



MOLDAVITE

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“The great movements of the Renaissance all derive their vigour from looking backwards.”

Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*

Chapter 1 The Barber-Alchemist

What is a life? When does it start, when does it end? Does it end? And is it lived in the events, or in the meaning that we find and make, after the events? The life that I now call mine started in a particular time and particular place, incongruously as if in a dream, but one that soon turned into a nightmare. In 1619 Prince Frederick the Protestant Elector Palatine ascended to the throne of Bohemia. He traveled there from Heidelberg with his beloved wife Princess Elizabeth Stuart, the daughter of King James I of England. Within less than a year, Frederick and Elizabeth, the Winter King and Queen, were defeated at the Battle of the White Mountain. This marked the reinstatement of the Catholic Habsburgs as rulers of the Czech lands, and of the lineage of the Holy Roman Empire. Frederick and Elizabeth, stripped of their rank and property, fled to a life of hardship and deprivation in the Netherlands. Of their thirteen children, their eldest son was tragically drowned in a boating accident. A daughter, also called Elizabeth, became an abbess and was known as La Grecque on account of her erudition in ancient languages. She corresponded over many years with the French philosopher Descartes. Sophia, another of Frederick and Elizabeth's daughters, grew up to be the mother of King George I of England. Thus Frederick and Elizabeth of Bohemia became a crucial link between the houses of Stuart and Hanover.

Among the entourage on their arrival in Prague there was an alchemist and scholar by the name of Adam Wood, who soon afterwards rented lodgings in the house of a barber in the Old Town. The barber, whose father had been a barber and his father before him, was a married man with two young daughters of marriageable age. He had been disenchanted with his life for some time. He could still remember the smile that had lit up his father's face when a regular customer had come in and sat down in their shop. His father had prepared the soap with an intentness of expression that had imprinted itself on the barber's memory, not least because he came to envy the contentment it betrayed. The young barber concealed his envy, both to his father and to himself, behind a facade of indifference and contempt. As he unwillingly followed in his father's footsteps, he acquired the habit of mentally absenting himself from the exercise of his profession, a process which alas only made him feel even more trapped.

Like many before and after him, the disenchanted barber imagined he saw the enchantment he sought in the glamour of another man's life. He took to scrutinizing the movements of his new lodger, Adam Wood. A fascination developed. Through careful observation and secret pursuit of his lodger on his daily journey from the Old Town to the alchemy workshop in the Prague Castle precincts, the barber discovered that Adam Wood was working with gemstones. He was enthralled. What could be more exciting and thrilling, he

thought, than to be a traveling scholar and alchemist? To be free to pursue the deepest mysteries of life without encumbrances such as razors, soap, wives and marriageable daughters? He started, stealthily at first, following a few steps behind, to pursue Wood as he went about his business. And so the barber got into the habit of following Wood on his morning walk through the Old Town, across the Old Town Bridge and up the steep hill to the Castle and Golden Lane where the alchemists gathered and worked. Surreptitiously he would peep in at the window of the workshop where Adam Wood conducted his experiments, or find some pretext to pass the doorway whenever anyone entered or left. After some weeks of this, he grew bolder, in time acquiring a disguise with a hood to cover his face. When deliveries of work materials were made, he occasionally managed to sneak into the workshop in Golden Lane a couple of times and look around at the mortars, pestles, copper cauldrons and other paraphernalia of this mysterious profession. One day, before he had even realized it, he found himself darting back out of the workshop with a green gemstone like a dark emerald clutched in his moist palm. He stopped short, for only a few weeks previously he would have believed himself incapable of such a blatant act of theft. Had he been of a mind to do so, he would have heeded this act of self-forgetting as a warning that he was treading on perilous, illicit ground. Instead, the theft of the stone became the turning point in a rapid and irrevocable downward spiral.

The barber's wife was somewhat alarmed one day on returning from her market errands to discover a sign on the shop door saying that they were closed. Finding her husband gone she went thoughtfully into the kitchen to prepare a soup that would remain warm all day on the stove. When her husband returned some hours later he was irritable and morose and ate his soup like an automaton, staring in front of him, his thoughts on magical gold and the famed stone of the philosophers.

However, some days later, Adam Wood announced that he had found lodgings closer to Golden Lane, on the other side of the river in the Lesser Town. This came as a shocking blow to the barber, for by this time his fascination with the other man's life had grown into a gnawing obsession. He was even less his own man now than he had been as a reluctant barber. Adam Wood paid his rent, packed up his things and left. Not long after this, he returned to England, having had to sell a number of his most valuable books to pay for his passage.

With neither apology nor explanation to his family the barber packed a small bundle before dawn some days later and left his home, his wife and his daughters, in fevered pursuit of his own dream of the enchanted life. He half believed that it was they who had been holding him back from his true destiny - a conviction which conveniently allowed him to conclude that they deserved to be left behind. For some days he took the gemstone around a series of assayers, at first in Prague and

then in Krumlov in southern Bohemia, in an attempt to find out what the green stone was and what an alchemist would want with it. As he travelled, sometimes in the rain in open carts, he would turn the stone over in his hands, frowning, as if waiting for it to speak to him. Its apparent unwillingness to give up its secret burned into him like an affront. Sometimes, as he stood in the workshop or emporium of one of the assayers, he fancied he saw a brief flash of interest (or was it avarice?) move across the other man's gaze, to be replaced with a look of guardedness or feigned ignorance, perhaps accompanied by the apparently casual offer of a low price. But money was not on the barber's mind. What he wanted was knowledge.

Over the months that followed, the more doggedly and single-mindedly the barber pursued his phantom life of enchantment, the more resolutely it eluded him. To someone else, it would by now have become apparent that the deepest mysteries of life do not take kindly to acts of pursuit. But the barber had the green stone in his pocket. By now he had convinced himself that it was his stone. That was all that mattered to him now. The knowledge that went with the stone was his whole focus. He neglected his body, eating and sleeping poorly and irregularly, working only sporadically and itinerantly to cover his travel costs and meagre diet. His exposure to a damp and rainy autumn season, spent travelling around Bohemia, had left him with a persistent wheeze. The quiet, unassuming, but persistent lament of his ailing body grew by a series

of imperceptible stages into an angry rage of intermittent fevers, accompanied by a barking, hacking cough. Yet still his only thoughts were of the stone. Being an unlettered man he was unable to interest any of the alchemists in Prague or Krumlov in letting him work with them. Resentment fuelled his frustration, and his debilitating fevers, still more. Autumn passed into a mercifully mild winter, thus enabling him somehow to survive as he continued to cling to his hopes of unlocking the key to the knowledge he was certain he held in the emerald-coloured stone. All he managed to ascertain was that it was a piece of Moldavite, a mineral gemstone found almost exclusively in the Bohemian basin.

The following spring arrived with a shock of forgotten joy and hope that only made him feel all the more the dislocation of his self-imposed exile. The warmth dried up his cough, but he was still short of breath and his joints ached with rheumatism. One hot summer's day, standing on the Old Town Square, the barber found himself alone and destitute in a glaring sun that seemed in itself a reproach, surrounded by the evidence of thriving livelihoods and the bustle of thriving families. Looking up, he wondered to himself what on earth he had been about. For the first time in years he stilled himself and looked around him. Then it hit him. Running rather than walking past the astrological clock on the Old Town Square as it chimed the hour, the barber wound his way down Charles Street to his shop and his home on Lilliova

Street. He found the shop boarded up. The baker across the street did not recognize him when he asked what had become of his family.

“Sad thing,” the baker had replied. “The barber just went off one day without a word. His wife was found dead a few days later. Poisoned herself, so they say.”

“And the girls?” the barber asked hoarsely, scarcely above a whisper.

“The last we saw of them, they were arm in arm with that madam from the brothel near the Bridge. She’s always on the lookout for good-looking girls. Rumour has it they are with her now.” The baker turned his head thoughtfully towards his shop.

“Who would have thought it?” he went on, “They always seemed such a decent family. Of course, the barber couldn’t light a candle to his father before him. Now there was a barber! You’d go in there and he had a way of making you feel like a prince. You could talk to him about anything at all, you just knew you could trust him, as if”

But the barber was not listening any more. Taking the stone out of the secret pocket he had sewn into his robes as a precaution against thieves he examined once more the fruits of his own theft and saw at last how he had squandered all this time trying to unlock a door that he had not yet earned the right to open. Going round to the back of the building he had once worked and lived in, he pulled off one of the boards blocking a window, took the stone out of his pocket and, remembering the loose

brick inside the chimney wall of the kitchen fireplace, hid it there, as if performing a burial or act of piety. There was only the half-formed thought in his mind that he must part with it, give it up. He looked around, missing the sight of his wife wiping her hands on her apron, or stirring the soup or stew she had made for that day. Replacing the brick inside the chimney and climbing back out of the window, the barber walked away from his old life for the second time. He was only too aware now that a dark shadow had fallen over his soul and that there were heavy debts to be repaid, if not in this life, then in some life to come.

It was perhaps inevitable that in his next life he should be born a woman. For what has fallen must rise, what has been suppressed must erupt and burst forth, and what has dominated and overruled must be tamed and brought to heel. He knew, in the parlance of an age still to come, that there would be hell to pay. Where he lived out the rest of his days is not clear. But to this day his ghost still haunts the area around Charles and Lilliova Streets in the Old Town of Prague. For there are worlds, and worlds, and worlds between worlds. If you fall asleep there, he may come to visit you in the night, as he once came to me, looking for the life, and the wisdom, that he threw away when he went to live someone else's.

Chapter 2 Cobblestones

In the car on her way to work at Our Lady of Ransom's school, Eva found her mind returning to a conversation with the Bishop and others at the seminar the evening before, at their weekly session for a part-time M.A. in Death Studies. She would never have believed that death could be such a relief from teaching. People laughed when she told them how much she enjoyed her seminars on death. As she stopped at the traffic lights, her mind wandered back over the discussions of the previous evening, on the denial of death in post-modern society, or the obscurity of Heidegger: "I am the other."

Having survived the predictable traffic jam, Eva sped as fast as she could without tripping up across the cobblestone courtyard at Our Lady of Ransom's independent school. She tried to keep her feet from sliding on the uneven stones, which were still slippery after a heavy shower earlier that morning. By now it was only spitting with rain and she clutched her paperwork close to her, partly to protect it from the wet and partly to warm herself. She thought of the flat, comfortable cobblestones of Prague, where she would so much rather be now. Always on the edge of her consciousness, close enough to feel but not to see, she carried with her a sense of exile from Prague. And yet this seemed absurd to her in her sensible teacher mode of consciousness, for Prague was a city she had only recently come to know. It did not make sense. What

made even less sense was the unreality of her life at Ransom's.

The ink cartridge in her printer had run out the night before at home. She needed to print out her latest assignment on Death. Arriving, panting, in the computer room to print out her worksheets quickly before her lesson, it took her three attempts to log on. The system was overloaded first thing in the morning. Retrieving her memory stick from her pocket, she brought the worksheet document up on screen and pressed the "print" command. Nothing happened. Of course it didn't, because there was no paper in the printer. Fishing her keys out, she opened the paper storage cupboard. It was bare. This meant dashing across the courtyard to another building in order to fetch paper. Or did it? On her way out of the room, she noticed some printed sheets scattered on the floor under the table. "Ah well," she sighed, "time for a little recycling!" There were just enough dog-eared sheets lying around to print out one copy of her worksheets on the reverse side. Two minutes before her lesson was due to start, this left merely the task of running off twelve copies.

Dashing back across the courtyard and down the damp, chilly cloister she cursed as she saw a line of colleagues three deep in front of the photocopying machine. They were clearly going to take at least five minutes, so she decided to use the time she didn't have for a quick dash to the school office to check her mail. There she encountered another

cluster of milling bodies trying to purchase office materials, deliver parcels or make urgent phone calls. Lowering her body into a makeshift scrum of one, Eva plied her way silently at waistline level to reach her mailbox. It was empty. On her way back out of the office, she was accosted by Miranda, one of her students, who urgently needed her to sign a chit giving her permission to leave lessons early on Friday. There was another delay and a brief remonstration with Miranda over the merits of carrying around a functioning pen with one when wanting a member of staff to sign something important.

Five minutes into her double lesson, Eva sprinted back over the uneven cloister flagstones to the photocopying machine, to find one copying marathon ended and Steven Mallory, the school's curiously gauche and uncommunicative PR officer, manually copying his way one by one through a laborious selection of intricately shaped press cuttings. Another four infuriating minutes elapsed before Eva was able to accomplish twelve copies of her worksheets on the Letter to the Hebrews, complete with questions, for her Religious Studies class, who were probably all at each other's throats in the classroom by now.

Ten minutes into her double lesson, by now in a lather of sweat, with a fresh ladder in her tights and a faint smell of damp sheep rising from her rain-sodden Merino wool twin set, Eva emerged from the cloister to find another downpour

unleashing itself on to the cobblestones. Ruined hairdo braced downwards to ward off the elements, the Hebrews clutched to her bosom, Eva started her third dash across the courtyard, almost running blind into the arms of a camel-coated stranger, who looked distinguished, grizzled and confused.

"Question!" he hailed, complete with raised right arm, across an invisible sea of wealth and privilege that apparently rendered complete sentences superfluous when talking to damp teachers and other social inferiors. This was enough to startle Eva's forging body into an ungainly halt, at the very moment her mind was deciding that she did not even remotely have time to stop. She did not like this Morse-code-like form of address. She turned her face upwards and sideways, both towards the elements and in the direction of the immaculate camel coat, blurred on the other side of her rain-spattered glasses. A sense of detached, clinical wonder overcame her for an instant at the way an otherwise rational, sensible adult can be trained to obedience like a dog, with a single authoritative tone from a well-heeled stranger. She also found herself wondering how it was neurologically possible for the body to obey ahead of the mind's decision not to.

"Can I help you?" she heard herself asking, her mind now decorously falling over the precipice that divides normal workaday tension from the silent hysteria of impending burnout, as she pictured the group that should by now have long been intent on

the Letter to the Hebrews descending into delinquent acts of classroom decadence.

"Appointment with Head. Can't find office!" came the barked reply, at a volume she would normally have expected from a person attempting to communicate across several acres of land, rather than the three feet that actually divided them.

"Oh," smiled Eva feebly but automatically, feeling wrong-footed, cross and wet, "please follow me, it is a little difficult to find". Much to her self-disgust, she even managed a polite smile.

It seems to be an unwritten law at schools with aspirations to elite status that they should be as difficult to navigate as possible. This serves the function of allowing those people to feel important who are undoubtedly in greatest need of it, i.e. the management. The ambition for status is often at war with the sober truth that to many of the fee-paying parents and students teachers are little more than servants with letters after their names. This dissonance between aspiration and reality is expressed in the geography of boarding schools by the placing of as many hurdles as possible in the path of hapless outsiders. Crucial information is supplied in the form of obscure abbreviations, codes, or apparently meaningless words ("San" instead of sick bay, for example, or "SCR" for Staff Common Room). Administrators and secretaries are dispersed at obscure ends of different buildings, preferably on the top floor. This navigational vagueness

fosters the impression that the institution you are visiting has no need to win you over.

So not for the first time, Eva cursed the fact that there was no reception area for visitors at Ransom's. Since signs showing where the Head and other important persons were to be found could scarcely be omitted altogether, they were generally placed just outside where the office in question was located, so that the only people who read them were those who already knew where they were going. In practice this meant that it was virtually impossible to go about one's business at Ransom's without having to give frequent and laborious directions to hopelessly lost people. It was usually far simpler to accompany the enquirer rather than give out confusing directions. It was partly in this way that Ransom's had acquired its reputation for being such a "courteous and Christian" school.

Not feeling at all courteous or Christian at the moment, but more like ninety years old than the forty-three she was, Eva heaved herself up the impressive sixteenth century wooden staircase to the Head's Study, with a light-footed blob of expensive camel coat bounding up behind her. Conveniently, the Head's door opened as they emerged round the banister. Barbara Styles, the Head, smiled her smile and the camel coat was absorbed seamlessly into the Holy of Holies, the door closing elegantly behind the two of them, neither of whom found it necessary to acknowledge Eva's presence any further.

A viper's nest of inner tension, and by now thirteen minutes late for her lesson, Eva hurtled back down the creaking oak staircase, back out into the rain, and half staggered, half sprinted across to the schoolhouse, where she then had to negotiate another two flights of wooden stairs up to the second floor before stopping on the corner to catch her breath. As she hove into view round the door of the classroom, a dozen mercifully quiet uniforms made languid attempts to peel themselves off windowsills and desktops, as Cola cans, snack packets and chocolate wrappers were deposited in corners, in the hope that they would be overlooked.

Eva invoked her legendary right eyebrow, usually deemed sufficient to quell any rioting rabble. A cautious, if petulant hush descended on the room. "And now, as promised", Eva wheezed, "the Letter to the Hebrews. Amanda, take your feet off the desk please. Charlotte, would you mind (pant, puff) handing these round?"

A large amount of underarm sweat was discreetly pressed and absorbed into two layers of cornflower blue Merino wool as Eva got out her pen and, wiping the rain from it, ticked names off in her class list. As always, the regular routine of classroom trench warfare turned out to be the most soothing part of Eva's working day. She could have killed for a large mug of black coffee right now. Instead, she donned her professional face and warmed herself on the thought of her next Beta-blocker.

"Please miss?" grated a teenage voice from somewhere near the window.

"Yes?" responded Eva half-heartedly, still preoccupied with her register.

"I like your ring miss!"

"Thank you Emily," Eva responded.

"It's very unusual miss," persisted the voice. "Is it an emerald miss?"

Eva looked up. "Well no actually," she smiled, holding out the hand in front of her and glancing down at the pale green stone in its simple setting. "In fact it's Moldavite."

"What's that miss?"

This time, Eva instead of cursing this further delay to the proceedings, decided to relax graciously into this latest movement in the sonata of interruptions to her plans for the school day. She smiled again.

"Moldavite is actually a unique gemstone," she said, aware that whatever she did she always seemed to sound like a teacher or an encyclopedia.

"For two reasons. Firstly it occurs almost exclusively in the Bohemian basin in the Czech Republic. It's called Moldavite because it occurs in the basin of the river Moldau in the Czech Republic.

Moldavite

The Czechs call it the river Vltava, and the stone is known to them as Vltavin. But secondly it is unique because it is the only known gemstone on earth that is actually extra-terrestrial in origin."

This last word had a magical effect on the class. Eyes opened wide and the girls exchanged fascinated looks.

"What do you mean miss?" whispered a girl at one of the front desks. They would scarcely have mustered this much enthusiasm for the Letter to the Hebrews, Eva couldn't help thinking to herself wryly. And yet there was a kind of connection between her ring and her subject matter.

"Well, yes," she went on. "You see most gemstones in the world, such as diamonds, sapphires and emeralds, are formed through a combination of processes going on above and below the earth's crust and in the magma.

"But Moldavite is different." She couldn't resist allowing a short dramatic pause to do its work on the class before going on.

"Moldavite is believed to have formed as a result of the crashing of a meteor to the earth about fourteen million years ago."

Looks were again exchanged among the class, and eyes opened wide.

"The meteor is thought to have crashed to the earth in the area in southern Germany near the present-day city of Stuttgart, but as it crashed and displaced huge amounts of debris it formed the region we now call the Bohemian basin in the Czech Republic. The material of the meteorite combined with other material from the earth's crust to form the gemstone Moldavite, which is green or greenish-brown in colour. It has unique properties."

"Wow, miss!" came a fascinated voice, as if speaking for everyone.

Eva was in full flow now. "Yes, so it is a unique gem in every sense of the word. And indeed the stuff of myth and legend."

The whole class was with her now and eager to hear more. "Who has heard of alchemy?" she asked, still amazed after all these years at how much like a teacher she sounded. One or two hands went up.

"Well there are varying opinions about what alchemy was. Some people say that it was the prototype of the modern experimental sciences, but a kind of misguided forerunner of them, misled by a lot of mumbo-jumbo about trying to turn lead into gold and that sort of thing." Eva paused to draw breath.

"But another view of alchemy is that it was a symbolic system concerned with the search for spiritual awaking and enlightenment. So thank you

for the question about my ring, because it does have a connection with Religious Studies after all, as I am sure you are all very relieved to hear!" A ripple of chuckles passed round the class.

"Who has heard of the Holy Grail?" Eva asked. A lot of hands went up this time.

"Well there has always been a great deal of speculation about what the Holy Grail was, including most recently the idea that it was a person, Mary of Magdala, rather than an artifact, an inanimate object.

"However, one school of thought believes that the Grail may have been made of Moldavite, or at least partly of Moldavite. I have never heard the sound Moldavite makes, but apparently vessels and cups made of Moldavite make a remarkable resonating sound when lightly struck, and again this unique sound is believed to be related to its unique extra-terrestrial origins.

"These origins are explained in some esoteric - including alchemical - circles with the myth of Lucifer's crown." Eva paused again, gathering her thoughts.

"As you will remember from our reading of the Book of Revelations, the Bible tells of a group of angels, led by Lucifer, which means Light-bearer, being expelled from Heaven for their disobedience.

"There was a war in Heaven, in fact, and a great battle between Lucifer and Michael, which Michael won. This is said to have happened because a group of angels known as the Watchers (it seems their task was to keep an eye on us, on the human race) had been misbehaving.

"First they had been having sex with human women and producing children...." the mention of sex had its usual instantly galvanizing effect on the class.

"The Bible speaks of a race or group of people on earth at the time described in the Book of Genesis who were known as the Nephilim. The Nephilim are thought to have been a race of giants descended from unions between Watchers and human women. Stories about giants occur in the myths and legends of many cultures, including those of Australian aborigines." Eva drew another breath and did one of the classroom body swivels in front of the board that she did when she was in full flow.

"But there was more to it than that," she went on. "There also seems to have been a major conflict among the angels about whether it was right to allow humans access to certain kinds of knowledge.

"You may remember from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, that there are all sorts of admonitions and threats of dire punishment for people who practice astrology and sorcery?"

A couple of knowing nods reassured Eva that not all their Bible study had been in vain. "Well, it would seem that the group of angels around Lucifer held the view that human beings should have access to this kind of esoteric knowledge - and to the power that went with it. After all this goes right back to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, when Eve is tempted with the knowledge of good and evil by the serpent, who tells her that if she eats of the fruit from this tree she and Adam will be like gods. God of course, has clearly said that if Adam and Eve eat of the fruit, then they will die. This implies that human mortality is a consequence of access to knowledge, which is an interesting idea, I think you will agree..."

"This story brings us to one of the central, eternal conflicts in the human soul: we seek, even crave knowledge, and the power that goes with it, but time and time again we demonstrate that we are not to be trusted with it, and, equally importantly perhaps, the more we know, the unhappier we seem to become. Ignorance, in many ways, is bliss, as the saying goes.

"But I digress," Eva said, looking round at the class.

"What, you may be asking, does any of this have to do with my Moldavite ring? Well, the legend tells that when Michael defeated Lucifer and threw him and his angels out of Heaven, as Lucifer fell to earth one of the stones from his crown fell and

crashed to earth, creating what we now know today as the Bohemian basin and bringing to earth the gemstone Moldavite. And because it is the only known gemstone on earth that originated at least in part in the Heavens it possesses unique and special properties. Since earliest times, Moldavite has been regarded as an especially precious gemstone, being presented as gifts among royalty, for example.

"Nowadays we tend to think of kings in terms exclusively of government and political rule, but this was not always so. Until at least the Middle Ages kings were also spiritual initiates in esoteric schools and were more like priest-kings, so their role as spiritual leaders was as important as their political leadership. Many of you will be familiar with the legend of King Arthur and the various legends of the Holy Grail, for example. These mythological stories are concerned with ancient times, but are a medieval reworking of these ancient legends, and they clearly depict King Arthur as having a spiritual role for his people.

"So Moldavite, because of its partly heavenly origin, is said to enhance Gnosis and spiritual insight in those who wear it.

"And now," Eva smiled, "at long last, we come to the Letter to the Hebrews, where we read, rather aptly in the light of what we have just been talking about, in Chapter 2, verse 5: 'For it is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, which is our theme.'"

Chapter 3 Golden Prague

Eva had strange dreams. In one she was flying along a straight road on a high plateau. She felt released as if from prison into a world of hot brilliant light and mysterious deep shadows, as if several octaves of awareness had been restored to her being. There was someone else with her, man or woman, she did not know, but just behind her, whom she could not see but who seemed familiar to her from somewhere, like a friend from childhood, or perhaps even before that. In her dream flying seemed the most normal thing to do. After what seemed like a long, exhilarating flight of some miles she landed at the entrance to a ruined shrine or temple. The last thing she remembered before she woke were the engravings of two doves and a snake coiled around a rock. As she awoke, she felt simultaneously the aching gravity of her body and the sense of having been wrenched away from her own core. Eva often dreamed of forests, hills and lakes such as she had seen in Bohemia, and in her waking life she would sometimes turn a corner in Prague, or look at a view out of a particular building, and feel sure that she had been there before. She never had this feeling in England.

One Sunday morning Eva woke up and decided that it was time to turn back into a human being. She had booked herself for the weekend into the Golden Fox Hotel in the Old Town Square in Prague, just across from the Kafka Exposition. On a whim, she had taken a last-minute flight after

Friday's staff meeting at school. Turning over in her warm bed and rearranging the soft feather duvet in its thick cream damask cover, she pummeled the square pillow to re-fit the shape of her head, feeling sure that Kafka himself would have appreciated the joke. There was the distant sound of a tram singing in its rails, its bell ringing as it turned a corner. As a teacher, Eva had grown alarmingly accustomed to feeling like an insect from a Kafka novel. Kafka was right: people really can wake up one morning and find that they have turned into something that isn't human.

Luxuriating in the Bohemian feather bedding, Eva found herself thinking about her employer, Our Lady of Ransom's, which appeared to have recently been taken over by aliens. Or was she, in fact, the alien? Back at Ransom's school in Newbourne, Eva spent most of her days chasing a tail she didn't have. In a breathless ribbon of working weeks and perpetual time famine, Eva rushed through her teaching day with an invisible yoke round her neck that was growing heavier by the day. She felt as if there was a stone pushing against her breastbone and a hostile hand gripping her heart in a vice. Her distress and panic had become palpable, like a predator colonizing her from the inside out, taking over her inner space, scarcely leaving her room to breathe. It was as if she was serving out a sentence she had pronounced against herself. The paradox was that she loved her work. She lay in bed, turning her Moldavite ring round her finger, thinking.

Here in Prague, ten years ago, she had rediscovered an inner space. Her mother Svetlana had married an RAF pilot during the war and, having left for England, had not visited her home city again until 1990. By this time she was already well over seventy. Travelling with her mother then, Eva had understood something she had only dimly seen before. English people had never been able to pronounce Svetlana's name, and so she had become known to everyone just as "Lana". The name Svetlana means "bright one", but the lost syllable, "svet", means "world". With a single syllable, a whole world had gone missing for Svetlana for over four decades. She had, it is true, become a new creation in England, but at the price of being a curtailed person. How the world loves to snip and trim us, she thought.

This revelation of her mother's unseen world had brought a shift in consciousness for Eva too. She now saw for what it was her mother's pervasive aura of loss, of not ever being quite "here", of speaking to her as if across a wide invisible moat filled with loss. As a child Eva had grown to believe that she had done something irretrievably wrong by having been born, and had structured her entire outer persona around the mistaken assumption that it was her mission in life to atone for her mother's deprivations. "Look, Mummy, I've found this glass in the attic: it's a present for you" or, ever the willing, smiling helper: "I'll go outside and fill the coal scuttle for you, Mummy!" This was the person that her world knew as Eva. And yet, as she

stood in 1990, now aged forty-two, with her mother on the Old Town Square, waiting for the medieval astrological clock to strike eleven, she understood for the first time that this person was a fiction and that she was, even to herself, a landscape without a map. Later, as the city's night reflection of spires and golden lights shimmered in the river flowing under the Charles Bridge that spanned the Old Town and the Lesser Town, she saw that she did not know who she was at all, and wondered how it was possible that she had never noticed this until now. This new understanding was both frightening and a relief.

Her mother took her by the arm with a kind, yet strangely resolute gesture that Eva did not associate with her mother's otherwise reticent manner. "Come on, Eva," she said, "I'll show you Novy Svet, the New World." Novy Svet, where Svetlana had lived as a child, was the name of an old quarter of the Lesser Town, on top of the hill behind the Hradcany Castle. It was a steep, meandering climb, past many cafes and restaurants, the haunts of generations of famous artists and writers, and of elegant but unexpectedly intimate foreign embassies, making the world Eva had been shut out from seem suddenly near. Despite the steepness her mother, who knew the way by heart, scarcely seemed to notice the climb and only stopped to reminisce about how that bookshop had been their local baker's, or how beautifully they had done up the Golden Ox Inn. Having seen the flat where the family had lived,

they walked slowly back down to the terrace behind the rear entrance to the Castle and looked down over the city.

Eva had felt then as a beggar child might have felt on discovering that she was the daughter of royalty, in this city of kings and Emperors, with its Italian architecture and a national culture as deep as an iceberg. It was as if all her deprivations and uncertainties, her misinterpretations, her vain attempts to expunge a crime that, as it turned out, had never been committed, had only happened in order to bring her to this revelation. From this new perspective, as she looked out over a heritage she had not until now even known existed, her consciousness made an infinitesimal shift, but in doing so crafted a whole new thing of her past, giving it a new shape and colour, just as, had she been a painter, she might have primed a fresh new canvas ready to start a self-portrait from scratch. By embracing a world of shadows only partly her own, she had found a way to light. Although she knew that the person others saw had been no more than a makeshift construction, the very emptiness of her inner space gave her hope, because it affirmed that the space was there. She had discovered that she had the power to live her life backwards as well as forwards.

Taking a deep, slow breath of summer air, Eva led her mother back down the steps. Her mother chuckled. "What we need now," she said, "is a nice glass of beer, preferably Pilsner Urquell. The

original and best". Walking back down from the Castle through Neruda Street and back across the Charles Bridge that her mother for some reason always referred to as the Old Town Bridge they meandered their way to a pub just off Bethlehem Square. Later, Svetlana had given Eva an antique ring with a green stone in it. "It is a stone that is unique to Bohemia and Moravia," she said, looking her daughter intently in the eyes, as if waiting for something. It had been at that time that Eva's intense dreams had started.

Eva opened her eyes, now seeing as well as feeling the reassuring solid textures and outlines of the cream damask linen against the dark wood bed, and hearing the discreet bustle of city life under her window. She fancied she could smell dark roasted coffee brewing. She could almost taste the fresh buttered rolls. The astrological clock on the Old Town Square chimed ten. As she rolled over in bed she was reminded of the biblical idea of the fullness of time. The more she slowed down, the more time she seemed to have, until sometimes, as now, she felt as if there were no time at all, as if she had shifted into a state of being that was outside time. This, then, was the first revelation for Eva: that her inner space was not the static, shrunken thing she had once taken it to be, under permanent siege from the enemies of selfhood, but a malleable and expandable universe with hidden mansions, different lands and uncharted continents. It followed from this that it was possible to live a life different from the one she had come to think of as

normal, and which she now saw as bordering on the pathological. She responded to this discovery, that her inner world was even less known to her than the outer one, with a kind of cautious embrace. Over the next few years there followed a strict compartmentalization of its various fragments. There was her "life", or what passed for a life, in England. For this was, as she now realized, the life of a non-existent person other than her self, whatever that was. This was a life of near hysteria for fear of lapses in work performance, the life of deadlines, schedules, schemes of work, scheming at work. And then there were the jealously guarded oases of "real" life, preserved for the school vacations.

With the addition of Prague to her life, Eva moved inwardly from a cramped and parched inner wilderness to a desert punctuated regularly and predictably with oases of carefully controlled dimensions. In her mind these were so separate from her "normal" world that she guarded them almost with secrecy, as if afraid that someone might take them away from her, as if rest and respite were a mistake, like a banking error she had benefited from but that she hoped no-one would ever find out about and make her pay back what was not rightfully hers. At Ransom's she thought she discerned from some colleagues the traces of turned-up noses and disdainful looks when she answered enquiries about her holiday plans with an "Oh, off to Prague, you know," knowing full well that they did not "know" at all, and probably did

not want to know. Everyone knew that upwardly mobile staff at schools like Ransom's were Francophiles, with at most a spot of Italian Renaissance thrown in, perhaps in the form of a rented holiday villa in Tuscany to enable them to "do" Florence and Pisa. European Union or no European Union, France was still quite foreign enough, and in the minds of her colleagues, she felt sure, Prague belonged to an inherently slightly indecent part of Europe that, if not quite Russian was, well Slavonic, and therefore relegated with other territorial odds and ends to that vaguely discerned entity that had once been known as Yugoslavia - which, as everyone now knew perfectly well had never really existed anyway and was therefore clearly not worth bothering with, except perhaps for a weekend break.

At Ransom's, as no doubt elsewhere, the imperatives of upward mobility comprised not an open, but a closed system of signs and tokens. Even the most basic social communication was preceded or accompanied by an obstacle course of status hurdles, which, predictably perhaps, became more vicious and convoluted the lower down the pecking order one happened to be. The customary starting point were the most obvious indicators, such as the regional accent (or hopefully the lack of one). Carol, one of the assistant housemistresses at Ransom's, had been taken to task within the first three sentences by one concerned parent on account of her Lancashire accent. This was, of course, done tastefully, or at least he thought so,

by enquiring as to whether she had been to university “up North”, to which she had replied, in a heartbeat, that she had done her postgraduate degrees (the plural was a nice touch) at Oxford. This magic name seemed to assuage his concerns about the northern twang.

Eva remembered stumbling one Sunday evening on a conversation that had accidentally been recorded on her answering machine during a lacrosse match the morning before. It appeared that someone’s cell phone, located in a pocket, judging by the quality of the sound, had been nudged into dialing her phone number from automatic memory. The ensuing recording had been a four-part shrieked quartet of status jostling that went on long enough to fill her entire allotted recording space with statements such as “Of course Ott is now playing in the NATIONAL team”, or “Emma’s going to read Greats at Somerville” punctuated by ,”Oh, how LOVELY!,” and ,”Oh, isn’t that MARVELLOUS!”

Among the staff at Ransom’s, on the other hand, the jostling within invisible pecking orders was even more hysterical and neurotic than the triumphalist utterances of the parents they lived to serve. They led to some harrowing conversations, such as one teacher agonizing over the phone for hours to Eva about her twenty year-old son, who was of course at Oxford, who had not achieved the firsts required of him in the examinations at the end of his first year at Balliol. This was clearly a catastrophe of such stupendous dimensions as to make a Greek

tragedy seem like light bedtime reading. Truly accomplished social self-flagellators can sustain exquisite social agonies throughout entire dinner parties, preferably at tables made up of lawyers and senior clergy, whose presence contrives to make a teacher from Ransom's feel both validated, for having been invited in the first place, and inferior, for being a teacher, rather than a lawyer or senior member of the clergy. At Ransom's ambivalence was nearly every teacher's middle name.

In tandem with these dramas of social makings and breakings, the women at Ransom's were permanently and desperately trying to lose weight off, in some cases, already gaunt bodies, since in the realm of the frantically upwardly mobile over-achiever there is nothing like a healthy dose of self-loathing to keep a woman at the grindstone, grateful for the overwork. If you must be born a woman, then you should at least have the decency to live, and be built, like a man. One way of achieving this, it seems, is to make a living (if you can call it that) out of neglecting other people's children, a privilege for which thousands of parents are inexplicably prepared to part with extraordinary sums of money. It would arguably, after all, be so much simpler and cheaper for people to neglect their own children, rather than pay someone else to do it for them. They might be a little more reluctant to part with their money if they knew just how little care and thought goes into selecting and managing the people who are going to be doing the neglecting. It is indeed vital to the healthy functioning of

internal status mechanisms that the house staff should be as isolated and despised as possible, since, logically, anything remotely resembling parenting, or even worse its female aspect, mothering, has such an unmistakably domestic ring to it that self-respecting, upwardly mobile professionals must dissociate themselves from the untouchables who perform such tasks. Through a deft closing of the status circle, the management and non-teaching staff of boarding schools contrive to forget that without their housemasters, housemistresses, tutors, or whatever they choose to call them, they would in fact have no boarding school. At Ransom's, where the pecking order was ironclad, non-teaching house staff were not even spoken to by some teachers. Deirdre Worth, an Oxbridge graduate and English teacher at Ransom's, for example, had perfected a drooping reptilian gaze as a way of looking straight through or past house staff in such a way that effectively precluded even an attempt to speak to her. Without a healthy dose of social sadism, schools like Ransom's would be unable to function.

Carol had a sister, Monica, who had worked for most of her life in a home for the elderly. "There is a pattern," said Monica. "When people bring their elderly parents to an old people's home and visit them often, they are always very appreciative of what the staff in the home do for them. Those, on the other hand, who ditch their relatives and only appear to visit once in a blue moon, often tend to throw their weight about and complain a lot, along

the lines of “Why haven’t you done this, and what are you going to do about that? It’s all to displace the guilt!”

“Ah,” replied Carol. “Well, yes, that makes sense.”

“And what is more, I now have the perfect answer!” beamed Monica. “Whenever a relative comes in with all guns blazing and starts their list of complaints, I listen very patiently for as long as it takes, sometimes many minutes, and I say nothing at all. Then, when they pause for breath, I say: “Well, I can see you are very concerned that your mother is not getting the care she deserves. I’ll just go upstairs and pack her bag then and she can come straight home with you!” Monica beamed. “You should see the look on their faces!” They gawp like trout out of water!”

Monica’s sister Carol noticed the same with parents of her girls. Her very first morning on duty at Ransom’s, very near the start of the school year, a mother had rung her and kept her on the phone for a full forty minutes complaining that her daughter Charlotte was going to have to go for a whole week without violin lessons because Ms Day the violin teacher had had the audacity to go on her honeymoon in September. It was an outrage! Little Charlotte herself, as it turned out, was delighted and relieved at this outrageous deprivation.

And so Eva would make her regular pilgrimages to Prague during her school vacations. In the early

days after that first visit with her mother she would travel by overnight bus from London Victoria coach station. This was before the advent of inexpensive flights and it enabled Eva to make the most of a suitable dose of sleep deprivation and physical discomfort prior to and in part in expiation for the luxury that was to follow.

Because "Eva's" Prague, in the early days a derivative of her mother's, was in this sense an unexpected oasis from the work culture of Ransom's, it was inevitably, like so much else in her life, over-idealized and a little sanitized. She thus contrived both to see and not to see the packs of shaven-headed young British stag-party men (why were there always eight in a group?) by thinking of them as being not "really" in the "real" Prague, by which she meant that Prague of the Old Town Square, the alchemists' Royal Mile, the art galleries, the radiant esoteric paths and symbols, the holy and secret places, the mysterious Prague of the Golem and the Jewish Cemetery. All these things were real to her because they were her borrowed world of beauty and meaning, that unanticipated gift squeezed into a space that was not really permitted, the space left by her outward life, the "real" life that was really the life of a person other than herself.

Chapter 4 Tapestry

Whenever I am staying at a hotel somewhere, or sitting in a cafe watching the world go by, I take some knitting or needlework. The thing is, it makes you invisible, especially if you are a rather overweight woman like me. Paradoxically the extra size makes you even more invisible. Not literally, physically invisible, of course, but socially invisible, which is worse, because it involves a deliberate choice by passers-by. Even if it is only for a split second, on some level they decide not to see you. They decide that you are not worth seeing.

