

# RORY'S BOYS BY ALAN CLARK

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## One

I suppose I've never quite dealt with the fact that I owe my existence to a pimple. A spot, a zit or, as they call it in my native Scotland, a plook.

It's a cautionary tale. The plook had popped inwards, you see, that was the trouble. My father's first bride, on radiant honeymoon in Kenya, couldn't cope with the horror of a blemish and had simply squeezed too soon. Blood poisoning had sneaked in and, before anyone realized she was ill, she'd slithered down the side of an elephant and been stiff as a board by the time they'd got her to Nairobi. Thanks to this bizarre death, my eager mother had sprinted down the aisle to become the second Mrs Blaine and receive some of the most socially prestigious seed north of Hadrian's Wall. Then, hey presto, there I was.

'Let that be a wee lesson,' Miss Elspeth Wishart had warned, when my teenage face began turning into the sebum repository of Perthshire. Miss Wishart, the school matron from whom I had few secrets, had repaid my confidence by regularly thrusting the tragic bride at me in the same way she delivered my weekly dose of syrup of figs. But the guys in my dorm took a different view.

'For Christ's sake Blaine, why don't you just splat them like everybody else?' they'd groaned during my nightly ritual with the Clearasil. 'They're like fucking fried eggs.'

Yet I never had. Perhaps I'd felt that, in the circumstances, the least I could do was to give some of them a home. But it's not a very edifying reason for existence, is it? Of course the act of conception is often a matter of luck: the car marooned in the snowdrift, the Babycham too many, the one feisty sperm that can swim like Esther Williams. But how can it be that the creation of Rory Blaine, gorgeous and gifted, was not part of some great celestial plan but merely the by-product of a blocked pore? As a reason for entering therapy, it's got to be right up there with Hamlet and his dad or Oedipus and his mum. So I have.

My therapist is a big fat chick in expensive shoes; I call her Ms Prada. The shoes imply that I, or rather BUPA, is paying her far too much and I kind of feel that people in the caring professions should look just a wee bit threadbare. But once a week I go to a room with eau-de-nil walls and a droopy azalea where she dribbles my psyche around on her shiny toe-caps. It seems I'm both clinically narcissistic and suffering from low self-esteem. This paradox appears to be very common which pissed me off because I'd assumed I'd be a pretty interesting case; a response which Ms Prada said merely proved her diagnosis. She has this weird high-pitched voice which makes you wonder if her vast shape could be due to helium ingestion and not chocolate éclairs. This week she declared that one way of dealing with emotional pain is by metabolizing it into art. So every day from now on, I'm supposed to write my thoughts onto this PC. It's to be strictly stream-of-consciousness stuff.

'Expect plenty of rocks and whirlpools,' squeaked Ms Prada, who's never shy of an obvious metaphor, 'but there will also be stretches of cool

translucent water which will help carry you towards the self-cognition you seek.'

Well babe, today there was a real whopper to metabolize. Today was my forty-fifth birthday. So now I'm well and truly middle-aged, though frankly I don't yet see that concept as a goer. Rory Blaine, middle-aged? I don't think so, do you? Too many adjustments would be necessary, none of which I feel prepared to make. I believe in sticking to what I'm good at and I'll be shite at getting older.

Anyway, extensive research suggests that no such image-repositioning is yet called for. I'm still a product with a satisfied public. The whiff of Issey Miyake wafting off my dick this morning proved it. Luckily its source had done a bunk in the wee small hours, cooing something about being slotted for the first flight to Malaga. I'd met him online. He was five feet six, built like Selfridges and a stranger to the polysyllable. In short, Perfection. But Perfection had turned out to be a trolley dolly who lived in East Acton with his mum and a whippet called Bruce. He was devoted to his mum; she always put condoms in his pocket when he went out on a date. I'd opened a bottle of Chablis Premier Cru to impress him.

'Ooh, it's a bit tart,' he'd giggled into his glass. 'Just like me.'

Christ, another fake. I'd binned the empty bottle along with the Post-It note with his mobile number inside the outline of a heart. This is where you'll expect me to write how empty I felt after another disappointing and meaningless encounter. But I didn't. Not any more. Now, it had become a bit like when the cleaning lady appeared. I was quite pleased to have the

company for three hours but then, with the job done and the necessary materials put back in the cupboard, I was more than happy to see the front door close again.

Today as usual I'd looked in *The Times* birthday column. I'm not there of course, which depresses me. Every year, I visualize myself in that élitist wee paragraph, sandwiched between the TV gardener and the transgender activist but sometimes a new name has shouldered its way in, someone much younger than me which depresses me even more. I wonder how I might have been described. 'Rory Blaine, advertising executive, 45.' Not quite worth a fanfare on the nation's breakfast tables, I suppose. Once, I'd dreamed that some day it might say, 'Rory Blaine, writer', but I'd long ago dumped my childhood sweetheart and let myself be seduced by the tawdry old slapper of advertising; all fur coat and no knickers. Now here I was, under therapist's orders, trying to write my way towards some sort of contentment. Maybe if I'd stayed faithful way back then, it wouldn't have been necessary.

Oh shite, lighten up Rory. This just isn't like you. Most people who know you would wet themselves.

'You're like the fucking Andrex puppy aren't you?' my secretary had once slurred at our Christmas party. 'Nose into everything, demanding attention, doing cute little tricks. Adorable in your way, but such a relief when you trot back to your basket.'

I waited a decent interval and down-sized her.

So Ms Prada is my dirty wee secret and will remain so. Of course it was a bit more than the blocked pimple in my pedigree which had led me to the eau-de-nil room with the droopy azalea. As Will The Quill once wrote, lately I have, yet wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth. Well not quite all, but I'd certainly been getting more 'Miltons' than usual. That's my word for feeling low, in tribute to Milton Keynes, the most miserable place on earth; endless, rain-soaked boulevards from which it seems impossible to escape. So I reckoned that maybe I needed to pull myself apart a bit, check out the inner workings, spring-clean the cogs and wheels. I'd never taken medication for it, never would; the only chemical I'd ever allow to mess with my mind came from Waitrose in pretty dark green bottles. Probably I just needed someone to talk to, which I couldn't imagine doing with anybody I knew. Not really talk, you know? When I visualize my buddies, they've got a glass in one hand and a Blackberry in the other. I couldn't really see them doing tea and sympathy. Rory Blaine and the blues? A most unlikely couple, they'd say.

But Rory Blaine and charm would be a much more recognizable pairing. Old biddies queue up for me to help them cross the road. Bull-dyke traffic wardens nearly weep at the sad explanation of why my meter's overrun. I've worked hard on the charm because I couldn't, to be painfully honest here, be called handsome. My features are makeshift at best, as if God had arranged them quickly when He wanted to get to the golf course.

But then I discovered the power of the facelift that comes from within. I long since decided I wasn't going to be plain and so I'm not. Besides, I've got the hair, Rory's famous golden mane. I wear it unfashionably long but

instead of feminizing me it has, as I calculated, the opposite effect; underpinning the rugged masculinity of the complete package. Through a world of Roundheads, I stride like a Cavalier. The rest of the body's holding up too; stomach flat as Norfolk, arse still like two new-blown balloons. No sign yet of the dreaded swagging effect that makes it look like an Austrian-blind. The gym is boring, but it works. What would have happened to a generation of gay men if the fitness revolution hadn't come along? There's a Ph.D. in that for someone.

Today was Saturday, thank God, and I didn't have to go into Blaine Rampling. The rockier economy was committing GBH on our profit margin, clients were cutting budgets, I'd had to let people go, good people. I'd even wondered about re-mortgaging the flat. I'd been the main man for nearly twenty years, but now I could feel the kids at my neck, their breath stinking of ambition, more aggressive than I ever was. Thatcher's children. Not a pretty sight. Last week, my junior partners had slammed a document on my desk; what they called a strategy for survival. They say we're not so cool anymore and in this business that's death. Quite often these days, they'd explain something to me, as if they didn't expect me to still be on their planet. I didn't like that. Smug wee shites.

I never hung around the flat much at weekends. It'd been designed by this uber-chic Brazilian queen, everything from the tinted windows to the bog-roll holder, so that it almost felt like his place rather than mine. Before Devonshire Street, there had been a loft in Soho, a studio in Chelsea and a penthouse in St Katherine's Dock, I think it was. Not sure; I've moved around a lot and they've all sort of blurred into one image of stripped-back

brick and recessed light switches you can never find when you're pissed. The image is furnished by various faces, a few of whom I'd even allowed a to park their toothbrushes for a while. Usually it'd just been for a few weeks or months; though one time a strange brush had nestled against mine in the tumbler for a whole summer. It'd never quite looked right to me though.

I pulled on a black T-shirt and my Versace jeans; waist thirty-two and holding. I put the sheets on the boil-wash programme and fed the cat. I couldn't remember if I'd last done it yesterday or the day before. The cat rubbed against my ankles when it sensed I was going out again. I felt guilty about the cat. I'd stumbled into Harrods pet shop after too good a lunch and my judgement was impaired. Sod's law dictated it was the one cat in a million searching for commitment, which I didn't feel able to give right now. It'd just have to butch-up. There was only one card on the mat. Miss Elspeth Wishart, bless her. Nobody I know sends cards these days. No doubt my email box would be as crammed as a Primark sale, but I decided to check it later. Out in Devonshire Street, the sun pierced into the hangover like a lance. A horn tooted, a hand waved.

'How's the plumbing?' yelled a small man in a big Maserati.

