanse from far beyond the mountains, only to arrive, starved, frostbitten and snow-blind, here. The tourists stopped what they were doing and held the poor man before he collapsed; they asked him all manner of questions, some sexually explicit and therefore completely out of place, but he did not understand a word. Through the cracked-glass cheeks, the ghostly eyes, the blood-crusts on his lips, we, Reader, you and I, can make out Poor Larry. But he meant nothing to these clowns.

"I beg of you," Larry whined, "listen to my tale."

One of the team made a joke, and the others, attesting to the craftsmanship of the teller, laughed.

“Please!” Larry persisted, clearly untrained in reading the mood of a room. “Hear my tale! Pass it on! Don’t let it be lost! Don’t let us all have died in vain.”

They all nodded and smiled.

“Do you...” Larry discerned a shadow begin to close in, from the sides of his eyes, slowly towards the centre. “Do you understand anything I’m saying?”

They smiled still, but did not speak.

They would not get what he would tell them; and further, they did not care.

Larry died.

But he might have died a little happier, had he known (he didn’t) that there were other survivors from his beloved hotel. Just after the goddess Nisaba had completed her slaughter, she descended back down through the floor, to travel to another planet boasting another hotel boasting a new litter of idiots to decimate. Outside, holding hands, the Drig kids, in a chain, emerged from the rubble of the destroyed building. They were cut, and bloody, but alive. They had been minutes away from launching their well-planned attack on the adults when the devastation started. Now, huddling in the snow, three women saw them and ran over. It was Enid, Rosella and Genevra, similarly bruised and bleeding, but whole.

“We’re all that’s left,” Enid confirmed. “We’ll have to take care of each other.”

Then, just under their feet, was warmth, and movement. They quickly jumped aside, in the fear that Nisaba was returning for another rampage. But it was a small, frosty-skinned man, saint-faced and pure-eyed, who uncurled himself, stood up out of the snow, brushed himself off, and looked at everyone, bewildered.

“That’s what I prayed!” Betsy exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” asked Enid.

“At the funeral! I prayed for this!”

The little man, who was shorter than she, turned to her with a baffled look.

“Prayed to Whom?” asked Enid.

“God! The real God!”

The little man squinted his eyes at her, as if he could understand the feeling, if not the content, of her words, and smiled a cherubic little smile.

“You don’t mean...” whispered Genevra.

“I asked God to make Inspector Pluck into a snow sprite!” cried Betsy. “I pictured him exactly like this!”

The little man was feeling the hair on the tops of all the children’s heads. Bo grinned up at him, thrilled with his new friend. The little man knelt down in front of him and gave him a hug.

“It’s as it should be,” Rosella realised. “We’re all going to live—happily ever after.”

The little man took Enid’s hand in his right, and Betsy’s in his left, and the whole group started off. Millicent/Sam yipped and ran up from somewhere and joined them. Miss Trojczakowski smiled at Signora Bergamaschi and Mademoiselle Rosella, and at all the children, and at the funny little man beside her, who was trying to mimic Millicent/Sam’s yipping, delighting the children and himself.