When my daughter Eva was doing the Norman Conquests in history at school, her teacher spent quite a long time discussing the Bayeux tapestry as a valuable historical document, and how long it might have taken how many women to make this priceless artifact. I suppose the Bayeux tapestry must have been made by many anonymous women like me who have since been absorbed into the backdrop of history, as if they had sewn themselves into their own work and their names had been lost. If they ever had any to lose, that is. It was an art form that went with the times. Authorship was not an issue: it was the work that mattered. They say that a good idea doesn't care who has it, but now the sharpness of the needle seems to be more important than the picture that is being sewn. I remember reading somewhere that we begin life without a name, make a name for ourselves and then grow to the point where we give it up

voluntarily in return for just being.

I am a tapestry woman. I have a talent for being seen but not being noticed. For me, the business of not being seen was very much an advantage. That was how I got involved in my work in the first place. They told me I was a good watcher with a gift for being overlooked. The most that people would remember was that "some nondescript woman" had been in the lobby knitting, but no-one could ever describe me or say when I had arrived or what time I had left. If anyone had bothered to look at the knitting - never mind me - they would have immediately spotted that my pure wool yarns were of a quality that was unobtainable in Czechoslovakia at that time. It was such a giveaway, but no one ever noticed. People don't believe what they see: they see what they believe. And if they believe that people who knit are by definition utterly harmless, then they won't even bother to notice you, even if you have a Beretta hidden among your four-ply. Actually I used to carry a Walther PPK, but it was a touch on the heavy side. That was long before the days of metal detectors at airports, of course. And anyway, I used to travel overland.

I wouldn't exactly describe tapestry as my passion. Passions are somehow so personal, so egotistical, whereas the whole point with tapestry is that it absorbs you quietly, anonymously, but completely, so that you forget yourself. This probably goes a long way towards explaining why it has gone out of

fashion in the last few decades. In our individualistic times, it has become a despised form. So it is not exactly a passion then - more a way of seeing the world. When I look back over the events of my life, even momentous ones like the birth of my daughter Eva, I remember them in terms of which tapestry I was working on at the time. Or even which one I was not working on. That is another thing about tapestry. When Eva was born I had been sewing a footstool cover with a floral motif on a blue-grey background, but it had been put away in a drawer for about four months while I knitted some baby clothes. After she was born, I took it out of the drawer again and finished it in the evenings after I had bathed her and before her last feed of the night. It was summer, so the light was good, and I would sit up in bed in the quiet, stitching the slanting stitches and watching her little sleeping body rise and fall in her cradle.

There is something about the rhythmical repetition of the stitching. It's relaxing and soothing. And even if you can only work for a few minutes at a time, you can put your work down and see what you have done. There is a leaf where there wasn't one before, or a petal, or a candle flame. It's an antidote to all the rushing around we do all day, before collapsing in a heap and not even being able to say what we have accomplished.

So this ability to take a piece of work up and put it down gave me a different feeling for time. I no longer needed to hurry or work to a schedule.

Tapestry didn't go away: it just waited patiently, sometimes even for years. Once I had a large, still life tapestry canvas, for example, that I had made a start on before realizing that it needed a proper frame, because it was too big to work on in my hands. It lay in a drawer for years before I found a second-hand tapestry frame to attach it to. Every time I took it out to work on it, I would think about the intervening events in my life, such as moving house, changing my job, this or that colleague being fired, and it suddenly seemed to me that none of that mattered any more. It was as if the still backdrop of my life, the things I took for granted, had now moved into central focus, while all the "big" events seemed to have become almost incidental. It was the little things, the fine stitching, that now made the big picture: the time taken to brew a really good cup of tea instead of quickly dunking a tea bag, the walks with the dog, the chats with my neighbours about nothing in particular. I came to understand these things as the real fabric of my life. This shift to the fine stitching created a sense of space inside myself. There was a part of me that no one could touch that belonged only to me and yet which was not "me" at all, but rather something infinitely silent that had been there before me and would still be there after me. The needle pulled the yarn up through the canvas, the needle pulled the yarn back down through the canvas. The pattern was already there: all I had to do was follow it. My "self" did not have to decide what to do, was not clouded or oppressed with choices that did not need to be

made. Freed from myself, I could just watch myself doing what needed to be done.

I do worry about Eva. She gets so wound up about that school and all the stupid power struggles that go on there. I don't think she believes me when I tell her that real trouble frees you from all that. Once you've tasted the real thing, you lose all taste for the synthetic.

I'd completely forgotten about the Walther PPK hidden under the old darned sheets in the dresser upstairs. It was my grandson Rusty who found it. He had come round with his friend Fluke one Saturday afternoon. They'd promised to paint the spare bedroom for me. The two of them could easily get two coats on in an afternoon, it's only a small room, and I'd told them I would give them a few quid for their trouble and buy them a Chinese takeaway, and we could watch a couple of DVDs from Blockbuster's. Rusty came downstairs into the living room, his eyes as wide as train tunnels, and walked in holding the gun between his finger and thumb. Fluke gawped at him, and then at me. It really was quite embarrassing. "Now you must promise me not to worry your mother about this," I had said to Rusty, and then made Fluke promise too.

"Cool! You've got a Rambo granny!" Fluke had volunteered, helpfully, clearly impressed. The gulf between fantasy and reality in young people these days really is alarmingly wide. "My name is Bond.

Granny Bond!” Rusty had boomed dramatically at Fluke, who laughed.

“Have you got any ammo for this thing, granny?” Rusty had eventually asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “Now don’t be silly dear”, I had answered, hastily running in my mind through the places in the house where I might still have some stashed away inadvertently.

“But what did you use it for granny?” Rusty had asked, inevitably. At least he instinctively used the past tense, thereby crediting me with enough law-abiding traits not to run amok with a Walther PPK at the local supermarket like some demented granny. Clearly, I owed them some sort of explanation. It worked out quite well, actually: I told them, in strictest confidence of course, what I had got up to for a living in Czechoslovakia in the sixties, and in return I was presented with a rather strange-looking mobile phone by Fluke, who promised me, with mysterious gravity, that I would never ever need to buy any credit for it as long as I lived. So, all in all, not a bad deal really. After all, those top-up cards don’t half make a hole in your pension.

They were quite disappointed when I told them that I had never actually had to use the gun, and even a couple of trips risked not carrying one at all. I’ve never liked the things and was always very grateful to get away with not having to use it. I was quite good at shooting practice in training, but shooting

at a live target would never have been for me.

After I married in 1946 and left Czechoslovakia to come and live in England I was approached to travel there under the legitimate guise of the publishing company I worked for in London. Most of the time I was just a courier. Although I was born in Prague I knew the forests in the south near the border with Austria very well. One of my grannies was from southern Bohemia. I would travel to Prague and then be contacted there. The firm in London published co-editions in two or three language versions with a partner publisher in Prague, mostly coffee-table books on hobbies, fishing, cat fancy and the like, although they did a nice series of children's fairy stories once. Sometimes I worked at that end of the chain, as a native Czech speaker, and sometimes on the Austrian side. Because of my Austrian grandfather from Vienna I can speak German and Viennese dialect too.

My daughter Eva never knew about this. It was a secret. All she knew was that I would sometimes have to go up to London for a few days at a time. There were absences even when she was quite small. It all started quite soon after she was born. I was never happy about being away when she was so little, but once I was involved it sort of took over. It wasn't easy, keeping the truth from her. Like most children she could sense that something was being held back and, inevitably, it came between us, like a silent barrier. It was a strange feeling,

telling the story to Rusty. It seemed so easy, because those issues were not in the way with him. He was not damaged by my past. He thinks of it as glamorous and exciting. But it felt good to share it with someone who is my own flesh and blood.

It was one of those moments, a release into the fullness of time, when one feels lit from above, as if from that vantage point all of life were just a series of such illuminated points, making a path that could only be seen from above, so that all the intervening time between those points just folds away, leaving only the meaning of the way itself, like the essence of a blueprint that one brought into life from that other place and had only to lay down in time.

“What are you smiling at Gran?” Rusty asked with a chuckle, seeing me staring into space.

,”Oh!” I said, startled, returning to the moment.

“Actually, I was thinking about a ring, a green ring.”

“Well” said Rusty, laughing out loud. “That explains everything!”

Chapter 5 Stardust

The line outside the Left Luggage office at Victoria Coach Station catches Eva's eye as soon as she gets there. She is now faced with a dilemma. Should she wait there to offload her bag for a couple of hours until she catches her train? Or should she subtract another ten years from the life of her aching joints by carrying it all the way down those steps to the Ladies, where she frankly needs to go pretty badly and pretty quickly? Ruefully, Eva supposes that stations are designed by people who never need to use them, or at least who never need to use the public conveniences. She concludes that architects must be exempt from weak bladders.

Wherever you go, at every subway, underground or metro station, apart from those near rail and bus terminuses, there are always escalators leading up to ground level. Near a rail or bus terminus, however, different rules apply. Whether at King's Cross or Victoria in London, or at Florenc bus station in Prague, the technology seems to run out just when you need it most. Having arrived with a substantial proportion of your worldly belongings wrenching your limbs apart, your palm sliced in half by your bag strap, your wrist dropping off and your bladder about to rupture, you are then faced with the equivalent of a Labour of Hercules before you can restore yourself to continence. As if in anticipation of our baggage, the architects of stations and airports seem to outdo one another in ingenious ways of turning conveniences into

inconveniences. They are down long, winding narrow staircases, they are up staircases, they are in the departures building, and you are in arrivals.

At Victoria Station in London, for example, you wander in semi-despair along an interminable labyrinth of corridors at the Underground, only to find yourself at the bottom of a steep staircase leading up to the street. You then lug your cases up this, to find yourself still a good five minutes' walk away from the Coach station, if your onward journey is by bus. Having forged your way through the crowds, crippling several passers-by with your luggage on the way, you then have to negotiate various obstacles before you stagger down another staircase to the public conveniences. Retracing your steps two or three times along the confusing row of arrows leading there, your troubles are still not over, for you will then likely as not find your way barred by a tortuous-looking turnstile demanding an obscene fee in just the combination of coin that you happen to be lacking. This is a popular trend at international train and bus terminals, where people have just arrived from far-flung destinations and have only managed to procure the local currency, if at all, in notes only. There follows a strained and desperate set of negotiations with an attendant who is unlikely to be able to speak any language you know. The necessary loose change somehow procured, often from some passer-by who has taken pity on you, you drop it into the slot of the turnstile. On the optimistic assumption that the turnstile responds

to your coin, you then face a combined obstacle course and intelligence test as you attempt to fathom, with your sphincter muscles by now at the utmost limits of human endurance, how to get yourself and your suitcase through the turnstile in one piece. There follows a hasty impromptu drama involving the lifting and shunting of bags and cases, often under the watchful, suspicious, disparaging, but not necessarily helpful eye of the attendant.

Admitted at long last to the fragrant inner sanctum, you will consider yourself fortunate beyond words if a pissoir or cubicle is actually vacant. All women, and those men who are in need of cubicles, are now faced with a new quandary: how to manoeuvre themselves and their luggage into the cubicle without coming into contact with anything unsanitary. At this point the experienced traveler will fling all hopes of privacy to the winds, reverse themselves into the open door of the cubicle, which is guaranteed to be half the size of a lavatory cubicle anywhere else, and place their cases in the open doorway where they can keep an eye on it.

There then follows a perfunctory inspection of the toilet seat, to determine whether physical contact with it is likely to prove life threatening. Actual contact with the target zone may prove tricky from this reversed and hampered position. The wary traveler first takes a generous length of toilet paper and carefully places it horizontally across the front part of the seat. If eye contact is difficult on

account of copious outdoor wear or shoulder baggage, the canny traveler will carefully lower themselves forwards and downwards until their head is parallel with the seat, peering upwards and backwards through the parted legs for as long as the sudden downward surge of blood allows before vision is impaired or balance is lost. Any scarf or particularly precious pashmina you may be wearing will at this stage usually come into contact with the floor and absorb anything up to half a dozen urine samples as it trails on the ground. This is often also the point at which your mobile phone works its way out of your side pocket or handbag and lands in one or more of the said samples. The resulting impact will turn out to be one of the best tests for the robustness of mobile phone housing ever devised, although it may temporarily cut you off from the outside world in the process. Your vocabulary of four-letter words will expand exponentially.

Depending on the state of the floors, your cell phone may turn out to be a virtuoso at aquaplaning across considerable distances, such as into one of the other cubicles, usually one that is occupied. You, however, have other pressing matters to attend to just now: you can always retrieve your sim card and the back cover of your mobile phone later. First, you must remember to lower yourself very gingerly on to the seat, to avoid any sudden back drafts that might inadvertently blow away your protective layer of toilet paper. Alternatively, your level of desperation has by now reached a

pitch where all such considerations are irrelevant. If you are traveling with small children, the above account will seem a ridiculous exaggeration of a perfectly straightforward situation. Either way, you will now, at long last, have reached that point at which the bliss of restored continence seems worth any price. For the truly masochistic, the exquisite agony of this scenario can be enhanced beyond imagination by attempting to use the on-board toilet of a bus in motion (no pun intended). In this case all the hazards associated with the stationary sanitary facility are heightened by finding oneself hurled at speed around an enclosed space while the lower half of one's body is completely exposed to the elements. One may even find oneself subjected to the additional humiliation, at a moment's notice, of an audience, since the doors of these contraptions rarely seem to remain locked for very long, which isn't surprising when a fully grown adult human body is being flung against them at anything up to 100 miles an hour.

Perhaps this was why Eva had an impulse that day, and decided to travel First Class, for once in her life. Admittedly this was only one of her short journeys - she had just been up to London the evening before for an evening dose of Death, so to speak (a lecture on Nietzsche that had been recommended for her Master's in Death Studies). She armed herself with a large gourmet coffee, a bottle of French designer mineral water and a beef Jerky baguette, and for good measure bought herself a book of Sudoku puzzles from the station

bookshop. It felt good, getting into that First Class carriage. As if she were a different person - or perhaps just herself in another life. Fiddling thoughtfully with the Moldavite ring on her finger as she looked out of the window, a little light seemed to go on in her mind as something surfaced for the first time in her consciousness. She wondered where and how she had managed to acquire her rather pernicious habit of living in unnecessary discomfort, as if she had programmed herself for some unnamed atonement. She knew in the instant of naming this habit of hers that its spell was being broken, and yet still felt the residue of mystery it left behind, incongruous, like stardust on a newspaper stand.

Chapter 6 Stardust II

Peter Seldon got into the London taxi cab in Shaftesbury Avenue and caught a brief glimpse of the billboards for his new play, "The Middle Man", before setting off for Victoria Station. Once there, he bought himself a Times, a large Cappuccino with an extra shot of espresso, a spicy chicken wrap and a Danish pastry, before settling down in the First Class carriage on the 11.48 express train to Newbourne. Taking a bite out of the chicken wrap he cursed wordlessly as a blob of mayonnaise landed down the front of his anthracite Cashmere polo neck.

"I can't eat or drink anything on trains without getting a map of the menu down my front!" volunteered a plump, cheerful-looking woman in the seat opposite him. Seldon frowned. The woman went on: "I never could get the hang of eating on the hoof without cutlery!" Seldon managed a grunt before getting grease all over the packet of paper handkerchiefs he had pulled carefully out of his jacket pocket and was now attempting to open the flap of. The train lurched slightly, depositing the Danish pastry on the rather grubby-looking carpet of the First Class carriage. Lifting his ample behind, Seldon turned quite red in the face as he bent down to retrieve it. The plump woman returned to her book of Sudoku puzzles, clicking with her tongue as she took the eraser end of her yellow pencil and erased a number she had just written in one of the squares. "I don't know," she said, "my son Rusty

can do about twenty of these things in an hour! I'm lucky if I finish two before I get to Newbourne!"

Seldon got up and retreated to the WC, where he worked for five minutes with liquid soap until he was satisfied that he had removed the mayonnaise from the Cashmere. He then returned to his seat with a wet patch on his polo neck. Hoping it would dry soon, he adopted a cautious posture with legs akimbo, reminiscent of a peasant woman giving birth in a field, in a second attempt to consume the chicken wrap without further damage. More of the mayo dripped on to the carpet and he wiped it up with another of the paper tissues. Taking the Cappuccino in his right hand, he discovered it was barely tepid by now, but drank it all in three gulps anyway. It seemed to turn instantly sour in his stomach. He wished he were alone in the carriage.

A shrill burst of Mozart made Seldon and his companion jump. He retrieved his ultra-thin cell phone from the inside pocket of his jacket. It was Emma McKinley, his 'source'.

"Just a second," said Seldon, walking swiftly to the far end of the carriage, which was fortunately empty.

"Got a possible idea for you," said Emma. "Blue-eyed first effort from a no-name in Bradford. Plot about young Asian woman setting up community centre for Muslim girls. Touching love interest with local young doctor. Forbidden but true love and all that. Kitchen sink, but could be a go commercially

and good for your image, goes without saying. Remember those critiques about your plays always being set in WASP territory? This could be an astute move. Blue eyes hasn't sent it to anyone else yet, so no problem there. And Gurinder Raychaudhury would be ideal for the role, by the way. She fancies a crack at London Theatreland. Could be a real crowd-puller. Sort of Seldon goes Bollywood, but on stage."

"Got a synopsis you can mail me?" Asked Seldon furtively, casting a cautious glance at the other end of the carriage.

"Sure."

"Usual fee?"

"Right."

"Good. Talk to you when I get back from Newbourne. Bye."

This was how Peter Seldon got the ideas for most of his plays these days. He paid under the counter for no name plots. He had no idea how Emma found the material, as he made a point of not asking. He even sometimes managed to convince himself that he was following in the tradition of Alexander Dumas, who had operated a writing workshop; only Peter Seldon's 'workshop' was for plays, rather than novels. The fact that his plots came from no-name manuscripts, of course, kept the risk factor of

exposure down. He would always alter the storylines just enough to make them seem authentic. And the scam kept Emma's bank balance nicely topped up. Seldon made a mental note to find out if Gurinder would be interested. That had been a good idea of Emma's.

By the time he got back to his seat, the plump woman had put away the Sudoku book and now appeared to be cheerfully engrossed in a book bearing the title "The Denial of Death: Youth Cults and Marginalization in Post-modern Society". The incongruousness of plumpness juxtaposed with evident intellectual interests made Seldon, almost in spite of himself, take a closer look at the woman, until he realized with an unpleasant jolt that he himself, the famous playwright, was hardly slim and lithe any more, nor had he been for many years. He wondered what it was about plumpness (actually she was quite fat) in people that made other people tend to assume that they were, well, lightweight? As if they could not possibly be intelligent or interesting and, of course (he found himself thinking) certainly not desirable. Eva herself, meanwhile, remained immersed in her book until just before they pulled into Newbourne station.

Then, in the practiced, deft manner that was typical of her she disposed of her discarded packaging and wrappings and gathered up her books and bag. Although they were among the first passengers to alight from the train, having been in the first-class

carriage nearest to the station exit, there was only one taxi standing at the rank outside the station. The plump but oddly nimble Eva managed to bustle up to it before Peter Seldon puffed up behind her.

“Ransom’s please!” he heard her say to the driver. Decades of aloof disdain were unceremoniously shunted aside in an instant of enlightened self-interest as Seldon shambled up to her side and boomed in the theatrical version of a friendly voice behind her: “ I say!” (She fancied afterwards she almost heard him say “my good woman”). “Would you mind terribly if we shared? I’m heading for Our Lady of Ransom’s too!”

There was a nanopause before he added: “We could share the fare!”

“Yes of course,” Eva replied, equally to both propositions. She got into the taxi and edged herself with some difficulty over to the other side. Seldon landed heavily beside her, displacing a gush of fragrant air made up of car seat leather combined with Hermes after-shave for men.

“Are you a parent?” he asked, to make conversation.

“I’m sorry?” she replied, resurfacing from a private reverie.

“Are you a parent?” Seldon repeated. She looked blankly back at him with a look that she suspected made her look obtuse and even slightly disabled to those who were unfamiliar with the workings of her

inner mind, which insisted on leading a life of its own that often took her far away from what was in front of her. Two, perhaps three full seconds passed before she grasped the meaning of his question.

“Oh, you mean a Ransom’s parent?” she replied at last. Seldon nodded, pleased to have elicited some sort of intelligible response.

“No, no, I teach at Ransom’s.”

“Ah!” he retorted, not adding: “That explains everything.” As a mere teacher, after all, she may have been perfectly satisfactory for all he knew, but as a Ransom’s parent she would not have sent the desired go-getting, “look, we have arrived” message to the outside world. She was too comfortable, too oblivious to appearances and style. Had he pursued his thought to its logical conclusion he would have had to admit that she just did not look, frankly, enough of a bitch.

The taxi sped importantly up the impressive gravel driveway to the main entrance of Ransom’s. Seldon felt massaged by the school’s reassuringly disdainful facade, which exuded an effortless patina of success and kudos. Under the circumstances, therefore, it was rather unfortunate that the Head chose this precise moment to pull up in her brand new, disconcertingly nouveau-riche sports cabriolet. It was incongruous. Seldon had somehow envisaged the Head of Ransom’s owning something rather more low-key and substantial - a Volvo estate perhaps. As it was, her car seat was so close

to the ground that she could not extract herself from the depths of the vehicle without treating the observer to the unsolicited privilege of two spindly, flailing legs, reminiscent of a large spider trying to wriggle out of a crack in a wall. The indignity was enhanced on this occasion by an unexpectedly generous viewing of a white cotton gusset. Not so much Volvo estate as vulva-in-state, chuckled Eva to herself, although she was practiced in keeping her humour well hidden from parents, even prospective parents, such as Seldon.

With the detached resignation with which Eva by now approached her role as unofficial walking signpost at Ransom's, she offered to accompany Seldon to the School Secretary's office on the first floor to meet the student who would be giving him his tour of the school. Since he was an important celebrity this offer did not elicit any show of gratitude from him. Dr Styles had by now recovered the use of her limbs and strode importantly into the school entrance a few paces behind him and Eva. Her status antenna was fully functional, despite the gusset interlude, and she recognized Seldon as a celebrity whose daughter would be a feather in the Ransom cap.

To this end, a show of audible warmth was instantly manufactured in the form of a cheery "Hello, Eva!" This was intended to indicate in one short phrase what an empathic and caring community Ransom's was. Simultaneously it allowed the Head without further ado to join the

two of them on their way up the stairs, so that she could then make a democratic “Look-I’m-just-one-of-the-girls, “look-how-my-people-love-me” gesture. This in turn enabled her to beam a bright, caring smile at her perplexed PA, with the words: “Don’t worry,” (her PA had not been at all worried up to this point) “I’ll show Mr. Seldon round the school!” The heart of the Upper Sixth girl, who had been excused from a chemistry practical that afternoon, sank in the PA’s office as she realized she would have to go to her lesson after all. The hopes of Dr Styles were high at the prospect of a celebrity’s daughter enrolling at her school. Eva just smiled knowingly at the PA and made herself scarce in the direction of the promise of afternoon coffee with Carol in Martyrs’ Complex. Carol was going to love this. It was vintage Styles.

At Ransom’s, several thousand pounds a year of the total boarding house budgets were regularly siphoned off at the end of the summer term in July. Among the Head and her inner circle this was jokingly known as the Fiddle Factor. These funds partly paid for supplies for the Ransom’s limited company that earned income for the school during summer lets - a tax dodge - and partly went to subsidize well-deserved holidays for the senior management team in the Maldives.

Dr Styles’ lifelong agenda of upward social mobility invoked in her an abhorrence of anything she perceived as career threatening. She would have been loath to admit it as the Head of a girls’ school

staffed mainly by women, but she felt profoundly uncomfortable around any of the activities traditionally performed by women, such as all forms of domesticity, either in the workplace or out of it. Her career so far had been that of a surrogate man, rather than of a woman living her own life. In the almost mystical way in which the mind-sets of leaders percolate down into the fabric of the institutions they lead, this sense of leading someone else's life at Ransom's, and for the women the sense of being a surrogate man, or even a failed man, was an integral aspect of the culture.

Barbara Styles therefore found it existentially important to distance herself from the boarding facilities at Ransom's and the people who worked in them, just in case their gendered humanity were to rub off accidentally and contaminate her career. In order to achieve this, she had always contrived to think of Ransom's, which was roughly 50% day school and 50% boarding, as a 'day school with a boarding facility'. In her worldview, this designation allowed her to absolve herself of all responsibility or concern for those aspects of the school's life that she was inclined to regard as being beneath her.

There was no denying, as Styles and Seldon passed from room to room on the ground floor corridor of Martyrs that the school was looking less than its best. Teenagers are rough with furnishings and decor, and comfy sofas have a short lifespan in boarding schools. As a result, the first two communal rooms which Dr Styles now opened for

Seldon's inspection were a rather sorry sight and would certainly have failed dismally as the outward signs of the thriving, reputable, forward-looking, empathic community that Ransom's purported to be. The floors were covered with an ancient, much varnished layer of dark cork, there was no carpeting anywhere, the faded, dirty curtains were coming off their rails, the walls were drab and stained, there were a couple of battered armchairs dating from the sixties, an old standard lamp in one corner with a crooked lampshade with a hole in it, and an old (untuned) upright grand piano behind one door.

In this sense, the material refurbishments on view to Seldon that afternoon in Martyrs' Complex were not the innocent side-effect of fiscal economies, or even of a zealous investment in state-of-the-art classroom equipment, which was also conspicuously lacking at Ransom's, but rather a statement about the management mind-set. The message that was bound to be picked up by any discerning parent being shown round the school that afternoon was that the comfort and well-being of people in residence at Ransom's, whether they were staff or students, was simply not a priority considered worth investing in. That was, indeed, a statement.

Seldon could not have known it, but this was the first time that Dr Styles had ever entered any of the rooms on this corridor. Whereas her predecessor had made a point of walking through the house

several times a week on her way to lunch, greeting girls and staff she happened to meet, Dr Styles' contempt for domesticity had always led her to avoid this sphere. There was no denying that it showed. The state of the furnishings and decorations in the Complex was an embarrassment.

Seldon, whose own sense of self-importance certainly precluded sending his daughter to a school where there were holes in the lampshades, developed a brusque, busy air with Barbara Styles, whom he had now inwardly dismissed as a cheapskate upstart, and called for a taxi on his mobile, mentally making a note to find the time to visit Benendon and Cheltenham Ladies' College as soon as possible. Sensing that she was about to be dismissed, and in order to spare herself an impending commentary on the state of her boarding houses, Styles fabricated a suddenly recollected appointment back in the main building and stalked off back down the corridor where they had just been, hands behind back, head down, frowning. The only question now occupying her mind was: who to blame?

Back in her study, she wasted no time and picked up the phone, dialling Carol's number. Carol and Eva were on their second cup of coffee and still gleefully dissecting the gusset incident. Carol picked up the phone.

"Hello Carol," said Styles in her friendly tone, "It's Barbara" ("Ah, using first name!" thought Carol,

instantly going into brace-yourself mode, as with Styles an intimate tone was invariably a bad omen. She wasn't wrong.

Barbara went on: "I've just been showing a prospective parent round the school, and I have to say I was appalled at the state of the two small common rooms on the ground floor."

There was a pause, intended to allow Carol to take responsibility.

But Carol was learning. Without skipping a beat she kicked the melody straight into the next movement: "I understand, Dr Styles. I'll get right on to the Domestic Bursar and see what we can do to bring them up to standard." Putting the phone down, and then pulling the line out of its socket on the wall as a precaution against a potential backlash, she sat back down and filled Eva in on the brief exchange.

"That'll make a hole in this year's trip to the Maldives!" Eva grinned, sitting back down and wordlessly accepting Carol's offer of another top up of coffee.

"It almost makes you feel sorry for them, doesn't it?" grinned Carol.

"No!" said Eva, grinning back.

"It is odd," she thought afterwards. "For all the waving of the Narcissi there seems to be nowhere for the grass to grow."

Chapter 7 The Prank

Eva quite enjoyed Sunday mornings on duty in Martyrs' Complex House at Ransom's. There was a luxurious feeling about the absence of haste and tension that inevitably went with the Monday to Friday schedule. She would get up around nine and make herself a large mug of strong tea, allowing it to brew for at least five minutes without hurrying it. The few girls staying in over Saturday night were rarely up at this time, so she loved the peace and quiet, without the clumping footfalls up and down the staircase near her door, the accompanying teenage shrieks and the ceaseless thud of countless competing stereos. Still in her nightdress, she would go into the living room of the small flat where Carol let her stay when she was on weekend duty. Opening the lined brocade curtains that looked out on to the playing fields, she took in the early March morning. Although the trees were still bare there was a glow of spring in the morning light, and there were snowdrops and yellow and violet crocuses in the flower beds below her window. It was beautiful, and yet she felt a lack, an incongruence, in the view. There should be more roll in the hills, more forest, more fir trees. She missed Bohemia.

Just as Eva put the steaming mug to her lips in anticipation of the first properly brewed cup of tea in what promised to be a leisurely day, out of the corner of her eye she became aware of something moving. A youth came into view. He might have been around sixteen years old, with dark, greasy-

looking, disheveled hair. Starting at the top right hand corner of the lacrosse pitch near the entrance to the driveway, he embarked on a determined but shambling path, stumbling out a diagonal foray across the field, rather like an upright two-legged crab with his body facing sideways towards Eva. His arms flapped at his sides as he attempted to keep his balance. Eva then became aware that she was not the only person observing this Sunday morning diversion. A second youth appeared in the entrance to the school driveway, in the same corner where the first had launched his tack across the pitch. Watching him closely, the second youth seemed to be carrying a jacket over one arm. A series of twitches in his body seemed to suggest, even from this distance, some indecision about whether or not to follow his disheveled companion, who was making remarkably good progress for someone who would clearly have struggled to stand still. Drunk or stoned as he was, he had clearly beaten this path before and was not going to let his temporary incapacity keep him from his goal, which seemed to be the far entrance of Martyrs Complex.

Eva gave out a resigned sigh as she deposited her mug of tea on the nearest surface. She would now have to get dressed quickly and go and investigate. Three minutes later she was making her way along the downstairs corridor. There was no sign of the youth. Having checked that the doors into the building were still secure, she stepped out on to the driveway and walked towards the other young man who had been observing from a distance. There was

no sign of the human crab. It took her a good couple of minutes to reach the companion. "Good morning," said Eva, "Can I help you?" The blonde boy looked embarrassed. "We're from Sutton House at Newbourne College," he explained. "We had an exeat last night to my friend's house (nodding in the direction of the now invisible friend) and I'm afraid he had a bit too much of one thing and another (with a meaningful glance at Eva). When he said he was coming up to see his girlfriend, the others sent me after him to keep an eye on him."

"I see," said Eva, trying to keep a straight face out of respect for the young man's sense of responsibility. She turned again to face the facade of Martyrs. At first there seemed to be no sign of the disheveled dark-haired youth, but squinting slightly Eva was able to discern a heap of something among the crocuses that had not been there a few minutes earlier. "Ah!" she said. "Well, I don't think there is anything more you can do for him at the moment, so I suggest you go back to where you are staying (What did you say the address was?), and leave me to deal with this." The blonde friend looked a little reluctant to go, but relieved to have the responsibility taken from him. He thanked her and left.

It took Eva another three minutes to trace the diagonal tracks of the dark heap now lying among the crocuses. Arriving finally, she addressed the heap, but the disheveled head was clearly oblivious to her questioning, although it did give off a moan when addressed at close quarters. "Not completely

unconscious then," thought Eva with some relief, and called the police on her mobile. A patrol car arrived within five minutes and she was able to give the officers the address she had obtained from the blonde friend. Picking up one of the Sunday newspapers lying on the back step and depositing the rest of them in the Martyrs entrance hall, she went back to her cold mug of tea. She had forgotten how many times in a week she made cups of tea and coffee that she never got around to drinking. "Still it's Sunday," she said, and put the kettle on again. This time she showered and washed her hair while the second mug was brewing. Of course it wasn't the same. Her peace and reverie had been disturbed.

From what the blonde companion had said, it sounded as if Dark-and-Disheveled was a relatively frequent visitor to Martyrs. The other boy had also indicated obliquely that more than alcohol may have been involved, which had implications. She had heard rumours that girls from Martyrs were getting out at night, especially at weekends, and perhaps having male visitors. If drugs were in the picture, this would need looking into. She put her fresh mug to her mouth and took a sip, but her moment of Sunday morning relaxation and the bliss of the slow start were gone. She decided to phone the Head Dr Styles to report what had happened.

The Head was not remotely interested in the decadent goings-on of teenage boys on a Sunday morning. In her "I-am-far-too-important-to-be-

bothered-with-this-kind-of-thing' voice, she responded: "Now Eva, we mustn't overreact!" Translated into English, this was Stylese for: "I am upwardly mobile, and therefore not about to risk my neck for the sake of a drunken boy from Newbourne College who might be the son of someone important. Nor am I about to come the hysterical Headmistress with the Master of Newbourne College, to whose house I am invited to dinner next Thursday, which means I have made it. And anyway, it's Sunday, and only plebs work on Sundays." Eva sensed that this was now a waiting game, so she waited.

As it turned out, there was another reason for the Head's lukewarm interest in pastoral affairs on this particular Sunday. Dr Styles was in a bit of a flap, as a matter of fact, as she had just received a phone call from London, saying that the young Queen Lucia of Mondavia, an old girl of Ransom's, was on a state visit to England and would like to visit her old school, including her old room. It was instantly clear to Eva that this was going to put paid to any ideas of a peaceful Sunday on duty. Our Lady of Ransom's was to be dusted down and polished in the space of two to three hours, and Martyrs' Complex was to be hastily made ready for a visit by royalty.

For the next two hours, Eva and a couple of willing helpers from among the girls who had stayed in house over the weekend worked like the possessed. Eva raided Leanne's normally sacrosanct cleaning cupboard for furniture polish and window cleaner,

vacuum cleaners were flung about and unoccupied rooms were hastily tidied. Quietly wiping the sweat off themselves and knocking down a quick cup of tea with a biscuit, Eva and the girls smiled at one another. They then locked everything away and went off to change. The two to three hours had already passed. They were followed by a fourth, then a fifth. Soon the girls would be running out of DVDs. As they moved into the sixth hour and it was already mid-afternoon, Eva's phone rang. "At last!" she said, rushing to pick it up.

,Oh, hello Eva, this is Dr Styles!" came the tone, just a little too bright, which experience had taught her employees to translate into an immediate need to watch their backs. "I'm just ringing to say that her Majesty will not be able to make it after all. She has been delayed at an engagement in London." She could feel Dr Styles bracing herself for an emotional outburst. But it did not come. Eva was neither annoyed, nor surprised at the news that she had just wasted several hours of her time on a Sunday, when she would normally expect to do very little. Nor, on the other hand, was she willing to rush to help Dr Styles, obliging and kind as she generally was, out of a potentially awkward situation by smoothing over the embarrassment, which is what she would probably have done a few months earlier. Instead, she found herself saying nothing at all. But there are silences and silences, as she now became aware. This was not one of those awkward silences, or dumbfounded silences, and it certainly wasn't an angry silence. It was the

understated but active silence of a woman who has found her own boundaries. After a peaceful interlude that had lasted a time very much of her own choosing, Eva simply said: "Thank you Dr Styles," and put the phone down. She instinctively knew that this relatively trivial exchange marked the beginning of the end of something. It marked a shift in power.

The next morning, she breakfasted with Carol, for whom she had been covering for the weekend while she attended a top-secret job interview in London. They exchanged news. "Just to remind you that Emma Ahmed has permission to go into town with a couple of friends this afternoon to celebrate her birthday."

"Right," responded Carol, taking a pen in her hand. "Can you just remind me of the other girls' names again?"

"Sorry to bother you," came a sheepish voice from behind the open office door.

"What is it Sarah?" asked Carol, looking up.

"Well, I was just wondering if you had any bread. I'm starving!"

"My flat door is open," said Carol. "Just go in and take a loaf out of my deep freeze. And don't catch cold before the doctor comes round this morning!"

"OK!" answered the disappearing voice.

“Now, where was I? Oh yes, the names!”

Eva pulled out her note: “Paula Sandmann, Charlotte Morgan-Day and Erica Sommers,” she read out.

“Thanks,” said Carol. “Now what’s this story about the boy from Newbourne College again?”

Eva told her in brief.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Carol. “It sounds suspiciously like the tip of an iceberg to me.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Eva. “Possibly even two icebergs.”

“How do you mean?” asked Carol, taking a swig from a huge mug of coffee with a picture of a large contented cow on the front.

“Well, first of all there is the alarming idea of a young man so accustomed to finding his way into Martyrs that he can do it when he’s paralytic,” said Eva.

“Get your point!” said Carol, with a mouthful of toast.

“And then there is the equally alarming idea of Newbourne College boys using weekend exeats from College to get drunk, and possibly worse, in day

boys' homes. Possibly even involving some of our girls." Eva took in a deep breath and looked over at Carol.

"And you say that when you phoned the Head she didn't seem concerned?" Carol asked with pursed lips and raised eyebrows.

"Well Carol," answered Eva, "not to put too fine a point on it, I suspect that the only thing the Head is really concerned about is her social standing over at the College. No-rocky-boaty, no stirry-shitty."

"I know Eva, but what we are looking at here is a possible regular security breach on our own premises at weekends, and the strong chance of regular substance abuse, possibly involving our own girls as well as Newbourne College boys!"

"That's certainly how I read it, but Dr Styles lives in a different universe, evidently."

Carol groaned. "You seem to be taking all this very calmly," she commented.

"I know," answered Eva. "I hope this doesn't sound cynical, but frankly I've had enough of bashing my head against brick walls at this place. If Dr Styles can't or won't read the signs, I don't see how we can make her."

"You're right," said Carol. "I know you are. It's just that I can't seem to let go of things like that, even

when I know I should.”

“Perhaps you should practice!” joked Eva.

“Ha ha!” said Carol, getting up and collecting the coffee mugs and plates.

“Fancy coming round after school this afternoon for a quick glass of Cava?”

“Love to,” said Eva, and picked up her bag to go.

Monday droned on, punctuated by coffee, Beta-blockers, more coffee, staff room politics and more coffee. There was a staff meeting in the afternoon with a particularly ingenious finger choreography interlude from Dr Styles - always an evil portent. It generally signaled the internal biochemical riot that accompanied any dangerous lack of synchrony between her agenda and her emotions. This time it heralded a repetition of her threat of ‘consequences’ for staff who ‘persisted’ in not attending assembly or lunch. The usual corporate wrist-slapping then. “Tut-tut,” thought Eva. “What an appalling lack of slave mentality! Off with their heads! Oh, sorry, they’re already off their heads!” Pauline Jenkins waved an ominous-looking piece of paper, yet another list. Ransom’s was, after all, a self-declared paper-driven republic. Eva mused whether Pauline might one day even turn into a piece of paper. A sort of inanimate version of Kafka. “Oh, to be in Prague now!” Eva sighed to herself.

After the staff meeting, as most of the teachers bolted back into their corners, there was yet more coffee in the staff room, and Eva remained behind, still foggy-headed after the meeting. She lurched over to the coffee machine and poured herself a large mug. The staff room phone rang. Eva answered. It was Carol, sounding rather breathless.

“I wonder if you could come over?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Eva. “What is it? Is anything wrong?”

“I’ll tell you when you get here,” said Carol, and hung up.

Eva thought better of the coffee and poured hers down the kitchen sink in the staff room, before gathering up her belongings and getting over to Martyrs.

“Thanks for coming,” said Carol, looking rather anxious as she sat in her favourite armchair in the service flat.