It was my genito-urinary doctor. His name is Rod. Honestly. The other day he'd shoved steel rods down my cock to widen my urethral stricture. It needs doing about twice a year and it's not pleasant; but Rod distracts me with gossip about his celebrity patients. Apparently the worst case of haemorrhoids ever seen resides in the arsehole of the most viciously homophobic columnist in the tabloid press. To understand is to forgive, Rod says.

Don't laugh, but I really moved to Marylebone to be handy for my specialists. Over the years I've built up a whole team so I've now got one for every part of my anatomy. I call them my mechanics and their job is to keep me in racing condition. I once read about the importance of listening to your body and now I've got the hearing of the blind. The slightest creak, gurgle or rattle and I pull myself over into the relevant consulting room to be tinkered with. So Rod looks after my stricture, my recurrent anal fissure and what he calls my 'recreational collateral-damage'. Other mechanics have responsibility for, *inter alia*, my mitral valve murmur, deviated septum, gastric reflux, grumpy back and a genetic tendency towards hernias. Whilst, on the outside, my body suggests low mileage and one careful owner, it probably wouldn't pass much of an independent inspection. It's travelled to too many places it shouldn't have gone. Luckily, in my world, it's only the chassis that matters.

I had a croissant and a decaf latte in Staff of Life, currently the coolest organic bakery on Marylebone High Street. I chatted up the cute Latino waiter I'd been cruising for weeks and flicked through the papers. War, famine, unemployment, some bimbo's breast implants that went wrong and left her looking like Ann Widdecombe. Depressing news about depressing people. Don't know why I bother. You've got to keep your distance from all that shite, create your own wee world and have one hell of a time in it. Unless of course it's something that directly affects you; then you've got to gallop out over your drawbridge and give the bastards hell.

I wondered how to fill the hours before my party tonight. I was taking a few of the gang to The Ivy. I couldn't really afford it, but it wouldn't have



been wise to let them know that. Unfortunately, the usual time-killing notion now broke in, squatted and couldn't be shifted. I told myself I shouldn't, then reminded myself it was my birthday after all. Half an hour later my Merc was parked by a row of seedy railway arches in east London. A sign depicted two thonged gladiators locked in sweaty combat. *Lose yourself in The Catacombs* it suggested; advice which I confess to taking at least once a week. I'd confessed it to Ms Prada in fact and she'd suggested I might consider adding the sex addiction module to our therapy structure. It would cost extra of course.

In the steam room I cast myself out along the tiled bench and waited for a nibble. Though it was a bit early, there was a steady traffic moving between the steam, the sauna, and the jacuzzis. Some of the regulars were in. The furtive, pot-bellied ones were often married and would be safely back in Pinner by tea-time. I always gave them a wide berth or you'd find yourself trapped in a conversation about decking. I avoided the screamers too, who tended to be rent or silly shop-girls. I looked for the relaxed, blokeish sort, the ones who didn't need to be defined by their sexuality. The sort I consider myself to be.

I was on nodding terms with several of today's selection; in fact I'd had a few of them. The young black barrister was in; the one with the cock like an ebony table leg who'd started shouting 'Fuck me Your Honour' at our climactic moment. I was half-wondering about a second round, something I usually steered clear of, when I saw him disappear with a John Prescott lookalike. I always felt a bit miffed when an 'ex' went off with a real

mingler; it somehow sullied what we'd had together, however brief that might have been.

You can't see very clearly in the steam room. A forty-watt bulb struggles like a candle in a fog. When the door opens, you can maybe judge somebody's age and condition by their silhouette against the brighter light outside. If the steam thins out, you might get sharper definition, a bit more detail. But facial features usually stay as smudgy as an Impressionist; which of course doesn't always matter, depending on what you have in mind. The door opened now and a Saggy came in. I cursed myself for getting here too early. The younger guys mostly came in the late afternoon; till then their granddads colonized the place. Tits to their knees, bellies like concertinas but libidos tragically unimpaired. I'd sworn to myself that I'd never be a Saggy. At some point in the dim and distant, I'd know when to walk away from all this. I'd know when I'd become like milk on the turn and I'd deal with it, no problem. The Saggy leaned on a stick, flopped down near me and started to play with himself. I reeled in my body and closed my eyes. The stick tapped on the tiles as he abandoned hope and hobbled out.

When I looked again there was a new presence in the vacated spot. Well-built, hairy. Mediterranean or Arabic maybe. I stretched out along the bench again, letting one leg dangle onto the floor. In a few seconds, other toes brushed mine. I twitched them in reply. A hand reached out and pinched one of my nipples.

'Great nips, mate,' said an estuary voice, young, unabashed. I'd tried dropping my own glottal stops for a while but it doesn't really work with a Scottish accent.

‘Like them?’ I asked. ‘Go for it then.’

Soft lips started moving expertly across my chest. The breath was sweet but the skin smelt of fucking Issey Miyake yet again. I let out a slow sigh. This was what I came here for, to this grubby armpit of London, to this clinical place. The young guy nuzzled my ear and stroked my hair but even this close the face remained featureless. Three or four intruders had drifted in.

‘You wanna go play downstairs?’ he said.

I hesitated. The Catacombs is a fast-sex establishment where you can either eat in or take-away. I always prefer the latter, on the same snobbish basis that I’d never actually sit down in a McDonalds. But I had the party tonight.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘I’m a bit tight for time though.’

‘I’m a bit tight too,’ purred the brazen voice, rising from the bench. ‘See you down there, stud.’

I took a long slow shower then headed to the top of the staircase leading to the basement floor. They were steep, slippery stairs, as if designed to make you think twice. This was the moment when my gastric reflux problem usually kicked in. Down below, in stygian gloom, were your actual catacombs, a maze of corridors lined with ironically-dubbed ‘rest rooms’. Some doors were firmly shut; from behind them came cries and whispers, shouts and exhortations. Others rooms, though occupied, had doors left open at varying angles of provocation. Some sat with hands clasped, knees

together, eyes lowered, demure as a wallflower at a dance. Others displayed themselves sensuously, lewdly even, their positions indicating what sort of pleasures they were willing to provide. The catacombs were a stuffy place, heavy with sweat and amyl nitrate, a sort of perverse catwalk where approval was gained by your lack of clothing; your audience lined up along the walls or peering out from the wee rooms. I'd learnt not to be daunted by an impassive reception. Only the old or the ugly, who had nothing to lose, took the risk of revealing admiration. But it wasn't until I caught an eye whose brow was raised in a question-mark, when I noticed a spine straighten or felt a hand brush against my passing thigh that I could be sure today's appearance had wowed the punters yet again and my intestines would finish their salsa and leave the floor. Today though, at forty-five no less, I strolled along the catwalk with the carefree arrogance of a man who can still pull a real cutie. A dark-skinned arm waved at me from a few doors along. Today there was no need to feel lonely.

Ms Prada has asked me to examine the possibility that casual sexual encounters are, as she puts it, speed-bumps on the road to full emotional maturity. But as I surrendered to the furry, perfumed embrace, I reminded myself what crap that was. This was not an addiction. It was not demeaning, it was life-enhancing. Okay, so maybe you didn't know, or care, what his name was, what his dreams were. Maybe it could be a bit mechanical, embarrassing even; but that was usually just before and after. During those central exhilarating minutes it could be ecstatic. There were no barriers or betrayals, no expectations or let-downs. I would be re-fuelled with confidence in myself and in the essential beauty of mankind. And I always offered to buy them a cup of coffee afterwards, even if praying they'd

refuse. But during that short glorious fusion it would seem like the most potent communication I'd ever experienced. Yeah,yeah, Ms Prada, honesty on these pages, right? Yes, there were times, the bad days, when I did it for comfort, like some people buy Cadbury's Creme Eggs. And yes I'd known other, deeper forms, a couple of times anyway, but they'd never worked out for me, so why hurt myself again? This would do.

And God, did this guy know what he was about. Though he'd dimmed the light in the tiny room I could see him properly at last. Arab. A bit older than I'd thought. Twenty-five even. Bit too athletic; all thrashing limbs and a running commentary. In loud porno-speak, he enunciated both the services he had to offer and those he hoped to receive. I felt obliged to answer, but I'm oddly inhibited with all that stuff. The rooms were separated by partitions, thin as Rolf Harris's wobble-board, which didn't even reach to the ceiling. I could clearly hear the progress of neighbouring encounters and presumably vice-versa. So when the Arab barked a demand that I give it to him doggy-style on the floor, I snapped 'on all fours, bitch' as quietly as possible without sacrificing the necessary authority. Nevertheless a familiar voice vaulted over the partition.

'Rory Blaine, is that you in there?'

'Jeremy?'

'I thought it was you, you randy old sod. Listen, love, don't you even think about that movement or you'll be screaming on my table by Monday.'

Jeremy is the mechanic responsible for my bad-tempered back.

‘Oh, right then, Jeremy,’ was all I could think of to reply.

‘Lie flat out and let him get on top. He’s not too heavy is he?’

I looked down at the Arab who had shrunk back into a corner and did indeed look smaller than he had a minute ago.

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Remember, love, you might pass for thirty-something in this light, but your spine’s forty-five today. Hope you got my e-card.’

I turned back to the Arab, raised my eyebrows and scratched my head like Stan Laurel. The Arab gave a nervous smile, then reached out and turned the dimmer switch full up, flooding me in a pool of sickly yellowish light. The smile flinched. There was a long pause before he spoke.

‘Er, listen mate... look, gonna leave it.’

‘Leave it?’

‘Yeah. Put it on hold for tonight.’ said the Arab. Another pause. I could hear his brain working. ‘Started feeling a bit shivery. Tickle in me throat too. Might be going down with the flu. Best not to pass it on, right?’