“What’s happened?” asked Eva.

“I just had a call from Dr Styles,” said Carol. “The police phoned her about ten minutes ago to tell her that Emma, Paula, Charlotte and Erica have just been arrested in town for shoplifting.”

In the corporate universe, ethical principles are for idiots, and Ransom’s was no exception. Any

member of staff foolish enough to couch an issue in terms of right and wrong, or even legal and illegal, was courting professional suicide. The endemic narcissism of the corporate management culture brings with it the hubris of entitlement. While it is clearly understood, therefore, that in the ordinary world of ordinary people acts such as theft or rape are not only intrinsically wrong, but also criminal acts punishable by law, it is taken as self-evident that these laws do not apply within the walls of the corporate institution. Ransom's simply could not allow itself to be sullied with anything so common as theft.

Fortunately, however, the corporate world has long ago occupied the headquarters of language at narcissistic gunpoint, and is therefore able to hijack any concept at a moment's notice and turn it inside out or back to front to suit the expediency of the moment. So when this group of well-heeled Ransom's girls confronted several nonplussed police officers, who simply could not understand why they would need to steal (whoops, a value-laden word!) from a department store, it was calmly and quietly explained to them by Dr Styles, with an air of unassailable respectability and even slightly amused gravitas, that it had, of course, been a prank.

The core of the Head's instantaneous crisis management strategy was the conducting of what she described to the police as a 'very thorough internal investigation' - the corporate term for

cover-up. For, of course, as soon as the girls had been arrested they had sent a barrage of text messages to their schoolmates, and the story had ignited an instantaneous forest fire around the school. Within minutes, many girls and several housemistresses and teachers had heard numerous accounts, from eyewitnesses within the student body, of a whole series of similar shoplifting incidents by the same girls in the same store. This clearly made it imperative that the police should not be allowed access to these internal sources of information. All sources of information that might be in a position to blab must be intimidated and gagged.

Awkwardly for private educational institutions, young people have an irritatingly robust and apparently innate sense of right and wrong. This is particularly perplexing since they so rarely appear to acquire it from the adults who are purporting to educate them. Carol and Eva thus found themselves having to field some difficult questions, such as X and Y had been suspended from school for getting drunk at the May Ball, while these shoplifters were not only not going to be charged, but would not even suffer any sanctions within the school. When, over the course of the next few days, they were bombarded with a relentless chorus of "It's so not fair!" Carol and Eva could only shake their heads.

As Svetlana discussed the events of the week with her daughter Eva over fish and chips in front of the fire that evening, she commented that the true

character of any person or institution always comes out in how they deal with crises. “If you want to know what makes a person or an organization tick, Eva,” Svetlana had said, “watch how they behave when they are not getting their own way, watch how they behave when something goes wrong, and listen carefully to the motives they attribute to other people. That will usually tell you just about everything you need to know about them. But what is often most significant is not so much what they say and do, as what they don’t say and don’t do.

“What takes absolute precedence at Ransom’s, Eva,” said Svetlana, “is the protection of its reputation. Image is the life-blood of an institution like this. People are nothing, principles are nothing.”

“It was just the same with the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia: if a Party member was arrested for a crime like theft, either a way was found to have the charges dropped, or if the evidence was too overwhelming to be suppressed, the member was banned from the Party. In that way the statistics could show that in the whole history of the Communist Party no Party member had ever been convicted of a crime. The Communists knew a thing or two about information management.”

Eva sighed and sank a little lower into her armchair, visibly deflated. “It’s all so depressing, Mum,” she said. “It just makes what we do seem such a farce!”

“I know dear,” said Svetlana, scrunching up the dirty newspaper from the fish and chips and poking it into the open fire. Then, grinning, she added: „But don’t despair!”

“What do you mean?” asked Eva.

“You haven’t seen the late edition of the newspaper, have you?” Svetlana gleamed impishly at her daughter, handing over a folded copy of the Newbourn Herald.

Eva could tell that her mother had been saving this for the right moment.

“What?” she said.

“Look at the front page headline!” Svetlana instructed.

Eva took the folded paper, pulled her specs down from the top of her head, unfolded the paper and read: “Drugs ring at Newbourn: 60 boys expelled!”

She looked up at her mother, aghast. “Mum!”

“Yes,” said Svetlana.

“So this means...”

“Yes,” said Svetlana.

Eva read on: “Police early this morning raided Sutton House at Newbourn College, following an

incident involving drugs over the weekend at a private home in Newbourne. Almost all boys in the house are alleged to have regularly smoked marijuana over the last few months. A dozen boys, including the son of the Master of Newbourne College, Dr St. John Masefield, have been arrested for dealing in illegal substances.”

Eva looked up. “So I was right!”

“Of course you were.”

“You know what this means, Mum?”

“Yes dear. Viewed in a certain light, it means that there is a God. Or at least that he is not mocked.

Chapter 8 Rusty

Eva switched on her laptop and burst out laughing. Her fourteen year-old son Rusty had evidently been tampering with her folder names on the desktop. Rescued Items had become Re-screwed Items and Macintosh was now spelled Muckintosh. Rusty, who had grown about five inches in the last twelve months and now seemed to consist of elbows, had straight auburn air that curled up at the ends and enormous feet whose odour sometimes preceded him into the room. He had disappeared earlier that afternoon to his friend Fallon Luke, known to everyone as Fluke, where they had engaged in illicit activities that Eva contrived to know as little about as possible, such as downloading movies from the internet to sell on the black market at school to help pay for a Playstation computer that she was supposed to know nothing about. Fluke was also reputed to have found a way of using his cell phone without having to pay for calls. He had built his first cell phone out of spare parts at the age of twelve and never looked back. Rusty's conversations with Fluke revolved around technology, music and a smattering of Czech swear words that Rusty had learned from Eva's mother through some obscure process of osmosis. Svetlana denied all knowledge of how he could have come by them.

He was currently doing a homework project for Economics about Thatcherism. "What was typical for Thatcher's economic policy?" Rusty asked Eva,

reading from his dog-eared, ketchup-stained worksheet and gallantly unplugging one earful of Green Day from his mp3 player to await her reply.

"Monetarism," replied Eva.

"What's money tourism?" asked Rusty, perplexed.

"Good question!" answered Eva, who did not manage an answer, as she was seized by a laughter attack that bent her double. This unfortunately brought her closer to Rusty's feet.

"What's that awful smell?" Eva asked, giggling.

"Sorry Mum!" said Rusty, triumphantly wiggling his teenage sweaty-socked toes to waft the smell more effectively through her tiny study.

"Look, do you want me to help you with this or not?" laughed Eva, in mock offence.

"Sorreeee!!" came Rusty's sing-song reply, followed immediately by a teenage neck-grabbing manoeuvre from behind that temporarily cut off Eva's air supply but which he clearly intended to be an affectionate hug. As she gasped for air, she was aware of a tinny refrain from a Green Day song making its way from a stray earphone into her ear. Suddenly he loosened his grasp.

"Love ya Mum!" he said, planting a cheese and onion flavoured kiss on her left cheek, and disappearing towards the kitchen in a gust of displaced unwashed-teenage air to find another snack.

They worked for a while together on the Economics assignment, referring to his textbook, which by some miracle he had not forgotten at school today, and doing some research on the Internet, printing

out pictures and pieces of text as necessary. Eva managed to steer him in the direction of some reliable sites, such as the Economist, as part of a campaign to wean him off the gospel according to Wikipedia. Thirty minutes of concentration for a fourteen year-old demanded yet another refueling break. Rusty bent low and made an oblique sideways movement, like a human Frisbee, propelling himself out of his chair.

"Don't forget you're going round to your Granny's for tea tonight!" Eva shrieked back at him over her shoulder. Rusty adored his Czech Granny Svetlana, and was fully able to do justice to her cooking and baking, no matter what he had eaten at home before. Whistling on his way out of the front door (always the most reliable sign that he was in a good mood), Rusty went out. As the door slammed shut it was as if the whole house stood still in space-time for sheer relief as a shocked, teenage-free silence alighted on it.

Eva smiled to herself and returned to her laptop, where she was doing some background research on the Elizabethan alchemist, John Dee. She was looking up information about when he had spent time in Prague at the court of Rudolf II. "This is the life!" Eva thought, as she settled down to an evening of blissful research into her favourite city.

Eva's mother Svetlana was dozing in her armchair near the open coal fire. This was one of the things about the British lifestyle she had most

enthusiastically adopted when she had come to live here in the late 1940s. It was an aspect of the culture she had remained faithful to even when it had gone out of fashion among the British themselves. Eventually she found she had waited long enough to see the open fire come back into fashion. Svetlana's attachment to quaint, homely habits only made her all the more fascinating and adorable to Rusty. One of his favourite treats on arriving at her house on a cool, dark autumn or winter evening, for example, was to take a toasting fork from the brass stand by the fireplace, and make himself toast over the open flames. He was never able to convince his friends that toast tasted better that way.

Perhaps because Svetlana's relationship with her daughter Eva had been a little aloof until recent years, Rusty's grandmother relished the emotional straightforwardness she could enjoy with her grandson. Svetlana had discovered an impish sense of fun rather late in life and then, to her delight, found that she could not only enjoy it, but even hone and perfect it with Rusty. Whenever Svetlana inadvertently broke old-age wind, for example, she knew she could rely on Rusty, who equally broke teenage wind, either to affect not to hear her, or to start some sort of ongoing competition.

"Heff enudder slayees of tooost, deeeerrr," Svetlana was saying, in her mock Czech accent. Actually, she normally had hardly any accent in English, but this was part of the fun she enjoyed with Rusty.

Rusty was already on his second slice of thick toast. He relished, among other things, that his Granny never scolded him for dropping crumbs, or even for occasionally dripping jam on the carpet. She also made all her own jams and pickles and grew potatoes in her back garden that actually tasted of potatoes. In a while, they would go into her kitchen and press fresh garlic and grate raw potatoes to make potato pancakes with marjoram - the ultimate Czech evening meal for Rusty.

The main topic of conversation in this benignly conspiratorial relationship was the ongoing question of How to Ransom Mamma from Ransom's. It had already been established between Rusty and his Granny that Ransom's was about as near as you could get to the Antichrist, and that all who tarried there were infected with such fatal plagues as self-importance, workaholism and, most damningly of all, humour deficit. Since Svetlana's visit to Prague with Eva in 1990, some sort of perspective and inner meaning had returned to her life, but Svetlana and Rusty agreed that their first priority must be to wean Eva off the dreaded Ransom's.

In truth, this project served more as a welding exercise for Rusty and his grandmother than actually to convert Eva from workaholic drone to autonomous being. For one thing Eva was clearly beginning to see the light of her own accord. One afternoon, for example, she had arrived for a visit at Svetlana's with an application form for a job at a

supermarket. She had worked out that she could keep herself and Rusty afloat on a thirty-five hour job as a supermarket cashier, or stacking shelves, especially if she was willing to work unsocial hours, such as weekend and night shifts. This liberating thought, like similar liberating thoughts, was perhaps more liberating in the thinking than in the doing, but it did feel good to Eva to know that she had an alternative like that waiting in the wings. Even a theoretical alternative gave her a feeling of freedom.

When she went shopping in the store, she would walk up and down the aisles comforting herself with the thought: "I could be working here, and I would have no more meetings to go to, no more fretting over exam results, no more snotty parents, no more snotty colleagues, no more seventy-hour weeks."

She would walk past the household cleaning materials or the packets of tea bags and the jars of coffee and imagine herself helping a customer to find a product, or stacking shelves with teabags, and still having enough of a mind left with which to think her own thoughts. Or she would picture herself at the end of a shift, perhaps at ten o'clock on a rather frosty night, putting her warm jacket on to go home and walking away from the store, back home up the winding hill to her house, with her head empty of all thoughts except for her night-time routine. She would picture closing her front door behind her and taking her coat off, putting the kettle on to make a hot water bottle or a last cup of

tea. She could imagine herself feeling that pleasant kind of tiredness that came from having a shift behind her, but with her personhood still intact and a mind that still felt like her own. On a night such as this, she thought, she would get into bed and read perhaps for an hour before turning off her bedside lamp, because her mind would be hungry for some content, and just as importantly still be in a fit state to accept that content. And then, refreshed from the brisk evening walk in the fresh winter night, she would switch off her bedside lamp, plump up her pillow and settle down to sleep, feeling like a person. No more corset-like sensible career suits, no more tight-lipped professionalism, no more high blood pressure, no more rushing around the school precincts perpetually late for appointments she had no interest in keeping.

Even more blissful for Eva in these moments of reverie was the thought of being able to get up the next morning at whatever time she woke, rather than having to snap into fifth gear at seven in the morning or even earlier. For, or at least so she imagined it, in her job at the supermarket she would not have to work an early morning shift immediately after a late night shift. This meant that she would now have time, even on a working day, to call her own. Bliss. In Eva's imagination this fantasy played itself out most satisfactorily in winter. She would picture herself on a winter morning waking some time between seven-thirty and eight and getting up slowly. First she would make herself a pot of tea - and have the time to

drink it. Then she would make herself some toast and put it on a tray with some butter and some ginger preserve. Rusty would still have to be dragged out of bed, clearly, but this would not worry her, because she would be in no hurry, so it would not matter. She would then eat her toast and ginger preserve and drink her pot of tea before deciding to take a leisurely hot bath. Then she would put the vacuum cleaner round the flat, perhaps mop the kitchen floor as well and, luxury of time luxuries, manage a whole basketful of ironing with time to spare. By contrast, her current record for putting off ironing she felt too exhausted to do was ten weeks.

Svetlana dozed on in front of the fire waiting for Rusty to arrive for tea, her own memories mingling with those about people who had been close to her before she had moved to England. As a piece of coal suddenly spat and cracked, rousing her from her dream for a second, she half opened her eyes and registered the warm flames and that it was already dark outside, before floating back to the threshold of sleep. Almost in anticipation of another of her regular chats with Rusty about the Awfulness of Ransom's and the self-annihilating effects of career mythology, another picture was evoked in her mind's eye. She was in an old basement in Prague, on a similar cold, dark autumn night many years ago, talking to Stanislav, known to his friends as Stanley. Stanley was a lawyer and bricklayer. It was in the late 1950s. He was making some adjustments to an old brick wall in the chimney of

an old building on Lilliova Street in the Prague Old Town. He had a slow, methodical, contented way of moving and his eyes were lit with a gleam of discreet satisfaction, as if it would be unseemly to look happy around other people who might not be.

"How is your wife keeping, Stan?" Svetlana was asking.

"She's well, thank you," Stan replied, loading another spatula with mortar and placing another brick carefully into the gap in the chimney wall that he was filling. The brick was being recycled from another site and was slightly chipped on one edge, so he turned it round and eased it into the layer of fresh mortar.

And the children?" Svetlana went on.

"Oh, they are fine too," Stan went on, a little more hesitantly this time.

Svetlana waited.

"You know they are still only nine and eleven, but we do rather wonder what will become of them - you know, their education and so on."

"You mean because of your being out of favour with the Communist Party? They will be barred from going to university then?" Svetlana asked.

"Well that, and the fact that I am no longer allowed to practise law. I only practised for about two years after 1948 and discovered that I just did not have the stomach for all the lies," Stan went on, as if he were informing her that he had just planted some runner beans.

"So you earn your living as a bricklayer," Svetlana confirmed.

Stan chuckled. "Yes," he answered. "When I think of all the anguish I used to go through in those early years in the law practice when I discovered that the Party actually had monthly quotas for how many people had to be convicted, so if someone's trial was due to come up at the end of the month and the quota had not been fulfilled, then you could be the best lawyer in the world and it would not help the poor plaintiff. You knew they would go to jail whatever you did. Then there were the dirty deals over Party members. It is, of course, ideologically unthinkable that a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia should be convicted of a criminal offence, so mostly the charges are just dropped."

"So it's either lie and cheat and play the game, or become a bricklayer?" Svetlana went on with a wry smile. Stan smiled. "That's basically what happens," he said, scraping a drip of spilt mortar off the floor.

"The irony, of course," he went on, musing as he waved another chipped brick gently around in his hand, "is that my 'punishment' has in some ways turned out to be a liberation. Not that I would wish it on anyone else, you understand. Don't get me wrong!"

"How do you mean?" Svetlana asked, feeling a little wrong-footed by a man she was determined to view as a victim turning round and saying that he had gained some advantage.

"Well, lest we forget," Stan ventured with a touch of good-humoured irony in his voice, "We are the fortunate citizens of a workers' paradise these days, which means among other things that I earn far better money as a bricklayer than I ever did as a lawyer!"

"So your wife is certainly not complaining then, with two children to feed?" Svetlana laughed.

"Indeed not," Stan went on. "What with the extra jobs I do on the side for friends and acquaintances, I make quite good money. And then, to be frank, I am treated like royalty wherever I go! I am fed with beer and Schnitzel, potato salad and roast chickens! Nothing is too much trouble for bricklayers: we are worth our weight in gold. A lawyer, on the other hand, as a sort of intellectual, is inherently suspect, and likely to be a rootless cosmopolitan, leeching a living from the downtrodden working classes.

"I have a great deal to be thankful for, you know," Stan added a few moments later, standing back and scanning his work. "When I think of the people I know who never came back from the war, or who were sent off to labour camps for having served in the RAF! No, I can consider myself very fortunate indeed.

"And if I am being completely honest," he added, almost furtively, as he gathered up his tools and put them away, "I am lucky that I don't have to fret and worry in my job. I just go and build a wall, or whatever they want me to do, eat a good lunch, washed down by good beer, and go home. My thoughts are my own. My mind is free. You might even say that my misfortune has given me my freedom!"

"Or your character has," said Svetlana.

"Don't flatter me too much!" chuckled Stanley, twinkling in her direction with a flash of intelligent humour in the twilight room.

"Oh, by the way," said Stan, pulling something out

of his blue overall pocket and handing it to Svetlana. "I almost forgot!"

"What's this?" said Svetlana, looking down at an odd-shaped piece of greenish stone in her hand.

"It's Vltavin," answered Stanley. "Known in most other places as Moldavite."

"Moldavite?" repeated Svetlana, still not understanding.

"Yes," said Stanley. "It's a strange thing. I was just repairing this old chimney when I noticed that one of the bricks was loose, so I pulled it out, and found that inside. Minerals used to be quite a hobby of my father's. He worked at the National Museum, you know, which has a fine collection of minerals. Moldavite is unique."

"How so?" asked Svetlana, very curious by now.

"Well firstly it is found almost exclusively in Bohemia and some parts of Moravia, but mainly near the river Vltava, hence its name."

"And?" asked Svetlana, sensing there was more to come.

"And it's also unique because it is the only gemstone on earth that is extra-terrestrial in origin," said Stanley.

"Extra-terrestrial?"

"Yes," Stanley went on. "It came about from the impact of a meteor landing in the Bohemian basin many millions of years ago. In fact it created the Bohemian basin when it hit the earth. I can lend you some books on it, if you like. It has a fascinating history and is surrounded with all sorts of legends."

"I would like that very much," said Svetlana

thoughtfully. "But you shouldn't be giving this to me, it must be very valuable. I can't accept it!"

"Ah," Stanley had then said, "but some things are more valuable when they are given away!"

There had been a moment's silence between them and then Stanley had added, in a way that brooked no further debate:

"Think of it as a keepsake from your homeland of Bohemia that you can have with you when you are in England. Have some jewellery made from it for your daughter!"

"Thank you Stan," she said. "I will."

The chimes of the front door bell jolted Svetlana out of her chair. She switched on the standard lamp and looked out of her bay window to see Rusty standing there, shivering a little in his thin jacket. She walked slowly to the front door and opened it.

"Ah, there you are dear," she said, give him a peremptory hug. "I've made us some goulash tonight. Thought it would warm us up."

"What kind of goulash?" Rusty asked, by now something of an expert on the nuances of Central European cooking.

"Szegedin," answered Svetlana, referring to a Hungarian goulash recipe involving Sauerkraut and sour cream.

Rusty grinned.

"Great!" he said, rubbing his hands together.

"Makes you fart though!" he added with a gleam.

Svetlana waved an unconcerned hand behind her as she led the way into the kitchen. "Who cares? It tastes good!"

Chapter 9 Taking the Him out of Hymn

Democracy has a lot in common with sex. The less there is of it, the more people talk about it. Only sometimes those who do the most talking have the least idea of what they are talking about. So when, in the wake of a rather unflattering inspection of the school, Barbara Styles and her Senior Management colleagues announced that Our Lady of Ransom's was reinventing itself as a 'forward-looking, empathic community with transparent, democratic institutions' this news was received among the staff much as if Count Dracula had just been appointed Director of the Blood Donor Service. Eva's mother had laughed until she cried, and then both of them had laughed until they cried, as her mother recounted tales from 'democratic' former Communist Czechoslovakia, when the word 'democracy' had seldom been off the lips of the ruling elite from morning till night.

"What most people in power mean by democracy," her mother had said, "is that everyone should be free to do whatever happens to be expedient to those in power, and if the people happen to want something different, well then they must be educated, and if that doesn't work, then they must have the expedient policy imposed on them, by force if necessary, for their own good. Expect a campaign of political correctness, dear. It is bound to be imminent. If Ransom's is to become democratic, then the people are going to have to be taught what to think. You keep an eye on the staff

notice board, darling!" That had been on Saturday.

The next Monday morning, Harry Hollingsworth picked up the baton at his music stand in the new Performing Arts Block and flicked back his blonde mane of hair in that way that drove teenage girls wild. The new building was a pyramid-like construction whose brass plaque had only that week been defaced with the addition of a capital letter "F" in front of the word "Arts". This creative gesture by a group of Ransom's students had provided much amusement to almost everyone except the Head and her Deputy, whose mouths had frozen into the shape of High Gothic arches for several days while the culprit or culprits were found and punished for this act of sacrilege. It simply did not do to have people poking fun at a brand new building which had cost millions, even if its roof was already sliding off after only three months and the Board of Governors were up in arms at the architect, who had been selected, from a shortlist of one, by the Bursar at the local Nineteenth Hole. This was not the first time that Bombast Sapphire, as he was known on account of his love of gin and being pompous, had blotted his copybook.

Harry didn't feel comfortable in this building. He never had. The girls, sensing his ambivalence, were restive and unfocused. The day had not started well. Unusually for him, he had gone out to dinner with friends the night before and ended up staying until four in the morning. After this late night he had got up, in a good mood despite his tiredness,

and gone to shower. The phone rang. Thinking it might be his girlfriend, Harry went to the phone in the living room. The call turned out to be from a tradesman ringing to ask if Harry's upstairs neighbour Ennio was at home, so that an inner door could be fitted in his hallway. Harry slid some sandals on to his feet and went out of his front door to go round the side of the house and ring at Ennio's. His own entrance was very close to the roadside and as he stepped out into the spring morning Harry noticed the drivers of passing cars registering his presence. Still somewhat sleepy, he continued on round the back of the house and made his way slowly up the metal staircase leading up to Ennio's attic flat. Looking down, he registered that his legs were bare. Looking a little further up, he suddenly realized that he was completely naked.

Gliding back into his house as inconspicuously as he could for one as conspicuously well-endowed, Harry went back to his shower, this time remembering to dress before going round to Ennio's with the news of the impending door delivery. A short while later, gathering his briefcase up to go to work, Harry recalled two things simultaneously. First, that he needed to take the rubbish out and second that he wanted to take some DVDs to a friend in hospital. Putting the DVDs in the container in front of his garage and the rubbish in the back of his car, Harry drove off with a strange feeling that something was not quite right. A mile down the road, he realized that the rubbish was still in the back of his car and the DVDs in the

container. Turning round, he drove back home, retrieved the DVDs from the container and put the sack of rubbish in it.

Arriving at work, he sat down at his desk, switched on his computer and realized that he couldn't remember his password. Ken, a passing colleague, noticed the confused and intent look on Harry's face and asked what the matter was. "I have forgotten my password," he answered. "It's so stupid! I know it's something really easy."

The colleague suggested they go to his office for a cup of coffee. Harry, who realized that he hadn't had any breakfast yet, agreed that this sounded like a sensible idea. Ken had a really good coffee machine, with pads, bells and whistles. Harry put some milk in his cup, placed the cup under the coffee machine, pressed the double espresso button and realized too late that he had forgotten to put a coffee pad in. He now had a cup of warm diluted milk. Ken suggested that Harry sit down and let him make the coffee. This sounded like bliss to Harry. The coffee was even better than bliss. Back at his desk, Harry managed to remember that his password was "Harry".

"I seem to be forgetting who I am," he thought.

Later, waving his baton to choir music that he could barely take in, Harry retreated into his fallback position in musical autopilot, a state of mind that he had perfected through decades of practice. This was ironic, given that the persona he

presented to the outside world was so dynamic and in the moment. He did not know how long he had been in this state when he became aware of someone tapping on his arm.

"Please Mr. Hollingsworth, Amanda isn't feeling very well."

The sudden wrench back to consciousness was always painful, but his absences were becoming more frequent and lasting for longer these days.

"Mr. Hollingsworth!"

"Yes, Alice. Well, would you like to take Amanda to see the nurse? She is looking rather pale, I must say!"

"Yes sir, she's been feeling faint since she got up this morning."

"Well, off you go now. And come back when you've seen her safely to the Sanatorium."

Alice and Amanda went off arm in arm.

"So, now, let's just go through that passage once again. I have a feeling the contralto line is a bit weak in that middle section."

Somehow, as always, Harry got through his lesson, and then made for the staff room for another large cup of coffee, which he clearly needed.

The staff room at Ransom's invoked mixed feelings in Harry. Its most striking aspect was the elegant view from the first floor windows down the driveway, which had unflatteringly been nicknamed the Jaws of Death by a group of subversive colleagues. Beyond the drive there were rolling hills and a few scattered houses. Harry enjoyed the changing light in the Staff Room, both at different

hours of the day and from spring through to winter, as the trees lining the drive acknowledged the seasons and filtered the light through varying amounts of leaves until winter came at last, with a stark, leafless beauty. The well-appointed room was set off to excellent effect, having been tastefully decorated by the Domestic Bursar, with Axminster carpeting, lined curtains in a harmonizing, low-key pattern and round comfortable chairs upholstered in a light brocade fabric, with a generous scattering of round coffee tables. In an alcove there was the staff kitchen, where drinks and light snacks were available throughout the school day. There was also a good range of daily newspapers and magazines.

Then Harry's aesthetic gaze alighted on the staff notice board. Phrases such as "must at all times" and "only with permission of the Deputy Head" leapt off the board at him like rounds of buckshot. A red laminated sign in one corner of the board reminded all members of staff that no notices were to be posted without the explicit permission of the Deputy Head. This eliminated all possibility of rank and file spontaneity in one fell swoop, just in case anyone was in any doubt. This was the window display of a sex shop for list fetishists. You were in apparatchik territory here.

Harry filled a large mug with some fresh coffee, added a slosh of milk and two spoonfuls of sugar, grabbed a ginger nut biscuit and went to stand two yards away from the notice board to sweep it for anything that might be relevant to him. His eye

stopped at a new notice that had not been there the day before, bearing special details about school assembly the next morning. One instruction it specified was for members of staff to "bring your hymnbook and a pencil". Intriguing. Just in case this proved a little too intellectually challenging for teachers, the Deputy Head had thoughtfully provided a neat, if disconcertingly infantile drawing of a pencil beside the instruction. It was interesting, Harry thought, how the cult of political correctness depended on the prerogative of a few to dictate to others what forms egalitarianism and tolerance were permitted to take. There was a note of paternalism in there that he found worrying. He also noted that a visual representation of the hymnbook had either been considered superfluous at a school that was a religious foundation, or too much of an artistic challenge to the Deputy.

Harry, although a religious man in his way, was not a regular attendee at morning school assembly, despite recent moral pressure from the Senior Management Team (subversively called the Severe Menstrual Tensions), who during the current school year had progressed from merely making it known that the attendance of staff was considered "desirable" to actively lurking behind pillars in the entrance hall in order to waylay staff who were walking in the wrong direction at 8.30 am. Staff who eluded capture in this way were placed on a list to be summoned to the office of Pauline Jenkins, the Deputy Head, to be remonstrated with for their lack of religious fervour and community

spirit. Challenged on one such occasion about the laxness of his attendance as Ransom's principal music teacher, Harry had replied that he used assembly time to compose himself. He was not surprised when the Deputy, a literal-minded woman, failed to appreciate the pun.

Simultaneously with the three-line whip for assembly, the Senior Management Team had also announced that all teachers were expected to attend lunch every day in the school dining room. These two policy decisions cut into the few remaining oases of quiet time for staff who were already working, in some instances, almost twice the length of an official working week. Those blessed ten to fifteen minutes in the staff room with a slice of toast and a cup of tea, or the cheese and pickle sandwich from home consumed in a quiet office, rather than in the cacophony of the dining room, were all that stood between some teachers and burnout. Harry himself was an inveterate sandwich in the office man.

He now turned his attention away from the notice board, making a mental note to attend assembly the next morning out of sheer curiosity, and proceeded to examine the human contents of the room. Five minutes into break, the 'in' and 'out' cliques were already crystallizing on schedule. Deirdre, an immaculate and frosty M.A. (Oxon) in a heavy tweed pencil skirt and a silk cashmere twin set, was wearing the customary haughty look with which she indicated to the world that she was an

Oxbridge graduate and therefore a race apart from lowly domestics, such as house staff. Her armour of contempt had protected her from even registering that some of the housemistresses were academically better qualified than she was. Carol, one of the assistant housemistresses, who was now laughing with Jane Trowbridge over tea and toast, was fond of saying:

"In my experience, when someone thinks that they are too good to do something, it usually means that they're not good enough!"

Harry doubted whether Deirdre would survive twenty-four hours on duty in one of Ransom's boarding houses. He tried to imagine someone knocking on Deirdre's door at two in the morning, feeling sick. She wouldn't get very far with that icy stare. Besides, the woman had a laugh that sounded like a lethal weapon. Carol and Jane, on the other hand, certainly knew how to laugh.

Harry averted his eyes from the rather unappetizing sight of a pair of middle-aged thighs barely covered by a red mini-kilt, and made for the toaster. Remembering that he still hadn't had any breakfast, he toasted himself two slices of thick toast and spread some butter and Marmite on it. "Ha, ha, ha!" he heard the machine gun-like scathing laughter coming from the direction of Deirdre's chair.

The next morning, having made a special effort to arrive early, Harry found himself standing alone in the staff room kitchen. He turned round and looked

at the clock. It was 8.20 am. He felt tired and a little dazed. There was a cup of black coffee in his hand, half drunk. He hated black coffee, and put some milk in it from the fridge. Realizing that the coffee was barely lukewarm, he revived it with a dash more instant coffee and some hot water from the kettle.

Glancing at the notice board, he remembered that he had wanted to go to assembly this morning. Looking round him, he saw his battered briefcase, which had belonged to his father, standing on one of the nearby coffee tables. He was relieved to find that his little-used hymnbook was still tucked in its usual place in a side pocket. It contained a makeshift bookmark, consisting mysteriously of a cinema ticket to a film a month before that he couldn't for the life of him remember having seen. Concluding that the school musical rehearsals must be taking more out of him than he thought, he grabbed an ownerless pencil that was lying on one of the nearby coffee tables, picked up his briefcase and made for the assembly hall.

The students filed in. The Head of the school, Barbara Styles, swept up on to the podium in her academic gown, while the Head teacher of the Junior School took her appointed place in the front row. Styles, shooting a meaningful glint around the hall, announced that the format of the day's assembly would be a little different from the usual one. She introduced a short prayer. The prayer having been intoned with a decorous lack of

fervour, the Deputy Head stood up and began to speak to the gathered assembly on the theme of Christian charity, a topic on which she appeared to have a body of knowledge that she was curiously loath to test in practice. Her exploration of the topic took the form of a detailed etymological journey from the Greek, and via a range of New Testament contexts presented in a tone of voice that one might have expected from someone ordering a list of groceries over the phone, in which 'Caritas' replaced 'cornflakes'. By comparison with this performance, a monosyllabic drone would have given Harry palpitations. The students, who had been drilled to observe silence at all times during assembly, were unmistakably starting to twitter as their attention wandered. Harry, who had been suffering from chronic insomnia for weeks, was sorry he had not smuggled his mobile phone into the assembly hall. A playback of this would almost certainly prove more effective than any of the sleeping tablets he had been using. After what seemed like twice the length of the Christian era to date, the Deputy Head made her way back to her seat. None of those gathered were any the wiser as to the nature of Christian charity.

At this, Barbara Styles sprang up from her chair and launched into a classic set piece among her many finger choreographies. This particular dance of the Styles fingers - which were locked in the telltale downward-pointing steeple position accompanied by a sudden intake of the breath and an upward swelling of the cramped bony shoulders,

might be termed the finger dance of the Pyrrhic Victory. Barbara was bristling with a sense of ideological triumph, but the Pyrrhic part had evidently yet to catch up with her.

"Now," she flashed round at her captive audience, "if you would please open your hymnbooks and take your pencils in your hands!" The Deputy Head stood up ceremoniously to join Styles in her moment of ideological triumph. She held several sheets of written notes in one hand. A few short moments ago, Harry believed himself to have been witness to the most mind-numbing experience of his life with the Deputy's exposition of charity. He now realized, with the chilling thrill of the captured mouse that the cat has so far only been toying with him, that this had merely been the warm-up for the piece de resistance. During the exposition on charity, time had become a kind of cosmic toffee, paralyzing the mind and making the prospect of imminent loss of consciousness seem like the apotheosis of bliss. But in what now followed time lost any meaning at all.

Afterwards Harry, and other colleagues he spoke to later, found themselves unable to determine whether it had taken minutes or hours. All they were aware of was a kind of collective mental derailment that had left them unable to feel or think. "Perhaps," sighed Harry to himself afterwards, "this was what it felt like to work under Robespierre."

At all events, Styles and her Deputy had proceeded

to lead the students and staff of Ransom's, duly armed with their pencils, on a journey of political correction through the entire school hymnbook, in which every reference to 'He' or 'Him' was duly and faithfully crossed out by the army of pencils and replaced with a suitably neutered substitute.

"I suppose," blurted Carol to Harry after assembly, tears rolling down her cheeks, as they opened a bottle of Cava at nine-thirty in the morning to restore themselves in the office of Martyrs' Complex, "that we will no longer be permitted to call it a 'Hymn' book now! We'll have to call it a 'Believing Person's Book!'"

Harry, dazed as he was, sprayed Cava out of his mouth. "And," as he gasped for breath, 'Hymns' will now have to be called 'Religious Persons' Incantations!!!!!"

They shrieked some more and drank another glass of the Cava, after which Carol made them some scrambled eggs on toast, also taking a tray to a girl who was sick in the house. She was kicking herself that she had not been able to make it to assembly that morning on account of the girl suddenly being taken ill.

"So then what happened?" she asked Harry on her return.

"Well," Harry answered, "how the hell do you follow that?!" Carol guffawed and took another slurp of Cava.

"But of course, if anyone can follow that, it's Father Barnes!" Harry went on.

"Thank God for Father Barnes," said Carol.

"And now," Styles had gone on, still on the podium, clearly intending what was to follow as a mere dessert to follow her main dish of political correction, "Before the last hymn ("hymn!?" thought Harry)...,

"Father Barnes will give us a short reading from Scripture." After the astonishing display that had gone before, Father Barnes, for whom the speeches of the Head and Deputy had clearly not been quite the bombshell they had been for everyone else, had then stood up. To those who knew him he was wearing his telltale expression of unctuous reverence, and had organized himself in a characteristic stoop of the shoulders that only his close friends would have recognized as his personal armour of godly irony. Harry wondered what would happen next. Only a handful of people in the assembly would have realized it, but there was clearly some kind of spiritual war going on between Father Barnes and the Senior Management Team of Ransom's.

Father Barnes quietly retrieved his battered old Bible from the folds of his garments, like an old Crusader drawing his sword, and going to the lectern, opened it at the Old Testament. Looking alarmingly benign, he proceeded:

"Today's reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 23, Verse 1:

'No man whose testicles have been crushed, or whose organ has been severed, shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord.'"

Father Barnes has then closed his Bible and quietly taken his seat. Two thousand years of ecclesiastical history was not to be overturned by some passing managerial fad. There seemed no getting round the fact that being on God's side in this world took, well, balls. The Lord, it seems, had won the first round after all.

Chapter 10 The Head Hunt

I worked on my tapestry for a while in the living room, thinking about Eva. She had been coming round after school for some time now with stories of the latest jaw-dropping exploits of the Ransom's Senior Management Team. Being Eva, she vacillated between outrage and blank incomprehension, punctuated by "Is it me, or what?"

She knows that I have seen a thing or two in my time, although not quite how much I have seen, and certainly not how much I have done. But although I have done what most people would call some bad things, I have to say that I have very little time for petty self-interested power games, especially because in my line of work that kind of thing could cost people their lives.

Then one day she came with the story of the Ransom's Head Hunt, and the Bursar gallivanting off to Zurich. She didn't believe me when I told her that there was a coup d'etat in the offing. "Oh no, she said, "the school is going international, it's great! At last some fresh vision and fresh blood coming into the place!" I just tightened the screws on my tapestry frame and tried very hard not to look sardonic and derisory to her, which I know I sometimes can.

When she was little I had to hide so many of my feelings from her to protect her. One day, she would have been about twelve, we were sitting in the park, talking about one of her teachers, when I made

some quick dismissive remark to show her how I summed him up. A look came over her face then as she looked up into my eyes, and I realized that the distance I had put between us to protect her was the very thing that was hurting her. She didn't feel protected at all: she felt excluded and put down. Her confidence in herself has always been a stunted thing and I have to look at her now every day and know that it is my work.

I explained my reasoning to her. "In the first place," I told her over a particularly well-brewed pot of Orange Pekoe, "if Armstrong-Cripps is getting up off his gin-sodden backside to do some work, you can be sure he is doing it for himself, not for Ransom's."

At Our Lady of Ransom's, the term 'head hunting' was bursting with a pregnancy of meaning that had already resulted in several miscarriages. Times were changing, and Ransom's was having to change with them. The school had recently been inspected, once as a school and then again separately for the boarding facilities and pastoral care. The added stress of the run-up to these had led to an epidemic of resignations by disgruntled, burnt-out staff. By any standards the Senior Management Team were starting to look a little careless with their human resources. There were even rumours of financial irregularities concerning Ransom's plc, the private limited company which had been set up to bring in revenue for Ransom's during the lets in the summer holidays. Funds left over in House budgets at the end of the school year would disappear by September and were rumoured to be subsidizing

senior management holidays. The Head, Barbara Styles, was looking white. Pauline Jenkins, the Deputy, had her mouth set permanently at twenty past seven.

The Board of Governors' newly formed Forward Planning Steering Committee spent a weekend in intensive seclusion at The Royal Lancings Hotel, known affectionately to locals as the Skewers' Arms, and emerged triumphant with what they regarded as an inspired action plan. Ransom's was to reinvent itself as Ransom International College, with the International Baccalaureate to be offered parallel to the English National Curriculum. The magic phrase, "management restructuring", was heard at Ransom's for the first, but certainly not the last time. Not only were the goal posts being moved: there was evidently to be a whole new game. The Head turned a paler shade of white. The Deputy's twenty-past seven mouth was now set at twenty-five past six.

Pensively the following Monday morning, the Bursar took one of his emergency bottles of Plymouth Gin out of the bottom drawer of his desk, leaving a bottle of duty-free Tangerey untouched. He gazed up into the cobwebs in the top right hand corner of his office as he poured himself the second glass of the morning.