‘No big deal,’ I said. ‘Want to give me your mobile?’

‘Sorry mate. Got nicked yesterday. Bastards.’ By now, his fingers were on the door handle and his towel wrapped round him, tight as a second skin. ‘Maybe check you out in here again sometime.’

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘See you later.’

The Arab closed the door behind him. For a moment I stood still in my spotlight, then flicked the room back to near-darkness and sat down on the bench on which Issey Miyake still lingered. A new emotion had landed on my plate. I began toying with it but realized it was going to be too hard to swallow.

After a few minutes, I fled the sweaty cell and turned back towards the staircase. I wanted to grab somebody, anybody. But the corridors were deserted. Sweat and amyl still hung in the air, but it was like the *Marie Celeste*. I knew this maze like I knew the thread veins round my nostrils, but I suddenly lost all sense of direction. One turning was a dead end; another led me to a fire exit. I retraced my steps trying to find the staircase. I pushed at the half-open doors of cubicles, one after another. Empty. Empty. Empty. I started to feel a wee bit sick. I was half-running round a corner when I crashed into Jeremy, the osteopath.

‘Good time then, you old ram?’ said Jeremy with the usual shifty grin that made him look like a timeshare tout in Benidorm.

‘Where the hell is everyone?’ I said, trying to calm my breathing.

‘Upstairs for the new afternoon cabaret,’ said Jeremy. ‘Who’d have thought the post-Millennium gay community would still be dazzled by the sight of sequins? Drag or shag, it’s no contest. I just came back down for my tit clamps. You coming up, love?’

'You lead on,' I said, searching for my smile so I could graft it back on. But upstairs I turned for the locker room and got dressed. The old Chinese queen on the front desk wished me a nice evening on behalf of the management.

Outside, the April sunshine had given way to drizzle. I got into the Merc, and sat for a while watching the raindrops stipple the windscreen. Then I drove slowly west towards civilization. As I waited by the lights at Clerkenwell, I saw the Arab, mobile clamped to ear, heading into a gay bar. The numbness inside my head was dispelled by a red raw anger.

'Fuck you!' I yelled out of the window. The Arab turned, confused for a moment, then gave me a cheery two fingers.

'Hey, what did you do in the war, Daddy?' he shouted back.

Cars behind me were tooting. I wrenched the Merc half onto the pavement, leapt out and grabbed him by the lapels .

'Listen to me, you wee shite. This Daddy was in a war once. About twenty-five years ago, when I was even younger than you. There weren't many on our side at first; maybe just a few hundred here and there who stood up to be counted. And there were millions against us. David and Goliath. So we were really bloody brave, don't you think? Some of us actually got killed too; beaten up, left in gutters to die. Others only lost their jobs, had their kids taken away or got chucked out by their loving families. So why do you think we went through all that? You going to tell me?'



The Arab shook his head, the sweat beading his brow along with the raindrops.

‘Because we wanted to know what it felt like to stand tall, not be cowed or scared any more. But it was also to make sure that kids like you wouldn’t have to go through the same crap one day.’

The Arab found his voice, though it was a bit strangulated as his feet were half off the ground.

‘So I’m supposed to build you a fuckin’ statue in Trafalgar Square?’

‘No, I don’t expect gratitude. Not from your self-centred wee generation. But if it hadn’t been for the likes of me, this bar wouldn’t exist, or that sauna or your financial advisers with their pretty pink mortgages. So I’ll live without your thanks, but I’m sure as hell not going to take any shite from a piece of gay-ghetto trash like you.’

The Arab looked me hard in the eye, curling one of the fat lips I’d been enjoying on my nipples only an hour ago.

‘That’s history, mate. It’s our time now. You’ve had yours. Get over it.’

I put him down before I killed him. This wasn’t completely beyond the bounds of possibility; Ms Prada had also urged me to attach her anger management module to our therapy structure but I’d turned it down. I’d been controlling my lousy temper all my life and I did so now. I twisted the car back onto the road and roared off. Then, for the second time that afternoon, I lost my bearings. I tore down unrecognized streets and got trapped in cul-de-sacs until I found myself on the Embankment.

It was raining quite hard now and blowing a gale, but I pulled in. I needed some fresh air. The odours of the Arab and of the room where he'd walked out on me were still in my nostrils. I walked along the river, trying to breathe deeply, trying to fumigate from my memory his expression as he'd turned up the light. But the dear old gastric reflux began to go into overdrive again, gnawing at my diaphragm in its familiar way. By Cleopatra's Needle, I flung myself against the river wall and projected the contents of my stomach over the side. A shout came from far below. Still retching, I looked down and saw a wino sprawled on the steps that led to the water's edge. There was vomit all down his front.

'Christ, I'm sorry,' I croaked. 'I'll buy you a new shirt.'

'No worries man,' said the wino, 'that's mine. Yours is there; all over Jonathan Livingston Seagull.'

Among the soggy flotsam of plastic coffee cups and take-away chicken boxes, a frantic bird was trying to flap its wings.

'Don't worry man,' said the wino. 'I'll piss on it in a minute. That'll do the trick. Uric acid has a hundred applications. It's what they use in Sketchley's.'

'Thank heavens, I thought I'd...'

'Well, there you go man,' smiled the wino. 'Nothing's ever as lousy as it seems, is it? However shitty your day, some little thing comes along to restore your faith in an essentially benevolent Providence.'

By the time I got back to Devonshire Street, it was getting dark. The flat was silent, apart from the delighted squeak of the cat as it wrapped itself pathetically around my ankles. I picked it up and sat with it on the sofa. It thought Christmas had come early, nuzzling its furry chin against mine. I really must get round to giving it a name.

I sat for a while in the dusk, watching the lights in the street come on, listening to the traffic and the fragments of other lives that floated up through the window; shouts, laughter, obscenities. In another hour or two, I'd step out there again, all dressed-up, and join the quite nice people I'd invited to The Ivy. I would kiss the cheeks, slap the backs, tell the jokes as they expected me to. Later, we'd all go up in the glass lift to the private members' club for coffee and liqueurs. I called them my friends and they, I guess, called me theirs. It's what we all do, isn't it? Except I wasn't really sure what it was supposed to mean, just how far it was supposed to go. Never been great at working that one out. Ms Prada says relationships are a major area I need to work on. Big news babe.

Today I'd become forty-five years old and been sexually rejected for the first time in my life. I felt fairly close to a major 'Milton' and I couldn't let that happen, not tonight, not at The Ivy's prices. But Ms Prada wasn't the only therapy I was concealing from the world in which I moved. I, Rory Blaine, am a closet folk-singer of traditional Scottish songs. I didn't claim that great a voice but I liked to think that what it lacked in finesse it made up for in feeling. I went and dragged my old guitar from its hiding place under the bed. The cat lolled on the arm of the sofa and patiently sat through *Annie Laurie*, *Ae Fond Kiss* and *The Skye Boat Song*. As I sang, I looked

across at Miss Elspeth Wishart's card, a predictably cheesy view of lochs and mountains. And somehow, after that, I felt a bit better.

It was almost dark in the flat now; only the distant wink of the washing machine reminding me that last night's sheets were now cleansed from sin. I switched on my mobile and left a message for Ms Prada, asking if she could squeeze me in on Monday. Then I checked my voicemails, and lo the prophecy of the wino on the Embankment came to pass. There were ten of them. The first nine were birthday greetings of a coarse or consolatory nature. But the tenth was about to change everything.

## TWO

Today I went to dig up Granny. It's thirty years now since I buried the old bitch alive, way down deep with a stake through the heart. So it was with a certain queasiness that I found myself going to open the tomb armed only with a box of Belgian chocolates

Not that her Ladyship had exactly rested in peace. From time to time over the years, she'd reared up at me in the papers or on the box, each time more barking, each time more mocked. I'd always turn the page quickly or grab the remote but she'd still thrash around my consciousness for days. Sometimes I'd even go off my food, turn down invitations, stay in the flat, drink a bit too much. Then gradually she'd sink back into the oblivion to which I'd struggled to consign her and I'd be all right again. I'd sometimes wondered if my image ever materialized to her, but I doubted it. Her annihilation of me had been complete. Granny had never done anything by halves. She was infamous for it.

And now they said she might be dying for real; at ninety-five, a second stroke, a month after the first and a lot more severe. The nursing home had somehow tracked me down; I'm still next of kin, after all. I was quite sure the patient wouldn't know I was coming. I could see a perfectly-pencilled eyebrow arch as if to say 'what on earth for?' As I drove through the gates, I asked myself the same question.

It was a Victorian toad of a house, crouching on the outskirts of Beaconsfield. How she must hate it after the beauty of Mount Royal. I felt a tickle of pleasure at the thought; amazing how long venom can stay in the blood. But as the ugly brick portico began to fill the windscreen, I fought

the urge to turn the wheel and run. No, fuck it. Rory Blaine doesn't run. Not this Rory Blaine anyway, the one my grandmother had never encountered and I realized I wanted her to meet that man, even just once. I accelerated towards the front door then braked pretentiously, sending a cloud of gravel-dust over a bed of plebeian geraniums. Faces appeared at a couple of windows. That's right. Wake up. I'm here. I took the stone steps two at a time.

The lobby was deserted, sickly with the smell of lilacs and beeswax. I slammed a bell on a table. From here, I could see into a cavernous lounge with tall windows overlooking the garden. Around its perimeter were twenty or so identical winged chairs, positioned at snooty intervals from each other, facing into the centre of the room. They were occupied by wisps of people, most in tweeds or twinsets, but some in dressing-gowns and attached to drips on metal poles that stood behind them like flunkys. Nobody was talking. You could almost hear the pulses, faint and feeble though they were.

A surly Welsh nurse appeared, smelling of the cigarette I'd clearly interrupted. She summoned my grandmother's doctor, a youngish guy with a tired smile and a clipboard.

'She's quite a girl, isn't she?' he grinned. 'That last attack would have finished most folk her age, but Sibyl's still in the ring.'

'But I thought she was at death's door?' I said.

‘Only for a day or two,’ he replied, swallowing a yawn. ‘Maybe she wasn’t sure of the welcome she’d receive. I never imagined that one day I’d be trying to save Lady Sibyl Blaine. I’m a good *Guardian* reader, you see.’

In some distant swampy corner of my brain, a primeval loyalty stirred and I stared him out till his cheeks flushed.

‘Sorry, no offence,’ he said, burying the blush in his notes. ‘Anyway, another attack would almost certainly see the Grim Reaper win the bout. Her Alzheimer’s has accelerated quite rapidly too. She may or may not know you. When did you last see her?’

‘Thirty years ago,’ I said

‘Gosh. Shame her speech is so badly affected then,’ he replied with a wee grimace of fake empathy, ‘I guess you’ve got a lot to talk about.’

He led me down a long corridor of identical doorways till we reached one bearing a wee card with ‘Sibyl’ hand-written in ornate script. God help them if she ever clocked that. He gave me a limp-lettuce handshake and scurried away.

Centuries ago, I’d so often stood outside my grandmother’s rooms at Mount Royal, waiting for the ‘come’ without which it had been strictly forbidden to enter. The word had been a reliable weather forecast; usually bright and breezy but sometimes, for no accountable reason, heavy with a likelihood of thunder later. Now, as I raised my hand to knock, three decades shrank into seconds and I began to feel Rory Blaine haemorrhaging away into the pretty pink carpet. But today, there was no answer. The Welsh

nurse zooming past barked to go right in and flung the door wide for me. Oh fuck.

It was sepulchral in the big room, as if she were already dead. The curtains were drawn against the daylight and the atmosphere was clammy with decay. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, the ghost-white hospital bed materialized like a ship in the night, a Flying Dutchman of tubing and monitors.

Ms Prada had instructed me to write down here what I was experiencing. She knew all about Granny. I'd called this morning and told her I'd been summoned. She'd given a wee gasp of satisfaction, like you do when you finally crack the last clue in the crossword. We'd booked an extra session for tomorrow.

I shuffled towards the bed a few steps at a time. No need to rush after all these years. Jesus, what a tiny creature she'd become; harmless now, innocent even. Safe inside the railings, she was a grotesque parody of a baby in a cot; the fuzz of hair still gold, the powder-white skin, the lips painted in a rosy bow. But the mouth was toothless and twisted sharply to one side. Her prosthetic leg was propped beside the bed, absurdly, as if she might suddenly fancy a stroll. Her hands lay on the sheet, brown and shrivelled as two dead leaves. My own gripped the side of the bed, knuckles white as the railings. Sorry, Ms Prada, I'm not sure I can write down what I felt. I didn't know what it was. I still don't really. Probably some messy mixture of pity and pain, of love and loathing. Whatever. Maybe some perspective might crash in later, apologizing for its late arrival. But it hasn't got here yet.



Then as I peered down at the mummified thing, the eyelids shot open. I leapt back before she grabbed my throat like in fucking *Carrie*. The eyes were unchanged, still the same blazing blue that could either make your day or freeze you like a dentist's needle. Inside the body of the ancient child, the woman I used to know was instantly there again.

'Hello Granny,' I said, unable to expel more than a whisper.

The twisted mouth tried to produce some words, but all that came out were a string of drool and an incomprehensible high-pitched squeak, like the Weed in *Bill and Ben*, *The Flowerpot Men*. I realized she'd not be up for my Belgian chocolates. Then the eyelids fell shut again.

From a dark corner came a sudden gargling snore. I'd not even noticed the fat old man dozing in an armchair; mouth lolling open, a magazine splayed across his belly. He'd woken himself up and looked a bit dazed.

'Hey, we got company,' he said after a moment, his wide face flooding with a smile. In an expensive cream suit, pink shirt and matching tie, he looked a bit overdressed for the occasion. A stick was hooked over the arm of the chair.

'Give us a hand up, will you, toots?' he said. 'Got a dodgy leg, or mobility issues as they say in this shithole.'

It was an odd accent, pitched somewhere between Bermondsey and Broadway. I pulled him to his feet, but he kept hold of my hand and pumped it greedily which sent a thick wave of white hair tumbling down across his forehead like snow sliding off a roof.

‘The grandson, I presume?’ he said ‘I’m Vic d’Orsay. You might have heard of me.’

‘Don’t think so, sorry.’

‘Fuck you then,’ he laughed. The smile never seemed to entirely disappear; it just went up and down as if on a dimmer. ‘Doesn’t Sibyl look nice? I make her face up every day. I just know it cheers her up.’

As he admired his handiwork, there was a long wretched moan followed by an overwhelming smell.

‘Oh Sibyl, honey, I told you before,’ said the old man, going over and patting her arm. ‘Never trust a fart once you’ve turned sixty. But chill Sibyl, chill. We’ll soon have that old pussy smelling like Harvey Nicks.’

He pointed to a chest of drawers.

‘There are clean sheets in there. Would you get them for me?’

‘Aren’t you going to call someone?’

‘No need, toots,’ said Vic d’Orsay. ‘We can do it ourselves. I’m supposed to take a little light exercise every day now. You’d be amazed how many calories wiping an ass consumes. Nothing like it for increasing the pulse-rate.’

He took off his jacket, folded it neatly over a chair, removed a pair of cufflinks the size of gobstoppers and rolled up his sleeves. When he pulled back the bedding the stench swamped the room. The taste of the bacon roll I’d bought on the motorway returned to my mouth. Vic d’Orsay threw the

window wide open and directed me to a conservatory next door. As instructed, I returned with a big bowl of pink and white flowers.

‘Nothing like broomstick to obliterate the smell of shit. It’s a horticultural SAS,’ he said, whipping off my grandmother’s nightgown like he was skinning a rabbit. She can’t have weighed more than a few stones now. The old woman started to cry a little; he leaned down and kissed her forehead.

‘Air-freshener’s no goddam good in places like this. All the pee and poo; the walls soak it in and breathe it out again like halitosis.’

He went into the adjacent bathroom, returning with a bowl of warm soapy water and a flannel. I had to look away.

‘Stargazer lilies are pretty effective too,’ said Vic, wittering on as he worked. ‘And hyacinths of course, but they’re so Victorian now. Luckily the gardener here knows the score. Look out of that window.’

Sure enough, from the blustery April garden, endless rows of pink and white flowers waved back at me like hankies on a dockside.

‘Right. I need you to hold her now while I put the clean sheets on,’ said Vic. I walked up to the bed and hesitated.

‘Come on toots, move your ass,’ he ordered. ‘Just roll her over gently while I slide the sheet onto one side of the bed, then same again other side.’

I looked down at my grandmother. Her eyes had closed again; full of drugs no doubt. But I still couldn’t believe they might close forever, it was

too against the grain. Amazingly, beneath the scent of the flowers and the reek of the shite, I could still just detect the smell she'd always had; the one I'd known since I'd arrived at Mount Royal that day long ago when, like the house itself, her arms, now shrivelled and useless, had wrapped themselves around me and felt so strong and sheltering.

That summer when I was seven, my father, half-pissed as usual, had put his Rolls into reverse and shot backwards off the ferry to Skye, drowning himself, my mother and a pair of lesbian hitchhikers in Mallaig harbour. That was when my English grandmother, till then just a distant, half-drawn figure, had exploded into my existence like shrapnel. I knew quite well there were pieces of her still in me, though I'd tried so hard to pick them out. I also knew that, for the years we'd spent together, we'd saved each other's lives. And then, in one terrible instant, it had all gone wrong and we'd both been left to fend for ourselves. For neither of us had it gone particularly well.

Now this fat smiley old guy wanted me to touch her, to hold her again. Christ, how many times along the years had I imagined doing that? In touching, slow-motion scenes of reconciliation, accompanied by the strings of Mantovani.

'I'm sorry, but I just can't do this. I need to go.' I said, striding to the door. 'I'll send a nurse in to help you.'

'Ok toots,' said Vic, the smile dimming a bit. 'Go grab two chairs in the lounge and order coffee. I'll be there in ten.'

There was another moan from the bed. My grandmother was looking straight at me. She tried to raise herself on her pillows, the scrawny shoulders trembling. She was struggling to say something. The old guy put his ear to her mouth; he seemed able to understand her.

‘I think she’s asking if you’re Archie,’ he said.

I forced myself back over to the end of the bed.

‘No Granny, it’s Rory.’ I said, ‘Rory, your grandson.’

The blue eyes peered, widened for a moment, then screwed tight shut against me. The skull under the dyed golden frizz began to thrash from side to side on the pillow, so violently that I thought it must splinter.

‘Go, Rory Blaine,’ said Vic. ‘Go now.’

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Vic d’Orsay limped into the lounge, his belly preceding him like the page-boy of some Oriental potentate. Coffee was brought by a teenage girl with bad skin. Vic was irritated by the scruffy layout of the tray.