"With a little judicious networking and some oiling of the wheels," he thought to himself, "we might just turn this to our advantage."

This was his chance. He had devised his strategy.

Sensing that Barbara Styles had only a tenuous hold on the headship, he now saw his best chance for edging her out and taking her place: he would pose as her stalwart henchman while quietly sawing away at the rather thin branch on which she sat.

Only that morning over his breakfast of bacon and volcanic coffee from, appropriately enough, the Great Rift Valley, Mrs. Armstrong-Cripps had been instructed which shirts, trousers and blazers to pack for his weekend trip to Zurich, on the Friday evening flight which he had in fact already booked but which he was miraculously about to find a rare last seat on after the coming proceedings of the day. Mrs. Armstrong-Cripps knew better than to ask why he was going to Zurich. The usual reply on such occasions was "Don't you remember anything I tell you?" - when in fact he had never told her in the first place.

Beth Armstrong-Cripps was widely assumed to be irretrievably nice. She kept her unconcerned, amenable smile fixed in its usual place on her pale face and dropped her eyes back to the latest issue of Private Eye, a tacit form of rebellion which was all the more useful because it suggested just the right note of arrested development from her student days. When instructed to pass him the jar of rough-cut bitter orange marmalade she was able to oblige without even losing her place in the Classifieds. As she later packed his convenient on-board hand baggage suitcase it came as no particular surprise

to her to find a partly used packet of condoms in the elasticated side pocket. What had passed for an intimate life between them over the two decades of their marriage had fallen so far short of intimacy that it now lacked even the energy to sustain even a pretence. She looked down at the condoms in her hands and turned them over. Putting them back in the elasticated side pocket of his case, she realized two things simultaneously. First, that she did not care who he had sex with and second, that whoever he she it or they were she was actually grateful to them for diverting his attention. This absence of jealousy, or indeed of any feeling at all apart from detached relief, came as a landmark in a featureless desert to her, perhaps even in its way a falling away of chains. She made herself another large cup of the volcanic coffee from the Great Rift Valley, poured in some cream, stirred in some brown sugar crystals and sat down at her computer.

"I was thinking of popping up to London today," she said in a flat voice to a form behind her back in the hall, as the Bursar put on his jacket. She thought she detected a grunt in distracted response before the door slammed shut behind him.

Striding purposefully into the meeting with the dreaded Steering Committee an hour later, he sat down with a smile on his lips that was the joint product of a couple of stiff gins and the thought of a rather jaunty strategy. Whereas the Head seemed to shrink in her chair as the meeting opened, Brigadier Armstrong-Cripps (Retired), Bursar of

Ransom's took his opportunity to boom his congratulations on their decision to reinvent the school and its management structure, thereby skating deftly past the potential minefield relating to why he and the Head had been excluded from this decision-making process in the first place. He added how "immensely relieved" he was at the Governors' "inspired and inspiring" vision for the future of Ransom's.

This unexpected effulgence from the Bursar invoked in Barbara Styles and her Deputy Pauline Jenkins much the same speechless incredulity as if Marie Antoinette had just offered her personal congratulations to the inventors of the guillotine. Until, that is, the Bursar quite unmistakably nodded the two of them a knowing, private wink. "May I suggest," he went on fulsomely, this time turning to face the full seated spread of the Committee and betting his entire hand on an appeal to their love of exclusivity, "that the appointment to the new position of Head of College would be best not left to chance applications resulting from public advertisements, but that the interests of Ransom's would be best served by employing the services of a professional head hunter - if you will pardon the pun?"

Encouraged by a stunned absence of objections on the part of the Steering Committee, the Major added in a low tone: "As you know, I do have some experience of the international sector from my previous appointment at Sondermatt International

School in Switzerland. I feel sure that, given a little time, I could reactivate some old networks and come back to you with the name of a suitable person."

The "suitable person", whom the Bursar had in fact, needless to say, had in mind all along, turned out to be none other than Carl Hersching, the Chicago-born Head of Sondermatt International School near Zurich and an old friend of the Armstrong-Cripps from his Gulf War days. Armstrong-Cripps knew perfectly well that no one in his right mind, Hersching included, was going to turn his nose up at a headhunting fee of hundreds of thousands in whatever currency it was offered. The trick with the holders of the Ransom purse strings was to make the obvious look arduous. No sacrifice was to be too great for Ransom's, and he had already booked himself on the weekend flight to Zurich in a personal effort to 'persuade' Hersching to accept an obscene amount of money that, in reality, wild horses could not have kept him from.

This superhuman feat of negotiating skill on the Bursar's part not only necessitated two further trips to Zurich, complete with, needless to say, accommodation in four-star hotels, but also required Ransom's to live up to its name by putting up the equivalent of a king's ransom in advance, so that Hersching would be able to launch his exclusive mission unimpeded. Not unreasonably, when putting the proposal to Hersching the Bursar placed a strong emphasis on Ransom's poverty as a church foundation, and during this delicate stage of

the negotiations knocked about a third off the maximum fee which the Governors' had placed at his disposal. This shrewd move enabled a substantial percentage of the advance payment to find its way into a numbered Swiss bank account belonging, by lucky chance, to the Bursar himself, in gratitude, as it were, to himself on behalf of Ransom's for his outstanding services to the school in its hour of need.

On a hill with a stunning view overlooking a Swiss Alpine lake, Sondermatt International School was at formal lunch in the Great Hall of Sondermatt Chateau. Those students, that is, who had bothered to turn up that day, because there had been ructions with the Dining Hall Prefects who were entrusted with maintaining order and decorum at mealtimes. It appeared that they had been misusing their office to show favoritism to friends, who were not instructed to remove caps on entering the Hall, nor remonstrated with for using bread rolls as missiles, or for similar misdemeanours and lapses of decorum. The Domestic Bursar who oversaw the Prefects had responded by disbanding them, and the majority of the students had responded by boycotting lunch. When, therefore, Carl Hersching stood up to formally introduce the Bursar of Ransom's to the student body of Sondermatt, the Brigadier was greeted with an unusually thin round of welcoming applause. Hersching then went on to outline his response to the catering unrest. Armstrong-Cripps listened in nonplussed silence as Hersching

announced that those who had not been at lunch would now not be permitted to attend supper, while those fortunate few currently in the Great Hall for lunch could expect a glass of wine with their supper. Armstrong-Cripps's incredulity grew as they were on their way out of the Great Hall, when the Domestic Bursar went over to the Sondermatt wine cellar to procure six bottles of reject wine, when he overheard two members of house staff announcing that those students who were barred from supper that night would be allowed to go to the local bar for the evening.

"This is shaping up even better than I thought," mused Armstrong-Cripps to himself, as he helped himself copiously to the mini-bar in his hotel room later that evening. The fine-tuning of his five-year plan for Ransom's was beginning to take shape nicely. The essence of the plan was to find the Mother of all College Heads, an absolute disaster of a leader that some highly reputable international school could not wait to get rid of, and would therefore recommend to the hilt, so that Armstrong-Cripps himself would never be suspected of deliberate sabotage. Indeed it would be part of this plan to play the devoted second in command. It was pure genius. What could possibly go wrong?

As the months came and went back at Ransom's, the Governors' Forward Planning Steering Committee waited, and waited, and waited. Hersching was reportedly in Canada, in Indonesia, in New Zealand. He certainly travelled more

extensively than at any time before in his well-travelled life, but it was not until a full seven months later that it occurred to Dame Alice Evans, Chair of the Governors and principal architect of the Ransom Reinvention, to ask whether Hersching was actually visiting any potential candidates for the Headship. Following a tentative written inquiry as to how the search was progressing, Hersching was discovered to be absent from Sondermatt on a prolonged, if rather impromptu, sabbatical leave, from which, alas, ill health prevented him from returning until many months later. So it came about that a premiere league school, which the Bursar had repeatedly insisted could not possibly afford a second washing machine for a boarding house inhabited by sixty girls, was inadvertently divested, in Phase One of the Bursar's plan, of close on three quarters of a million pounds sterling in pursuit of a phantom - and a headless one at that. The next letter sent out to Ransom parents announced a substantial rise in school fees for the following school year to cover "increased running costs", but principally of course to cover the running of Hersching by the Bugger Dear, as he was known to those below him in the Ransom pecking order.

In a tour de force of brinkmanship, the Bursar managed to retrieve, just in time, both Hersching and a decently short list of allegedly suitable candidates for the headship of the reinvented Ransom's. After all, the last thing he wanted to do was to create the impression of dozens of potential

candidates all champing at the bit to try their hand at running Ransom's. It was vital that the process be both obscenely expensive and fraught with pitfalls. He and Hersching had scoured the globe for potential heads that other schools were desperate to get rid of. Gratifyingly on cue, the Board of Governors and the Parents' Association dissolved in an orgy of relief and gratitude to the very men who were in reality fleecing them for all they were worth, and who intended to go on doing so for some time. It was not to become clear until much later that this squandering of precious non-profit school funds had been part of the Bursar's plan all along. He had even provided Hersching with a time frame for his globetrotting ventures.

What no one except the Bursar himself knew was that the real Headhunt was not to begin until after the appointment. The beauty of his plan was that it did not even much matter who was appointed, although the more money was spent on finding the hapless new incumbent, the more he himself would appear as the school's knight in shining armour when the appointment turned out to be a total failure, which he intended it would. He couldn't lose: if the new incumbent turned out to be incompetent and obtuse, all he had to do was sit back and wait for them to shoot themselves in the foot. If, on the other hand, he or she turned out to have talent and class, he knew that he could rely on the rest of the Senior Management Team to sabotage and undermine them for all they were worth. There are, after all, few people quite so

vicious as an ambitious narcissist of mediocre abilities brought face to face with real class and talent. And the Senior Management Team of Ransom's was practically a self-help group for narcissists. But whoever was going to profit from this game was going to need a strong stomach.

None of this impending debacle need ever have leaked out to the employees of Ransom's had the school not been quite so careless with its boarding staff and found it necessary to interview, among others, a Ms Kimberly Brockman, a young Canadian teacher who had spent the last two years working at Sondermatt. Arriving at the school at ten on a Tuesday morning, Ms Brockman, who gave the impression of being a very pleasant young woman in the throes of post-traumatic stress syndrome, was given a brief tour of Martyrs' Complex. She had applied for the Assistant Housemistress's position currently occupied by Carol Smith, who was already packing enthusiastically to leave, even though there were still several months to go to the end of the school year.

She smiled wanly as Carol directed her into the Sanatorium, which was part of Martyrs' Complex. Bridget Dawes, one of the two school nurses, was attending to Sophie Foulkes-Banfield, the ten-year old daughter of the President of the Ffoulkes International Banking Corporation. She was a pupil at Young Ransom's, the junior part of the school. Mrs. Ffoulkes-Banfield had come to take her home, as Sophie was running a high fever. "I'll just give

her a Paracetamol to keep her temperature down until you get her home," said Bridget kindly. "Here, take this bottle of mineral water too. You need to drink plenty of liquids!" She handed the flushed-looking Sophie a plastic bottle. "After all," Bridget added conversationally, "we've got to get you fit for the Middle School!"

The voice of Mrs. Ffoulkes-Banfield exploded into the enclosed space of the Sanatorium surgery in that tone and volume that was unique to people of her station in life, a tone that expressed its obliviousness to any need for consideration for people who did not belong to that class. "OH!", she boomed, "we're not keeping Sophie HERE after junior school! She's going to Cheltenham Ladies College!

"RANSOM'S," she added with disdainful emphasis, "is for GROCERS' daughters!"

"I must remember to inform the Head of this flattering assessment!" mused Carol, rolling her eyes discreetly in Bridget's direction, while the latter did her best to conceal her smile behind a starched cuff. "Well I expect we can kiss our new applicant goodbye after that," thought Carol to herself. She cast a glance at Kimberly, whose expression, whatever she might have been thinking, was a wall of impenetrable discretion. Carol indicated to Kimberly that they might like to move on with their tour. "See you at lunch," said Carol to Bridget over her shoulder, and ushered Kimberly towards the staircase.

"Now, let me show you the girls' accommodation!" Bridget heard Carol's voice fading down the corridor and, having seen her social superiors out of the sanatorium and watched them drive off in their four-wheel drive, popped another DVD in the player for the two girls being kept overnight in the San and settled back into a comfy chair to have five minutes with the Daily Mail crossword and a cup of coffee.

Thirty miles away, Beth Armstrong Cripps was doing the same thing on the 10. 27 train up to London. Had the Brigadier known where she was going and what she was going to do there, it might have taken the smirk off his face. As a wise person once said:

"If you're cocky, there's something you don't know."

Chapter 11 Beth

I had promised Beth that I would not tell Eva about our friendship. It made sense.

"Svetlana," she had said (from the beginning she never had any trouble using my full name, instead of the shortened 'Lana' version) "I just need to know that my privacy will be protected."

"And not just because of school," she had added, shooting me one of those rare straight glances that alert the discerning eye to her intelligence and wit.

It wasn't just because of school things that she needed my discretion. Beth was going through a difficult time in her marriage - had always been going through a difficult time in her marriage. It was one of the reasons she seemed aloof and mercurial at the same time.

We had first bumped into each other on the train to London. She seemed to find relief in the company of an older woman she vaguely knew already but who was not judging and sizing her up all the time. Also she knew I was Czech, which made it easier for her to talk to me outside the usual social conventions, on a more human level. I seem to remember the first real conversation we had was after she had just returned from a long weekend in Prague and was full of impressions. She was guarded at first, but we found ourselves bumping into each other on the platform at Newbourne several times a year after that, got talking and eventually actively sought each other out and made arrangements to travel up together.

I have to laugh sometimes. Eva attributes almost magical powers of discernment and prediction to me when it comes to Ransom's. She doesn't know quite as I do the value of human intelligence from a reliable source. And Beth is a reliable source about Ransom's: she has no career axe to grind and is under no illusions about any of the players. She is a good observer and, equally importantly, bright enough to interpret what she sees. Above all, she does not suffer from that fatal compulsion of her husband and other senior management members at Ransom's - that need to be seen to be clever. She wouldn't call it by the same name as I do, but she has learned to cultivate the art of being underestimated and to wear it lightly. Given her proclivities, this is an art that has stood her in good stead in recent months.

You can tell a great deal about a community by the way it gathers its intelligence, and from whom. One of the least savory methods is the active recruitment of its fallen angels. In Czechoslovakia after 1968 many Communists were expelled from the Party for their involvement in the Prague Spring reform movement. What amazed me for decades afterwards, and turned my stomach, was the way that, far from being resentful of their loss of status, many of these expelled ex-members became sickeningly eager to please the post-68 regime. They became the system's most reliable internal network of informers and would go to enormous lengths to obtain the information they needed. They would use their existing work and social networks

to work on people and coax and wheedle their opinions inadvertently out of them, over a glass of beer or wine, or in small groups in people's homes. In those days people no longer knew whom they could trust - and so they trusted no one. What made it worse was that the post-68 political culture was based on pure opportunism. There were no convictions or principles involved any longer, no ideals or scruples to clutter the road to advancement. 'Normalization' was what they called it. It's symptomatic of corruption to breed euphemisms.

One of the first signs that there was corruption at Ransom's was the way that the sense of trust was being undermined and replaced with endemic paranoia. This meant that the management did not trust anyone. And when the management does not trust people it always means that they themselves are not trustworthy. "Always look carefully at the motives people attribute to other people," I said to Eva. Whenever Eva came round to me I would sift the tales of the day for the signs of who the informants were, and who was receiving this information. Barbara Styles made no bones about the fact that she had 'her spies'.

It was around that time that I started to make friends with Beth. After only one conversation I was sure that I had read her right. She had that guarded, slightly dazed quality, that self-induced vagueness that people wrap themselves in when they see some crucial truth but are still trying to live their lives as if they did not see it. Nowadays it

is called denial. I prefer to call it pre-awakening. This phase can last for weeks or years, even a lifetime. I have seen whole families in its sway, trying to pretend that one of its members was not mentally ill, for example, and even collectively adopting the delusions of the sick person out of misplaced loyalty rather than face the truth.

So I sifted Eva's daily stories until I had identified the Head's spies, and why they were her spies. One was clearly Madge, a cleaner in Martyrs' Complex House. She had that sickening combination of properness ("Oh, I could never call a housemistress by her first name, it wouldn't be right!") and reptilian omniscience that gave you the creeps even hearing her talked about. What had clinched it for me was the allegation that she had been caught red-handed some years earlier with a piece of valuable jewellery belonging to the then housemistress of Martyrs. Part of Madge's duties included cleaning the housemistress's flat once a week. She could have been sacked, of course, but wasn't. Knowing Ransom's this didn't suggest humanity. It suggested leverage. Madge, then, was one of Dr Styles' spies. When I told Eva she didn't believe me at first, but later she used this line of communication one last time both to expose it and to serve her own purposes.

On one particular day Beth settled into her seat on the 10.27 fast train to London, with her Daily Mail already folded neatly open at the crossword page, her treasured Private Eye in her bag, her half-litre

stainless steel flask of freshly brewed Kenyan coffee and her bacon sandwich. This was her favourite connection of the morning. It was a fast train, but it allowed her to get up and do what she had to do around the house without having to rush about in a lather. Being too late for commuters, this train was rarely full. She generally had her choice of seats and this time chose one near the window, facing the direction of travel. The journey time, just under an hour, was long enough to get comfortable with herself, do her crossword for a while, or read a couple of articles in *Private Eye*, but not long enough for her to feel bored.

There was something about a short rail journey that felt to her like a little holiday. She loved these little oases in her life where she could be herself and not have to guard her own thoughts. Sometimes she would chat with me or another fellow passenger, but she also liked to be alone in her own space. She worked through a couple of crossword clues. On some journeys she would spend the whole hour focused on the crossword and be jolted out of her thoughts by her sudden arrival at Victoria. At other times she would do a couple of clues and then decide to save the rest of the crossword for the journey back (she did not think 'home'). She would then chuckle to herself at a couple of *Private Eye* items. Quite often, she would simply keep both in her compact, flat leather shoulder bag and sit quietly drinking her coffee and eating her bacon sandwich, looking out of the window, thinking and daydreaming.

Beth had promised herself a shopping spree today. This would have surprised the Brigadier, had he been interested enough in her to be capable of surprise. Among their social circle his wife was legendary, or notorious, depending on one's point of view, for her indifference to shopping, and had found herself isolated among the wives in their circle. They even physically kept their distance from her when she was in the same room, as if fearing that her lack of interest in Liberty's and Fortnum's might be catching. Early on she had been labeled 'strange' - an epithet that her husband had soon latched on to and would often reproach her with. Aspersions against people's conformity were the main lever he liked to use to undermine them psychologically. Like all bullies he was a tireless disseminator of self-doubt in his victims. He persisted in this over the years like someone unable to resist squeezing a blackhead, even though he himself despised the wifely shopping fetishes of other women in his circle. Had he but known, he was secretly envied by some of his male acquaintances. Most of them looked on with disbelieving longing at the stress-free frugality and regular predictability of his wife's spending habits, which gravitated single-mindedly towards good quality combined with value for money. Not a few of them also envied him for the quality in her that paradoxically most unnerved him - her quiet containment and independence from the need to impress.

The Brigadier was used to dominating people and it

didn't suit him to be with someone who ran on a different fuel than him. She was too elusive. Yet he could not bring himself to recognize this or admit defeat. He was both attracted to and repelled by her discreteness. She had understood by now that on some level, without consciously either wishing it or seeking it, she had shown him that he had met his match. He for his part was punishing her for it on a daily basis with his icy indifference, his sexual escapades, his crudeness and his heavy drinking.

At home, the Brigadier was given to sitting on the sofa in front of the TV in a pair of old worn boxer shorts with at least one renegade testicle dangling like an old British Empire flag flapping on an island outpost. These optical territorial statements were confirmed acoustically by regular bursts of loud farting, starting with deep notes and working one, two, or sometimes even three notes up the scale. For years now Beth, an early riser, had been able to predict to within five minutes when he would wake up in the mornings. She could time it from his first fart, roughly twenty minutes before he woke, followed by a gradually increasing reveille of hot, foul wind before his blood-shot eyes opened. Even in his sleep, Beth mused, the Brigadier was an arsehole. He was a shallow, sadistic, manipulative, game-playing social climber without a shred of scruple or empathy. He was born to be Bursar of Ransom's.

Emerging on to the platform at Victoria Station, Beth hopped on to a number 38 bus and made her

way to Piccadilly. Checking her watch to make sure she still had enough time she got off at Hatchards book shop and browsed the bookshelves for a good half hour, choosing and paying for a couple of new titles and placing them carefully in her spacious leather bag. At her favourite coffee shop a few yards down from Hatchards she ordered a large gourmet coffee and spent a leisurely ten minutes drinking it and reading the blurb on the back covers. Checking her watch again she made her way to Berridges Hotel, scanning her appearance quickly in a shop window on the way: beige Burberry mac, flat black moccasins, matching leather gloves, deliberately forgettable facial expression.

Once in the hotel, she walked slowly to the lift, located a yard or so to the right of the reception desk, and pressed the button to the fourth floor. On the way up she took out a red lipstick and transformed the mood of her face in a couple of deft strokes. She had deliberately left it to this last moment to change out of the flat sensible moccasins into the patent leather high heels. This was partly so as not to have to totter around unnecessarily in foot-swelling gear. In fact, this moment of surreptitious transformation was an important part of the ritual for her. Turning right out of the doors she knocked discreetly but smartly on the door of Room 407. As usual the door appeared to open by itself. Closing it noiselessly behind her she cast a stern glance at the Cabinet Minister, who was already trembling with anticipation. Wordlessly she unzipped her elegant

black handbag on the polished walnut table near the door. Moving the vase of flowers aside she removed a neat dog whip, remembering with a frisson that they were illegal in this country.

"I hear you've been an extremely naughty boy AGAIN!" she intoned with a deadpan expression, pointing with the dog-whip to the floor.

"On your knees!"

"Yes mistress, sorry mistress!"

"You will be sorry by the time I've finished with you," affirmed Beth matter-of-factly, smartly undoing her Burberry mac and removing it in the familiar, seamlessly casual, yet inexplicably dominant movement that invariably drove him to erotic distraction. She flung it lightly over the arm of the chair that she felt, rather than saw, was waiting for it.

Underneath the Burberry mackintosh she was wearing a black leather basque and black stockings. She was as eternally surprised as he was at how she could stride around the room in her high heels as if they were welded to her feet. Afterwards she would return deftly to sensible respectability before they left separately and met up at a restaurant they had agreed on beforehand. They had never talked about this aspect of their encounters in so many words, but for both of them these oases of dominance were heightened by the ordinariness of what went before and after. The absence of overt kinkiness was what made it so kinky. Making herself comfortable on a small brocade sofa

and flicking one of her shoes on an off, Beth cast a disdainful look at the ecstatically submissive cabinet minister.

"Since when do you stand fully dressed in the presence of your mistress?" she demanded. He lowered his head, feeling the weight of the country's latest political crisis slide off him like ice cream off a hot spoon.

"Sorry mistress," he crooned.

"I want you to strip from the waist down - no leave the tie on! And then serve me some champagne," she went on, taking the Private Eye out of the handbag and opening it.

"Of course, mistress," he rejoined, feeling the hamster-wheel of his mind slow down gently to the blessed straightforwardness of one simple command at a time, absolved for a couple of hours of all responsibility. He didn't need to think about anything. All he had to do was do as he was told. He would do anything for her. Anything.

Chapter 12 The Tower Gate

Eva emerged from under ground at the Prague metro station on Republic Square and walked the few steps to the street cafe outside the Art Nouveau-style Municipal House. This was where she always liked to start her first day in Prague. Sitting at one of the little tables in the street facing the National Bank, she ordered two cups of coffee, both for herself. Eva couldn't abide small amounts of coffee first thing in the morning. It was almost worse than none, and she was now past worrying about raised eyebrows or volunteering explanations to justify her little eccentricities. Looking down to the antique ring on her hand with its distinctive green stone she smiled and remembered her first visit here with her mother. She breathed slowly and watched the world go by for a few minutes. Looking over to the National Bank on the other side of the street she saw someone who looked just like herself walking past the bank, across the street and through the archway under the Tower to her right. The woman even walked like she did, and seemed to be talking to herself as she walked, another of her habits. This wasn't the first time she had seen her, Eva felt sure. She had had a similar experience at the airport, when she was sure she had seen a woman identical to herself sitting at a cafe in the airport lounge. She had walked towards her, but by the time she reached that end of the lounge, the woman was gone. Eva looked up, back in the here and now. Meanwhile there had been a brief frisson of excitement at the National Bank across the street

as three police cars pulled up at speed while Eva's eyes were still diverted by the sight of the woman, and a couple of heavily armed officers now disappeared into the main entrance. The police cars melted discreetly into a side street before she even had time to notice where they had gone.

Eva smiled to herself and thought of a couple of delinquent senior management personalities back at school who could do with a little firm policing. She smiled to herself at how apparently unconnected events in the world outside seemed to echo her inner states. She smiled, yet also felt annoyed at how people and events that she would now rather forget somehow managed to pursue her wherever she went, even here on holiday. Snippets of conversation and scraps of anger about what was happening at work would well up unexpectedly and lead a life of their own, going round in circles in some usurped space in her head. It was like having her mind forcibly colonized. In one way she wished they would go away, but in another she welcomed this fresh backdrop of Prague against which to peruse them. It reminded her that her working cosmos was only one of many microcosms after all, and that its conflicts were only storms in a teacup. She was grateful that there were other realities that were just as real. Such as this place, which was her solace and refuge, her confirmation that civilization and meaning can still be retrieved.

Whenever Eva left Prague to go back to England she would arrive back home and turn out her

handbag, where she would find, tucked into side pockets, little packets of sugar from this or that cafe on the Old Town Square or the Lesser Town, or Metro tickets. She had a special jar in her kitchen where she would put the little packets of sugar, sometimes loose, sometimes in lumps, planning to use them when visitors came round for coffee. But when they did come round she would look at the packets, especially the ones with the name of the cafe on, and she would put them back in the jar. Instead, she would get out the sugar bowl belonging to her tea service and offer that sugar to her guests. Josh, her husband, would sometimes find her standing in the kitchen staring at an old Prague metro ticket, not having the heart to throw it out. If she kept the tickets in her bag for a while, she felt childish, pathologically sentimental, but if she threw them away it was as if she was discarding something precious that needed to be preserved, as evidence of her other world. There seemed no way round her sense of loss.

But at times such as this sunny morning at the end of July on Republic Square, at the very start of the school summer holidays, Eva also found the contrast amusing between herself, as she already luxuriated in a personal civilization that was her private possession. The powerful people at her school, she mused as she took in the view of summer Prague and took her first sip of coffee, were still busy with timetables and forward planning and their jostlings for power. This thought lent an extra note to the coffee's aroma. Oh, the

joys of being a nobody, she thought. How wonderful to be enough of a nobody to be able to be oneself.

A scene from the last day of term reenacted itself before her inner eye in this deliciously incongruous setting. The Board of Governors at Ransom's, legendary for their aloofness, had been compelled by a recent crisis to pay some attention to what was happening in the upper echelons of the school. Exhausted teachers, their minds already fixed on distant beaches, were tying up loose ends on the last day, and house staff who could not remember their last decent night's sleep stumbled over cases and boxes and fought their way through a fog of hung-over breath from students who had been having an illicit party all night in an attic. Against this backdrop the Board of Governors were, at long last, meeting in camera at Ransom's to deal with 'The Crisis'. Groans of tired exasperation struggled with naked curiosity when a plenary staff meeting was called for four o'clock that afternoon in the Great Hall. One by one, the Senior Management Team were summoned to the Board to give an account of themselves and the situation.

On a good day, Eva's mother used to refer to the Senior Management at Ransom's as 'arrogant narcissists'. On a bad day, they were known as 'that bunch of hyenas', or even 'those f****ing cannibals'. This was how, for example, she had explained the sudden departure a couple of months earlier of a recent addition to the team, who had had the effrontery, as Eva's mother put it, of being

a civilized human being. Adele Branston had been savaged by the cannibals and sent packing, but not before her lawyer had tied them up in knots. Awkwardly, moreover, for the Senior Management Team, they had accomplished this feat not only in unseemly haste, but also without consulting either the Parents' Association or the Board of Governors. Eva and her colleagues had arrived at work one Monday morning to the news that their brand new Head of Senior School, Adele Branston, was now their brand new ex-Head of Senior School. Furthermore, she was being replaced, for an 'interim' period of two years (Eva and her mother had shrieked with laughter at this) by none other than the Bursar, Armstrong- Cripps.

For some reason the Senior Management Team found inexplicably perverse, this brief but dramatic series of events was willfully interpreted en masse by staff, parents and students alike as a coup d'etat. Parents threatened to remove their children from the school, while several members of staff also made it clear that they would be moving on at the first opportunity. Moreover they churlishly insisted on assuming this to be the first outward sign of a major power struggle going on within the ranks of the Senior Management Team for the overall Headship of Ransom's. The Senior Management's astonished dismay at public reaction to these events, and above all at the response to the way in which these events had been communicated to the outside world, appeared to be entirely genuine.

"What more proof do you need, my dear," Eva's

mother had said, "that the school is being run by narcissists?"

The Narcissi Theory appeared to have been resoundingly confirmed. The school braced itself for news that Barbara Styles would soon be resigning as Head of Ransom's, and that her role would be taken over either by the Bursar, now Head of Senior School as well, or Drummond MacLean, the Director of Studies.

"I give her eighteen months at the outside," Harry Hollingsworth the music teacher had said to Eva.

Even this dark prophesy of doom turned out to be hopelessly optimistic. On the last day of the summer term, at the plenary staff meeting scheduled for four o'clock, the bombs dropped. The first public intimation that something was wrong had come in Styles' end of year letter to parents, in which she stated that "mistakes had been made," and that she would be tabling a 'Vote of Confidence' at the beginning of the next school year. Cannier members of staff took this to mean that her position was weak and that she was attempting to take the wind out of her opponents' sails by tabling the issue of confidence herself.

Exhausted though everyone was by the end of this turbulent school year, no-one's face was missing from the Great Hall that afternoon. The brief preamble included a passing reminder: the plenary session would be followed by the customary farewell party for employees who were leaving that

year (the Exodus Fair, as Eva called it). Then the Director of Studies got up slowly from his seat in the front row. It was a swelteringly hot summer's day, but with his eyes fixed dramatically on his audience, he very slowly pulled on an elegant black jacket to match his elegantly cut black trousers. Eva had never seen MacLean wearing a dark suit before: he usually dressed more in the smart casual, deceptively neutral, apparatchik style. It was difficult to avoid the impression of deliberately relished, macabre drama. The name of Machiavelli sprang spontaneously into the minds of many of those present. The Bursar's wife, Mrs. Armstrong-Cripps, was sitting immediately behind Eva, who turned round to her and said,

"This feels like an execution!"

"That's exactly what it is!" came the immediate reply. MacLean stepped up with exaggerated ceremony on to the podium and placed his hands on either side of the lectern.

Now it had to be said that Barbara Styles, of the twitching hand choreography and the compulsive snide quip, was not what one would call the most beloved of Heads, if indeed there is such a thing. She was undiplomatic, tactless, obtuse and devoid of empathy and charm, thus arguably ideal for a meteoric corporate career. The Director of Studies referred in his opening words to the present meeting of the Board of Governors, which was still in session, and intimated that the Senior Management Team had come under criticism from the Board, among other things, for being

'inhumane' ("Not difficult to believe!" thought Eva).

He went on to inform the assembly that after prolonged and concerted efforts (i.e. the ten months since the start of the current academic year), he had reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that the Head, Ms Styles, could not be worked with and that if she remained at the school, he himself would, as he put it, finish the timetables for the coming academic year, but would be unable to continue in his present function. There was a hush of arrested breath as the mood of the assembled staff oscillated between stunned skepticism and euphoric hope at the prospect of this loss.

Hardly had this bombshell of information been delivered before Armstrong-Cripps, the Bursar - tight-lipped, livid with rage and immaculately turned out in dark blue, sprang to his feet and strode to the podium, just as the Director of Studies was sitting down. The Bursar proclaimed that for his part he considered it to be his duty to support Styles as Head of Ransom's in this difficult transition period and that if she were to leave, he regretted that he would no longer be at the disposal of the school as interim Head of the Senior School. The assembled staff gasped as one. Or almost as one: a colleague sitting next to Eva commented with macabre glee: "My God! There's so much shit, you can't see the fan!"

As the Bursar returned to his seat, Barbara Styles stood up and said that she had spent her first year

just getting to know the school and hoped that she would not be condemned before she had had time to show what she could do. She added that until the previous day she had had no idea that any colleague was finding her difficult to work with ("If there were such things as a Nobel Prize for Obtuseness!" thought Eva). Styles went on to say that she found the criticism leveled against her, that she was not responding to parents' concerns, to be quite unfounded, and that she had always been available to hear the concerns of parents. "Liar!" volunteered a voice in the row immediately behind Eva. "She has been ignoring all emails from the Parents' Association for weeks!"

Styles sat down, and a handkerchief was seen dabbing decorously eyes behind her glasses. Eva thought silently of at least one colleague who had left Barbara Styles' office in tears of humiliation in the course of the last few months. She knew that what goes around comes around, but she hadn't realized it would come around as fast as this. The generally elliptical orbit of karma at Ransom's appeared to have become circular overnight. Eva closed her eyes and pictured herself on Charles Bridge in Prague first thing on a summer morning. Soon, very soon, she would be there, and this would seem like a mirage.

"Do I detect the smell of burning hubris?" Harry Hollingsworth volunteered from the seat next to Eva. Not for the first time, Eva decided that ignorance was not so much the absence of

knowledge as the presumption of it. The significance of the occasion lay not only in what was said, but equally or even more so in what was not being said. At no stage in the course of that afternoon did any member of the Team make any reference to the best interests of the students, or the school as a whole.

Eva found herself wondering what could suddenly induce people like the Bursar and the Director of Studies, who appeared to define themselves in terms of power, status and titles, suddenly to make so free with threats of resignation. The answer seemed clear: the Senior Management Team were under pressure themselves, and were being threatened with dismissal by the Board of Governors - or at least with the dissolution of their committee as a decision-making institution. This was a face-saving, damage containment exercise, she decided. They seemed to be unaware that they had brought this crisis on themselves.

She wondered what had happened to her in the last couple of years. Only a few months ago, these extraordinary events would have had her upset, anxious, furious and outraged. It was difficult to tell whether she had crossed an invisible line, or whether they had, but what she was witnessing here made it impossible for her to sustain any form of personal engagement with what she could now only look on as a circus. These people were out of control. She had realized a while ago that they were beyond reason and persuasion. She now believed

them to be beyond rescue. Somewhere along the line she had discovered that she floated a lot better when she stopped struggling, and the flailing hands of her once drowning arms had now set themselves into a pleasantly stiff middle finger.

That had only been two days ago. This, now, was that blissful moment of good coffee on the first day of a well-earned holiday in her special city. The end of a school year always felt like an interminable childbirth that seemed to go on for two or three weeks, growing more intense and exhausting with every hour. This one had, in one respect, been worse than most. Then, suddenly, it was over. The nightmare was past (until September anyway). She was delivered. The square rumbled and bustled in the golden light of morning. Every place has its own special quality of light, and Prague's summer light was golden, its winter light silver, as befitted a royal imperial city.

She could have picked a much quieter, more beautiful place in Prague than Republic Square, and yet it felt right to be here. Eva's eyes traveled to the Powder Tower to her right, the beginning of the Royal Mile that led up to the Castle. She did not know why, but this was where she liked to start her walks through Prague these days. For years she had taken the metro to Mustek station at the bottom of Wenceslas Square, out of habit more than intention, and walked through to the Old Town Square from there, but nowadays it was as if her feet kept drawing her back to this other route,

to the true beginning. The Powder Tower, its golden stone black with pollution, resembled in shape that other imposing tower that marked the entrance to the Charles Bridge, where her walk would almost certainly take her today. The Powder Tower was her portal into Prague. It was her way of saying "I am here: show me." She drank her second coffee and counted the angels on the Tower.

Having paid the waitress, she approached the tower and walked through. She wondered why there were actually two gateways into the street beyond. One led through the Tower itself, the other was immediately to the right, adjoining one side of the Municipal House. There was the royal portal of the Tower, perhaps originally intended for vehicles, Eva mused, and another for pedestrians, giving the traveler the choice of either. Or perhaps the point was to be both riding a vehicle and to be a pedestrian at the same time? To be both stationary and moving, leading both an inner and an outer life? In this case the portal could be seen less as a way into the sacred and out of the profane, and more as a way of joining the two in a new way. They were not mutually exclusive, but complementary. She remembered how the Tarot card symbol of the Tower had had a very different meaning when she had given readings years ago; her deck, long ago discarded, had shown a picture of a Tower being struck by lightning and a figure falling from the top to the ground. It was a symbol of precipitate, often unforeseen and far-reaching upheaval.

The night before, lying in her single hotel room in the Old Town, Eva had been hovering softly above the horizon of sleep when she had become aware of an invisible, dark, troubled presence in the room, a black moving shadow trying to reach her. Eva had had experiences like this many years earlier, when she had regularly read the Tarot cards for people. Then she had not known what to do with the rather terrifying visions she sometimes had, and had simply given up the practices that seemed to invite them. But, lying in her hotel room the night before, she had silently affirmed to this being, whoever or whatever it was, her identity as a servant of good, and the presence had left her. Somewhere along the road between those earlier days and now she had learned how not to be a slave to fear.

A few days later, Eva bought a book on alchemy. Included in its many anecdotes was a ghost story about the very street in which her hotel had been. It was about a barber who had abandoned his wife and daughters some centuries ago out of his obsession with becoming an alchemist. Without the head of the family to provide for them, his family had quickly and tragically been reduced to destitution. His wife had committed suicide: his daughters had been compelled to go and work in a brothel. It is said, so the story goes, that the ghost of the barber still haunts the streets near where he once lived in the Old Town, perhaps looking for a way to return to his former modest living and make up for the neglect of his worldly responsibilities. In the thick of her duties at school, and bombarded by

its spiraling lunacies, Eva was often tempted to abandon her working life. This gateway to the Old Town seemed to be telling her that she did not have to, even that it would be unwise to do so. A slower, more modest, earthbound pedestrian pace allowed her and other travelers like her to absorb more of the depths of the place, its signs and symbols, rather than being swept away by its grace and beauty and missing their message.

It had struck Eva that the tower was not placed at right angles either to the street in front of it, or to the streets that lay behind it. It did not merely open up the way for a predetermined route that was already prepared. On the other side of the tower the traveler was immediately presented with a choice of different destinations, and different ways to arrive at the same destination. Familiar with the Tower from many previous walks, Eva knew that all these various routes, even the ones that appeared to be diversions, eventually wound back to where she wanted to go. She felt that she was being invited to make her own way. She could take the first turning to the right to the Paris Hotel, or she could veer slightly to the left and go along Celetna Street, which led straight to the Old Town Square. She walked through the arcade down the left-hand side of the road leading to Celetna Street and stood still for a few moments to breath in the atmosphere on this side of the Tower. Only a few steps from Republic Square, she might have been in a different city. This made her stop and look around her. Having decided to go down Celetna street, she was

immediately faced with yet another choice: she could either continue straight along Celetna, or take another left turn, which she now knew would eventually take her back on to the main shopping street, a little way along from where she had just had her coffee. It was as if the heart of the city wanted to make sure that you really wanted to be there, and tested your intentions. Free will was built into the architecture. Standing on the corner and facing down Celetna Street along her planned route, her eyes wandered upwards, for the first time, to a statue she had never noticed before. On a corner building, inside a golden cage, was the statue of a Black Madonna and child. Taking her guidebook out of her handbag, she read that this was a statue of the Black Mother of God. She couldn't understand how she had been walking past it year after year and never noticed it before. On the ground floor of the corner building there was a bookshop named after the statue. She had been going there for years to buy posters and postcards of Prague and had never noticed its name before either. Only a few steps further on there was another bookshop on the same side of the street. She had never been inside before. She went in now.