‘You’d think this was some goddam Little Chef rather than an extremely expensive nursing home,’ he said. ‘Bet she knows how to lay out a line of coke though. Apparently the staff-room here’s like something out of William Burroughs. And this is fucking Beaconsfield.’

I found myself a tad shocked by this old guy using expletives and wondered at exactly what age I’d have to stop swearing in order not to distress the younger generation.

When I'd entered the lounge, I'd pulled two of the winged chairs together by a window, causing heads to turn.

'Good afternoon,' I'd said politely to the nearest tweedy waxwork, but it had turned away again.

In his flashy clothes, Vic looked like a peacock in a chicken coop. A middle-aged woman, visiting one of the winged chairs, crept over and asked for his autograph. Her husband had proposed while Vic was singing *Moonlight In Amalfi* on the car radio, they now had four children, a golden retriever and an apartment in Croatia. Vic said he was honoured to be 'a figure on her landscape of love'. He signed a paper napkin, kissed her on both cheeks and patted her bum as she turned to go. She was thrilled.

'You've never heard of me, have you, toots?' he asked, pouring the coffee.

I lied and said that I thought his name was coming back to me.

'Vic d'Orsay, also known as The King of Croon. Five Top Ten singles, three gold albums, one platinum. Second in the Eurovision Song Contest, six Royal Variety Performances. There might have been a seventh but I flashed my dick at The Singing Nun and was never asked again. Oh yeah and an honorary degree from Lowestoft Poly, now called The University of the Fens.'

He put down his cup and peered at me with blatant curiosity.

'You all right now?'

‘Oh yeah, sure.’ I lied again, but I don’t think he was fooled this time.

‘Well, well, the grandson,’ he said.

‘I’m surprised anyone here knew she had one.’

‘Oh I did,’ said Vic. ‘I knew Sibyl slightly many years ago, though she doesn’t remember me at all now. It was me who tracked you down. Not difficult in these Googling times. I knew you were estranged but I thought it was right.’

‘I nearly didn’t come.’

‘So why did you then?’ he asked, cutting us both more Madeira cake. I bit into mine, shuffled a pack of answers in my head and, to my surprise, heard myself dealing the honest one.

‘I wanted to find out if there was anyone to visit.’

‘And is there?’

‘Not on today’s evidence,’ I said.

‘She’s ill, confused, easily upset,’ said Vic. ‘Give it another go. You might not have much time to fix whatever it was that broke.’

That last sentence was spoken in an odd shifty way, as if he already possessed the information. But I couldn’t imagine Granny ever unlocking her skeletons, even when faced with the imminent prospect of turning into one herself.

‘Hey look, it wasn’t the loot, my coming. I knew I’d have been dumped decades ago,’ I said. ‘Anyway who *is* the heir to Mount Royal these days? Battersea Dogs Home or that crowd of loonies she hangs out with?’

‘The loonies, I’d guess. It’s not right. Not the way things should be.’

For the first time, Vic d’Orsay’s smile completely disappeared. He looked quite different without it. I almost felt I should turn away, like I was seeing him undressed. He twisted in his chair, spilling crumbs onto the pink silk tie.

‘Forgive me, but am I right in thinking you’re Jewish?’ I asked.

‘Well Barbra called my agent about *Yentl* but the part just wasn’t me.’

‘So how come a Jew is wiping the arse of a notorious fascist and anti-Semite?’

Vic put down his cup and brushed the cake crumbs from his tie, creating a yellowy smudge. The tie was ruined. He shrugged.

‘Because all of us reach a stage in our lives where everything can be, has to be, forgiven. Everything. Even the very worst things.’

‘I don’t think I’m quite there yet,’ I said.

‘You will be. At least I hope you will,’ he replied. ‘Anyway, I just felt sad for her when I found her here in this state. I thought she needed a friend. There didn’t seem to be many others.’

‘How long have you been here, sir?’



‘Jeez, call me Vic or you’ll make me feel as old as Max Bygraves,’ he replied. ‘Two endless, fucking months. Just a minor stroke, nothing like as bad as Sibyl’s. Leg still a bit screwed, that’s all. But I needed looking after for a while, so I had to come here.’

He leaned in closer.

‘No little woman at home, you see,’ he said. Bright pink indicator lights flashed onto his cheeks and two untamed eyebrows did a wee jig. It was said.

I looked around the soulless room. The silence was broken only by dozy breathing and soft, scattered sighs.

‘Why does nobody here speak?’

‘Nothing much left to say. We know all about each other’s lives, or as much as each of us chooses to weave tales from.’

‘What tales do *you* tell then, Vic?’ I asked.

‘Only the ones which make it easier to fit in.’

‘And do you?’

‘Well it’s either this place or another like it,’ said Vic. ‘Anyway, I can play the part. I learned the lines a long time ago and I’ve been speaking them ever since. The King of Croon, arch-celebrant of heterosexual love. In lots of ways, I’ve become the part, as they say. And I’m not the only one. There are two or three other men and women in this place who I strongly suspect are playing it too. Mind you, poor old Dickie over there is so ga-ga

now he can't keep up the performance any more. That makes life here a bit hard for him.'

An emaciated, daddy-long-legs of a man was snoozing over by the door; his chair at a distance from the others, bony fingers clawing at his chest as if sleep brought him no peace.

'But I'm lucky,' Vic went on. 'I'm only here on remand till proved well enough to leave. Most of these folk are sentenced to life, to use a very inappropriate noun.'

Despite his leg, Vic insisted on walking me out to the Merc. As we passed the daddy-long-legs, a hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

'I was fucked by The Master,' The voice was wheezy, androgynous, but the eyes begged me to believe him. 'I was fucked by The Master.'

'Which school were you at then, sir?' I grinned.

'Hush now Dickie,' said Vic gently. 'He means Noël Coward. Dickie was a chorus-boy in his day.'

'Well I can see that,' I said 'You've still got the legs for it, sir.'

Dickie gurgled with pleasure. As we went out of the door, the sexless voice called after us.

'I was fucked by The Master.'

‘Be quiet, you disgusting old man!’ shouted a woman in a champagne-coloured wig. ‘It’s intolerable to have to live with people like you. I served in the ATS.’

‘And Dickie served in the Royal Marines, Mrs Parker-Brown,’ Vic replied, ‘where he won the DSM.’

‘For buggery, no doubt,’ the woman snapped, before returning to her copy of *The Lady*.

‘I hope that by the time you ever need a place like this, things will be different,’ said Vic as we reached the lobby. ‘But I’m ashamed to say a lot of my generation would still shove Oscar in Reading Gaol with a much longer sentence and no hope of parole.’

Outside, the sky had darkened and the Merc was sequinned with raindrops. Vic was much taken with it. He’d had one himself long ago, bought from Tom Jones. There’d been a pair of panties still in the glove-box.

‘Well, if I come again, maybe we could go for a spin to the nearest pub.’ I said, realizing that I actually meant it. I often say things I don’t mean; it’s an occupational hazard in advertising. But was I going to come again? It hadn’t exactly been a success. Vic d’Orsay seemed to have read my thoughts.

‘Listen toots, I know this has been rough,’ he said. ‘But try again. Just be here. Words don’t always matter.’

I reached out to shake his hand, then, on an impulse, gave him a swift manly hug. I felt him flinch for a second but, when we broke apart, the smile was back at full blast.

‘Sorry, shouldn’t have done that,’ I said, glancing back at the windows of the lounge. ‘I hope nobody was watching.’

‘Thanks anyway’ said Vic. ‘That’ll keep me going for weeks.’

When I was turning round the gravel circle towards the head of the drive, I saw Vic watching from the lounge. As the car rolled past the window I stabbed the horn, but he’d already turned away and been swallowed up by the room.

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I’d walked across to the pretty middle-aged lady with the diamonds on her head, handed her the bouquet and bowed. Granny and I had been rehearsing it for weeks. The Queen had asked if I’d travelled far. Only from Hampstead, I’d replied, though I went to school in Scotland. She’d thought that was very interesting and thanked me for coming. I’d told her it was okay, I’d not been doing anything else that night anyway. She’d said I had lovely golden hair. I’d said hers was nice too.

Granny hadn’t been able to curtsy of course, not with her leg. The film première had been in aid of her disabled charities. Afterwards at The Savoy, we’d hobbled round the dance floor together, the brave aristocrat and the sweet orphaned grandson. There had been a pic in the posh magazines. ‘Lady Sibyl Blaine and Master Rory Blaine,’ the captions always read as

Granny trotted her miniature escort round the social circuit. We'd become quite a celebrated pair, smiling out at unknown readers in dentists' waiting-rooms.

Not long afterwards, she'd announced that we'd both go up to Scotland a week before the autumn term started at Glenlyon. I must have been about ten by then. There was something we ought to do she'd said. This was strange because Granny never went to Scotland. She'd often declared that three years of it had been enough to last a lifetime. But having made the decision, she'd seemed determined to make it a great treat, as was her way. And so we'd been chauffeured round the Lake District, the great abbeys and houses of the Borders and then to Edinburgh; St Giles Cathedral, the National Gallery, Holyroodhouse. I'd tried to play guide; history was one of the few things I was good at. I'd wanted to show her my country wasn't the backward puddle of a place she mocked before her important guests at Mount Royal. On a chilly late August evening, we'd huddled under a blanket on the Castle Esplanade as the pipes and drums skirled and strutted past us. Granny had given me a wee nip from her flask. A man on her other side said he worked in childcare and that he'd report her. She'd laughed so much he'd moved his seat. I'd laughed too of course. I was never shy with Granny. I was a different person when we were together.

And then we'd taken the road to the isles. On a crisp clear morning, we'd stood together on the pier that jutted out into the blue-grey waters of Mallaig harbour. The air was sharp with the smell of the sea and the coming of autumn. Each of us had carried a bunch of white lilies.

‘I rather thought we should both come here, even if just the once.’ she’d said. ‘I felt you were ready now, my darling. I do hope I wasn’t wrong.’

She’d turned and gazed at me intently. She’d seemed to be searching my eyes for something, just as I’d been discreetly searching hers. After all, it was her only child whose bloated body had been pulled from the bottom of the harbour three years before. But I’d seen nothing unusual there, only a sudden shiver underneath the suit of peach-coloured linen which had turned the heads of the drab women in the village. We’d taken turns throwing a lily out onto the water until they’d all been carried away on the early tide towards the distant mass of Skye.

‘Well that’s done,’ Granny had said. ‘Shall we have an ice-cream?’

And we had. Then she’d decided we deserved another one. She’d put her arm tightly round my shoulders and we’d licked our way back to the car.

‘Joined at the hip, aren’t we, my darling?’ she’d laughed, tapping the top of her false leg. ‘Joined at the hip.’

### Three

At Battersea Dogs' Home, there will be a barking and a gnashing of teeth. In leafy suburban avenues, fascist loonies will be stuffing shite into envelopes with my name on it. The fickle finger of fate has poked down through the clouds and tickled me under the chin. I have inherited Mount Royal and all that goes with it. I have no idea how or why.

She went in the middle of the night. They'd found her in the morning. Another massive stroke. It would have been quick and without pain, they'd said. But how the hell did they know that if nobody had been with her? I didn't like to think she'd been frightened.

They'd asked if they could keep her false leg; 'to maximize the life-style quality of a future mobility-challenged resident.' Can you believe that? At their rates, they could have supplied prosthetics to half the casualties of The Somme. At first I'd told them to fuck off, but then they'd pointed out that it wouldn't burn anyway, so I gave in on condition it was only attached to a needy Jew or homosexual.

She'd wanted a service in the chapel at Mount Royal but its crumbling condition had thrown up health and safety issues which, her solicitor decreed, could rebound on the estate in the event of injury. So a week later, there was the usual fast-track disposal in the red-brick caverns of Golders Green, attended by myself, Vic d'Orsay and a pick 'n' mix bunch of weirdos; desiccated nobility with cracked lips and bad breath; creepy middle-aged types in cheap suits, even a few shaven-headed young bruisers.

Vic d'Orsay had just been sprung from the nursing home and was back in his flat off Sloane Street. After our first encounter, we'd met two or three more times over the following weeks as my grandmother had slithered downhill. I'd actually, as promised, taken him out to lunch at a country pub. He'd managed to top me in the telling of filthy jokes; there had been one about clitoral farts even I'd have baulked at. I'd liked him, I'd felt sorry for him, though I'd made no plans to fertilize the acquaintance. But when Granny died he'd called me up and offered his help in organizing the funeral. Totally clueless, I'd been only too grateful. Mind you, Granny had left fairly precise instructions. It was just to be a few of her favourite hymns and Bible readings croaked in monotone by shuffling relics of a long lost age. She'd ruled against any sort of eulogy but as the vicar stood up for final prayers, Vic hissed in my ear.

'Jeez, somebody has to say *something*'.

He went over to the coffin He addressed not the congregation but the corpse, leaning towards Granny just as I'd seen him do when he tried to understand what she was struggling to say. He talked about journeys and paths chosen, about the crosses we carry, about the loneliness of it all and the comforts we sometimes turn to, rightly or wrongly. He talked about forgiveness too, as he'd done with me on that first day I'd gone to see her. And then, tears on his podgy cheeks, he kissed the coffin.

But I didn't cry. I don't now. Haven't for a very long time. Ms Prada doesn't approve. But I'm all cried out, as the fat lady once sang. However the gastric reflux was going at full blast and for days I'd been in a 'Milton' that just wouldn't shift. I stared at my wreath on the coffin, so white and



fragile against the harsh mahogany, the same lilies we'd thrown into Mallaig harbour. Then the flowers and Granny slid silently away to wherever they were going.

The weirdos started gathering their hats and coats and shuffling towards the exit. Suddenly, the piercing scream of a woman came from the mysterious spaces into which the coffin had disappeared. Everybody froze. I thought Vic might have a second stroke. We found out later that a trainee disposal operative had caught her finger in the machinery that rolled the box towards the ovens. The finger had come clean off. Good old Granny. Fucking-up people's lives till the last possible second.

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The obituaries had been extensive but not very charming.

Lady Sibyl Constanca Blaine. Born Mount Royal, London, 1910. Only child of the Earl of Ashridge (earldom now extinct). Married Sir Archibald Blaine, Scottish shipbuilder 1932. Divorced 1935. One son, Hector Rufus (predeceased). Socialite. Member of Edward VIII's circle. Loses leg when crushed by horse; 1968. Personally shoots horse before being taken to hospital. Prominent figure in right-wing politics from late-1970s. Creates neo-fascist salon. National Front candidate in elections of 1979 and 1987. Imprisoned in Holloway for incitement to racial hatred; 1989. Becomes *Spitting Image* puppet; 1994. Attacks Michael Foot with walking-stick on Hampstead Heath; 1997. No charges pressed. The *Guardian* called her 'a sad corruption of *noblesse oblige*'. The *Daily Telegraph* mourned 'a misguided woman whose excesses obscured her sometimes valid

arguments'. *Pete 'n' Denise* blogged that 'she spoke for us all', while *Ollyboy* felt 'she was a fuckin nutter, may she rot in hell.' The last word however went, as it should, to *The Times*. 'She is survived by a grandson.' Well, sort of.

A few days later, I'd taken delivery of the ashes. I'd hidden the urn in a distant cupboard with my folk CDs till I figured out what to do with them. And I'd assumed that would be that. But then there was a summons to a posh office in the Temple. Her Ladyship had scribbled a codicil to her will a few days before she died. Bingo.

I, Rory Blaine, am one of the few gay men in London who can honestly tell you I've never been to Hampstead Heath since reaching the age of consent. Thirty years ago, I'd thrown a self-imposed cordon around NW3 which, until this very day, I'd never once crossed. NW3 is where Mount Royal stands.

It was quite bizarre of course, when I returned from Oz and started living a couple of miles away. Tricky too sometimes. If friends living there invited me to dinner, I'd always suggest a West End restaurant. If a business meeting called, I'd plead illness or send somebody else. If I were flying in from the east, I'd never look down in case I glimpsed the cupola. But over the years, it somehow worked. I'd created a black hole in the landscape of the Borough of Camden. A place that no longer existed. Dreamscapes however were another matter. They were less amenable to annihilation. In dreams, I went there constantly.

Once upon a time, you see, I'd been a Blaine of Mount Royal, an insurance policy in bricks and mortar against the worst vicissitudes of existence, guaranteeing a life-long payout of respect and deference. Then suddenly I'd no longer been covered. But now, through some fluke of fortune, it had come back to me and I didn't quite know how to handle it. Ms Prada was really excited, saying that a physical return to my childhood could represent a major milestone on my road to total mind-management. She also felt I should increase the frequency of our sessions. There were some brochures for The Maldives on her desk.

With two more exceptions, I decided not to tell anyone else, at least not yet. The first of these was Vic d'Orsay who answered my email with just four words: 'Justice has been done'. The other was Miss Elspeth Wishart, my old matron from Glenlyon. She replied, by second-class post, with a warning about rich men, camels and eyes of needles and an enquiry as to how punitive the Council Tax might be.

Granny's will was still in probate. But one morning the final papers on the house were signed. Among the reams of legal guff, I was handed a yellow post-it-note with a scribbled security code for the gates of Mount Royal. With six wee numbers, I became the owner of one of the greatest mansions in England. Shite, what did I do now?

I went back to the flat, made some cheese-on-toast and watched a TV programme about a semi-literate Bradford couple struggling to set up a B&B in a derelict farmhouse near Avignon. I put out the rubbish and tried to remove a wine-stain from the carpet I'd been living with for months. In this way I managed to delay for three whole hours. Eventually I swore at

myself and grabbed the car keys. I suddenly wished I had somebody to go with me so I asked the cat if it fancied a jaunt and it squeaked that it did.

The journey back across thirty years took about twenty minutes. As I drove up the leafy tunnel of Fitzjohn's Avenue into Hampstead village, it felt like I'd never been away. Though pockmarked now by the usual chainstores, it still oozed its effortless conceit with the Mary Poppins lamp-posts, cobbled alleys and wee bow-fronted bookshops bulging like hernias. A nice middle-class sun, not too hot, not too cold, shone down on the glossy ladies with the well-groomed dogs taking coffee at the pavement tables. A dishevelled man was selling *The Big Issue* outside Maison Blanc but none of them seemed to see him.

The Merc climbed up to Whitestone Pond on the breezy brow of London. A few hundred yards along Spaniards Road, I swung across the traffic and onto an overgrown path, hemmed in by towering oaks, which ended below a high wall and dark-green metal gates. I punched the numbers on the yellow post-it-note onto a keypad. The gates hesitated before creaking open. Maybe they weren't glad to see me; I could hardly blame them for that. Driving through, I was blinded by fierce summer sunlight. The trees had given way to a vast clearing where everything was sky and space again. And there, against the watercolour backdrop of the city, was Mount Royal.

With the sun on my retinas, its image was hazy, as it had sometimes been in my dreamer's eye. The geometric perfection of its walls and windows was diffused; its outline seemed to sway a little, like the oaks that guarded its entrance. But then I angled the car into some shade and all such fragility

vanished. The walls reared up like a honey-coloured cliff, arrogance in every stone.