Not long after the dismissal of her ghost the night before, Eva, still hovering on the edge of sleep, had had a vision of a snake-like creature uncoiling itself in and around her body. Once she had addressed her fear, as with the previous, ghostly presence, the snake-like creature (it seemed to have many heads) disappeared from view, but its presence remained,

quiet and not at all menacing, as she sank into sleep, although it was then followed by some visions of strange creatures of descents and depths, which Eva nevertheless, by now too tired to get excited all over again, decided to ignore.

Armstrong-Cripps, the Bursar of Ransom's, a pragmatist to his bone marrow, to express his attributes charitably, was fond of quoting the former Kanzler of Germany, Helmut Schmidt, who had allegedly asserted: "People with visions should go to the doctor." This was a viewpoint that went some way towards explaining the fate of Adele Branston, the visionary and freshly ex-Head of Ransom's senior school, at the hands of her illustrious colleagues of the Senior Management Team. A belief in bringing out the best in people can prove fatal when their best is a conspicuous talent for sticking knives in each other's backs. On the other hand, those at Ransom's who adhered to its Christian principles may at some stage have read, thought Eva to herself, as she emerged from the esoteric bookshop in Celetna Street, the verse from the Book of Proverbs that now sprang to her mind: "Without vision the people perish." People certainly seemed to be perishing at Ransom's, Eva thought to herself wryly.

She looked down at her purchases from the bookstore: a large book on esoteric Prague, a book about the alchemist Simon Bakalar, and another about the life of John Dee, the Elizabethan alchemist.

"Hurray for the inner life!" she thought to herself with a smile and set off at a brisk pace for the Old Town Square to start reading.

Chapter 13 Bethlehem Square

Having made herself comfortable in a street cafe opposite the astrological clock on the Old Town Square, Eva ordered a Cappuccino, opened one of her book purchases with a shiver of pleasure and started reading:

"On the evening of the summer solstice in Prague in 1585, a group of men made their way from a house on Bethlehem Square then known as the House at the Green Mound. The owner of the house was one Thaddeus Hajek, sometimes also called by his Latinized name Hagecius. Hajek was physician to Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor, nephew of Philip II, King of Spain. In addition to his appointment as physician to Rudolf, who had moved the court of the Holy Roman Empire from Vienna to Prague, Hajek was regarded as one of the leading astronomers in Central Europe, renowned both for the accuracy of his observations, along with Tycho Brahe, of the famous Nova sighting of 1572, and for his use of clocks. In keeping with his Roman Catholic monarch's encouragement of religious tolerance and interesting research, Hajek was a Protestant. He had inherited the house from the alchemist Simon Bakalar.

"The Square was, to be sure, one of the more curious locations in a city that under Rudolf was becoming increasingly known for curiosities. Although only a few minutes' walk from the Old Town Square, Bethlehem Square was located on the edge of a pauper district called Prague Venice that

had been the object of reforming zeal since the days of Charles IV. It had developed into a Renaissance melting pot, home at various stages in its history to brothels, pubs, cutpurses, religiously motivated projects for civic and moral reform, such as 'Jerusalem' (a home for fallen women), crackpot healing methods, dubious potions and elixirs, and some of the most ground-breaking scholarship and thought of the entire Renaissance era. Here was humanity in all its unsanitized complexity, with squalor and glory living side by side. This was the age of Shakespeare, the supreme master at distilling this terrifying, ungainly raw material of illumination and darkness, enlightenment and obscurity into a guiding vision of the human that married the light with the shadows.

"The ill-starred John Dee, a countryman and contemporary of Shakespeare, was at that time still in the favour of his gracious Queen Elizabeth and Emperor Rudolf II. He was among the party accompanying Taddheus Hajek that evening. In 1585, all still appeared to be well with Dr John Dee. His son Michael had been born in Prague and baptized only three months earlier. Having summoned a vision of Michael the Archangel, Dee had been instructed by the latter to name his son after him. Another in that small Solstice company was Emericus Sontag. Sontag had been assigned to assist Dee in his work by the Polish prince, Lord Albert Laski of Sieradz, who had traveled extensively in Europe, including a visit to the court of Queen Elizabeth.

"Like Hajek, Dee also counted as a Protestant, but his beliefs and practices were more along the lines of his Queen's own creed, which asserted:

"There is only one Jesus Christ. The rest is dispute over trifles."

Dee was, it is true, openly critical of the institution of the Catholic Church, but this did not necessarily mean that he rejected the Catholic faith. On the contrary, his diaries reveal a pious man who became increasingly deeply attached to Catholic ritual, as, ironically enough, Henry VIII himself had been, despite having set himself up as Defender of the Faith in the teeth of the authority of Rome. There was far less of a real doctrinal and ideological divide between Catholic and Protestant in the Elizabethan Age, than a need on the part of certain interest groups to cultivate and underscore such a divide in the interests of particular ruling houses and power groups in the Europe of that time. Where the interests of power divide, the ideologies must be made to divide with them.

"Dee believed in a 'truth' that was not only a matter of faith alone, however important that might be, but also of learning and reason. What one believed needed, in his view, to be confirmed by science. Dee thus stood with at least one foot on the threshold of the Age of Enlightenment. He cherished the dream of a Europe undivided by religious schism and intolerance. Dee's reputation as an alchemist and scholar, despite his bold critical visions of Rudolf's reign, had earned him the favour and support of Rudolf for the time being. However Dee's idealism

and visions of tolerance were already starting to bring about his undoing. Regular reports of Dee's activities on Bethlehem Square and at court in Prague were being delivered to San Clemente, the Spanish Ambassador to Rudolf's court, and further afield, to Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth's spymaster back in England.

Meanwhile the English Hospice in Rome, later reinvented as the English College, which operated as something of a training centre for pro-Catholic missionaries and spies, sought to offset Dee's potentially damaging influence by dubbing him "a married priest, given to magic and uncanny arts." If Dee could not be coerced into supporting the cause of Hapsburg, and therefore Roman Catholic hegemony in Central Europe, then the only recourse was to discredit him.

"Although Dee had one foot in the Age of Enlightenment on that Solstice evening, his other foot was walking in a place of murky shadows. To his left was the man he now knew as Edward Kelley, deprecatingly dubbed 'Il Zoppo', 'the cripple', by one Papal official. Kelley had turned up as a disfigured itinerant at Dee's house in Mortlake three years earlier in 1582. A series of famines in the late 1570s, combined with the unsettling effects on the economy of an influx of large quantities of gold and silver from the New World, had led to a rapid increase in destitution and urbanization in England. Just as the silver miners of Saxony to the north of Bohemia were facing economic

catastrophe, so too the roads of Elizabethan England were frequented by dispossessed itinerants seeking their fortunes in London, or wherever else they could eke out a living.

"During Dee's first encounter at his home in Mortlake with this mysterious hooded visitor, the latter had introduced himself as Talbot, perhaps to impress Dee with a borrowed pedigree from Lancashire, or perhaps to conceal his true name of Edward Kelley because he was in trouble with the law. One version of the story is that Kelley had been surviving as a conman, had managed to divest a woman of her jewellery, and was being pursued in an attempt to retrieve the jewels. Kelley is described as having a disreputable appearance. In addition to the limp he was said to have a deformed ear. A possible explanation for this is that the lopping off of an ear was the usual punishment for forging or adulterating coins. The skin of his face was also pockmarked, perhaps as a result of illness, or from having had stones hurled at him while being punished in the stocks. Even less salubrious versions of Talbot's career prior to meeting Dee have him practicing necromancy in Lancashire. His name was also linked with Thomas Langton, a local squire in Lancashire whose interest in the occult led him to arrange for Kelley's release.

"It may be, therefore, that Kelley's principal intention on arriving at Dee's house in Mortlake was no more than to lie low with his booty, the jewels conned from the unnamed lady. Dee makes

no reference to this alleged incident in his diary, although three months after the man's arrival Dee had come to the conclusion that Talbot was a charlatan. Talbot, or Kelley, had been introduced to Dee by a Mr. Clerkson, an agent for 'skryers', or 'cunning men', who could summon spirits in return for bed or board.

"Fraud or no, Edward Kelley was an unusually well-educated person for one of such dubious status, and also seems to have been determined to follow Dee to Bohemia. Why Dee himself, having exposed the man's fraudulent past, would agree to take him and work with him, is a question that remains unanswered. Once established among the alchemical fraternity of Prague, Kelley went on to become famous for his 'alchemical projections', which involved the use of a mysterious magic powder. Pursued there doggedly by the man from England who had been entrusted with the retrieval of the lady's jewels, Kelley is reputed to have used this powder to produce two thousand pounds' worth of gold, handing this over with a sample of the powder to the man in recompense for the booty. This money was apparently used to purchase substantial estates in Warwickshire. The man is also said to have found a piece of flint on these said estates and turned it into a huge diamond.

"On this particular summer solstice evening, however, we find Edward Kelley walking alongside Dr John Dee, together with Taddheus Hajek and Emericus Sontag, out of Bethlehem Square and

through the adjoining streets to the tower of the Old Town Bridge. It is shortly before eight in the evening and sunset is approaching as they make their way quietly, but with some suppressed excitement.

"Being among the most learned scholars of their age, Dee and his companions will have been familiar with the custom of the Etruscans, later adopted by the Romans, of basing the construction of a settlement on the demarcation of a cross. An Etruscan priest or augur would mark out two intersecting lines, at the centre of which a hole would be dug in the ground, known in Latin as a *mundus*, using a curved holy stick called a *lituus*, which looked rather like a bishop's crosier. In ancient times, before subsequent ages became characterized by an increasing separation of the sacred and secular, this demarcation of the cross with two intersecting lines, called in Latin the *cardo* and the *decumanus* respectively, signified a cult division not only of the earthly space on the ground, but also of the heavenly sphere above it, into quadrants, each of which had a significance. Using this ceremonially established Holy Cross, a sacred circle could be drawn around the planned circumference of the city in the places where the moat and fortifications would later be constructed. Nor was the location of the city gates left to chance. The main road, or *via principalis*, which led into a Roman military camp, corresponded to the *cardo* line, while the line perpendicular to it was analogous to the *decumanus*. Some military camps,

especially on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, later developed into towns or cities with this layout. Vienna, Budapest and Cologne, for example, were all originally planned along these fundamental lines.

"It should not surprise us to hear mention of the expression 'Holy Cross' in connection with the work of ancient, pre-Christian augurs and priests in the rituals associated with the planning of a military camp or town. The procedures and practices of Roman geodesists have been preserved in the rites of the Roman Catholic Church in the demarcation, limitation and blessing of cemeteries as holy ground, for example.

"It was already known to the party that similar geodesic practices, such as cross formation, had been employed in important churches connected with monasteries founded by Charles IV in Prague. The ground plans of these buildings were analogous to cruciform sacred buildings in Hildesheim and Paderborn. For John Dee and his companions in the 1580s, the medieval revival of these ancient sacred ground plans, and the sacred, harmonious division of earthly and heavenly space, were of highly topical interest. In 1527 the German painter Durer had drawn a plan for an ideal city very reminiscent of the concept underlying the structure of Prague. Only a generation before this summer solstice night, Leonardo da Vinci had drawn up a plan for Imola, a circular variant on this ancient ground plan. Most of these drew some inspiration

from the ideal state of Atlantida formulated in the 4th century BC by the Greek philosopher Plato.

"The Romanesque Rotunda of the Holy Cross, a church they had passed only a stone's throw from Bethlehem Square, thus marked the geodesic centre of Prague, the point of intersection between the cardo and the decumanus. This spot was, as Dee and his alchemist companions well knew, the magical centre of the city. For them, the fact that the alchemist Simon Bakalar had chosen to live in a house as close as possible to that centre, and then to bequeath it to Taddheus Hajek, was a decision that required no further explanation. Bethlehem Square lay at the centre of the inscribed circle of Prague, at the heart of a microcosm. But where there is heaven, there is earth, and where there is power and light, there is also refuse and corruptibility. Dee and Kelley walked side by side.

"A cross drawn inside a circle traditionally symbolizes the Earth, forming four quadrants indicating the basic points of the compass. By further dividing these quadrants into thirds, twelve sections are created, representing the twelve signs of the zodiac, which proceed in anti-clockwise direction from the first zodiacal sign of Aries, which forms the first section. In Prague, therefore, the four fixed signs of the zodiac are located in the directions of the main points of the compass: Taurus in the north, Leo in the west, Scorpio in the south and Aquarius in the east.

"The world would have to wait another seventeen years for Campanella's essay on the Sun State or Civitas Solis, published first in Italian in 1602 and in Latin in 1613. In this essay Campanella offers his inspiring vision of the ideal town:

"When they built their city, they laid down the fixed signs at the four points of the compass." Campanella may have been describing the horoscope of Heliopolis, a city founded by Aristonicus on 2nd August 133 BCE.

"What Dee and his learned companions could see, as they looked out from the tower towards Prague Castle, waiting for the sun to set on that summer solstice evening, was that they now found themselves in a living ideal city. Two centuries earlier, Charles IV had left nothing to chance when founding it. The Old Town Bridge, now called the Charles Bridge after its founder, was at that time not only in practical terms the only bridge over the river Moldau (Vltava) in that age, but also represented the bridge between the astrological signs of Taurus and Gemini as laid down in the ground plan of the city, and in keeping with Charles IV's own personal horoscope, in which the mutable signs, such as Gemini, were predominant.

There was a firm belief among the learned scholars of that time, for example, that the sequence of prime numbers, 1, 3, 5, 7 and 11, represented a particularly powerful and propitious combination that would protect and enshrine Charles' beloved city. Finding himself able, therefore, to lay the

foundation stone for the bridge in the year 1357, he ensured that the stone would be laid on the 9th July, at 5.31 am, thus ensuring both a forward and reverse sequence of the propitious numbers 1,3,5,7,9 and 9,7,5,3,1. His city was conceived as a foundation made both on earth and in the heavens, expressed in sacred mathematics - a New Jerusalem.

"Equally significantly, when Charles IV founded Prague he took care to ensure that sacred relics were located at key places within his city. As Dee and Kelley had learned from Hajek, the remains of St Vitus, for whom the Cathedral in the Castle precincts was named, were buried behind the Cathedral presbytery. At first sight, the choice of St. Vitus, who was not a popular saint in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, might have seemed an odd one. Unless one knew that the name Vit, Vitus in Latin, was a derivation of the ancient Slavonic god Svantovit, the supreme god of Slavonic mythology.

"In ancient times a Slav prophetess or sibyl called Libuse, had seen a vision while standing on the hill of Vysehrad, south of the present Castle, or perhaps at the modern-day site of Sarka. She saw a city built on seven hills whose glory would reach to the stars. The triangular ground plan of the historic core of Prague is today sometimes said to reflect the tripod of Libuse the prophetess. But concealed within the architecture of the city are no less than four triangles, one isosceles and three equilateral

ones, as well as three crosses, The triangles represent the four elemental triangles of the astrological structure of the zodiac. The triangles and crosses together make up seven points, all marked by important buildings. The mystery of the seven points dates back to early Slavonic times, when the calendar was based on measurements of the rising and setting sun on the local horizon, particularly at the equinoxes and solstices. Ancient Slavonic religion took the form of a solstitial cult. Even by Romanesque times such a calendar would have been regarded as an anachronism, and yet we find it built into the very architecture of Prague and being honoured by each succeeding generation of Prague architects, not only through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but into the Baroque era. What Hajek, Dee, Kelley and Sontag were witnessing was not merely a wonder of architecture, but an unbroken line of ancient Slavonic culture that had survived from the pre-Christian era through to their own day. Prague's glory not only reached up to the stars, but was even clothed in them.

"Standing looking out over the River Vltava and Hradcany Castle, they saw at 20.13 in the evening how the setting sun of the summer solstice, viewed from the Old Town Bridge tower, lit up the main spire of the Cathedral, then the second tower to its right at 20.20. At 20.27 it settled on the ridge of the Cathedral roof. Finally, the last visible beams of the sun settled directly over the place where the relics of St. Vitus were entombed, just before darkness fell on the city."

Eva closed her book and looked up. She loved the way you could unfold a whole world in a book, or close it and open it at will in all its fullness, as if time were an irrelevance. There was a hum of excited voices below the window of the first floor cafe. A crowd was beginning to form in front of the astrological clock on the Old Town Square in readiness for the chiming of the hour, when the figures of the twelve apostles would appear and circulate above the clock face. A sense of richness and immediacy, a deep fabric of meaning, enfolded her. Her whole sense of self had been reshaped in this place. It was odd how the specifics in the structure and history of this city had become for her a catalyst for something timeless against which all she now experienced was increasingly being measured. The deeper she went into this place, the more substance she found in herself and the less she found in the trappings of the life she appeared to lead on the surface. She felt lit up from within. In this city, even nightfall was a tribute to light.

Chapter 14 In-service Training

"From the sublime to the ridiculous," muttered Eva sardonically to Jane Trowbridge, Housemistress of Martyrs' Complex. "The perfect way to start a new term!" Jane shot her a dry, feeble smile. The room being used for the In-Service training was a small classroom located up two flights of stairs, tucked away behind the assembly hall. "Odd that," thought Eva, "given that the whole school was still deserted until the girls got back the next day. Why not use a classroom near the Staff Room?" Seeing herself as something of an expert on the workings of the Head Barbara Styles' mind, rather like the amateur astronomer who studies obscure meteorites that threaten to exterminate life on earth, Eva read significance into this dislocated location and its lack of comforts. "Our Dr Styles is playing cat and mouse with her conscience again," she mused. "Mum was right last night. She's about to pull a fast one."

A tide of angst and the suppressed urge to flee had already charged the atmosphere in the room, rippling up through the obligatory start-of-term veneer of compulsory optimism. As the staff, with some foreboding, took their seats at the rectangular table, Styles' eyes darted round the room, as if in search of underlings in ambush. Nervously filling the short time it took for the staff to seat themselves, she used the moments to stroke the emblems of her status. She smoothed the pleated skirt of her wincingly ill-advised lime-green suit,

which set off her sallow skin to bilious effect. She buttoned and unbuttoned her jacket several times, and ran her fingers under the expandable bracelet of her gold Tissot watch. The table she was sitting at was bare apart from her black Mont Blanc pens and the paperwork for the training session. Typically for Styles, there was no evidence of a printed agenda for the session. Interesting, thought Eva.

"Shall we begin?"

Given Barbara Styles' aspirations to upward mobility, nature had proved less than co-operative, endowing her with a voice reminiscent of a circular saw felling illicit timber in a rainforest. Her voice did not emerge from her centre, but escaped instead like some captive from a provisional refugee camp located in the constricted drainpipe of her neck. This sense of constraint was not only audible, but even visible. She made repeated involuntary, raptor-like jerks of the neck, often accompanied by abrupt asymmetrical gyrations of her shoulders, as if trying in vain to shake off some inner blockage. When she was really tense, like today, she reminded Eva of a clockwork mechanical toy. On the rare occasions when she was relaxed she was more reminiscent of those toy dogs with nodding heads that people put on the parcel shelves of their cars.

Smiling to herself (Styles noted this with some puzzlement and even displeasure, which Eva took as further evidence of a hidden agenda), Eva held on to this thought of the nodding dog to help her through what was to follow. The only effective

defence on an occasion like this was an unassailable sense of proportion, which meant subcutaneous, intravenous humour.

As (with a jerking nod and a neck-twisting twitch) Barbara Styles began speaking, Eva's eyes were drawn to the finger ballet being performed as a sideshow by her hands, whose staccato-like dance was quite out of step with what she was saying. In a series of sharp darts with the fingers, like office guerrillas outrunning invisible foes, Dr Styles would draw this or that sheet of paper closer towards her, move another a little to the left or right, straighten the angle of another, or push some papers away from her, before readjusting them back to where they had been before. It occurred to Eva to wonder whether this finger ballet sideshow might after all be the real show, and the words just a smokescreen. On the basis of similar experiences in morning assemblies, when jaw-dropping statements had been accompanied by similar finger ballets, Eva felt sure that this dance too was the forerunner of something ominous.

The incessant nervous precision behind this adjustable two-dimensional barrier of office supplies suggested an inner struggle taking place inside Styles' mind. Perhaps, thought Eva, to convince herself of whatever version of reality was currently most expedient for her. Reality was a notoriously elastic concept at Our Lady of Ransom's, and truth did not even figure in its vocabulary.

The little minuet of adjustments repeated itself with deft little variations throughout the next three minutes or so, during which Styles broached the theme of the day's training session.

"I thought it would be helpful....".

("To whom?" Eva couldn't help wondering)

"..... to run through some typical situations that crop up in boarding, and discuss.....

("DISCUSS?" thought Eva incredulously. "Can this mean that Ransom's is no longer a dialogue-free dictatorship? When was that edict passed?")

Eva found that her mind had temporarily wandered at this point, in retreat before a thunderous avalanche of corporate jargon. The mind-numbing effects had already set in like a drug, Eva noted, aware of a fog forming in her head, like protective wadding against what promised to be a morning of pure bullshit. Perversely, she found herself relieved to discover that she was still capable of seeing it coming.

Meanwhile, a silent, unanimous wave of "Oh shit!" had already passed telepathically round the rest of the teachers sitting around the heavy, angular table. Bodies tensed, rapid glances were exchanged, Pauline Jenkins turned her back suddenly on the group and made herself intently busy sorting a set of three marker pens in front of a virginal flipchart. Red. Blue. Green.

"It's a pity she can't find any pictures to straighten," thought Eva. "That seems to be her only passion."

Barbara droned on with worrying blandness, before looking over to her loyal deputy Pauline Jenkins,

who to give her credit was looking uncomfortable. This was a bad sign. Pauline might be a Ransom's robot, but she was not without some vestigial sense of human decency.

"What we("Ah!" thought Eva, "that tell-tale royal we!")
".. envisage here is that we just run through one or two.."

("The whole gamut then," thought Eva).

"..... situations that tend to crop up in boarding from time to time ("Haven't we just heard all this before?," thought Eva, "or have we just moved into a time loop in a parallel universe?").

" and look at the best way...."

("Meaning, of course, the most expedient way," Eva felt herself thinking through the fog)

" to handle them."

("Meaning how to avoid having to handle them at all," Eva concluded).

Eva was quite adept at deciphering Styles' utterances by now. So, it seemed, were most of her colleagues. Less than five minutes into the Inset, a second wave of visceral symptoms passed like a sympathetic barometer change round the table, as vegetative nervous systems went into familiar Ransom's high alert. Asthmatic bronchial tubes battened down their hatches in panic, blood pressure levels rose, acid corroded into stomach linings, and large intestines knotted in Irritable Bowel dread.

"If Styles is chairing an In-service training session for boarding staff," Svetlana had said to Eva the

night before, "expect a carve-up. She would never lower herself to be present at anything to do with boarding unless her own personal agenda was involved. This isn't about professional training. This is a box job."

The 'box job' was Ransom's slang for Styles' principal management tool, which she herself referred to as "putting people back in their boxes". A typical 'box job' might consist of a combination of put-downs, humiliations private and public, or social snubs. Most typically it entailed a creative onslaught of all of the above in varying sequences. This had the added advantage of disorienting even the most intelligent target, thus bearing a close resemblance to wars of attrition in armed combat. Indeed the more intelligent the target, the greater the likelihood that they would be reduced to a gibbering idiot. For this reason, among others, intelligence is a huge drawback in corporate life - almost as much of a drawback as morals.

The "Art of War" and Machiavelli's "Prince" might in some respects be regarded as the Old and New Testaments of the corporate Bible - even, or perhaps most especially, in an independent school like Ransom's that was a religious foundation, where awkward traits like principles and compassion can so easily get in the way. The 'box job' thus complied in all respects with the imperatives of virtuoso multi-tasking and flexibility (there were almost always several box jobs running concurrently at any one time). Luckily for Styles,

unluckily for everyone else, putting people back in their boxes also happened to be her favourite hobby. More than this, it was a compulsion, which had implications. Dr Styles did not know it yet, but her penchant for the box job meant that, under the right circumstances, she could be played even more easily than she could play. But not today.

In a world of counterfeits, the real is the ultimate enemy. Having grasped this, it was not difficult for Eva to predict who would be the targets of this ideological reality surgery. She herself would be one of them, for sure. Four months earlier, she had attempted to alert the Deputy Pauline Jenkins to the fact that a new and inexperienced Assistant Housemistress in Immaculate Conception, the house next to Martyrs, was being bullied by the Housemistress, Pat Sherman. Looking back, Eva could see that this had been a futile act of windmill tilting.

Sherman was a nauseatingly smelly, globular sociopath. However, not only was she the longest-surviving member of the boarding staff at Ransom's, but by some miracle of corporate natural selection (the survival of the fattest, perhaps, or the triumph of matter over mind) she had even managed to establish her globular, sociopathic way of dealing with people as the norm. Bullying? What bullying? Sherman had successfully offloaded almost her entire workload on to her new Assistant Shakhriya. Shakhriya got the girls up in the morning, Shakhriya put the girls to bed at night,

Shakhriya attended to their needs at break and at lunch. Shakhriya was on active duty sixteen or seventeen hours a day, every day. She even seemed to be on duty most weekends. Meanwhile Sherman, who had the smallest teaching load of any Housemistress at Ransom's, around six lessons a week, plus a couple of meetings, spent most of her time with her feet up in her flat watching DVDs and drinking wine, washing down bag after bag of savoury snacks. Shakhriya was exhausted within ten days and had gone round to Carol, her counterpart in Martyrs, for support and advice. Eva, who spent a lot of time round at Carol's, had been there at the time.

They had to tread carefully. "Have you tried writing down your work schedule and showing it to Pat?" Carol asked.

"Yes, I did that last Thursday," sobbed Fakhriya. "She just told me it would balance out over the term, and that I had only been here a month!"

Carol and Eva exchanged a glance, acknowledging familiar territory.

"Well, continue keeping a record of your hours," Eva had urged.

"Of course," Fakhriya had said.

"Have you talked to the Senior Housemistress?" asked Carol next, already guessing what the answer would be.

"Yes, she invited me round for coffee a couple of days ago, but she admitted to me she wouldn't touch this with a bargepole, she's scared shitless of Pat Sherman."

Nothing new there then. One of the reasons Pat Sherman was being so difficult at the moment was because she had been passed up for promotion to the post of Senior Housemistress at the start of this academic year. The job had gone to Eddie (Edwina) Bennett, who was nice but spineless and not terribly bright (Styles and Jenkins liked people like that).

Carol and Eva had discussed the situation, and had decided that Fakhriya didn't look as if she would be able to take much more of this, so Eva volunteered to go and talk to Pauline about it. Some sort of rational professional framework was needed here to enable the two to work together. Rational. At Ransom's. Right.

Eva had made an appointment to see Pauline and had put the situation to her as neutrally as she could. Pauline had listened impassively, told Eva to leave it with her, and then done absolutely nothing. She had obviously been learning fast at the feet of the Headmistress. After another month of doing two people's jobs for sixteen hours a day, Fakhriya had done something quite unexpected: first she had gone to pour out her woes to Father Barnes, the school chaplain. Then she had gone to see a lawyer, who had nearly wet himself laughing when she told him what hours she was working. Fakhriya discovered that there were things called laws that were designed to protect people in the workplace and that there were things called rights that she could invoke in a situation like this. She made an

appointment to see Styles, sat down in her study and started talking about duty of care. Every now and again the outside world managed to find a chink in the Ransom's armour. And whenever that happened, Ransom's always seemed to be caught with its trousers down. A deal was hastily made with a Head who purported to have been taken completely unawares by the situation, and Fakhriya left Ransom's with a rather fatter bank balance than when she had arrived. Father Barnes looked particularly pleased with himself around that time, although Styles couldn't figure out why.

Clearly, however, in the managerial climate of Ransom's, there could only be one rational explanation for this embarrassing departure less than a term after Fakhriya's arrival. It must be someone's fault, that is someone else's fault than the management's. The secret of corporate managerial success being to have all the power, and preferably all the money, but none of the responsibility, Fakhriya must, logically, have left because she had not been adequately supported by her colleagues. The colleagues must, therefore, be punished. They must also be punished for having made a nuisance of themselves.

But even Eva was rather surprised now at the Inset to hear the Fakhriya dilemma being presented in Styles' circular saw-like voice as a "hypothetical situation" that might need to be dealt with in boarding. There was a lot of rapid eye contact around the table, none of which was lost on Styles,

as the rest of the staff at last, suddenly and with some consternation, grasped what the game was. Even as their ears heard the words that Styles was uttering, it was difficult for their minds to accept that the Head of a school of this standing could do anything so unprofessional, or indeed as potentially open to legal action, as to humiliate staff, one after the other, and in each other's presence, under the pretext of a training session. Styles' eyes narrowed as she uttered one of those sighs of contentment that were typical of her just as the knife went in. Then she threw out the bait at Eva:

"So, what would you do in this situation?"

Eva knew she was the prey, but found herself unable to resist the bait.

"Well, having established that the member of staff concerned ("God, how I hate this corporate-speak!" she thought) has spoken to her line manager, the housemistress, and discussed her written record of working hours, and having checked that the Senior Housemistress was already aware of the situation, I would take the matter to the Deputy."

"NO!" retorted Dr Styles with voice raised. "That is exactly what you SHOULDN'T do!"

Public wrist-slappings were nothing unusual at Ransom's, but

Eva found herself more curious than angry. She actually felt that the Head was making the most almighty fool of herself:

"So what would you advise in a situation like this?" she found herself able to ask quite blandly.

"Well," came the rather blustered reply, "the important thing is not to push it up the pyramid!"

("PUSH IT UP THE PYRAMID???", everyone round the table found themselves asking wordlessly).

"I'm sorry," said Eva, trying not to laugh, "I'm not sure I quite follow you..."

The word 'pyramid', it seemed, was now the polite Ransomite euphemism for 'pecking order'.

Styles, who was never at her most gracious when being legitimately challenged, spluttered some more impatient bluster.

"Well, if a new assistant housemistress is not coping with her duties ..."

("Aha!" thought Eva, so this is the version of reality we are being asked to swallow: 'not coping with her duties! The poor woman was being BULLIED!')

"..... then it is the responsibility of her colleagues to support and advise her to enable her to cope!"
Stunned silence.

"I see," said Eva, reeling slightly from the steadily growing stink of a fresh pile of corporate bullshit.

"So you would see this kind of issue as being no concern of the management?"

"No," said Dr Styles triumphantly. "As I said, this kind of thing should not be pushed up the pyramid."

("I know just what I'd like to push it up!" thought Eva).

"And what," said Eva out loud, politely but with emphasis, enunciating carefully, "about duty of care?"

Eva couldn't have known it, but this was the lance that Fakhriya had used in her final conversation with the Head. Barbara Styles dodged this unexpected, and awkwardly appropriate invisible

challenge with her whole body, jerking to one side with a wide-eyed glance of alarm. Partially recovering from the shock in a very short time, however, she affected not to have heard the question and became very interested in the paperwork in front of her again. The greasy, stinking, globular form of Pat Sherman, who had deliberately sat herself strategically opposite Eva in order to watch the skewering, glowed and preened with an almost sexual satisfaction. She had just been given *carte blanche* in public, and she intended to make full use of it.

This opening gambit turned out to be the first in a battery of professional put-downs aimed at almost all the house staff except, conspicuously, Pat Sherman. One by one, they were all obliquely but publicly reprimanded for having had the effrontery to trouble the management with their petty little boarding issues. Their mission in life, it seemed, was to make themselves as invisible as possible and not to pester the grown-ups. As the implications of the Styles gospel of boarding management slowly began to sink into the minds of her stunned staff, they found their will to stand up for themselves waning, in spite of themselves. It was a classic piece of corporate goal post moving. But the best was yet to come.

"So!" sighed Dr Styles contentedly and with deadly understatement (as the rest of the company still quivered in their seats, on the verge of emotional collapse, feeling as if they had just been savaged by

vampires), "That takes care of the Inset part.."
("The Inset PART??!") Discreet panic-stricken looks were exchanged.

"Fortunately we still have plenty of time.."

("We do?! For what?!")

".. to move on to our main theme for today.."

("Aha," thought Eva, irritating Styles with another of her knowing smiles. Rule number one, which Styles had mastered a long time ago. NEVER give your agenda away until your guns are properly loaded and facing the right way, and the enemy is preferably exhausted from another skirmish)....

"Which is....."

("Go ahead you blood-sucking bitch! Make my day!")

"The Old Ransomites' Reunion."

So that was it. The 'Inset' had not really been an Inset at all. It had been a two-pronged stratagem for putting a few jumped-up little house staff into their boxes, while at the same time softening them up for this. Now it made sense. You had to hand it to her. It was cunning. That was the thing with these stratagems: whichever way the axe fell, you lost. Unless - ruminated Eva - unless you simply stopped playing their game and started concentrating on your own. This thought elicited her third rogue smile of the morning, which in turn elicited her fourth, as Eva noted Styles' frown of annoyance on seeing her so at ease with herself.

"Sorry, Stylesie dear," thought Eva, smiling directly at her, "but you've just blown your cover. Oh dear,

now what are you going to do? And, which is just as bad, you have pushed several people in this room this morning to a point where they have far more to gain by not cooperating with you than they have to gain by cooperating with you."

Eva was reminded of something else her mother Svetlana had said the night before: "Some people are so clever, they're stupid." In spite of herself, her curiosity as to what was going to happen next almost overcame her sense of sorrow and dismay at the poisonous mind-set she was being exposed to. Almost.

For now it seemed, salt was about to be rubbed into the great wound of last year's Old Ransomites' Reunion. Every other year, during the first weekend of the May half-term holiday, there was a corporate 'expectation' of the boarding staff that they would voluntarily give up a weekend of their holiday in order to wait tables and clear up vomit at the Ransomite bacchanalia for old students of the school, plus spouses, partners and cronies. A small select group of students would also be chosen to assist them, who were likewise expected to feel corporately honoured to have their bottoms pinched and their breasts ogled and to wade through sick until the small hours of the morning.

The year before last, the whole occasion had got even more out of hand than usual, and several drunken spouses, partners or cronies, had entered a boarding house (blind drunk in the small hours of

the morning) where some of the girls had at last retreated, exhausted, to sleep. There had been one unspecified 'incident', in which two girls had been woken, frightened and molested by the intruders, and another in which Carol had discovered a party of several revellers of both sexes cooking breakfast with her bacon and eggs in the house kitchen at six o' clock in the morning, having somehow broken into the house.

These excesses had led several members of the house staff to write a letter to the Head with a copy to the Board of Governors, in which they categorically refused to have anything to do in future with what was, after all, a private social function involving guests for whom they had no professional responsibility, and expressing their dismay at students of the school being exposed to this kind of behaviour from people who should be setting them an example. It had been taken as a given by the boarding staff from that time to this that their cooperation from the event had been withdrawn. Under the circumstances this seemed more than reasonable.

How naive can one get? Pauline Jenkins had disappeared discreetly a few minutes earlier, and returned now with two VIPS: Patrick Donahue, Chairman of the Old Ransomites' Committee, and Andrew Moran, Treasurer of the Board of Governors. They entered the room, oozing smiles. Eva winced. One sat down at the corner of the rectangular table nearest the door, the other

walked right round the room and sat himself down at the corner diagonally opposite. Dr Styles formed the third angle of an invisible isosceles triangle, which had been constructed through the seating arrangements to contain the house staff. Eva could smell the tactics already. It all looked as casual as it was meant to look. There followed an effulgent, bowing and scraping introductory speech by Styles, who bobbed and danced like a mating partridge in front of so much status in one small room, babbling on about "thinking outside the box."

"So, having been put back into our boxes, we now have to think outside them! Nothing like being kept on one's toes, is there?" thought Eva.

Moran and Donahue made some sympathetic noises about the Bacchanalian excesses, before moving into their spiel. They spent the next fifteen minutes, smiling relentlessly throughout, talking about a marquee - how big it would be, where it would be located on the lacrosse pitch, where the band would play, what kind of music would be played, where the bar would be, how many courses the meal would have, where the extra parking facilities would be. The anxious frowns on the faces of the housemistresses and their assistants round the table began to melt in relief, and even gratitude. Except for Eva. Eva sat back in her chair and looked round the room, taking in the seating constellation and the way that Moran and Donahue were basically talking to each other across the room, and the way that none of the other people present had even been given a chance to speak.

So that, then, was that. It had been decided, without a single word of discussion, let alone opposition, that this year's Reunion would be held in a marquee, rather than in the main building. Even Jane Trowbridge and Carol seemed not to have noticed how brilliantly this performance had willfully missed the point, which was that the house staff had already unanimously decided that they wanted nothing further to do with the event, nor to spend a weekend of their hard-earned holidays waiting at tables and clearing up vomit. It was, Eva had to admit, a very deft piece of boardroom sleight of hand. You had to hand it to them. They had handed it to them. On a plate. Eva got into her car and drove round to her mother's.

Svetlana, taking one look at the expression on her daughter's face, went wordlessly into the kitchen as Eva went to sit down in front of the fire, and came back with a bottle of vintage Medoc and two huge Bordeaux glasses.

"Here," she said, pouring her a glass.

Eva sighed, too drained to speak. She gazed for quite a while into the flames of the fire, sipping thoughtfully. Svetlana waited.

"You know," said Eva, "there were moments in that room today when I was completely fascinated, even enjoying it. It's like staring into the eyes of a snake. It's mesmerizing."

"Yes, Eva, I know," said her mother. "That is why it is so important that you get out of there as soon as you can. That is the kind of poison you are dealing with. Its fascination is what makes it so deadly, you

see? As long as you live and work near it, it either kills you by sapping your strength, or turns you into an addict. Before you know it, you're outdoing them in venom. We become like what we loathe."

"It's terrifying," said Eva.

"It is," said her mother. "Listen, why don't you book a flight to Prague for half term? It'll give you something to look forward to. It always does you good!"

Eva's eyes filled with tears.

"Prague seems such a long way away today," she said, her voice shaking.

Svetlana took her hand and squeezed it.

"It only seems a long way away as long as you're moving away from it. Make the choice, Eva."

Chapter 15 Lax

It was morning break time at Ransom's and Eva retreated with grateful speed into the downstairs Ladies', which looked more like a facility in a hotel than a school. The floor was carpeted wall to wall in petrol blue with a demure, forgettable pattern, and there was a row of three elegant porcelain washbasins with mirrors. Eva was grateful to find herself alone for a few moments of peace after the onslaught of a double lesson with a restive and obtuse group of students. Emerging from a cubicle to go and wash her hands, she savoured the temporary illusion of being somewhere other than a school.

Until her eyes alighted on a metal rail behind her bearing something like a dozen very short mini-kilts neatly arranged on hangers. They were in various colours and patterns of tartan fabric, among them a Dress Stewart. This much she recognized, but as Eva was no expert in tartans most of them were unfamiliar to her by name. What was most striking was the sheer number of them. "So this is where she keeps them," Eva thought. "How odd."