As the cat and I got out of the car I had a frantic urge to piss. I often do. Rod, my genito-urinary mechanic, says it's not prostate, just another manifestation of tension. I did it into an urn of half-dead geraniums, guiltily, till I remembered they were now my urn and my geraniums. Back up in the oaks, as they'd always done, the rooks were gossiping loudly, no doubt about me. A scruffy caravan parked inside the gates disgorged a fat, sixtyish man in an unkempt security guard's uniform.

'It'll be Mr Blaine?' he asked in a fierce Irish accent, attempting a half-baked salute. 'Welcome, Sir, welcome.'

He handed me a chubby bunch of keys, each one neatly labelled. Did I need him to accompany me? He was clearly glad when I declined. A Bruce Willis film was about to start on TV and he never liked to miss one. You never knew when a *Die Hard* scenario might arise in today's security environment.

'A very fine house, sir,' he said, contemplating his charge. 'But the heart's gone out of it. Still, not my place to say so. Shout if you need me.'

The gravelled carriage circle enclosed a roundel of shabby grass. At its centre was a marble plinth with the figure of Father Thyme. We were old buddies. I used to dress him up in sunglasses, a string vest, a bra stolen from a maid, anything I'd thought might make Granny laugh. I leaned against him and stared at the place which, despite my best endeavours, I'd never stopped thinking of as home.

‘Well look at you,’ I said.

Christ, it was a stonker of a house. They said that Wren had doodled it on an envelope then handed it to a minion while he got on with St Paul’s. Money had been no object; the first Earl of Ashridge had gone into exile with Charles II and been rewarded with baubles, bangles and job opportunities. Artists, sculptors and woodcarvers had crammed Mount Royal with treasures. Nell Gwynn, Mrs Fitzherbert, Lily Langtry had strolled in its gardens, Walpole, Pitt, Disraeli had nattered in its rooms. For three hundred years, it had stood as evidence of what civilized people could achieve when they weren’t beating the crap out of each other.

But Bruce Willis hadn’t been wrong. Her Ladyship had neglected her legacy. The stone was pitted with pollution and the shining slate I remembered was scabbed-over with bird-shite. Pediments had crumbled and window-frames cracked, gutters were broken and loose drainpipes reeled off the walls like drunks. And though time had been merciless, the hands on the Clock Tower had, paradoxically, long stopped ticking. But despite the ravages, the beauty was imperishable. The sunlight still glanced off the panes of the cupola that crowned the roof, the lions were still rampant around the portico. Maybe Bruce Willis had written it off too soon. Perhaps there was still the possibility of rejuvenation, with Rory Blaine as its saviour of course. But that was a fantasy. Granny’s solicitor had made it pretty clear that inheritance tax meant the Chancellor was the real new owner of Mount Royal. Sooner or later, it would be raped by developers, drawn and quartered into yuppie apartments or sold off to become some fat Arab’s harem.

The cat had already climbed the wide shallow steps to the front doors. I wondered if it might be experiencing agoraphobia never having been further than my teeny roof terrace, though no doubt a cat from Harrods can handle anything. But I wasn't quite ready to go inside yet. Instead I went through the gate in one of the wrought-iron screens that framed the north front and began to circle the house, warily, as if something might leap out at me.

On three sides Mount Royal was simple, austere almost. As if it were totally sure of itself, not needing to dress up and show off. Only on the south front, which overlooked the gardens and the city, did it show a splash of flamboyance, like an accountant in a blue suit. Here the wings of the letter 'H' flung themselves further out, the pediments were more ornate and, just below the roofline hung the huge stone shield with the Ashridge coat of arms and its Latin motto which basically translated as 'fuck everyone but us'.

Below the terrace, a horseshoe staircase curved down into the Italian Garden with the Great Fountain, the statues, the giant urns and, at the furthest point of the axis, the Orangery. But the paths I remembered were long gone, buried somewhere under thigh-high grass and years of indifference. Here and there, chorus lines of ancient dahlias, blowsy in scarlet and purple, brazened their way up through the chaos. But the tall glass doors of the Orangery were chained now, the latticed panes crusty with dirt. The dry fountain basin was clogged with long-dead leaves, a ripped bag of compost and a pair of mouldy wellingtons. As I pushed my way onwards, my shoes crunched on the skeletons of rooks and squirrels.

I sat down on a mucky stone bench and gazed up at the house. Where did I start with all this? I felt a bit detached, as if it weren't me going through the experience. With its rows of shuttered windows, the house looked fast asleep but I felt sure it was watching me. Okay, that sounds bonkers but you don't know it like I do.

'You've been in deep shite for a while, haven't you?' I said. 'Me too.'

Back round on the north front, violent mayhem was blasting out of Bruce Willis's caravan. Shouts of 'Die, motherfucker!' weren't the background music I'd imagined to putting my key in the lock of Mount Royal, but life's a funny thing.

The high double doors, the wood fissured and filthy, didn't want to budge. Perhaps, like the gates, they felt some token reluctance was appropriate. I stepped back, unsure what to do. Then a cry of 'Take that, asshole' exploded from the caravan and inspired my left foot. Thirty years after being kicked out of Mount Royal, I kicked my way back in.

It was almost pitch black inside, the air thick as unstirred porridge. I threw the doors wide and prised open the shutters, letting air and light puncture the gloom. The chandeliers tinkled inside their shrouds. Wow. Mount Royal wasn't a wall-flower that made you wait for its charms, it delivered right away. The Gilded Hall was the grandest room in the house, rising two storeys high to a wild Verrio ceiling. At ground level it was dominated by a pair of marble chimneypieces, cavernous enough to park a Mini. On the white panelled walls were endless Ashridge portraits, some the size of billiard tables. Twin staircases flew up its opposing walls and linked



arms at the top. On three sides of the first floor, open galleries led to the rooms in the east and west wings. But though the gilding was flaking and the chequered marble floor had been hidden by bargain-basement rugs, the sheer nerve of it still hit you between the eyes.

The cat and I went for a prowl; the Saloon, the Library, the Music Room, the State Dining-Room, the Chapel. Some rooms were still in their original Caroline clothing; masculine, dark-panelled, rooms with no fat on them. Others had been remodelled by Wyattville in the early nineteenth century, flibbertigibbets in plaster, silk and damask, girly by comparison. The huge spaces shrunk you like Alice. Even now, damp and grubby, the furniture under dust-sheets, they still did the business. As much as Glenlyon, these had been my school-rooms. I'd taught myself about everything in them, the chairs and tables, the silver, the china, the carvings. The pictures on the walls were old acquaintances; the swan-necked ladies and their complacent lords, the ribboned girls on swings with sad, attendant blackamoors, the dishy nobleman with curls like Marc Bolan. Sometimes I even knew their names and stories; the frail countess who'd died in childbirth, the younger son who'd been lost in a shipwreck. Long dead, they had still breathed for me. Along with Granny and the servants, they'd been palpable presences. We had all lived together, a world in a house. They will be your charges one day, Granny had said. I'd not forgotten a single one of them.

But it was tiny things that carried the shock of familiarity; the same tongues of cold air darting out round the same corners, the beefy doorknob that had squeaked forever, the unchanged touch of a satinwood banister. The smell hadn't altered either; something given off by the wood, the

fabrics, even the stone of the walls, a strange fusion of opulence and decay. What wasn't familiar was the silence that enveloped the house, as if Mount Royal were holding its breath, waiting to see what was going to happen now. When a distant door banged somewhere, the cat and I jumped together.

At the foot of one branch of the staircase, one of the portraits had been covered over. I didn't need to guess whose it was. I tugged at the dust-sheet. With a slow hiss it crumpled to the floor and my grandmother stared down at me. She can't have been more than twenty or so; in an ice-blue gown that matched her eyes, sapphires threaded through her hair. But it was the expression de Laszlo had captured in her youth which struck you. Hard to articulate exactly what it was. Not just a rich kid's arrogance, but something in the blood perhaps, the utter certainty that things would go the way she wanted them. But they hadn't. That was for sure. And yet that look had never entirely left her, not even after the strokes had twisted her features. It was probably on her face inside the mahogany box they burnt at Golders Green.

My heels echoed on the uncarpeted wood of the staircase. At the top, I faced the suite of rooms which had been hers, but I wasn't going in there. In time maybe, but not today. Instead I headed for the corner of the east wing which, for eight years of my life, had been mine. Here the door was locked, which was odd as all the others had opened. But the lock was ancient and anyway it was my lock now. I reprised my heroics. Jesus Christ. The room was empty. Totally. No furniture, no carpets, no curtains. The light fittings had gone, the wall-sockets torn out. It had been laid waste and left to rot. I'd been vaporized.

With an instantly recognizable groan, a floorboard sagged under my weight. Bloody hell, could they still be there? I prised it up. Fuck, yes. A mouldy pile of wank mags I'd bought in Camden Town with blazing cheeks and smuggled home with thumping heart. Blokes with permed hair, flowery shirts and erections sticking out of bell-bottom pants. Like the portraits downstairs, these faces were old friends. They'd have bus passes and prostate problems now, unless the plague had got them. I thanked them for the pleasure they'd given me and stamped the board back down. Rest in peace. I shook my head. All those years of fearful caution, then I'd blown it in a moment.

The cat and I climbed onwards till we reached the narrow wooden spiral that snaked up into the cupola; the highest point in a house that perched on the highest point in London. I lost myself in the view again, like I always had; the towers of Canary Wharf, the tip of Big Ben, the mast at Crystal Palace and, right below, the gardens, the woods and the wide green splash of the Heath. Up here I'd been King of the Castle. Impregnable. Safe.

The unlikeliest of faces now entered my mind and obscured the view. I hardly ever thought of my father. It should have been him standing here, not me. He'd only have been in his early seventies, my mother even younger. But Hector Blaine's life had gone off the rails long before he'd reversed his car into the drink. Under the iron rule of my grandfather, Archie, Blaine Shipping had been the biggest maritime empire in Scotland, but it had only taken Hector about five years to run it into the ground. After her brief, mysterious marriage to Archie, Granny had hurried back south to Mount Royal and the parental embrace. But she'd never abandoned the name of

Blaine and, I'm guessing, couldn't bear the shame of her only son being a wastrel. So she'd poured Ashridge money into the shipyard but it was too late. What was left worth having was vultured by a rival and the Blaine flag was lowered over the Clyde after a century and a half. She'd never spoken to Hector again.

After that, my poor daddy didn't appear to have much talent for anything except self-indulgence. They'd lived at the gambling tables of Nice and Monte Carlo; I'd lived in a big villa in Kelvinside, looked after by a flush of nannies. I'd seen them so rarely that when they died the only difference was one of degree. Granny had considered me too young to go to the funeral and after our eventual trip to Mallaig harbour we'd rarely mentioned them again. We'd had each other after all. Granny was the last of the Ashridges, there were no cousins hovering to inherit; after her, the line would be extinct, a fact which seemed to nag her like a tooth. And I was the last of the Blaines, but of course that would be remedied in time; Granny had been quite confident of that.

'When I'm gone, it will be business as usual,' she'd said in the car that day as we'd driven away from Mallaig. 'You will carry on at Mount Royal, you will continue the line and I will look down on you proudly from my white fluffy cloud. Is that a deal, my darling?'

But at the thought of her loss, I'd erupted with violent sobs and clung frantically to her till we'd reached Fort William and had fish and chips for lunch. And now, fuck me if it hadn't happened; after all the years, after all the water that had roared under the bridge. Here I stood, up in the cupola, the master of Mount Royal. At least for a while.

‘In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome . . . , and all that jazz,’ said a voice. ‘But this one needs serious re-pointing I reckon.’

‘Vic d’Orsay, what the hell are you doing here?’

A snowy head ascended from the well of the spiral. He moved with some effort, the slight limp still there. We’d not met since Golders Green a couple of months ago.

‘Her Ladyship’s lawyer is an old buddy,’ he panted, his belly rising and falling like a bellows. ‘At lunch today, he let slip you’d just taken possession. The security guy let me in. I came to congratulate you. Hope you don’t mind the intrusion.’

Maybe I should have done, but I suddenly felt glad to have him there.

‘Jeez, it’s really something isn’t it? Even in this state,’ said Vic, absorbing the panorama. I pointed out the landmarks and Vic delivered the necessary oohs and aahs. There were some old orange boxes lying around the cupola. Flicking the dust off one with a blue silk handkerchief, he sat with his chins resting on the top of his stick and fixed me in his gaze.

‘Were you surprised she put you back in her will at the eleventh hour?’

‘I didn’t expect her to leave me a pot to piss in.’

‘She didn’t,’ said Vic. ‘I did.’

‘Sorry?’

‘As we’d both predicted, she’d left the lot to the loonies and the lurchers,’ said Vic. ‘She didn’t change her will, I changed it for her.’

I sat down on another orange box, my mouth doing a passable imitation of a goldfish. The cat leapt up onto a third and swivelled its head between us as if it were at Wimbledon.

‘I don’t have many talents beyond my music,’ Vic went on, ‘but one of them was a boyhood genius for calligraphy. I can copy somebody’s handwriting two minutes after I’ve seen it. In this particular instance, I employed it to spectacular effect.’

‘How the fuck did you do it?’ I whispered as if I didn’t want the cat to hear.

‘One day before her second stroke, my friend the solicitor brought her some important papers. She could still hold a pen at that point and I helped her sign some stuff. Then, after her big attack, I tracked you down, got to know you a bit, felt angry at the wrong being done to you. The whole thing came to me when I was trying to clip my toenails. Complete in every detail. I now knew where she kept the will and one afternoon while she was totally spaced, I dug it out, added the codicil, signed it in her handwriting and witnessed it in my own. Then I went into the sluice and got one of the nurses to provide the second signature. It was done and dusted in ten minutes. I was so chuffed with myself, I had a meringue at tea.’

‘Didn’t the nurse suspect anything?’

‘It was that surly Welsh one. A babe of strictly limited intellectual gifts. Certainly too dumb to know you witness a signature in the presence of the signatory and not while emptying out their shit.’

‘But why on earth did you do it? What’s in it for you?’

There was a long pause.

‘Well you see, the quacks say there’s no reason why I can’t have another ten years at least. And I’d like them to be good years, not just the fag-end of life, if you’ll excuse the expression. But as I mouldered in that lounge with poor old Dickie and the other stiffes, it dawned on me that even passable health, the affection of a million middle-aged ladies and an enviable portfolio of investments was unlikely to bring me what I really wanted.’

‘Which is?’

He coloured a bit, looked away and stroked the cat.

‘Oh toots, just the things most people are searching for. Say no more.’

‘And what’s that got to do with me?’

Vic stood up and began to circle the tiny space.

‘I came to this house once, donkeys years back. I remember the magic of just being in those rooms. Before the rot set in, of course. Not just the literal rot, but the bad things that Sibyl allowed to happen here in later years. You remember too, don’t you? Well young Blaine, I have a plan for us to make it that way again.’

‘Us?’ I said, with a prick of irritation. That wasn’t a concept I was used to wrestling with. ‘What if I don’t agree to this plan of yours?’

‘Well I could just go to the cops and confess,’ said Vic. ‘I could say I felt your exclusion from Sibyl’s will to be a grave injustice, that I was depressed after my stroke and, under the influence of my medical cocktail, I did a very silly thing and I’d now like to cleanse my conscience. The quacks will testify on my behalf. Like you, the cops will be unable to imagine any personal motive since we hardly know each other and, as I’m a national treasure Grade II, I’d bet I’ll just get my ass kicked or at worst a suspended sentence and useful publicity for the sales of my back catalogue. Mr Rory Blaine however will be disinherited, the loonies will get it as planned then have to sell it and some gentleman from Jeddah will move in with his fifteen wives.’

‘So you’re blackmailing me into going along with whatever you’ve dreamed-up?’

‘Only in the nicest possible way.’

I was getting dizzy watching him circumnavigate the cupola. Granny’s solicitor had said that the amended will, written just three days before her death, might normally have excited some suspicion. But since I, the new beneficiary, had not visited the home since the previous week and as one of the witnesses was no less than Vic d’Orsay, the celebrated singer, any thoughts of foul play had been instantly dismissed.

‘Victor, for fuck’s sake stand still,’ I barked. ‘What’s this plan?’



‘If my calculations are correct, you can only pay off the taxman, restore the house and pay its running costs if two criteria are met. The first is that you get a sizeable injection of extra dough. I can provide it. The second is that the house will have to work for its living. My scheme would not only enable it to do so but might even be a nice little earner.’

‘You’re assuming I want to keep this wreck.’

‘I *was* assuming it, yes. Until ten minutes ago when I found you here and saw the look on your face. Now, I know you do,’ said Vic. ‘Anyway what was *your* plan? Flog it off, then fritter away what’s left, chasing young Spanish ass in Marbella? You belong here, Rory.’

The old sod was dead right on both counts. I’d imagined selling both the house and the business then heading for the sunny villa with the jacuzzi and the hot-and-cold running boys. But to have Mount Royal again only to lose it for a second time was something I didn’t think even Ms Prada could help with. I knew that for certain now I was back inside its walls.

I leaned back against the latticed glass and gazed out over the tops of the oaks. It had been a shock of course. Not Vic’s crime, I’m ashamed to say, but the fact that Granny hadn’t, after all, wanted to fix things at the last. In those final weeks, I’d made four or five trips to the white bed with the high railings. I’d worried that my presence might freak her out again, but she’d just lain there and stared. It hadn’t been easy. I’d asked Vic to come the first once or twice, he seemed to understand the fractured sounds she made. But there were none for me. Still, I’d nattered on about anything; the years in Australia, the agency, the awards, wanting her to know I’d made something

of myself even if she might not consider it much. I reminded her of dancing at The Savoy, freezing outside Edinburgh Castle, the day we'd won five hundred pounds at Ascot. But nothing. Oh well, Vic had said the words didn't really matter. The leaf-thin hand had lain still on the sheet. The final time I'd seen her, I'd let my own rest beside it, the fingertips almost touching. I'd told myself not to be pathetic. This might be my last chance. And it had been. And I'd not taken it. Then the inheritance had suggested that things had indeed been sorted and I'd been half-drunk on the joy of it. But now I'd discovered that was a sham. I stood here under false pretences.

'That big wrist-watch over there has stopped,' said Vic, peering down at the Clock Tower. 'What d'you say the two of us get it going again?'

It was hot as hell up here now. Vic d'Orsay waited, pushing the delinquent wave of hair back off his sweaty brow.

'Okay then,' I said finally. 'Let's hear how we save Mount Royal.'

He only spoke one short sentence but I laughed and laughed until I thought I was going to piss my nice new Paul Smith chinos. But the cat seemed to like what it heard and rubbed itself admiringly against Vic's dodgy leg.

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