The kilts all belonged to the latest human resource addition to the PE department, Scarlett Baines, nicknamed Thunder-Thighs. Scarlett had established a unique reputation within a few days of her arrival at Ransom's with the virtuoso, if rather disquieting accomplishment of settling without visible mishap into the PE department. The

latter ranked, even by Ransom's standards, as a strange enough place to be considered a health hazard. The PE department at Ransom's comprised a mysterious, incestuous subculture that incurred almost as high a staff turnover as the boarding. This was partly explained by the dominant globular presence of Pat Sherman, Ransom's senior sociopath, whose accomplishments included the gargantuan feat of teaching two double lessons of PE a week without moving. Apparently she was good with a whistle.

She was also a keen administrator and, like so many leading lights in schools, an acolyte of the Ancient Cult of List Worship. It was a rare moment when Pat did not have a list of some sort in her hand, or was not preparing a list on her computer, or pinning lists to a notice board. They provided her with an endless source of responsibility-free power. What made Pat Sherman the bane of the PE department was her insistence, although in practice this was impossible to prove, on treating the departmental notice board as if it were her personal property. Whenever Erica Jarvis, Ransom's principal lacrosse coach, posted her A and B team lists, or her coaching schedules, for example, she would pass by the notice board a while later only to find that they had been taken down. Erica was a nationally respected lax coach - at any one time there were two or three Ransom's girls playing in the English national team. In Sherman's eyes this evidently made her an upstart in need of stringent administrative containment. In

this way, the reign of psycho-terror waged by Pat Sherman on the notice board of the PE department mirrored the one simultaneously being waged by Pauline Jenkins with the aid of “her” notice board in the Staff Room, with its threats of dire punishments to people who posted unauthorized notices (a throw-back from her apprenticeship as unofficial Chief Executioner while she was still being groomed for apparatchik stardom in the school library).

With her sheer black hole bulk and the kind of manipulative cunning that is only possible in a person with two gravity warped brain cells, Sherman made her bid for power. She found that the traits that had impeded her progress in the world at large (her compulsive lying, her complete lack of empathy or scruple, her Olympian sense of entitlement) were her fast-track ticket to success at Ransom’s. Like her superiors she viewed talent in her colleagues not as an asset so much as a dangerous infectious disease, a threatening potential epidemic of competence. Talent paranoia was the cornerstone of Ransom’s staff development policy.

The cult of list worship practiced at Ransom’s, known by the innocuous-sounding euphemism of “paper-driven culture”, thus formed a near impenetrable force field repelling all intelligent initiative, creativity and growth, both from inside and out. Experience has shown that this is the most effective way of converting even the most obdurately excellent system into a mediocrity magnet, especially when combined with mindless

assessment criteria. Consequently, staff turnover at Ransom's was highest among the well qualified, the widely experienced, the multi-faceted and the uniquely talented. High flyers flew the nest as fast as they could, and were replaced with hyperactive multiple-choice clones.

The first port of call of the high flyers on their way out was often Martyrs' Complex House, whose staff were assumed to be ideologically subversive, mainly because of their intrinsically suspect reputation for smiles, warmth and kindness. For many of the disgruntled staff at Ransom's this made Martyrs' the furthest outpost of an evil empire. Thus Jane Trowbridge, Carol and Eva would find themselves handing out paper tissues and medicinal glasses of Cava to a succession of living sacrifices to Ransom's ancient cult of the list.

In common with other ancient cults, this one too had its carefully circumscribed and slightly weird erotic aspects – in this case a simmering but never openly stated hostility among senior female staff towards anything suggestive of undiluted womanhood, such as child-bearing, nurturing or anything to do with caring. Women who were “in” at Ransom's thus cultivated subtle forms of cross-dressing and a heavy smattering of ritualized cerebral sadism, topped off with the quintessential Ransom's aphrodisiac – social climbing. The dog-collar, or even better the bishop's mitre, were the favorite sex-toys in the ritual erotic life of Ransom's, although barristers' wigs came a close second.

Female rebels and subversives, on the other hand, liked consuming things with bubbles, sported nail polish and were occasionally seen kissing people. Invoking the virulent instinct for self-preservation that is the main talent of the closet sociopath, Thunder-Thighs Baines had taken one look at the malodorous, globular black hole that was Pat Sherman and grasped immediately the irresistibility of its gravitational pull. Pat, in her turn, ran her eyes up and down the chunky, muscular forty-seven year-old Scarlett disporting her impressive thighs in the mini-kilt of a thirteen year-old and sensed, with the instinct of one whose mission in life is to exploit other people's foibles, that here was someone kinky enough to be useful to her. They became inseparable.

With two of them now at it, the ritual sadism of the PE notice board was bound to draw blood soon. Erica was now subjected not only to the frustration of crucial information going astray from the notice board, but also found herself abruptly removed from her post as lax coach to Lax Team A. The girls were informed crisply one chilly morning that they were now to be coached by Scarlett Baines. More than this, the A and B teams were to be "reshuffled" according to the degree of "cooperative team spirit" they displayed to Baines. This translated into a strategy whereby any girl who challenged her - and A Team lax players were not usually backward in coming forward - was relegated to the B Team. Erica, a lithe, first-rate PE teacher and coach in her late fifties, and therefore within spitting distance of

retirement, was as crushed and dismayed as the lax teams. The Black Hole Committee had taken over. In sympathy, Martyrs' Complex began ordering Cava by the crate, rather than the discreet bottle or two as before.

"I wouldn't mind quite so much if Scarlett knew what she was doing," wailed Erica, "but she hasn't got a clue about coaching lax players of this standard, and worst of all, she is a disaster at people skills, especially with girls of a certain age!"

Eva, Jane and Carol had not at first understood what Erica had meant by this turn of phrase, until stories soon began filtering back into Martyrs told by girls returning from the dreaded new coaching sessions, as well as from regular PE lessons. There were references by girls, generally aged between thirteen and fifteen, to incidents of Scarlett "touching them" during lessons. Once one girl had started talking over the biscuits after school, others followed. At first Jane, Carol and Eva just listened, perhaps asking the odd question to double check, but then a member of the Lower Sixth started on the theme of her own accord, one bedtime, as Jane and Carol were tidying up their office for the night before turning off the lights. Amanda Collett had just started her A Levels at Ransom's that September. Before that she had been at the same school where Scarlett had previously taught.

"I was amazed when I saw she was teaching here," Amanda had said. "We all thought she must have been sacked from Sutton Dempsey."

Carol tried not to show much of a reaction.

“Oh?” she said, neutrally.

“Yeah,” Amanda went on, “she used to do kinky things.”

“Like?” Carol had continued. Jane had frozen in the doorway on her way back into the office after tidying up some crockery.

“Well, in our PE lessons she used to do things like make girls lie flat on the floor, face upwards, for several minutes at a time, like at the start of a lesson, while she stood astride them and told the rest of us what to do in the lesson!”

“Stood astride them,” repeated Carol carefully, trying hard to sound neutral. “And what was she wearing?”

“Oh, you know, those short kilts she goes around in all the time,” said Amanda. “They’d have to just lie there staring up at her you-know-what. And then she would tell girls to jump over the horse and touch their bums as they went over.”

“But surely it’s usual to secure people on their way over?”

“Secure, yes, but not touch up!”

It is reassuring in this day and age to know that our children are protected at school by means of a detailed and thorough apparatus of legislation and watertight professional procedure, from the kinks and perversions of dubious persons who might otherwise exercise unwholesome power over them or cause them harm. One of the mechanisms designed to ensure that proper procedures are invoked in a situation like this is the compulsory

appointment at schools of a Chief Child Protection Officer, who can, if necessary, call in the social services or even the police. At Ransom's the Chief Child Protection Officer was – the Headmistress Dr Styles. This spelled the kiss of death for any hopes of protecting the children. If anything it spelled a vendetta.

Carol asked for an appointment to see the Head. The Head did not invite her to sit. Standing beside the Head's desk, Carol calmly explained what the girls had been telling her and other staff in the house. Dr Styles did not so much as blink. She merely said; "Tell the girls to write a collective letter of complaint, if they feel that it is justified."

Carol waited to be asked if she knew of anything that could corroborate or refute the allegations being made. No questions came. She left.

"It was one of those occasions," she said to Eva afterwards, "when you realize that the essence of what is being done lies in what is not being done."

Jane Trowbridge was worried. She could see a Styles cover-up in the offing.

"If Dr Styles is asking the girls to write a formal letter of complaint collectively, then she must be going for a cover-up," she said, thinking aloud.

"What makes you think that?" asked Eva.

"Well," answered Jane. "For one thing, do you remember the last inspection we had, when one of the inspectors made that wry comment about the Head always "mislaying" records of letters of complaint when she was asked for them?"

"Now you come to mention it!" laughed Carol. "They

certainly seemed to have her number, didn't they?" "Yes," said Jane, "but that isn't what really worries me."

"What then?" asked Eva.

"Well, if – and I mean if – there is any truth to these allegations about Scarlett touching girls up and doing kinky things, then there is a strong possibility of there being a legal case of some sort against her. But a letter of complaint written by all the girls collectively would not be admissible as evidence in a court of law. "Dr Styles," Jane went on, "is effectively refusing to wear her Child Protection Officer hat on this one. This is too hot a potato for her taste."

"She's going to try to brush this under the carpet, isn't she?" said Eva.

"I'm sure of it," said Jane.

Having written their letter, as requested, the girls who had made the allegations were summoned to the Head's study a couple of days later – there were no other members of staff present – for a lengthy collective interview on two separate occasions. Another followed some days later. The girls themselves summed up the situation by saying: "Telling her about it has just made it worse. We felt as if we were the ones who done something wrong. " They said they felt betrayed.

Roughly simultaneously with these interviews, Pauline Jenkins was seen in the staff room pointedly making a huge fuss of Scarlett Baines, laughing and joking with her. This uncharacteristic

cheer looked so forced that some colleagues were even seen ostentatiously putting their fingers in their mouths behind Jenkins' back. Scarlett was still wearing the kilts regularly. She also appeared to have no compunction, despite the nature of the allegations against her, about filling her private car with Ransom's girls on her way to and from school.

The message was as clear as it was depressing. Scarlett Baines and Pat Sherman began to frequent the staff room on a much more regular basis, now that they were clearly "in" with the highest echelons of the pecking order. They soon took over a choice corner of the staff room near the balcony in celebration, to rival even the primordial aura of approval surrounding the Oxbridge English Literature mafia. They held court loudly every morning during break time. Harry Hollingsworth, the music master, finding himself unable to cope with the sight of the Baines thighs decorated with Dress Stewart one day, removed himself to a dark recess and hid behind the Independent newspaper.

This turn of events had repercussions in the PE department, where the Sherman-Baines duo now reigned supreme over the notice board and the decision-making. By Christmas, a young newly qualified teacher had gone on long-term sick leave and did not return, rumoured to have suffered a nervous breakdown. Her replacement, hastily appointed over the Christmas break, lasted just two weeks before also disappearing. Meanwhile, Erica still hung on grimly, fuelled by a regular intake of

Cava plied by Jane, Carol and Eva at Martyrs'. But she too was beginning to crack. She decided to go to the management. It was like watching a lone lemming venture to the verge of the same cliff edge from which so many had never returned.

Erica, normally an open, talkative person, was crushed on her return from a conversation with Dr Styles. So much so that she did not even feel able to talk about it. She looked deflated and disoriented.

Eva was worried about her. "She's looking more pale and worn out every week," she told her mother one Friday evening after school.

"Erica Jarvis is discovering the painful truth that not everyone is open to reason," said Svetlana to her daughter over a large glass of Medoc. "It's one of the hardest lessons a reasonable person ever has to learn. It's like discovering that there is not one human race, but two."

"I don't think Erica can take much more," said Eva.

She was right. One Monday morning at break in the staff room, she noticed more of a buzz than usual over in the Sherman-Baines corner. Pat Sherman seemed to have absorbed even more of the space-time continuum around her and was wobbling with chuckles. Scarlett was sporting a new red kilt.

"Have you heard?" Harry Hollingsworth leaned over to Eva as she made herself a coffee. "Erica has been signed off sick with stress. She's unlikely to be back for some time."

Eva looked up wide-eyed at Harry. "Oh no, poor

Erica,” said Eva.

The takeover of the PE department was now complete. Sherman and Baines had won, it seemed.

Curiously, that evening Svetlana seemed neither surprised nor saddened by this news. Instead she smiled one of her smiles, threading a piece of green yarn through an enormous tapestry needle. “Mmmm,” she said. “Interesting.”

“What?” asked Eva.

“I’m not sure yet,” said Svetlana, looking at her work. “Just a feeling I have.”

“Ah,” said Eva, smiling an involuntary smile.

Some weeks went by and there was no news from Erica, who had sent word to Ransom’s via the school secretary, thanking everyone for their cards, flowers and good wishes, but requesting that no-one visit her for the time being. Meanwhile, the replacement of the replacement PE teacher had also handed in her resignation. Even by the standards of Ransom’s PE department this exodus was starting to look careless.

The situation was responded to with a tour de force of Ransomite managerial genius. One morning it was announced in assembly that the acting head of the PE department was to be: Pauline Jenkins! The whole school was throbbing with it. “I didn’t even know Pauline Jenkins taught PE!” said one young colleague in the staff room, to be immediately quashed with a collective silent look of “Oh for heavens’ sake don’t be so naïve!” Of course Pauline

Jenkins didn't teach PE! This wasn't about PE! This was about Jenkins' and above all Styles' chickens coming home to roost, as Pat Sherman and Scarlett Baines, having first been given carte blanche to bully all and sundry with impunity, now raged embarrassingly out of control. Clearly Styles and Jenkins had not seen any of this coming. To the pure all is pure, but to the bully there is no such thing as bullying. They could not risk putting anyone else in to head up the department, for fear of what might come to light. After all one of the two reigning terrors had been accused of "inappropriate" behaviour with the girls, and nothing had been done about it. This was clearly an attempt to keep the lid on something. Deliciously, this turned out to be the tip of an iceberg that threatened to be of Titanic proportions. Carol heard from one of the cleaners, who had heard it from another cleaner who had a second part-time job at a law firm in Brighton, that Erica Jarvis had taken counsel. She was suing Ransom's for constructive dismissal.

Svetlana gave one of her rare chuckles. "I bet that's got Styles wincing! You know, it really is comforting to know that even the most callous person can still feel pain in their wallet. Yes, that is what I call the shit elegantly hitting the fan."

She heaved a long, gentle sigh of contentment. "Have another glass of Bollinger, dear?"

"Another bottle even," glowed Eva, sinking into her pile of cushions and putting her feet up.

Chapter 16 Narcissi

Whenever I see Eva walking down my front path in the late afternoon with her shoulders tense and drawn in, her head down and that line between her eyebrows, I know it's going to take a pot of tea, not just a cup, to get her to unwind. It means she has a story to tell. Through Eva's accounts, I have been following events at Ransom's for so long now I could do it blindfold over the custard creams. Everything seems to be unfolding pretty predictably.

One of the principal functions of boarding schools is to serve as social climbing frames for their managerial staff, who tend to come from lower middle class backgrounds and strive after social recognition by means of a specific version of proxy narcissism through association with the wealthy and powerful. Oddly, the latter are often oblivious to this crucial social function of boarding schools, as they tend to be oblivious to so much else. Obliviousness is indeed the shared mechanism by which this mysterious transfer of status appears to occur. The ability to be oblivious is arguably the most important prerequisite for success in a boarding school career.

There are exceptions to these managerial social climbers at boarding schools. For example hard-drinking Bursars of the retired army officer variety, who by virtue of their upper middle class or even higher pedigrees have nothing further to prove in terms of social advancement. They are basically doing little more than treading water to top up already generous army pensions until they can

retire. If they have awful wives, these years can be usefully filled with such harmless pursuits as extra-marital affairs with secretaries and Domestic Bursars and pulling pension plans out of the hat to make it look as if they are actually doing something useful. Not surprisingly, the tooth and claw power struggles going on around them either provide them with mild amusement, or leave them stone cold. Either way, they are perceived by most of the boarding school community around them as being snobbish and aloof, when what they usually think they are being is discrete and professional. Either way, their role forms a third variation on the theme of obliviousness.

Irritatingly for the climbers, however, social advancement by proxy is only possible because of the distasteful domestic realities of boarding itself, and thus also of the boarding staff who do the actual work. The climbers who are so busy trying to prove that they are so much more than menial thus find themselves in the irksome position of being dependent on menial labour for their own advancement. Within most boarding school cultures, therefore, these incarnations of necessary social evil thus fulfill the important secondary role of giving everybody else in the school someone to look down on and, whenever necessary, to blame when anything goes wrong.

This built-in ambivalence is not without its pitfalls, however, since a school's boarding staff are simultaneously not only its work horse and scapegoat, but also unquestionably its backbone. In practice the only way one can maintain a

sustained view of one's own backbone, institutionally speaking, is by keeping one's head very close to, if not actually inside, the nearest available orifice. This is not only a most uncomfortable position for everyone concerned, but also has disadvantage of seriously limiting one's perspective. Many of the absurdities of boarding life can be explained by this inherent conflict between pragmatic necessity and social aspiration - one hesitates to say pretension. It will readily be seen that upholding a permanent state of collective denial is sometimes the most exhausting aspect of all in this already exhausting profession.

To this fraught social ambivalence must be added the sober reality that boarding schools, by virtue of their submarine-like nature, are magnets for people with various personality impairments, particularly of a kind which make it difficult for them to relate to others on an equal, one-to-one basis. This leads one to a sense of being surrounded by colleagues with a penchant for being permanently and irrefutably right that is all too rarely balanced by a gift for listening to what anyone else has to say. With a growing sense of dread and dismay, the realization slowly dawns that those who do best in boarding in the long term would long ago have been withdrawn from circulation in almost any other walk of life on the grounds that they were a health hazard.

Ordinarily, one could at least console oneself with the thought of being able to get into one's car at five o' clock and drive home to something resembling

the real world. However, given that it is in the nature of boarding to live and work with the same people, it does not take long to become infected with a pervasive sense of mild derangement, from which some unfortunately never recover and others succumb to entirely without ever realizing that there was an alternative. Daily life in boarding frequently takes on the characteristics of a guerrilla war between the merely stressed and the manifestly deranged. The principal weapons in this warfare are back-stabbing and mind jobs on the side of the manifestly deranged, which can, on occasion, even lead to full-blown coups d'etat, and various forms of civil disobedience, mostly harmless and often humorous, on the side of the merely stressed. Needless to say, the higher up the food chain one goes, the nastier it all gets.

Eva was looking tired and drawn, but was laughing, in that way that people do whose laughter muscles are not getting nearly enough exercise and can't seem to find their rightful pathways in the face. She laughed furtively, apologetically, as if her laughter were an escaped prisoner expecting to be recaptured at any moment. Not knowing what else to do, I planted a kiss on her brow as I refilled her cup. This gesture took her by surprise, as I caught her upward glance at me standing over her. She looked just as she had done as a little girl. On an impulse, I stroked her hair, which was still damp from the drizzle outside. I was aware that my attempts to repair the damage caused by my reticence and distance all those years ago may well

be making her present pain all the more acute by contrast. Was I just confusing her with my comforting gestures, which she had taught herself not to expect? She didn't need to tell me that the atmosphere at Ransom's was getting more tense and poisonous with each passing week. That much I could read in her face. "Have another piece of Dundee cake," I said.

"You see Mum," she was saying, "I was on evening duty yesterday - you know Wednesday is Carol's day off, but she was there in the office with Jane Trowbridge, the Housemistress, and Leanne the other cleaner."

"Madge wasn't there then?" I verified.

"No, that was the point!" answered Eva. "Actually Leanne wouldn't normally have been there at that hour either, of course, she finishes at lunchtime. She just came round on her way to bingo."

"The thing is," Eva went on, "Madge has been number one cleaner at Martyrs' for so long that she thinks she owns the place. She's been at the school far longer than anyone else, even longer than Father Barnes, the Chaplain.

"Nice man, I like him," I said.

"Yes, he is" said Eva, looking up and smiling in agreement. "But it's a running joke at Ransom's, that everyone who goes to work in Martyr's Complex, including Jane - she's now in her third year as Housemistress you know - everyone becomes one of "Madge's Martyrs". She terrorizes the place with her moods and passing judgement on everything, and poor Leanne doesn't know whether she is coming or going half the time.

Madge treats her like dirt.

"Jane and Carol and me were worried about Leanne, because we really like her and we can see that she is suffering - she goes round in tears some days - and the girls in the house really like her too and she really cares about them. Leanne always comes to tell one of us if she notices that one of the girls is being given the cold shoulder or not eating properly. She has her ear to the ground and that really helps us if one of the girls needs a chat or a bit of TLC.

"And then there are Madge's awful sulks if we try to tell her anything. She clatters that blasted bucket of hers about and she won't speak to us for days. Or she'll lock the toilet paper away in that cupboard that only she has the key to, and then when we go to her to ask for it she'll really spin it out and be awkward about it. Carol and I got so fed up we went to Tesco's in her car one day and bought a whole load of toilet paper out of our own money and put it on top of the wardrobe in her flat so that we would have some to give the girls when they asked for it. It was so embarrassing!"

Eva paused to take a sip of hot tea and a bite of cake.

"So our friend Madge is on quite a power trip then," I added.

"You can say that again! But we found out quite by accident that that wasn't the worst of it!"

"She was the Head's spy?" I volunteered blandly.

Eva nearly dropped her cup, her eyes shooting over towards me in astonishment. "Now how on earth could you know that? I didn't know it myself until a

couple of days ago!"

"Well it really isn't hard to guess dear," I answered, scooping some cake crumbs off the trolley and depositing them on my used plate. "Knowing what we do about our dear Barbara, and how paranoid she is, you don't need to be a mind-reader to work out that she would have some kind of network of informants. And who better," I added, folding up my napkin, "than a nasty bit of work like Madge who has been at the school forever and knows the place inside out?"

"But why on earth spy on us at Martyrs?" exclaimed Eva. "She positively despises everything to do with boarding! What on earth could interest her about our goings on?"

"I don't think you would describe our dear Barbara Head-Fuque," I went on, as my daughter spluttered some tea over her skirt, "as the most empathic person on earth?"

"Hardly!" muttered Eva, wiping her skirt with a fresh paper napkin bearing a William Morris Pre-Raphaelite design to match my blue china. "Nice napkins, Mum!" she muttered through another mouthful of cake, raising her folded napkin aloft.

"Well then," I went on, retracing the thought process step by step in my mind, trying to put myself in the position of Barbara "Head-Fuque" Styles, "it would seem logical to assume that she would compensate for this lack of empathic insight by procuring more concrete forms of information into the day-to-day workings of her school." I paused, rethreading a piece of vegetable-dyed terracotta-coloured yarn and attaching it with my

curved tapestry needle to the underside of a canvas I was repairing.

"Also," I added matter-of-factly, "she enjoys having power over people, and knowledge, so they tell me, is power."

"It seems that Madge has been listening at all the keyholes in her orbit and passing it all on to Mrs Styles," sighed Eva.

"Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves though, dear," I volunteered tritely, but convinced it was true.

"We just feel so powerless!" exclaimed Eva.

"Well of course you do. That is exactly what you are intended to feel."

Eva looked, rather than uttered, the question she wanted to ask, before rolling her eyes with that "Oh, all right mother, cast us your pearls of wisdom before we all die of suspense" look, grinning from ear to ear, which made a very pleasant change from the look she had been wearing on her way in.

"I thought you all did a smattering of psychology in teacher training, sweetheart?" I replied with a querying raised eyebrow.

"Yes, of course," said Eva.

"Well then, you will surely have done something about narcissism? You know, personality disorders?"

"Are you saying Barbara Styles has a narcissistic personality?" Eva asked.

"Oh, I think I am saying rather more than that, dear. From where I am sitting, narcissism seems to have become the prevailing management style - and not just in schools." I tied up the loose terracotta

end and swivelled the tapestry frame round to look at my work.

"I'm not sure I see what you are getting at," said Eva.

"Well, you may remember from your psychology reading that the narcissist, having little or no access to their own true feelings, which are suppressed, is unable to "read" other people's emotions. In other words, they have very poor empathy skills?"

"Yes, that would fit," said Eva.

"But they also have an unconscious need to manipulate others into acting out their own unacknowledged feelings, especially the underlying feeling of powerlessness that led them to become narcissistic in the first place?" I looked up. "So..."

"So you are saying that we are being manipulated into feeling her powerlessness?" Eva had picked up the thread.

"That's right. Think about what you are all feeling at this moment."

"Impotent rage would sum it up!" said Eva, looking reflectively into the fireplace.

"And are you normally given to fits of impotent rage? Outside school, I mean?" I asked.

"No, not at all!" Eva replied.

I picked up another, darker piece of yarn and threaded it through my needle, turning the work over again. The darker thread was starting to set off the flower to good effect. "That's how it seems to work," I said. "It all seems to hinge on inducing a state of emotional exhaustion in you, resulting from living out emotions that are not actually your own."

"There must be more to it than that," said Eva, now in tune with the line of thought.

"Oh yes, indeed there is," I answered. "Have you noticed lately how you and Jane and Carol and Leanne seem to be living out your whole working lives in a series of knee-jerk reactions to whatever little manipulative scheme is being worked out at the time?"

"Yes," answered Eva slowly, gazing into the fire, as the reality dawned.

"So that," I said, working the next couple of stitches, "is where the narcissist gets their energy - from conning you into abandoning your own agendas, whatever they may be, and having your energy sapped by all those little mind games."

There was silence for many seconds, as this perspective was absorbed. I continued stitching my leaf quietly, waiting.

"The question though," said Eva thoughtfully, "is, what can we do about it?"

"Ah," I said, reaching the end of a row of stitches, pulling the yarn through the back of the canvas.

"Do you think something needs to be done then?"

"What do you mean?" Eva asked, looking a little perplexed.

"Well, I know I'm just an old woman who....."

Eva didn't even let me finish my sentence before she burst out laughing. There was a naughty glint in her eye. "Now Mum," she said, "you know perfectly well that's what you always say just before you drop one of your bombshells!"

"One of my bombshells, dear?" I repeated, reaching for the scissors and cutting off a piece of yarn at

the back of the canvas.

"Come on Mum," said Eva. "Let's have it then!"

"Let's have what dear?"

"The words of wisdom, of course!"

I couldn't help savouring the brief pause as I plucked a piece of moss green yarn out of the basket.

"Well...." I started.

"Yes?" there was real amusement in her voice now.

"Well you know, there are times when the best thing you can do is nothing."

"As in absolutely nothing?" Eva pressed.

"Well the point with these narcissists, if I am right about her, that is,"

"Which we should not doubt," said Eva, grinning.

".... is that the more you respond to them, the more energy you feed them with. They are rather like vampires, you see dear."

"Figures," said Eva, teeth sunk into a digestive biscuit.

"So arguably the best thing would be to cut off the supply of attention?" I volunteered, stabbing my needle into the outline of a leaf.

"That could take more self-discipline than I think I have," said Eva thoughtfully.

"Oh I think you could find yourself rather enjoying it, when you start to get a response," I answered.

"A response?"

"Yes. Think of it as a kind of addiction, dear. Your negative emotions are Mrs Head-Fuque's "fix", so to speak. So what do you think will happen when you cut off the supply?"

"Er, she will get withdrawal symptoms?"

"I'm sure she will dear. And people with withdrawal symptoms get....." I waited.

"Desperate?" Eva responded.

"Yes, and careless."

"Mmmm. Like sort of forcing an error in tennis, you mean?"

"Exactly, dear."

"So if I understand this right, you're saying that the less we respond to this provocation from Madge and the Barb, the more likely they are to make a mistake that they can't recover from?"

"More or less, yes." I smoothed the canvas, ready for the next stitch.

"So paradoxically, the best thing we can do now is nothing?" Eva mused.

"Exactly dear."

"Right!" She sighed.

Eva stood up, looking around her. She made to collect her things together and go. I sighed contentedly and reached for more yarn. I do enjoy tapestries.

"Unless, dear, you wanted to kill two birds with one stone, and deal with Madge, and possibly one or two other irritating people as well?"

Eva appeared to think better of leaving and sat back down again.

Chapter 17 The Crooked House

The Crooked House was an oak-beamed coffee shop in Crooked Lane in the centre of Newbourne, just a stone's throw away from the Cathedral. Although easy to reach, it was tucked away from mainstream traffic, slightly off the High Street. Tourists might easily have passed it by without noticing, but Eva liked to go there to meet colleagues and friends. Its interior decor reminded her of cafes in Prague. As she walked through the entrance and saw the wooden panelling, the slanting fall of golden light from the skylight on to the round tables, the square cream damask tablecloths placed over the round ones underneath, she could smell the dark, nutty smell of the coffee. Her eye took in the display of cakes under the round glass casing of the counter. Something blinked inside her whenever she went in. There was a pang that came on realizing that the space she occupied here was so nearly, but not quite, the right one – not, after all, that place of places, that sense of *genius loci*, where she felt in tune with herself. It struck her as odd, even now, that she should feel so strongly about a place where she was technically a foreigner. Whenever she came in here she would hungrily pocket into her memory the trinkets and signs of this momentary illusion: the original abstract paintings on the walls, the tinkling spoons, the row of coats hanging in an open wardrobe near the door, implying guests who had plenty of time, or the extended table of a dozen or so elderly women, antique-jewelled, coiffed and conversing. They seemed unaware that old age had

unofficially been declared unseemly and redundant. This borrowed place and time seemed to Eva like an unexpected gift. It was one of the rooms in her mind's eye that she could go to at any time she wanted, if only she would make the time.

Moving forward towards the skylit centre of the café, Eva smiled to herself in anticipation of the feast of gossip and strategy to come. Ransom's was about to be bombarded with a humour offensive of unprecedented elegance. The first colleague to arrive and join her was Leanne, one of the two cleaners at Martyrs' Complex, the senior girls' boarding house at Ransom's. Eva and Leanne had become friends, provoking consternation and raised eyebrows in Ransom's staff room, where Christian love was apparently seen less as a virtue directed universally at all humanity, than as a tastefully understated emblem of upward mobility. The gales of laughter frequently heard from the Martyrs' office during morning coffee breaks, which the Housemistress, her Assistant Carol and Leanne would take together, if you please, were taken as evidence of the "questionable appropriateness" of this relationship. As an Assistant who did not teach, but merely provided round-the-clock pastoral and moral care, Carol had grown used to a position of sustained social invisibility. Without realizing it she even reinforced it with her good-humoured response to it. But then her own academic qualifications were embarrassingly good, which made her something of a walking affront to her professional superiors.

Leanne on the other hand had been working as a

cleaner at Ransom's for two years, during which she had been mercilessly bullied by Madge, the other House cleaner, who had been there for decades. Moreover, Jane Trowbridge, the Housemistress, had recently discovered that Madge the Badge was one of Barbara Style's principle sources of insider information in her Machiavellian style management culture.

The flow of this information, as Jane, Eva and Carol discovered, had been increasing in direct proportion to the relentless cheerfulness with which Carol met the mounting barrage of snubs and insults meted out to her by Barbara and her deputy, Pauline Jenkins. However, Madge was soon to retire, and a parting shot had to be prepared. This was a council of war. A frisson of anticipation rippled over Eva just as Jane Trowbridge walked in, still aglow with the thrill of having "escaped" for an hour from the school they referred to as Saint Scholastica de la Paranoia.

An Espresso Macchiato and a Latte materialized and were stirred conspiratorially. Madge, aged around sixty, they learned, was not looking forward at all to retirement, although her husband, a retired accountant, had found a new lease of life in the last two years. He now stacked shelves at a local supermarket and found that he revelled in a job that allowed him to work his shift and then just put his coat on and go home to a life that he now actually had the energy to live. He played a lot of golf.

Madge, bless her, was one of those people who become so institutionalized that they become more like the institution than the institution. By now over twenty years at Ransom's, she had seen Headmistresses come and go, Housemistresses come and go (with much greater regularity, since few seemed to last more than a couple of years at Ransom's), and she fancied that it was her privilege to dominate the stream of downtrodden cleaners who came to work in her team. In the two years since Leanne had started working as a cleaner at Ransom's she had learned to grit her teeth behind a cheerful smile, but was beginning to crack round the edges under the onslaught from Madge's sharp tongue. "Mouth like a bee's arse," Carol had confirmed. Her friendship with the House staff, who saw the cleaning ladies integral to the House team, was also perceived by Madge as a threat.

"I just bumped into Harry Hollingsworth on my way in," said Jane, still wearing a fleeting puzzled frown, in spite of her anticipatory glee, as she seated herself and looked back over her shoulder towards the empty doorway.

"He just walked straight past me, even though I said hello to him quite loudly and called out his name. That's not like him at all: he's usually so friendly and outgoing."

"I expect our poor music master is even more overworked than usual," said Carol. Harry was one of the few members of the teaching staff who looked her in the eye in the staff room and spoke to her as if she were a normal person, rather than a pariah.

“Of course there is the musical coming up,” said Eva. “It’s an awful lot of work.” She picked up her purse. It was her turn to pay today.

On one side of the café the wall was mirrored from seat level up to the ceiling and Eva caught sight of a plump middle-aged woman walking parallel with her. She was about to greet her mother in surprise and tell her how well she was looking before she realized that she was looking at her own reflection. She laughed to herself, recalling how many years ago her mother had once told her the same story about herself in a department store.

Eva went up to the counter and ordered large Cappuccinos, two slices of Black Forest Gateau, a buttered scone and a Danish pastry with pecan nuts. She had been so under the spell of her Prague illusion for a few minutes that she had forgotten there would be no waitress service here. In England she so missed being able to go to a café and just dump her heavy bag on the floor, fold up her umbrella, hang up her wet coat in a place provided for that purpose, sit down and wait to be served. As her varicose veins stung and pulsed with fiery cramps during the several minutes she stood at the counter waiting for her order to be made up and put on a tray, she wistfully recalled memorable coffees that had been drunk elsewhere as she had remained seated from start to finish.

On the way back to the table she recognized herself in the mirror this time. The tray, however, was

huge, heavy and unwieldy and she seemed to have one hand too few, as her bag threatened to cut off the circulation to her lower right arm under the tray, which was too big for her to be able to see what she was doing with her feet. Having at least one experience behind her of tripping up over invisible obstacles on café and restaurant floors in the past, she slowly and carefully slid her feet in front of her in the manner of someone making their way systematically across an uncharted minefield. At the very last second, when she had nearly reached the table and her right arm had grown so numb from the weight of the bag slung over it that she could no longer feel the tray, Jane Trowbridge tossed her magnificent shoulder length Titian-coloured mane in her direction, sized up the situation and snatched the two nearest cups of Cappuccino, allowing Eva to deposit the tray without mishap. After a little dabbing of saucers with napkins and a light massaging of the right wrist, the gossip session could continue.

Carol, Leanne and Jane all lit up cigarettes. Carol had purchased a packet of multicoloured Cocktail Sobranie for the purpose. She used an ebony cigarette holder that her father had once brought back from a trip to France. They particularly enjoyed smoking at the Crooked House since the school had been declared an opt-in non-smoking institution, which meant that people now smoked in their cars or in the bushes behind the kitchens. “Smokers are the new lepers,” Carol announced matter-of-factly, with an elegant, expensive

sounding click of a magnificent engraved cigarette lighter she had recently purchased in a jumble sale. Leanne admired it as Carol told the story, but laughed, saying: "I bet you any money La Tight-ass Styles and her side-kick Sexless Jenkins have never even been to a jumble sale in their lives!"

Carol half snorted, half chuckled her assent. "Of course not, it would be against their Christian principles to do anything so common!" Jane's Titian hair glimmered and shimmered with glee behind the smoke wisp rising playfully from her Cocktail Sobranie.

"But enough of this coarse and futile frivolity ladies!" Eva said with mock determination, calling the girls to order. "There is serious fun to be planned!"

"Madge," confirmed Jane, with a shimmer of Titian assent, looking portentously round at the others.

"Madge," the others grunted one after the other, like a meditation group practicing a new mantra.

At this point Eva took over. "The beauty of this cunning plan," she revealed, looking wide-eyed but confident as she took a turquoise-coloured Sobranie out of the pack and lit it with a dramatic click from the borrowed lighter, "is that it is a multi-tasker of unsurpassed elegance and economy."

"A multi-tasker," repeated Leanne, smiling knowingly.

"Yes," Eva went on, "in one simple operation we - to use the phrase our Female Führer is so fond of - put Madge back in her box - in return for all the spying she has done on us, make the Führer think

twice about the reliability of her spying tactics by showing her that we control her sources of information, and” - pregnant pause - “take a little side swipe at the Bursar and his bit on the side the Domestic Bursar while we are about it!”

“Oh shame!” cackled Jane, taking another drag of her cigarette.

“Wicked!” intoned Leanne.

“There will be a modest total equipment outlay of, say 40 quid,” Eva went on.

There was a clink of loose change and some rustling of folded notes being unfolded as the conspiracy kitty materialized among the cakes and gateaux. Eva scooped it up and put it in the side compartment of her serviceable leather purse.

“Thanks girls,” she said.

“Now,” she went on, “the main thrust in phase one of the operation – if you will pardon the rather masculine imagery ladies - (general cackles and titters round the table) – will be carried by yours truly and our very own Carol!!!” A decorous round of applause and grunts of approval followed.

“However, the rest of you are most welcome to be in on phase two, in fact the more the merrier, because the gossip factor is both the target of the operation and its principal weapon!”

“Genius,” said Jane, putting out her cigarette and smirking with anticipation.

“And here,” said Eva, leaning forwards, “is what we do...”

A silent glance of understanding passed between Carol and Eva as they sat in the House office of

Martyrs Complex at nine-thirty the following morning. They had deliberately left the office door open as Carol moved between the office and the staff kitchen making coffee and toast. By this time, Madge would have worked her way through the dorms and would be about to make a start on the communal bathrooms adjacent to the office. The timing had to be right.

"I just don't know how you could do it, Carol!" said Eva, launching her first missile in as natural a voice as she could, attempting to sound stern and outraged.

"What are you talking about?" muttered Carol, sounding as sulky as she could.

"Well, after all Carol, he is a married man!"

There was the sound of a metal bucket being deposited abruptly in the corridor a few feet away. Eva suppressed her mirth and ploughed on. "Even if he is having an affair with the Domestic Bursar," she added, sounding rather sulky. The bucket handle seemed to pass out loudly, dropping against the bucket with a clang. Eva waited, breathing gently, smiling at Carol, who now spoke up:

"The thing is, Eva," she said, "when it boils down to it, it's actually no concern of yours who I see or go out with! It's actually none of your business!"

"None of my business!" Eva was booming dramatically now. "You are – well – carrying on with a member of the senior management team of this school – a married man I might add, and whose name has been linked with another senior member of staff! Has it never occurred to you to ask yourself what kind of trouble that could make?"

The sense of tension out near the bucket in the corridor grew steadily and palpably towards a crescendo, almost like silent, invisible sex for one – an eavesdropper's orgasm. Eva was having difficulty controlling herself by now and was grateful that both she and Carol, who was grinning painfully, her eyes wet with laughter, were invisible to their target audience.

"I am quite sure," Carol forged on, "that Crippie (she nearly lost it at this point with her little invented nickname taken from Armstrong-Cripps' surname)... that Crippie would be appalled if he thought that anyone in your position in the school was so presumptuous as to pass comment on his private life! I have no doubt at all that he would consider it the most almighty cheek!"

Eva was in full flow now:

"In my position in the school? Presumptuous?" she repeated with impotent rage and mock indignance. She laid it on as thick as she could now, shifting up into full-blown insult gear. Knowing what was coming, Carol braced herself with a grin and clutched theatrically at her heart.

"How dare you, a mere assistant housemistress ("here it comes," thought Carol, "the moment of Ransom truth!"), who isn't even qualified to teach, tell me I'm presumptuous! You little golddigger! You're only shagging him for what you can get out of it!"

"Oh come off it, Eva!" Carol was shouting now. "Why don't you admit it! You're jealous!"

"JEALOUS!" boomed Eva. "Of you? Don't be ridiculous!"

They had timed it well, and just as they heard the first heavy footfalls of girls stomping upstairs at the start of break time, Eva gently pushed the door of the office closed with her foot, leaving poor Madge in a paroxysm of unrequited curiosity, standing alone in the corridor outside, invisible beside her silent, impotent bucket. Drunk on the hubris of decades of power-mongering tittle-tattle that had enabled her to scupper many people and careers in her time, Madge alas had no yardstick with which to measure what she had just heard. As she stood there, gazing in visionary excitement through the fading wallpaper of Martyrs towards the imagined tour de force of her career, its very crowning glory indeed, she could almost feel the frisson of erotic power she would feel as she passed this delicious information on to Dr Styles the Head. She fancied herself about to consummate the most glorious piece of tittle-tattle in the history of Martyrs. In reality she was being played like a violin.

Behind the closed door, Eva and Carol were bent double in silent mirth. At one point Carol even slid off her chair on to the floor, to the alarm of her Burmese cat, curled up underneath. Temporarily reclined against the heavy desk in the centre of the room, Carol reached up for her coffee mug and a slice of toast and Marmite, while Eva blew her silent kisses of applause with both hands.

"We deserve Oscars for this," she mouthed to Carol, as a reluctant bucket was heard clanking away thoughtfully into a remote distance.

"Time to move into stage two, I think," responded

Carol, taking a large gulp from her mug.

“My, this is thirsty work!”

Some of Eva’s toast was catapulted across the room in the ensuing muffled guffaws. But by then she had already reached for the phone.

Just after lunch, when a good few members of Ransom’s staff had reason to be in or around the main office on the first floor, a van marked “Amelia’s the Florist” drew up outside the main entrance to Ransom’s. A man bearing an enormous bouquet ventured tentatively up to this sanctum on the first floor, just as the Head was emerging from her Holy of Holies in the narrow adjoining corridor to issue her PA with some instructions for the afternoon. Fortuitously, the bouquet blocked her passage into the post room, which was unaccountably bristling that afternoon with a decorous but resolute crowd animated by what one could describe as a sense of suppressed fun. Jane Trowbridge, Eva, and even one or two cleaners, all seemed to have developed an intense interest in their mailboxes or a fresh supply of paper clips that afternoon. This interest vanished, however, on the appearance of the bouquet, to be replaced by a chorus of “Oh, what BEAUTIFUL flowers!” and, from someone at the back, “Oh, how ROMANTIC!” and, of course, “Now WHO can they be for?”, followed by a general exchange of meaningful querying looks.

Eva’s instructions to the florist had been clear: the accompanying card to Carol was to be put in an

unnamed envelope, so that it would have to be opened in front of everyone. Jane shimmered in a cloud of freshly washed, ladylike Titian hair, towards the school secretary, as Dr Styles, in spite of herself, craned her head round the gathering crowd of employees. Murmuring to Mrs Danes the Secretary just loud enough for her to hear but not so loud as to permit a contradiction from Dr Styles, Jane urged:

“Under the circumstances, I think it appropriate that you open the envelope, Mrs Danes. After all you are the school secretary.”

The deliveryman melted away back to his van in relief. Slowly, with a professional, unhurried hand, Mrs Danes opened the tiny envelope and drew out the card inside. Before she had had time to digest the import of the words on it, she was reading aloud to herself, and therefore the assembled staff of Martyrs: “Carol – thank you for an unforgettable night. Your Tiger Crippie.” She looked up at them all from her desk, her lips open as if waiting for the right words that just would not come. Her left hand found its way to the phone on her desk.

“Oh, no need to phone her,” reassured the Titian head. I’ll take the flowers back to house with me now. We wouldn’t want these to fade, now would we?” And, raising the bouquet like a Roman standard before her, she walked regally out of the office as her colleagues parted in smiles on either side. Eva’s eyes were fixed on Dr Styles, who turned tight-lipped on one heel in silence and returned to her office.

Convention has it that whenever anything unpleasant needs to be said at a boarding school, it

is best presented as a quotation from an anonymous parent. This faceless parent – the paying customer of the boarding school business – must at all costs be placated and reassured, and thus becomes the blanket under which all inconvenient issues, and most inconveniently those of right and wrong, are stowed away. So well stowed are these issues as a rule, that the words “right” and “wrong” have disappeared from the vocabulary altogether, to be replaced with “appropriate” and “inappropriate”, thus absolving all those concerned from anything remotely resembling the sense of personal responsibility that was formerly considered to be a cornerstone not only of civilized life, but of all good education.

Thus, when Carol was summoned to the Styles Sanctum twenty-four hours later, to be greeted dryly by the Styles-Jenkins Diumvirate (the usual sign that Styles was on shaky ground), she was told, before she had even had time to sit down: “We have had a call from a parent.” Translated into English, this meant that Madge had spilled the beans from her clanking bucket outside the Martyrs office, but did not wish to have her cover blown. Carol was therefore presented with an entirely fabricated scenario, in which the alleged parent had been horrified to hear from their daughter, who had heard it in a classroom (tones of horror at the sacrilege), that her housemistress, that is to say her assistant housemistress was, well, carrying on with the Bursar.

Dr Styles moved from this intended bombshell into

her version of a pregnant power pause, in which she clearly expected Carol to look embarrassed, guilty, or remorseful, or perhaps a combination. Pauline Jenkins was sitting upright with her shoulders hunched together as if she was trying very hard to turn herself into a piece of paper. Carol threw her head back and laughed.

“Well you know what teenage girls are like! They love to make up stories about members of staff carrying on romances and the like!”

This was not the response that Styles had anticipated. Carol had had the benefit not only of foreseeing, but also of being able to plan for this conversation, and she had chosen her words and her tone carefully. She knew that the less she said now, the less power she would give away. So she just breathed and smiled, looking relaxed. Having discussed this scenario with Eva, who had discussed it with her mother, Carol was mindful of what a slap in the face her good humour must be for Barbara Styles. It meant not only that the Head’s wrong-footing intimidation tactics were not working. More importantly it meant that her whole long-term agenda was off the map. Dr Styles was not pulling the strings here, nor was she provoking the emotions that she needed to provoke in this woman in order to get her “fix” of proxy emotion. She was the one being played here. Worse than that: she wasn’t even in the game, whatever it was. She had become irrelevant. Dr Styles, thought Carol, settling a little more comfortably into the brocade chair surrounding her, was standing in the gateway to narcissist hell.

For quite a long while nobody said anything. Even this tactic appeared to have no effect on Carol, who had been warned to expect it. She continued to breathe and smile contentedly, visualizing herself lying in a gently rocking boat somewhere just off the Costa Blanca – Elche perhaps, or Altea. She absorbed into her field of vision the elegant brocade of the chair in which the Head was sitting, noting with detachment the tension in Dr Styles’ body and the twitching of her hands – oh those finger choreographies! Carol knew that Dr Styles could never reveal her “source”, just as she knew that the “source” itself was a fake, because she had been one of those select few who had faked it. She herself was the source of the source.

“So this,” she thought to herself, easing her mind a little deeper into the luxury of her unconcern, “is what it feels like to watch somebody hoist themselves on their own petard.”

Chapter 18 Taking the Waters

Eva had been asked to attend the official opening of the Performing Arts Block at Ransom's not as a guest, but rather to culminate a process known to Dr Styles as "putting someone back in their box". She was there because it pleased Barbara Styles and Pauline Jenkins to see her walking around with a tray of drinks or canapés in her hands, rather than hobnobbing with the VIPs. In their world, such tasks denoted status failure, the most devastating of all human catastrophes. They would have been aghast to learn, had they been interested, that Eva rather enjoyed doing things like that.

It had taken Eva many months and frequent conversations with friends to work out that the two women felt threatened by her. It was a combination of two things, it seems. First, she was better qualified academically than the pair of them put together, which posed a threat to their status ambitions, and second, Eva seemed to suffer from an infuriating absence of any need to flaunt the fact. This put her provokingly outside their sphere of power. Salt was rubbed daily into this open wound by the ease, albeit in a rather self-effacing way, that characterized Eva's dealings with the people around her. Although she was not aware of it herself and had to have it pointed out to her by friends, her way with the students, their parents and her colleagues was free of the typical finger-jerking choreographies, faux-pas, knee-jerk responses and general gaucheness that were the

trademark of most of the senior management at Ransom's, including Dr Styles and Mrs Jenkins. Clearly, therefore, Eva was an upstart and had to be "put back in her box".

At first, she had been nonplussed by a series of inexplicable put-downs and slights from Dr Styles and Mrs Jenkins. Arriving at the school some years earlier with three university degrees, including a doctorate, she had been informed, for example, that she was "not qualified" to teach at a "reputable girls' independent school", as she lacked a formal teaching qualification. When a colleague found a distance learning course that would enable her to qualify while doing teaching practice in her present employment, Eva was told that the course she had selected "might be good enough for a state school", but was "certainly not good enough for a school like Ransom's".

At this point even Eva became aware that there was an agenda here that had little or nothing to do with her. She also sensed that she was being provoked and insulted for fun. It was intended that she should be riled. Once Eva became aware of it, however, she found myself responding without even having to think about it.

Once, for example, that instead of losing her temper at being told that the postgraduate course she had chosen to qualify her as a Religious Studies teacher was not good enough for a school like Ransom's, she immediately turned the question around and

asked Dr Styles: “ I do understand that you are concerned to uphold the highest professional standards at your school,” (at this Styles darted her an inquiring look that confirmed her suspicions that she was intended as prey here).

“Please then,” Eva went on, rather surprised at her own nerve, “what course would you advise me to take to qualify me to teach Religious Studies at Ransom’s?”

This was clearly not the answer Dr Styles had wanted or expected. Her bluff called, she blustered: “Well I don’t have time to discuss it now. I’ll get Pauline to get in touch with you!”

End of staff development interview, then. Eva was dismissed, but she had Styles’ number now, and she knew it. Pauline would get in touch with her, indeed! Pauline Jenkins - herself a refugee from a failed theological college and wannabee university that had had to close down for lack of customers - was going to advise an Oxbridge triple graduate on how to develop her teaching career. A few days later Eva found in her mailbox in the school office a prospectus for a full-time Bachelor’s Degree course in Religious Studies. So she knew now what the agenda was, as she had by now also realized that she had to be “put in her box” - Dr Styles’ favourite game. The prospectus was meant to be a slap in the face. In reality it was an invitation to the dance.

As it happened, two other members of the Religious Studies department at Ransom’s, including Father Barnes, the Chaplain, were studying for a part-time

M.A. in Religious Studies at Newbourne College. Death Studies. It was highly rated. Eva signed up for the course. This did not suit Styles and Jenkins at all. And that was how she came to be doing a Master's degree in Death. It was a delight: the other students were so interesting – everything from a fresh graduate in her twenties to a gay bishop. A life of the mind again, at last! An antidote to this angst-ridden insanity. Eva came alive and looked forward to Thursday evenings even more than weekends.

Clearly, the duo were going to have to come up with something to undermine her. One day, Pauline came over with her tray and joined Eva at the lunch table. "Not a good idea, that course," she commented, stabbing disdainfully at a green bean with her fork. Clearly Eva was intended to be thrown, or go on the defensive.

"Screw you," she thought, reaching for her cherry yogurt. Smiling her brightest, warmest, sincerest smile, she responded: "I'm enjoying every minute of it!"

Eva allowed a few seconds to pass, savouring the cherry flavour and even turning the spoon over in her mouth. Just as Pauline was on an intake of breath to prepare for her retort, Eva added innocently: "And of course it comes with the highest recommendation from Father Barnes!" There wasn't a great deal Pauline could say to that without getting steering herself into spiritual waters that could easily have swept her away, and she thought better of it.

“Pauline dear,” Eva thought to myself, “you have the soul of a flunky. You are no match for this. Do yourself a favour and just go away.” And to be fair to her, she did - at least for the time being.

Once Eva had grasped that this game was not about her professional development at all, but about Styles and Jenkins feeling threatened, she rapidly became adept at predicting when the next put-down would come. Since she was obviously intended to be provoked, she made an extra effort to vaunt her natural cheerfulness and good humour, while bracing herself for the consequent escalation of tactics. After all, she was depriving addicts of their fix, and that could only have one result. They would inevitably be compelled to step up their campaign in an attempt to get a rise out of her. This upped the stakes. They would have to start taking risks in order to stand any chance at all. There was no option left open to them: if they couldn’t humiliate Eva behind closed doors they were going to have to humiliate her in public.

And then the email came, sweet as treacle: would Eva mind serving drinks and snacks at the inauguration of the Performing Arts Block?

“But of course I wouldn’t MIND!” Eva responded by return. “I would be delighted!” And the delicious thing about it was that it was completely true.

So the final coup in this process of putting Eva in her box had been planned for this evening, which was to mark the crowning social triumph for the

Styles and Jenkins duo – the evening when the Bishop and Dean of Newbourne Cathedral, backed up by a cast of a dozen or so other local VIPs, were to attend the official opening of the new Performing Arts Block. Their moment of greatest social triumph was to be Eva's moment of greatest public humiliation. This trademark combination of social climbing and putting someone down in public was the ultimate aphrodisiac for the Head and Deputy of Ransom's. Eva could sense them quivering with repulsive gender-free excitement as they followed her movements with the trays from across the teeming room.

One of the reasons Eva rather enjoyed tasks such as preparing and serving food and drink at social occasions, apart from the pleasure of seeing people enjoy themselves, is that it allowed her to slip into a kind of meditative state in which she was fully occupied with the filling of the glasses, the arranging of the canapés or the tidying up of the dishes and cutlery, but at the same time also mentally free to play with whatever thoughts were preoccupying her at the time. So it was that, as she filled flute glasses with vintage champagne and carried the trays around the room, or made sure that the plates with the canapés were attractively topped up from the supply in the serving room, she found her thoughts turning to the Golden Fleece myth. She had been discussing it in her Religious Studies class only that morning. Surprisingly, quite a heated debate had started up among a group of girls from Martyrs' Complex, some of whom took

the view that the story of the Golden Fleece was a myth relating to the demise of the Minoan bull cult in favour of the cult of the ram, hence the fleece, while another faction had insisted that the labyrinth could be interpreted in terms of Christian symbolism (one of the girls had recently been to the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral). Be that as it may, as Eva's hands dealt with champagne corks and flute glasses, canapés and trays, her mind was musing on whether the Minotaur's labyrinth was a symbol of the powers of heaven or of hell and whether the greater feat was to be able to get into or to get out of the labyrinth. She could not fail to see parallels.

At break time earlier in the day, Eva recalled, uncorking another bottle, she had bumped into Harry in the staff room. He had looked pale, tense and preoccupied. Eva knew that he had been good at ancient Greek at school and had had the benefit of a classical education. "What do you think, Harry?" she had asked. "Is the Labyrinth in the myth heaven or is it hell?" He had stood still, attempting to think. Taking a gulp of coffee before darting out of the room again, he had grunted rather than called over his shoulder: "Depends on whether or not you have your sword and your clew of string!" and disappeared. Eva had not seen him again for the rest of the day, although she knew he must be around somewhere, because he was to play a piano solo that evening.

So the crucial aspect of the story was the sword

and the clew of string – representing intellect and love? Guidance? That meant, then, that the essence of the genius loci wasn't only in the place itself: it was also in what you were spiritually equipped with in order to perceive the place. Filling up another tray of champagne flutes, Eva wondered what had become of Harry. It wasn't like him to pass up a glass of bubbly. He enjoyed taking the waters.

At certain places on the earth at certain hours of the day, notably early in the morning and in the late afternoon, the geomagnetic energy emanating from the earth reaches optimum levels. As our bodies are made from the dust of the earth, if we walk outside at these hours, then the geomagnetic energy is at its most healing and reviving. In certain special places, the particles of which we are made can realign to restore the balance between positively and negatively charged energy. Harry had read how a geophysicist from Prague had conducted extensive research at the well-known Bohemian spa of Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary), where he measured geomagnetic emanations near the famous mineral water springs. He had discovered to his surprise that the optimum geomagnetic energy levels occurred at precisely the times when patients at the spa had for centuries traditionally been recommended to promenade and take the waters. The healing effects of a visit to a spa, it seems, had at least as much to do with walking in the electromagnetic energy as it had to do with the mineral properties of the water itself.

Listening to the rising and falling waves of his own breathing, Harry contemplated this link with the earth as he sat having a late breakfast in a street café at the spa town of Frantiskove Lazne, not far from Karlovy Vary. Just as an excessive love of tradition, he reflected, leads us to continue to take the waters, but forget to promenade in the places where we can be healed and revived, so an excessive contempt for tradition also leads us to abandon the places where that healing energy is to be found. We live in an age of epidemic burnout, in which permanent exhaustion has become a badge of honour that it is almost suspicious to be lacking.

It was a strange feeling, to be aware of his breathing again. Looking back over the previous six months or so, Harry felt as if he was viewing someone else's life. He had certainly been living someone else's life. A grey fog of insomnia had become his relentless companion. His sleep pattern had dwindled from eight hours to six, then six to four, then four to two. He hardly knew any more if he was asleep or awake. His world of harmonious music had receded behind a cacophony of nervous energy. He had worked like an automaton, driven by an invisible, and as it turned out, illusory imperative. He became increasingly forgetful. He could never find his keys, or his glasses, or would carefully put away crucial paperwork only to forget where he had put it and spend frantic minutes or even hours searching for it. He ate only irregularly and badly. He drank pints of coffee to keep awake during the day and red wine to calm himself down

at night. He would find tickets and receipts in his pockets for events that he could not remember having attended. All the while he would be congratulating himself on how well he was coping with the pressures of his job. He was still doing it on the night he was taken away.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the evening of the formal inauguration of the Performing Arts Block at Ransom's. It had come at the end of a particularly long and tiring day, when the last thing Harry had wanted was to be sociable at work and do his party piece. He was there to play a piano solo at the reception, which was to start with a champagne reception in the Head's Study. Armstrong-Cripps, the Bursar, had ordered in several crates of an outstanding vintage, which he had taken the trouble of sampling generously at home the weekend before, just to make sure it was good enough. By a quarter to seven the Bursar was already striding about the school premises looking important but nonchalant as the guests of honour were awaited.

Barbara Styles and Pauline Jenkins had been in a near-orgasmic state of social climbing anticipation at the prospect of the evening ahead. The Bishop of Newbourne was to attend the champagne reception, along with the Dean of the Cathedral and several other guests of honour, including some prominent QCs. At seven o' clock on a mild late spring evening, just after an ominous rain shower had left the lawns a little too squelchy to be glamorous,

Barbara and Pauline gleamed at each other at the sight of the vehicles, including the Bishop's, gliding towards them up the driveway of Ransom's. A tremor of satisfaction and the sense of decades of graft and social ambition coming to fruition almost led them to touch each other in affection before they hastily smoothed their angular garments and set their high-achieving smiles. Hands were shaken, corks were popped, canapés were handed round, by Eva among others, and the crème de la crème of Newbourne society were mingled with. It was the apotheosis of years of careful planning and execution.

Afterwards, when the recriminations were still at their hottest, it was asserted that Carol, one of the assistant housemistresses, had deliberately left a kettle of water boiling unattended on her old gas hob in Martyrs' Complex. At all events, the social climbing orgasm that had been worked up to for so long and with such care by Barbara and Pauline was rudely curtailed, a mere five minutes after the clinking of the first champagne glasses, into an ignominious coitus interruptus - by the cruel jangle of the fire alarm.

Barbara Styles froze in outraged disbelief, while Pauline Jenkins darted a horrified glance towards her, knowing before she even had time to think that their moment of glory was ruined. The Bishop, on the other hand, unaware of the deeper significance of what was, for him, a rather humdrum social event, looked amused, even hopeful. On an

occasion like this an unexpected fire alarm broke the monotony. Had Dr Styles and her Deputy but known it, he would have thought much better of them, and liked them better, if they had been able to respond to the alarm with good humour.

But humour was not on the menu that evening. Incandescent with impotent rage at this rape of her imagined social triumph, Barbara Styles nevertheless knew that all she could do was adhere to procedure. Awkwardly she ushered her guests out of the French windows on to what she only now remembered was a squelching muddy lawn. Her brand new sling-back shoes, purchased especially for the occasion, impaled themselves into the mud with a wet farting noise at every ungainly step. Spilling vintage champagne over the edge of her flute glass, Barbara led the way like an amphibious reptile, turning in an ungainly and perilous gyrating movement to face her guests with what she hoped would appear a resigned and gracious smile.

They had reached a spot just under the balcony of the elegant staff room on the first floor. Out of the corner of her gash-like mouth, Barbara shot monosyllabic orders at Pauline, indicating that she was to determine what had caused the fire alarm to go off. She knew with absolute certainty, even as she heard the drone of the fire engine making its way up the hill towards them, that there was no fire.

Harry Hollingsworth, however, who had retreated some time earlier to the staff room immediately

above where they now stood, was in no condition to make this kind of distinction. He was no longer aware of where he was, or even of who he was, or what he was doing in this place at all. He was not even aware that he had taken all his clothes off and was standing naked by the open French windows of the staff room, facing the driveway and the VIP guests some distance below. The sound of the alarm going off might have come from his own soul, and could not have been more real to him. Indeed it was the only thing at that moment that did seem real. There was, clearly, something on fire, and it needed putting out. He became aware of a gust of warm spring air coming from the open window and moved towards it. There was hope, he thought, if only he could put the fire out. Just as the group of VIPs standing on the lawn were being reassured by Barbara Styles, her grating voice drowned out, alas, by the siren of the fire engine - that everything was absolutely fine and it must, surely, be a false alarm, Harry's own suspicions were confirmed. There was indeed a fire and he must do whatever he can to help, however small his contribution. And so, taking a step forward out on to the narrow balcony he took his impressive penis in his hands and, after only a moment's concentration, produced a gushing cascade of urine in an elegant arc over the wrought iron trelliswork.

By some inexplicable fluke of aerodynamic accuracy this cascade plopped - warm, fragrant, yellow and bubbling - straight down into the Bishop's glass, splashing only a few drops playfully

over the edge of the flute on to his right hand. Two dozen pairs of VIP eyes swept a synchronized upward glance to the source of this cascade and were inescapably confronted with Harry's ultimate party piece. Barbara Styles staggered back in horror, the flute flying from her fingers, and landed open-mouthed on her backside in the soft spring mud of the drenched lawn, one lone sling-back heel burying itself like a miniature Olympic lance beside her. In a single second, Our Lady of Ransom's, usually a seething hive of frenetic activity, social climbing hysteria and over-achieving angst, was reduced - indelibly, unforgettably - to a helpless, chastened silence.

As Eva, her canapé tray poised in her right hand, gazed up inquiringly at Harry, who was still standing in the window, smiling gently into the distance, she understood what her mother had meant. Where reason and humanity were exiled, life had no choice but to intervene.

"Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba..." was all Barbara Styles was able to utter for several minutes before being escorted back to her study by Pauline. Her debacle was complete and irrevocable. Meanwhile, the Bishop and Dean shook with silent laughter, propping each other up side by side with their inside arms, their outside arms, understandably in the case of the Bishop, holding their champagne flutes like unexploded hand grenades at a safe distance, as tears streamed down their cheeks. This was the most fun they had had in public for years.

Meanwhile, Bursar Armstrong Cripps, who was after all a Gulf War veteran, sprinted into the building to “deal with Harry”. Not caring for the implications of this, Eva quickly disposed of her tray of canapés and sprinted into the building after him. Bounding up the oak staircase beside him she volunteered to call the ambulance, thus providing Harry with a protective plan of action before Armstrong Cripps had even reached him. Given the literal-mindedness of the Senior Management Team at Ransom’s, it seemed unlikely that any of them had yet grasped what was happening.

Once Harry was safely draped in a blanket, with Eva in the ambulance to accompany him, and Pauline Jenkins was in the study with Dr Styles, the Bishop, Dean and other guests made as dignified a farewell from the embarrassed Board of Governors and staff of Ransom’s as circumstances would allow and got into their cars. As they made their way back down into Newbourne, the Bishop and Dean were still gasping and clutching themselves in the privacy of the inside of the vehicle.

“That poor chap Hollingsworth” chuckled the Bishop with guilty sympathy, still laughing in spite of himself. “Must have been terribly overworked. Do hope he’s all right.”

“Mind you,” he went on, “that Styles woman does have a way of making a champagne reception feel like a concentration camp outing. No wonder they’re all going off their trolleys! I’ve never seen so much Angst in one place. This was supposed to be

a celebration!”

“I know!” responded the Dean. “To judge by the looks on the faces of her staff, you’d have thought they were at an execution! ”

“You know,” mused the Bishop, as he wiped his eyes, “if that woman’s arse was any tighter she’d have to shit through her nose!”

Chapter 19 Rusty

Eva switched on her laptop and burst out laughing. Her fourteen year-old son Rusty had evidently been tampering with her folder names on the desktop. The Burn Folder had been renamed “Bum Folder”, Rescued Items had become “Re-screwed Items” and Macintosh was now spelled “Muckintosh”. Rusty, who had grown about five inches in the last twelve months and now seemed to consist entirely of elbows, had straight auburn air that curled up at the ends and enormous feet whose odour sometimes preceded him into the room. He had disappeared earlier that afternoon to his friend Fallon Luke, known to everyone as Fluke, where they had engaged in illicit activities that Eva contrived to know as little about as possible, such as downloading movies from the internet to sell on the black market at school to help pay for a Playstation computer that she was supposed to know nothing about. Fluke was also reputed to have found a way of using his cell phone without having to pay for calls. He had built his first cell phone out of spare parts at the age of twelve and never looked back. Rusty’s conversations with Fluke revolved around technology, music and a smattering of Czech swear words that Rusty had learned from Eva’s mother through some obscure process of osmosis, since to Eva Svetlana denied all knowledge of how he could have come by them. Another of Rusty’s specialities was playing with the names of celebrities. In this way, for example, Antonio Banderas became “Pantstonio Bum Dare-

ass”, George Clooney “George Loony” and so on.

He was currently doing a homework project for Economics about Thatcherism. “What was typical for Thatcher’s economic policy?” Rusty asked Eva, reading from his dog-eared, ketchup-stained worksheet and gallantly unplugging one earful of Green Day from his mp3 player to await her reply.

“Monetarism”, replied Eva.

“What’s ‘money tourism?’ asked Rusty, perplexed.

“Good question!” answered Eva, who did not manage an answer, as she found herself seized by a laughter attack that bent her double. This, unfortunately, brought her rather closer to Rusty’s feet.

“What’s that awful smell?” Eva queried, already guessing the answer.

“Sorry Mum!” said Rusty, triumphantly wiggling his teenage sweaty-socked toes to distribute the ripe smell a little more effectively through the enclosed space of her tiny study.

“Look, do you want me to help you with this or not?” laughed Eva, in mock offence.

“Sorreeee!!” came Rusty’s sing-song mock reply, followed almost immediately by a teenage manhandling neck manoeuvre from behind that temporarily cut off Eva’s air supply but which he clearly intended to be an affectionate hug. As she gasped for air, she was aware of a tinny refrain from a Green Day song making its way from his loose earphone into her ear. Suddenly he loosened his grasp.

“Love ya Mum!” he said, planting a cheese and

onion crisp-flavoured kiss on her left cheek, and disappearing towards the kitchen in a gust of displaced unwashed-teenage air to find another snack.

They worked for a while together on the Economics assignment, referring to his textbook, which by some miracle he had not forgotten at school today, and doing some research on the internet, printing out pictures and pieces of text as necessary. Eva managed to steer him in the direction of some reliable sites, such as the Economist, as part of a campaign to wean him off the gospel according to Wikipedia. Thirty minutes of concentration for a fourteen year-old demanded another refuelling break. Rusty bent low and made an oblique sideways movement, like a human Frisbee, out of his chair beside Eva, propelling himself with a sudden displacement of air into the direction of the kitchen.

“Don’t forget you’re going round to your Granny’s for tea tonight!” Eva shrieked back at him over her shoulder. Rusty adored his Czech Granny Svetlana, and was fully able to do justice to her cooking and baking, no matter what he had eaten at home before. Whistling on his way out of the front door (always the most reliable indication that he was in a good mood), Rusty departed. The door slammed shut and it was as if the whole house stood still in time and space for sheer relief as a shocked, teenage-free silence set in. Eva smiled to herself and returned her attention to her laptop, where she was doing some background research on the

Elizabethan alchemist, John Dee. She was looking up information about when he had spent time in Prague at the court of Rudolf II. "This is the life!" Eva thought, as she settled down to an evening of blissful research into her favourite city.

Eva's mother Svetlana was dozing in her armchair near the open coal fire. This was one of the things about the British lifestyle she had most enthusiastically adopted when she had come to live here in the late 1940s. It was an aspect of the culture she had remained faithful to even when it had gone out of fashion among the British themselves. Eventually she found she had waited long enough to see the open fire come back into fashion. Svetlana's attachment to quaint, homely habits only made her all the more fascinating and adorable to Rusty. One of his favourite treats on arriving at her house on a cool, dark autumn or winter's evening, for example, was to take a toasting fork from the brass stand by the fireplace, and make himself toast over the open flames. He was never able to convince his friends that the toast tasted better made that way.

Perhaps in spite of the fact, or perhaps because Svetlana's relationship with her daughter Eva had been a little aloof until recent years, Rusty's grandmother relished the emotionally uncluttered straightforwardness she could enjoy with her grandson. Like other people whose lives have known trauma and even tragedy, Svetlana had discovered an impish sense of fun rather late in life

and then, to her delight, found that she could not only enjoy it, but even hone and perfect it with Rusty. Whenever Svetlana inadvertently broke old-age pensioner wind, for example, she knew she could rely on Rusty, who equally inadvertently broke teenage wind, either to affect not to hear her, or to start some sort of ongoing competition.

“Heff enudder slayees of tooost, deeeerrr” Svetlana was saying, in her mock Czech accent. Actually, she normally had hardly any accent in English, but this was part of the fun she enjoyed with Rusty. Rusty was already on his second slice of thick toast. He relished, among other things, that his Granny never scolded him for dropping crumbs, or even for occasionally dripping jam on the carpet. She also made all her own jams and pickles and grew potatoes in her back garden that actually tasted of potatoes. In a while, they would go into her kitchen and press fresh garlic and grate raw potatoes to make potato pancakes with marjoram - the ultimate Czech evening meal for Rusty.

The main topic of conversation in this benignly conspiratorial relationship was the ongoing question of How to Ransom Mamma from Ransom’s. It had already been established between Rusty and his Granny that Ransom’s was about as near as you could get to the abode of the Antichrist, and that all who tarried there were infected with such fatal plagues as self-importance, workaholism and, most damningly of all, loss of humour. Since Svetlana’s visit to Prague with Eva in 1990, some

sort of perspective and inner meaning had returned to her life, but Svetlana and Rusty were agreed that their first priority must be to wean Eva off the dreaded Ransom's.

In truth, this project served more as a welding exercise for Rusty and his grandmother than actually to convert Eva from workaholic drone to autonomous being. For one thing Eva was clearly beginning to see the light of her own accord. One afternoon, for example, she had arrived for a visit at Svetlana's with an application form for a job at Tesco's supermarket. She had worked out that she could keep herself and Rusty afloat on a thirty-five hour job as a supermarket cashier, or stacking shelves, especially if she was willing to work unsocial hours, such as weekend and night shifts. This liberating thought, like similar liberating thoughts, was perhaps more liberating in the thinking than in the doing, but it did feel good to Eva to know that she had an alternative like that waiting in the wings. The existence of this theoretical alternative gave her a feeling of freedom.

When she went shopping in the store, she would walk up and down the aisles comforting herself with the thought: "I could be working here, and I would have no more meetings to go to, no more fretting over exam results, no more snotty parents, no more snotty colleagues...No more seventy-hour weeks...." She would walk past the household cleaning materials or the packets of tea bags and the jars of coffee and imagine herself helping a

customer to find a product, or stacking shelves with teabags, and still having enough of a mind left with which to think her own thoughts. Or she would picture herself at the end of a shift, perhaps at ten o'clock on a rather frosty night, putting her warm jacket on to go home and walking away from the store, back home up the winding hill to her house, with her head empty of all thoughts except for her night-time routine. She would picture closing her front door behind her and taking her coat off, putting the kettle on to make a hot water bottle or a last cup of tea. She could imagine herself feeling that pleasant kind of tiredness that came from having a shift behind her, but with her personhood still intact and a mind that still felt like her own. On a night such as this, she thought, she would get into bed and read perhaps for an hour before turning off her bedside lamp, because her mind would be hungry for some content, and just as importantly still be in a fit state to accept that content. And then, refreshed from the brisk evening walk in the fresh winter night, she would switch off her bedside lamp, plump up her pillow and settle down to sleep, feeling like a person. No more corset-like sensible career suits, no more tight-lipped professionalism, no more high blood pressure, no more rushing around the school precincts perpetually late for appointments she had no interest in keeping.

Even more blissful for Eva in these moments of reverie was the thought of being able to get up the next morning at whatever time she woke, rather

than having to snap into fifth gear at seven in the morning or even earlier. For, or at least so she imagined it, in her job at the supermarket she would not have to work an early morning shift immediately after a late night shift. This meant that she would now have time, even on a working day, to call her own. Bliss. In Eva's imagination this fantasy played always itself out most satisfactorily in winter. She would picture herself of a winter's morning waking some time between seven-thirty and eight and getting up slowly. First she would make herself a pot of tea – and have the time to drink it. Then she would make herself some toast and place it on a tray with some ginger preserve. Rusty would still have to be dragged out of bed, clearly, but this would not worry her, because she herself would be in no hurry, so it would not matter. She would then eat her toast and ginger preserve and drink her pot of tea before deciding to take a leisurely hot bath. Then she would put the vacuum cleaner round the flat, perhaps mop the kitchen floor as well and, luxury of time luxuries, manage a whole basketful of ironing with time to spare. By contrast, her current record for putting off ironing she felt too exhausted to do was ten weeks.

Svetlana dozed on in front of the fire waiting for Rusty to arrive for tea, her own memories mingling with those about people who had been close to her before she had moved to England. As a piece of coal suddenly spat and cracked, rousing her from her dream for a second, she half opened her eyes and registered the warm flames and that it was already

dark outside, before floating back to the threshold of sleep. Almost in anticipation of another of her regular chats with Rusty about the Awfulness of Ransom's and the self-annihilating effects of career mythology, another picture was evoked in her mind's eye. She was in an old basement in Prague, on a similar cold, dark autumn night many years ago, talking to Stanislav, known to his friends as Stanley, lawyer and bricklayer. It was in the late 1950s. Stanley was making some adjustments to an old brick wall in the basement of an old building on Bethlehem Square in the Prague Old Town. He had a slow, methodical, contented way of moving and his eyes were lit with a gleam of discreet satisfaction, as if it would be unseemly to look happy around other people who might not be.

"How is your wife keeping, Stan?" Svetlana was asking.

"She's well, thank you," Stan replied, loading another spatula with mortar and placing another brick carefully into the gap in the chimney wall that he was filling. The brick was being recycled from another site and was slightly chipped on one edge, so he turned it round and eased it into the layer of fresh mortar.

"And the children?" Svetlana went on.

"Oh, they are doing well too." Stan went on, a little more hesitantly this time.

Svetlana waited.

"You know they are still only nine and eleven, but we do rather wonder what will become of them – you know, their education and so on."

“You mean because of your not being in the Party? They will be barred from going to university then?”

“Well that, and the fact that I am no longer allowed to practise law. I only practised for about two years after 1948 and discovered that I just did not have the stomach for all the lies.” Stan went on, as if he were informing her that he had just planted some runner beans.

“So you earn your living as a bricklayer,” Svetlana confirmed.

Stan chuckled. “Yes,” he answered. “When I think of all the anguish I used to go through in those early years in the law practice, when I discovered that the Party actually had monthly quotas for how many people had to be convicted, so if someone’s trial was due to come up at the end of the month and the quota had not been fulfilled, then you could be the best lawyer in the world and it would not help the poor plaintiff. You knew they would go to jail whatever you did. Then there were the dirty deals over Party members. It is, of course, ideologically unthinkable that a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia should be convicted of a criminal offence, so mostly the charges are just dropped

“So it’s either lie and cheat and play the game, or become a bricklayer?” Svetlana went on with a wry smile.

Stan smiled. “That’s basically what happened,” he said, scraping a drip of spilt mortar off the basement floor.

“The irony, of course,” he went on, musing as he waved another chipped brick gently around in his

hand, "is that my 'punishment' has in some ways turned out to be a liberation. Not that I would wish it on anyone else, you understand. Don't get me wrong."

"How do you mean?" Svetlana asked, feeling a little wrong-footed by a man she was determined to view as a victim and hero turning round and saying that he had gained some advantage.

"Well, lest we forget," Stan ventured, with a touch of good-humoured irony in his voice, "we are the allegedly fortunate citizens of a workers' paradise these days, which means, among other things, that I earn far better money as a bricklayer than I ever did as a lawyer!"

"So your wife is certainly not complaining in that respect then, with two children to feed?" Svetlana laughed.

"Indeed not," Stan went on. "What with the extra jobs I do on the side for friends and acquaintances, I make quite good money. And then, to be frank, I am treated like royalty wherever I go! I am fed with beer and Wiener Schnitzel and potato salad and roast chickens! Nothing is too much trouble for bricklayers: we are worth our weight in gold. A lawyer, on the other hand, as a sort of intellectual, is inherently suspect, and likely to be a rootless cosmopolitan, leeching a living from the downtrodden working classes.

"I have a great deal to be thankful for, you know," Stan added a few moments later, standing back and scanning his work. "When I think of the people I know who never came back from the war, or who were sent off to labour camps for having served in

the RAF.....No, I can consider myself very fortunate indeed.

“And if I am being completely honest,” he added, almost furtively, as he gathered up his tools and put them away, “I am lucky that I don’t have to fret and worry in my job. I just go and build a wall, or whatever they want me to do, eat a good lunch, washed down by good beer, and go home. My thoughts are my own. My mind is free. You might even say that my misfortune has given me my freedom.”

“Or your character has,” said Svetlana.

“Don’t flatter me too much,” chuckled Stanley, twinkling in her direction with a flash of humour that sent a diamond spark even in this twilit room.

“Oh, by the way,” said Stan, pulling something out of his blue overall pocket and handing it to Svetlana, “I almost forgot!”

“What’s this?” said Svetlana, looking down at an odd-shaped piece of greenish stone in her hand.”

“It’s Vltavin,” answered Stanley. “Known in most other places as Moldavite.”

“Moldavite?” repeated Svetlana, still not understanding.

“Yes,” said Stanley. “It’s a strange thing. I was just repairing this old chimney when I noticed that one of the bricks was loose, so I pulled it out, and found that inside. Minerals used to be quite a hobby of my father’s. He worked at the National Museum, you know, which has a fine collection of minerals. Moldavite is unique. The Curator of the National Museum was apparently something of an alchemist.”

“How so?” asked Svetlana, very curious by now.

“Well firstly it is found almost exclusively in Bohemia and some parts of Moravia, but mainly near the river Vltava, hence its name.”

“And...,” asked Svetlana, sensing there was more to come.

“And it’s also unique because it is the only gemstone on earth that is actually extra-terrestrial,” said Stanley.

“Extra-terrestrial?”

“Yes,” Stanley went on. “Moldavite is a unique gemstone because it resulted from the impact of a meteor landing in the Bohemian basin some fourteen million years ago. Actually it created the Bohemian basin when it hit the earth. I can lend you some books on it, if you like. It has a fascinating history and is surrounded with all sorts of legends.”

“I would like that very much,” said Svetlana thoughtfully. “But you shouldn’t be giving this to me, it must be very valuable. I can’t accept it.”

“Ah,” Stanley had then said, “but some things are more valuable when they are given away.”

There had been a moment’s silence between them and then Stanley had added, in a way that brooked no further debate, “Think of it as a keepsake from your homeland of Bohemia that you can have with you when you are in England. Have a piece of jewellery made for your daughter.”

The chimes of the front door bell jolted Svetlana out of her chair. She switched on the standard lamp and looked out of her bay window to see Rusty standing there, shivering a little in his thin jacket.

She walked slowly to the front door and opened it.

“Ah, there you are dear,” she said, give him a peremptory hug. “I’ve made us some goulash tonight. Thought it would warm us up.”

“What kind of goulash?” Rusty asked, by now something of an expert on the nuances of Central European cooking.

“Szegedin”, answered Svetlana, referring to a Hungarian goulash recipe involving Sauerkraut and sour cream.

Rusty grinned.

“Great!” he said, rubbing his hands together.

“Makes you fart though!” he added with a gleam.

Svetlana waved an unconcerned hand behind her as she led the way into the kitchen. “Who cares? It tastes good.”

Chapter 20 An Android Calls

Svetlana went into the kitchen. It smelt slightly of vegetable oil and garlic from the potato pancakes she had made with Rusty the night before. There were still a few dried marjoram leaves strewn over the worktop. She piled up the leftover cold pancakes on to a plate and put them in the corner near the back of the worktop, knowing that Rusty would find them later in the day when he was peckish. He almost loved eating them cold even more than when they were still fresh and hot from the pan. It was Saturday morning and Rusty had stayed overnight after a Bond movie evening in front of the TV. There was popcorn scattered within a radius of two metres around his place on the couch, as well as between the cushions. Going upstairs again, Svetlana quietly opened the door of the small guest room where Rusty was sleeping and detected his characteristic three tufts of slightly greasy auburn hair protruding from the gangling mound under the duvet.

Back downstairs in the kitchen she made the most difficult decision of the day: whether to start the morning with strong tea or strong coffee. She decided to whet her whistle with a small pot of tea and take it from there. Her Brown Betty teapot was still brewing under her handmade tea cosy when the phone rang in the hall. It was Eva. Even in her foggy first-gear version of herself so early in the morning Svetlana could detect that this was not just the usual “Everything-all-right-with-Rusty?”

call she usually made when he had stayed the night. The pitch of her voice was wrong. There was a hint of Ransomite hysteria.

"Er, you remember that parcel that was delivered to me at home instead of school by mistake a few days ago and that I brought round to yours a couple of days ago, and then I forgot about it?"

"Yeees.." Svetlana sensed that this was a moment she needed to sound soothing.

"Well, the thing is, I have a Saturday morning departmental meeting this morning – yes I know – and I'm already running late. I just had a call from Pauline Jenkins, you know the Deputy Head?" As if Svetlana needed reminding. No wonder Eva was sounding tense and undermined.

"Yes," she said again, maintaining her stance of patient neutrality.

"Well it's a parcel of stuff from the printer's and Pauline needs it right away, and she is willing to come round to your house this morning to collect it.."

("We are honoured", thought Svetlana).

"So I was wondering if you could just stay in until she gets there to pick it up. She said she should be round within the hour."

"Don't worry, dear," soothed Svetlana. "I'll stay here until she turns up." ("And" she added to herself, "I bet you any money she'll make a point of not being round within the hour, just to make sure that we are all made to feel her importance!")

"Have a nice meeting, dear," she soothed down the phone at Eva and hung up.

"Now what's she got to feel so chirpy about?" said

Eva looking at the receiver as if for inspiration, before putting it back down.

Muffled thudding and crashing from upstairs indicated to Svetlana that Rusty was conscious. "Put some boxer shorts on and get your butt down here!" Svetlana yelled uncharacteristically up the stairs, in the hope that this would provoke an early response. The guest room door opened immediately. "WA!!!??" came the glottal stop response.

"I said get your butt down here" (Svetlana surprised herself sometimes). "We have a level five prank emergency!"

Complete with the boxer shorts that Rusty had now been wearing for twenty-five consecutive days (he had a bet on with Fluke from school), his lanky form exploded into the kitchen, nearly taking the door off its hinges, just as Svetlana was demurely pouring herself her second mug of tea.

"Did you say a Level Five?" asked Rusty, now fully awake.

"I did," said Svetlana, sipping contentedly in her dressing gown.

"I'm all ears!" said Rusty, as an avalanche of Cocomops almost found its way into a bowl, followed by half a gallon of Jersey milk. "Tell me all", Svetlana thought he said through the munching.

"Well, Rusty," said his Granny, "you remember that awful woman who's Deputy Head at Ransom's?"

"Poor Lean Jen-Tits?" queried Rusty matter-of-factly.

"That's the one," said Svetlana.

"Mum says she has a painting of Brussels Sprouts

over her bed,” said Rusty, offering conclusive proof of her total insanity.

“That figures,” said Svetlana. “They generate quite a lot of hot air in my experience. The thing is, she’s coming round here in an hour or so to pick something up, and....”

“Come on Gran, spit it out!” said Rusty, still munching.

Svetlana smiled. She looked up into a corner of the kitchen, as if for inspiration.

“As part of our ongoing plan to liberate your Mamma from Ransom’s,” she went on, “I feel we owe Ms Jenkins an unforgettable welcome!”

“Now you’re talking,” grinned Rusty, narrowing his eyes in glee.

“So what’s the plan?”

As Svetlana had predicted, Pauline Jenkins did not turn up within the hour, or even within the hour after that. Instead, she strode up the garden path with a proprietorial air at 11.45 am, nearly three hours after Eva’s worried phone call. But this did not throw Svetlana, for she had been expecting the ploy, just as she was also expecting to be patronized and had warned Rusty to expect the same.

The advantage of Ms Jenkins’ self-important delay was that the two of them had plenty of time in which to prepare, in some detail, a scene that she would not forget in a hurry. Like many teenage boys, Rusty often assumed that his age-group exerted a monopoly over tasteless pranks and other acts of devilment, but during the course of the next

two hours Rusty's respect for the senile sense of humour grew so exponentially that he was forced to admit he and Fluke were still amateurs.

"Now the first thing I would like you to do, dear," his Granny had said, in the tone she generally used if when talking about black plastic sacks full of rubbish, "is just pee on to the old towel I've put into this plastic bowl. I'd pee on to it myself, only it seems a pity to waste good teenage pee when it's in the house. It's far more acrid and smelly, I think you will agree."

Rusty seemed to consider this fact to be self-evident enough not to merit disputing. He seemed to be frozen to the spot.

"Oh!" said Svetlana, as a light suddenly went on in her head. "I don't mean in front of me, dear! Just pop upstairs into the bathroom."

"Er, how much, er, wee do you actually need?"

"Oh, as much as possible dear," answered Svetlana brightly. "But the main thing is to have enough to make a really good smell."

Rusty went upstairs and obliged with a fairly impressive quantity. As he only seemed to need to relieve himself twice a day anyway it was lucky Granny hadn't left it for another fifteen minutes before asking him.

He returned downstairs with the plastic bowl containing the wet towel, holding it slightly away from him as if it were radioactive.

"Well done, dear," said Granny cheerfully. "Now would you just help me to move my armchair so it's facing the living room door, but quite close to the

fire. Put the bowl down for now.” Rusty helped her shift the furniture around.

“Let’s put the gas fire on, so the fumes will evaporate nearby!” Svetlana put the fire on. “Right then, we’ll just pop the pee bowl next to it, but out of sight, so it will steam away there nicely!”

As they worked, Svetlana explained the broad outline of her action plan, which was an adroit mixture of revenge and wrong-footing tactics designed to confuse Ms Jenkins, who, they had both decided, richly deserved it. In order to create the right effect of degenerate senility, it was necessary to work on the living room to suggest the right mixture of domestic chaos and unsanitary neglect. Having created a satisfactory impression there, they then set to work on Svetlana herself. Rusty was sent to retrieve from the laundry basket a pale blue candlewick dressing gown that she had unwisely worn while baking a cake. The daubs and splashes down the front made her look deliciously disreputable. The laundry basket was then placed behind the living room door to put the parcel in. Next, Rusty was given a crash course in the sixties’ hairdressing technique of back-combing, so that odd strands of Svetlana’s white hair were made to stand on end. Rusty even managed to find a couple of dead flies on the windowsill to place at strategic points in this new coiffure. When she looked at herself in the mirror over the fireplace she almost gave herself a shock.

“Excellent!” she purred. “Now for the finishing

touches.” Rusty was then dispatched upstairs to his Granny’s bedroom to fetch a tube of KY jelly. Rusty, whose knowledge of this substance so far consisted only of mono, rather than stereo versions of its uses, did not dare allow his mind to venture into the uncharted waters of his Granny’s possible uses for it. Instead he donned his best effort at tight-lipped matter-of-factness and did as he was told. He returned and handed it to her without looking, hoping she wouldn’t notice how red he had turned.

“Now the great thing about this stuff,” said Svetlana, making a satisfying farting sound with the tube as she squeezed some jelly into her hand, “is that it can give you a really convincing, and above all long-lasting, senile dribble!”

Rusty nearly collapsed in such a paroxysm of humour and relief from potential embarrassment that he was glad he already had the peeing behind him.

Next, they experimented with the lamps to get the angles right, so that a KY dribble down the right-hand side of Svetlana’s mouth would be shown off to best effect. Finally, they put the parcel at the bottom of the laundry basket, and the basket back behind the door in the living room (they didn’t want to risk spoiling the effect by having Ms Jenkins go upstairs and see how well cared for the house really was). Then they sat down to wait, amusing themselves in carefree innocence with a game of Scrabble, while discussing some final touches to their role play. They were already on their second game when they heard a car being parked

resolutely outside. The garden gate clicked open and they caught their first glimpse of Ms Jenkins striding up the path.

“Poor Lean is here,” announced Rusty superfluously, looking up from the Scrabble board and strewing a few biscuit crumbs on the floor from an empty packet of shortbread.

“Would you like to open the door, dear?” smiled his Granny conspiratorially. “And remember: for once, I don’t want you on your best behaviour! In fact,” she added, “the best thing you can do Rusty, is a parody of yourself.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult!” grinned Rusty over his shoulder as he made for the door. He remembered to muss his hair over a second time (he had already gelled the wayward tufts on the back of his head to stand up as waywardly as they could) and rolled up one legs of his jeans to calf length, leaving the other trailing down over his trainer. He also had a streak of dirt from the back garden down one cheek to complete the effect.

While removing her dentures, Svetlana peaked discreetly round the curtain of the bay window as she waited for Rusty to open the door. This gave her an opportunity to watch Pauline arrange herself on the doorstep. Svetlana had already heard from Eva about the recent de-himification of the school hymn book. Taken together with the person Svetlana now saw standing before her, that bizarre ritual of political correctness began to acquire a kind of warped logic. Ransom’s seemed to have been taken

over either by a race of gender-free mutants or some bizarre form of android that someone had neglected to equip with any of the less tangible and attractive attributes of humanity, such as emotion or humour. Any aspect of reality that could not be captured and expressed in the form of a list passed them by.

The most striking aspect of Pauline's appearance was her lack of discernible gender. She was tall, angular and slim, with largish feet that she was in the habit of setting at right angles to each other while standing in conversation, as if in an attempt to contain her opposite number in an invisible box. Up to the middle of her head behind her ears her dark blonde hair gave the impression of having been shaved off with a hedge-trimming device, leaving a long fringe that went right round her head at the same length, in a severe version of the pudding-basin cut. This in turn evoked a caricature of a medieval monk or eunuch in Marks and Spencers slacks.

After the Valedictory service in the Cathedral at the end of the previous school year, Svetlana had overheard the Head of Newbourne College remark to someone nearby that Pauline was the "campest guy" he had ever seen. Pauline herself had missed this gem, although standing not far away. She had just spotted the Dean of the Cathedral and was executing a deft cutting movement in front of Eva, to whom she had been talking at the time, in order to invest in some impromptu networking. The

version of a smile that marked the opening gambit of this smart move called for a strong stomach indeed, somehow reminding one of a digital version of Uriah Heep, and Eva had gladly conceded social defeat and moved away from the group.

Pauline's ecclesiastical connections were nonetheless deep, even intimate. She had, it was rumoured, been married to a vicar for a while (one couldn't help wondering how physical union could have been possible). She was also a mid-life refugee from a theological college that had been closed down because of the dwindling number of recruits to the clergy. In a last ditch stand, the college had tried to pass itself off as a university, but to no avail.

Pauline had thus arrived at Ransom's with little more than a suitcase full of clerical connections, but this had proved enough to pique the interest of the Head, to whom social climbing was her life's work. Pauline was welcomed with open arms. While she was being groomed for stardom as the new Deputy Head (a human being was only months away from retirement), she was put to work, for the sake of form, in the school library, where she was able to practice jargon such as "synergy" and "paper-driven culture", mainly by issuing death threats to people who had forgotten to return their library books, or rebuking colleagues who had ventured into her android sanctum with things like cups of coffee. In her spare time, which she seemed to have quite a lot of at this stage in her career, she

also enjoyed walking around the school corridors straightening pictures. All this proved wonderful practice for later, when she would stand behind pillars early in the morning, waiting in ambush for unsuspecting teachers trying to avoid going to assembly. As behooves someone who is being groomed for stardom and has little more to prove, she was also the first person to get into her car at four thirty in the afternoon, while the mere underlings put on their third pot of coffee of the day, gulped down another Beta blocker and got stuck into their preparation and marking for the next day. Meanwhile, the Head prepared with a barely concealed frisson of upward mobility for her social triumph in Cathedral Close.

An android apparatchik smile was still arranging itself on Pauline's face as Rusty made to open the front door, but since the elderly mother of a teacher at Ransom's hardly ranked her on the same level of importance as high clergy, there were few teeth showing. Rusty, looking as greasy and disreputable as he could, opened the door and gazed up at Pauline with his most impenetrably stupid teenager expression, leering slightly into the pale sunlight. The ratchets of Pauline's brain were not quite fast enough to put on the brakes and re-align her mouth, already poised for the obligatory dose of name-dropping that opened most of her conversations: "So sorry I'm late, I got held up unexpectedly by the Dean at the Bishop's Palace!" she beamed with digital superfluosness at Eva's son. Her voice, Svetlana noticed, had already

acquired some of the unfortunate circular saw-like pitch and intonation of Barbara Styles, the Head, evoking distasteful suggestions of an unhealthy symbiosis.

Rusty had been well primed. “Oh yeah, right”, he responded, remembering to ban as many “T’s” from his pronunciation as possible. “Gran’s ‘specting ya,” he enunciated as slowly as he could, in the hope that Svetlana would be assembling her decrepitude to full effect in the living room. He entered first, followed by an erect, supercilious Pauline.

It was like pricking an upright sausage balloon. The first thing that hit Pauline, as she attempted to make out shapes through the chink in the thick drawn curtains, was the most appalling smell of warm urine. A huddled shape sitting by the gas fire farted and grunted in that order (Svetlana and Rusty shared a passion for whoopee cushions). “Er, I’ve. I’ve, I’ve,” Pauline stammered, then remembering her android manners, “I mean, good morning Mrs, er,” (remembering that she had forgotten Svetlana’s name).

Rusty had been carefully instructed by Svetlana to allow any ensuing silences in the encounter to mellow gently, like the urine in front of the fire. “If you are tempted to break the pause,” she had said, “just count the flowers on the wallpaper or distract yourself in some other way. You’d be amazed what a powerful weapon silence can be in the right hands.” Now, Rusty could see what she had meant.

Pauline was starting to shift her weight from one big flat foot to the other and, as if in a desperate attempt to take charge of this uncomfortable reality, even started steeping her hands the way Barbara Styles used to do in assembly when talking about that Christian love they both professed interminably, but which they seemed to find so elusive in practice.

Something close to a sixty-second eternity may have passed before Pauline clutched at the traditional straw of those out of their depth. She decided to shout. "I've come to collect the parcel!!!!" she intoned very slowly to the smelly huddle in the armchair, which responded by picking what appeared to be a dead fly out of its dishevelled hair and proceeded to examine it closely in front of thick spectacles. The woman was clearly dribbling down one side of her mouth.

"Parcel!" croaked the crone in the chair, holding the fly out for Pauline to inspect.

"No, no, Mrs er... PAR-CEL!"

Rusty, on the verge of an explosion that threatened to detonate his innards at any moment, rocked forwards and backwards on his trainers, hands clenched behind his back, keeping his eyes trained downward on the carpet so that Pauline would not notice the tears of laughter.

The doorbell rang. With the instant eyeball to eyeball communication of hardened anti-snob squad insurgents, Svetlana and Rusty agreed

wordlessly in a glance that she would hold up the front in the living room while he went to answer the door. A couple of seconds later, Eva entered the room, followed by Rusty, who with a shrug communicated a nonplussed silent enquiry to Svetlana. His Granny merely grinned as inanely as she could and thrust the dead fly forward proudly towards her daughter.

“Parcel!” she repeated, nevertheless managing a quick wink that Eva was able to discern, but Pauline, who was now visibly sweating from her loss of customary command and upwardly mobile poise, could not.

With a subtle and instantaneous inward shifting of gears which Eva was able to register as pleasing to her, Eva grasped the situation.

“Now mother, I’ve brought your medicine, dear,” she said, leaning down to Svetlana and seizing the benefit of Pauline’s blind side to raise her eyebrows and grin at the same time. Then, savouring the moment, she took in a long, deep breath, stood up very slowly and, turning to Rusty, inquired in her sweetest voice: “Where did Granny put the parcel this time, dear?”

Rusty, still under the sway of an earlier phase of his anti-snob-squad training, stretched his best blank insolent look to about ten seconds, gazing round the room while pouting, before responding: “Laundry basket”, pointing to the plastic basket behind the door.

Eva, suddenly every inch her mother’s daughter, beamed a smile of equanimity on Pauline, even

giving Pauline's arm a patronizing little pat for good measure as she passed by her. Opening the lid, she dexterously picked each item of soiled linen out by hand, dropping it on to the carpet, asking herself with rhetorical good humour: "Now, I wonder where it can be?"

At last she found the parcel, nestling among some knickers. She pulled it triumphantly out of the basket with both hands, like one of the Three Wise Men at a nativity play.

"Here we are!" she exclaimed brightly, handing the treasure over to a speechless Pauline, whose locomotive system appeared to have temporarily disengaged itself from her brain. Svetlana, Eva and Rusty bathed in a hiatus of silent, beatific bliss, in which Pauline struggled in vain to find words, repair her damaged persona, or even move one of her gender-free limbs towards the door.

Then, as if on the cue of an invisible conductor, the three of them exchanged a glance of accord, as if to say: "That'll do for today" and Eva, turning to Pauline, said: "See you on Monday morning then!" and ushered her stumbling out of the door. Svetlana and Rusty, arms round each other, tears streaming down their grimy faces, gazed through the net curtains as Pauline staggered back down the path towards her car and shooting a puzzled frown back over her shoulder before driving off in a cacophony of excessive revs and crashing gears. "You'd think a robot like her would drive an automatic!" Rusty commented.

The front door closed, Eva returned to the room. She looked at Rusty, then at Svetlana, then burst into giggles and splutters. "You're both very, very naughty!" she said, wagging her finger first at one, then the other.

"I know!" grinned Rusty.

"I know!" smirked Svetlana. "But then so are you, darling!"

"So it would seem," said Eva, collapsing on to the couch. "And what on earth is that awful smell?"

Svetlana and Rusty both burst out laughing.

"Pissed-off android?" guffawed Granny, winking at Rusty.

Arriving at school, still dazed from her experience, Pauline Jenkins was too disoriented to notice some unfamiliar cars parked outside the main entrance in places normally reserved for the Head and her partner. As Pauline made her way pensively up the stairs, eyes down, holding the parcel in front of her, she did not even notice Barbara Styles, looking white and drawn, who was standing waiting for her at the top of the stairs. She almost bumped into her.

"Come into my office right away," Styles muttered through lips tight with multiple blown covers.

"Is something wrong?" inquired Pauline superfluously.

"The police are here," said Barbara in a low voice, that still echoed mercilessly around the oak-panelled landing, enunciating the word "police" with a special care that denoted its placement in verbal quarantine. She was attempting to say what

she had to say without actually having to say the words out loud, and discovering that she couldn't.

"The police?" repeated Pauline vacantly, retaining the tone of verbal quarantine that this unsavory word merited.

"The fraud squad, to be precise," came the reluctant specification. In a working environment to which buzzwords and euphemisms were its life's blood, this abrupt restoration to a discourse in which words had clearly defined, unequivocal meanings was like a sharp pain to their minds, which were used to the moral anesthetics of their own corporate jargon.

"The fraud squad," echoed Pauline blankly, irritated by the sound of her own empty words.

"The fraud squad," confirmed Styles, tightening her jaws.

"What fraud?" Pauline found herself asking, at the same time aware that this sounded as if one would hardly know where to begin the list, therefore annoying herself yet again with her own inadvertent truthfulness.

Styles' knuckled clenched yellow-white.

"The Bursar's, it seems."

"The Bursar's?" Pauline could hardly bear the sound of her own drone by this stage.

"Yes," the Head went on cautiously through the minefield, "it seems that there are some funds missing from the Head-hunting budget." Pauline did not even notice herself being ushered into the Head's inner sanctum and the door being closed behind them.

"But how," asked Pauline, at last relocating some of

her Ransom's priorities, "did they find out?"

"God knows," answered Styles, oblivious to the irony of including the Lord in her equations so very late in the day.

"All I was told is that someone very high up is involved."

"Someone very high up? You mean in the Church?" Pauline was still struggling for some social scaffolding.

"No, I mean in the government. Some kind of fiscal watchdog committee stumbled on it by accident, it would seem."

"The government?" flailed Pauline.

"Yes," answered Barbara. "It would appear that the Bursar's cover was blown, directly or indirectly, by a cabinet minister, no less."

Faced with this much social status in one sentence, Barbara and Pauline would normally scarcely have known whether to weep or preen themselves. Looking out of her study window down on to the lawn below, Barbara's eye was caught by the Bursar's rather silly wife Beth, shoulders trembling, with her face turned away towards the driveway, being hugged sympathetically by Father Barnes. Uncomfortable in the presence of all displays of sincere feeling, she instinctively turned her head away from them and back into the room. This was perhaps fortunate. Had she delayed for only a couple of seconds longer, she would have been in time to see Beth turn her head back round to face the Father, and seen, inexplicably, that she was trembling not with grief, but with tears of laughter, as was Father Barnes.

“So you did manage to whip up a bit of support after all?” he teased, putting his arm round her as the Bursar, in handcuffs, was led towards one of the inappropriately parked cars and driven away.

Chapter 21 In Memoriam

It was a fine edge, Eva realized that afternoon, that divided life from death, propriety from hypocrisy, thoughtlessness from malice, irony from desecration. She went into the chapel a good twenty minutes before the memorial service, lit a candle in Harry Hollingsworth's honour, dropping a noisy coin into the box below the stand, and knelt for a few moments in prayer before taking a seat in a back row pew. She was no longer surprised by her urge to laugh. By now she knew that her sense of absurdity was the constant, and faithful, companion of her humanity. Her humour wrapped itself around her sorrow like the arm of a best friend. She had a palpable sense of the warmth of Harry's presence, smiling invisibly beside her, waiting to enjoy the show. She almost expected to feel him prod her playfully in the arm with his baton, throwing back his golden mane and laughing.

From the perspective of the drafty sandstone opulence of Newbourne College, down in the "right" end of town, it would have to be admitted that the Chapel of Our Lady of Ransom's had "upstart red brick" written all over it. It was airy and light, and had simple lines that were conducive to modest meditations. It was a place where one could breathe. Father Barnes loved spending time here and had gathered around himself a small flock of girls, like flotsam from a spiritual wreck surfing a tide of spiritual hypocrisy, who helped him prepare for services and clear up afterwards.

So Harry was gone. Gone over that finest and sharpest of life's edges into oblivion, or eternal rest, depending on one's point of view. It would not have done for the school to be involved in the funeral itself, Eva thought, watching the flame of her prayer candle dance in an invisible breeze in its stand. She was aware of intermingling currents of sadness, gratitude, and an affirmation of her own survival, as well as a feeling that she needed to make war on someone.

Funerals had uncomfortable associations with the disposal of bodies. In the world of corporate education, even religious corporate education, teachers are not supposed to die in the saddle. They are supposed to make a predictable series of good career moves and then retire in multi-pensioned, de-mortgaged superannuation, to die quietly in de-corporated discretion. Death comes as an affront to the corporate world, like a harsh spotlight mercilessly trained on a plywood set that the cast has been working so hard to pretend is real. The ritual of the memorial service allowed the school to pay sanitized tribute to a person who had embarrassed it with the inappropriateness of his mortality. At least Harry had had the decency to die during a half-term holiday, so that the funeral was over by the time everyone came back to school. The memorial service was a convenient device whereby people who had been incorporated into the corporate culture could be excised from it through the exclusion of their bodies. This meant not only that Harry could be praised and disposed of at the

same time, but happily also, in the absence of a body, that the reality of death itself could be denied.

Needless to say, the more culpable the workplace had been in the death of an employee, the more sickening the eulogy could be expected to be. Eva was already inwardly bracing herself for it. Fittingly, the eulogy on this occasion was to be given by Drummond Maclean, Ransom's Director of Studies, whose own principal contribution to the shortening of Harry's life had been his demand for award-winning musical output on the one hand, in whose glory he was always the first to bask, while doing his damndest to throttle the rehearsal time required to achieve it on the other. There was, of course, no inconsistency in this. It is the function of management to uphold standards at human expense. And as the management of Ransom's were so fond of pointing out: "No-one is indispensable." "It is a pity though," Harry himself had often pointed out, "that they never seem to apply this wisdom to themselves."

As her colleagues made their way into the pews in front of her, Eva sat it all out, as it were, for Harry, trying to watch them all through his eyes and recall the phrases he would have used to describe them. He would undoubtedly have reserved his undiluted vitriol for the managerial cannibals who now duly stooped their shoulders, clasped their hands together, pursed their lips and knitted their eyebrows in corporate, crocodile mourning, somehow managing, despite the paper thinness of

their empathy, to tiptoe their way reverentially forward to the front pews, where they would be seen to be making the appropriate display of ostensibly restrained, but in reality entirely non-existent grief. Predictably, at the meeting of the Senior Management Team the evening before, Harry's death had been described as "awkward."

"The only place Maclean and Styles have ever felt any pain is in their bank balances and their career ladders," Harry had always liked to say.

"Harry's body may have been displaced, but his spirit continues to snap at their heels a little," thought Eva, smiling to herself, causing Barbara Styles to twist her carefully arranged furrowed brow as she walked past. "That must have hurt!" chuckled Eva to herself, with a stab of grief that Harry was not there to see it.

There was a hymn, sung with decorous indifference, through which Eva floated by trying not to think how Harry would have conducted it in morning assembly. En masse, the corporate behinds of Ransom's seated themselves on the reproduction pews of the chapel. Eva's mind wandered to a recollected picture of Harry making himself a cup of coffee and a slice of toast in the staffroom, laughing and telling her his latest joke, a trace of wayward Marmite streaking his chin. He would never tell another.

"He will always be with us!" boomed the Morningside voice of Drummond Maclean, causing Eva, who had judiciously prepared a handkerchief

for this purpose should it prove necessary, to cry out loud and muffle her laughter by burying her face in it. It was all she could do to keep her balance and not slide off the pew on to her hassock. She even found it necessary to pinch herself in the thigh in order to regain control of her renegade emotions. A few heads from the SMT pantheon in the front row turned to see who was responsible for this unseemly display and Eva was treated to several peremptory gazes of glacial contempt before the sound of Maclean's voice drew their attention back to the front.

"It is not fashionable in these egalitarian times," Maclean went on, pronouncing the word "egalitarian" as if it were a source of lethal contagion, "to extol the virtues of duty and discipline." Eva clenched her lips between her teeth and closed her eyes tight as a delinquent image was conjured in her mind of Harry, dressed in black leather, disciplining a troop of naked and eager Ransom girls with a whip. Finding herself shaking again despite her best efforts, she resorted once again to the surreptitious thigh pinch and the cliché of her handkerchief. Resurfacing from behind the pew many seconds later, red-faced from suppressed emotion, she found Father Barnes looking straight at her, wearing a multi-layered expression of complex sensitivities, ranging from tender, enquiring sympathy to humorous, conspiratorial delinquency. The unfeigned humanity of his gaze unlocked her tears, which now fell in hot, salty drops and with a thick veil of

silence that drowned out Maclean's words for several minutes. It was unbearable to her that Harry should be so completely there with her and so utterly absent. She bowed her head and waited for the wave to pass.

Another hymn, also ideologically purged of him, followed, the body of Ransom's standing up as one and singing in unenthusiastic unison, making Eva feel like a toy bobbing up and down in a pool of tears. When they had all reseated themselves in a sympathetic creaking of pews, there followed a moment of silence, before Father Barnes made his way quietly to the lectern. His glance met hers for a brief second, as if to say, "this is for you."

"The reading from the New Testament," he went on, lowering his gaze, "is taken from the Gospel according to St Luke, Chapter 9, verse 60:

"Leave the dead to bury their dead; you must go and announce the kingdom of God." There was an intake of surprised breath on the front row, and Eva, although feeling drained from her tears, raised her red, sore eyes.

After the service, she waited, glad of a moment of quiet, for everyone else to file out and for the mutterings and hand-shakings to be over, before slowly getting up and walking towards Father Barnes in the doorway. He took her hand to shake it. "Thank you," she said simply.

"Thank you," he replied.

"I don't know what came over me," she said, wafting

her handkerchief in the general direction of her swollen face in a gesture of superfluous explanation.

“I think you’ve been Ransomed,” he said.

Chapter 22 Dreaming and Waking

Back in the hotel room that she had booked in a rather unprepossessing-looking, but conveniently located street in the Prague Old Town, Eva, tired from all the walking she had done that day and from her bedtime reading, sank into a heavy sleep before the astrological clock on the Old Town Square had even struck ten. She seemed to dream a lot during the school holidays, and especially when she was in Prague. Her sense of a perpetual energy deficit during term time, combined with lack of exercise, made sleep shallow and agitated. The more oblivion eluded her at night, the more her sense of self eluded her during the day. Each passing week saw her consciousness recede deeper into a fog of two-dimensional, automated responses to external demands. With each futile meeting, every new or revised scheme of work, each new edict from the corporate machine, or the latest mind job on herself or one of her colleagues, she became more and more sluggish and de-motivated, her sense of self flimsier. Her mental fog was only punctuated by the refreshingly uncomplicated good humour of her coffee or Cava sessions with Carol, Jane, or her mother Svetlana. These were the signposts on her map of the territory of her retreating selfhood, her only reassurance that it still existed, waiting to be reclaimed.

Through this mental fog she was still intermittently aware of bodily aches and unnamed discomforts that seemed to lead rebellious, guerilla-like lives of

their own in the body that she supposed was still hers, but which seemed to communicate with her senses through a dark tunnel that was mostly blocked. Even her body had been colonized by her work, it seems. It had become a battlefield, a word that could not lie, but with the text carried off into slavery, sacrificed to some alien god. In this state she found herself unable to decide whether she had become a soul without a body or a body without a soul. At all events, for Eva the process of retrieving herself at the start of every school holiday began with her longed for surrender into several successive nights of deep, undisturbed sleep, accompanied by potent dreams.

She knew now from experience how to tolerate the initial worsening of her fogged consciousness during the daytime that accompanied these first few unbroken nights. She had learned to wait the two or three days, sometimes even a week, that it took for her body and mind to knit back together again as her sleep pattern restored itself. Her constitution seemed to turn off all non-essential thinking processes while it went into a familiar mode of maintenance and repair. Once launched, this process was obdurate and insisted on taking its course.

At first Eva had struggled and panicked, perhaps in a café somewhere in Prague, when she would find herself gazing at a handful of loose change, trying to work out how much to pay the waiter for her coffee or her soup. Her mind simply stopped and

went blank for seconds on end. But now she just allowed her world to slip gently and hazily into a misty slowness until it had found its own focus again. Her recognition of this pattern helped her to accept it and work with it, rather than resisting it as she had done at first. Earlier in her Prague phase she had snatched greedily at the city's sights and treasures like a beggar afraid that her plate of food was about to be stolen from under her nose. She had gone from overdriven teacher to overdriven tourist, from one time famine to another.

Now the pattern of her recuperation was so well established and predictable that she had lost all fear of it. She came to see it as a comforting sign that nature, working within her and through her, knew after all how to defend itself. She understood then that some things are not made to happen, but allowed to happen. This was the beginning for her of a new discipline – the discovery and cultivation of the inner self. It had been screaming at her for years through the joints and sinews of her body, her aching knees, the angry fire in her guts, but then she had still seen her body as a cranky, faltering machine that failed, infuriatingly as she then thought, to perform up to the high-octane standards of corporate expectation. She had mistaken her friend for her enemy and waged a cold war against it. It had responded by screaming louder, and then even louder: “I don’t know what this game is and I don’t care, but I’m not playing it.”

When last in Prague, she had developed an interest in Orthodox Christian art and its mystery of the incarnation. It contrasted starkly with the disembodied, de-gendered, cerebral spirituality of mainstream Ransom's, and consequently irritated Styles and Jenkins to the extreme. Hence, Eva's new interest evoked a fresh campaign of put-down vitriol from the management. It smacked too much of spiritual sincerity in an institution that had hijacked God in the cause of upward social mobility. Eva hardly noticed any more. Its very incarnate presence fascinated her. She asked herself why crucifixion symbols had become the icons of the religious life at Ransom's. Why all this death? Where was the birth, the life, the resurrection? Where, indeed, was the body at all? If the body – especially, she mused, the female one – was to be beaten and despised in an ever-renewing cycle of guilt, self-flagellation and self-loathing, where was the meaning at all in God being made incarnate? What was the point? Where was the redemption? What had gone missing from the equation? When had God been kidnapped, and by whom? In the meantime she decided to spend some of her time during this visit to Prague delving into the history of how the Czech lands had been converted to Christianity by Cyril and Methodius of Salonika. The next day, for example, she could go to the Orthodox Church near the Charles Bridge – the Old Town Bridge, she could hear her mother correcting her, with a smile.

Much as she loved reading, back in England, Eva's mind and spirit were too depleted to allow her to read for sustained periods of time, although she had piled up a backlog of treasured finds from Prague bookshops, as well as titles she had ordered with feverish optimism online but found she hardly had the strength to read. As she fell into bed at night she would barely manage a paragraph or two before capitulating to tiredness and turning off the light. Next to her bed she had a stack of books about John Dee, alchemy, Rudolf II and Bruno Giordano. She felt the palpable fascination and pull of this city, while at the same time sensing the presence of a deadly flaw in the potential for obsession to which some of these figures had fallen prey. In the back of her mind a sense of connection was forming between the alchemical history of this city and the sense of a process of inexorable consequences unfolding at Ransom's. Where she had once kept her work in England with her "life" in Prague in separate compartments, she could now feel a growing sense of common ground, even of universal laws at work. Even when she was not directly pondering on these things, they floated in her mind just below the level of conscious thought.

Then there were the dreams. They were vivid and seemed so portentous, perhaps because she had grown used to a life without dreams in her working life, that she began to write them down. One night, for example, she dreamt that she was in her living room, looking out of a large picture window towards the horizon. In her dream the landscape outside

was a hot desert. As she gazed out she saw three balls of brushwood ignite into fireballs and scud across the horizon from left to right. The air outside was tinder dry and electric with a yellow-orange heat. At first it seemed to Eva as if the three fireballs had nothing to do with her, but then suddenly a pony appeared, apparently being pursued by one of them. It ran straight towards the window of her living room, smashing through the glass pane and disappearing past her into the back of the house. When she asked someone about the pony she was told that it was dead, but she did not believe it. She was sure it had escaped unscathed. The dry electric heat from outside was blown into the house, but she knew she was in no danger.

That night in Prague she dreamt what she laughingly referred to afterwards as her Count Dracula dream, but which did not seem at all horrific to her - quite the opposite. The dream was in black and white, reminiscent of a classic old movie of the fifties. The scene was set in the darkness of night, but with a full moon shedding its light on an old graveyard with higgledy-piggledy tombstones jutting out at odd angles, indicating both great age and an advanced state of dereliction. Against this backdrop stood a ruined abbey with no roof. It reminded her of the Whitby Abbey scene from a Dracula movie, where Dracula lands at the harbour on board a ship, except that in the film the ship containing the Count's coffin had landed in a terrible storm, whereas her scene was one of poetic stillness and calm. Out of the open roof of the

derelict abbey three immense trees were growing, stupendously tall and in full leaf, in contrast to the stark outlines of the rest of the scene, which seemed deathly still and devoid of any signs of life. Recalling the scene of her dream afterwards, Eva described it as one of monumental beauty and significance. Waking from it with a sense of peace and grace, Eva jotted down her impressions so as not to forget them, then turned over, wrapped her duvet around her and went back to sleep, resolving with a smile, her eyes already closed, to talk about the dreams with Carol and Father Barnes on her return to Ransom's.

It came to her, to me, the next morning, over my second cup of coffee, sitting in a sunny spot outside a café in Novy Svet, looking down the street back towards the Castle. I had walked the full length of the Royal Mile, from the Powder Tower, through the Old Town Square, across the Charles Bridge, through the Lesser Town and up the Castle steps. Continuing on up the hill, I had put the Castle behind me and was enjoying a leisurely late breakfast at the café.

A young couple was walking up the hill towards me with a small child. The little boy, who might have been about three, was obviously weary of trudging up the hill, so his parents had taken him by one arm each and were joking with him to cajole him, swinging him up between them and then setting him down, before swinging him up again. They were all laughing and enjoying themselves. As they moved closer to me, I could hear that they were

speaking Spanish, and I recalled in that moment a passage I had been reading in bed the night before about the Emperor Rudolf II having grown up at the Spanish court. There was an instant sense of right chemistry as I smiled to myself, lifting my face to the light, which was shining down on to my table through the dappled leaves of a plane tree. I closed my eyes for a brief second and felt a new breath entering my lungs, as if my breath led a life of its own. When I opened my eyes again it was as if the scattered fragments of a mosaic had all simply relaxed into their rightful places, restoring a forgotten pattern. I saw the dynamic, electric, erotic trust and warmth between the couple, the man and the woman, the male and the female, and then the child who was the living, bodily expression of it, and of them, but who was also completely himself. The whole essence of their life was in the relationship. There was no either/or. The world is not binary and finite, right or wrong. The finding of self was in the giving of self, the meaning of the one is in the other. It was the death of ego and the birth of self. So it was too, I decided, with the events of our lives and the memories we create through them – event and memory, the male and female of experience, experience the spiritual child who lives on when the event and the memory of it are long gone. The body and the spirit are one. God is the God of the living, not of the dead. Experience, too, is the death of ego and the birth of self, the marriage of heaven and earth - the end of the Royal Mile.