Moonshine

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Extract

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ONE

The waves scattered the lights from the Swansea to Cork ferry as though tossing silver coins to the marine life of the Bristol Channel. The wind flung the contents of my stomach after them. I bitterly regretted the Battenberg cake.

'You don't look well, dear,' the motherly stewardess had said. 'Take my advice and have a little something to settle your insides. The crossing's going to be rough.'

Discouraging though this sounded, they were the first kind words that had been addressed to me all day. She had put down the plate before me and urged me to eat. It would have been impolite to refuse. Now my imagination was haunted by those lurid pink and yellow squares of cake, clad in wrinkled marzipan. As I pressed the cold iron of the ship's rail against my burning face a sense of monstrous ill-usage overwhelmed me and I groaned aloud.

'You poor thing! I've suffered from *mal de mer* myself and it's no fun. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where thy victory?'

The voice was male, self-assured, amused. I suppose there is something comical about sea-sickness if you don't happen to be feeling it. I wanted neither the sympathy nor the teasing but nausea and faintness made flight impossible. I would have fallen if the stranger had not taken my arm.

'Steady! Come on, let's sit down.'

He half carried me to a row of benches. Naturally, at this hour of howling purgatorial darkness, they were empty.

'I feel awful!' I moaned. I would have added, 'The human race is despicable and life is a hideous pantomime,' if I had not, even in

this moment of crisis, a disinclination to make myself utterly ridiculous.

'It's bad, I know. You just want to die.' He pushed me on to a seat and sat down beside me.

'I do!' I sobbed, the kindness in his voice encouraging me to give way to melodrama. 'You'd better let me throw myself in. It'll be the solution to every problem.'

'Not for me, it won't. People might think I pushed you overboard.'

'How like a man! It's got nothing to do with you. They'll think, quite rightly, that I couldn't stand another minute of this beastly boat going up and down, up and down. Oh, how I *hate* the sea!'

The man laughed. 'We haven't left the bay yet. Mumbles Head is over there, to the right. There's only a slight breeze and the water's as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond.'

I lifted my head. The lights of Swansea rose and fell most unpleasantly but the moon sent an unbroken path of beams across the water to meet them. The howling was all in my mind.

'I hate mill-ponds.' I continued to cry.

'That's right. Let it all out.' My self-appointed nurse patted my arm from time to time. 'Now.' He handed me his handkerchief. 'Have a good blow. Feeling better?'

I blew. 'I feel worse if anything.'

'The trick is not to register the motion of the ship. Don't, whatever you do, look at the rail. Keep your eyes fastened on something on board. A lifebelt, a noticeboard or a ventilation funnel. Or, even better, look at me.'

The light from the saloon window fell on the right side of his face. I saw someone reassuringly ordinary, fairish, with prominent ears. I could just make out a cheek creased in a smile.

'I suppose you're a journalist.' I was too tired to put as much venom into the accusation as I would have liked.

'My goodness, you know how to hit where it hurts! Do I look like a sot and a liar? Have I the appeal of a tramp with rotting gums and a leaky urinary tract?'

'You are, aren't you?' I persisted.

'I'm a literary agent. A pretty innocent game, on the whole. Are you a film star who wants to be alone?'

'Well . . . no and yes.'

I stared at him, trying to pierce the darkness and the bone, cortex and synapses that housed the impulses operational in lying. The last ten days had destroyed my trust in anyone I had not known from the baptismal font.

'What can I say to convince you?' He felt inside his coat. 'Wait a minute.' He stood up and searched his trouser pockets. 'Here we are. Car keys and useful torch attached. Present from a desperate godmother. At the time I thought it was a bit mean but now I'm grateful.'

He directed a pencil beam on to an open passport. I saw the photograph of a young man with a high forehead and bat-wing ears. Below this it said, *Literary Agent*.

'See?' He directed the light on to the white slot on the passport cover. The name was Christopher Random. 'That's me. I can show you my driving licence, if you'd like.'

'I believe you. I'm sorry I doubted. You've been extremely kind, Mr Random.'

'You can call me Kit.'

'I'm sure you've got more interesting things to do than sitting here with me.'

'I was about to have some supper. You ought to eat something.'

I shuddered at the idea of the cafeteria with its stuffy smell, smeary tables and bottles sticky with congealed ketchup. 'I can't go inside.'

'All right.' He stood up. 'Promise you won't do anything silly?'

'Like what?'

He paused. 'Like look at the waves.'

I closed my eyes. 'I promise.'

The crying had made me feel better, as it always does. I felt light-headed now, and immensely weary. For the past week and a half I had slept shallowly for no more than a couple of hours at a time before a sense of something being terribly wrong had dragged me back to consciousness. Now I sat in a state of apathy feeling the vibration of the engine through the slats of the bench, the slow chilling of my feet and fingers and the tip of my nose. The realization that I need do nothing for several hours as every second the boat took me further from home seemed like an extraordinary kindness for which I was inexpressibly grateful.

My thoughts wandered and revised my impressions of the day. There had been a long train journey. I had been gripped by an

obsessive fear that I was being followed. The man sitting opposite me seemed to be watching me covertly from behind the open pages of his *Gardener's Weekly*. I became convinced that he was a newspaper reporter. After we passed Cheltenham he struck up a conversation with the woman next to him. He was a retired miner with silicosis. I saw again his eyes, mild, uncomplaining, his long upper lip and his patchily shaven chin as he talked about his passion for gladioli. And then, as I dozed, it grew redder and more angular, with fierce eyes and bared teeth. It became my father's face.

I roused myself and pulled my jacket closer round me, for though it was July the breeze from the sea was freezing. A young couple sauntered past, arm-in-arm, gave me a curious glance and walked on. I fell again into a waking dream in which my father's face was constantly before me. His expression of ferocity as he threw down the newspaper at breakfast ten days before had lodged itself so securely in my memory that whenever I ceased to think actively it floated up from my subconscious to fill the vacuum.

We had been sitting in the dining room, a shrine to Victorian mahogany, brown leather and second-rate watercolours. There were always twelve chairs round the table and we had occupied the same places from the time my brother and I had left the nursery. As in a dentist's waiting room, we sat as far apart from one another as the arrangement allowed.

My father was a small man and, with characteristic perversity, had chosen to marry my mother, who at five feet eleven was seven inches taller than he. This had embarrassed me horribly as a child. It seemed to detract from the dignity of each and I was afraid that people might laugh at them. If my father was in a good humour with my mother, he called her 'Lanky'. Her name was actually Laetitia.

When I examined the photograph on my mother's dressing-table of my father in uniform as a young subaltern I could see he might once have been attractive. His hair had been thick and sandy, his brows well marked, his expression keen and pugnacious. Now he was largely bald so that clumps of hair sprouted above his ears in speckled tufts and his eyebrows were unruly. He bore a striking resemblance to a wire-haired fox terrier. He spoke in an aggressive, impatient manner and when he was angry the spaces between the

thousands of freckles on his face became tomato red and the bridge of his short, hooked nose grew purple.

Of course he was going to find out.

When I had seen the newspaper neatly folded by his plate, placed there by our daily, Mrs Treadgold, I knew the moment of revelation had come. The story had been the third item on the television news the night before. I had switched it off with a fluttering heart and a sick feeling in my stomach as soon as I saw Burgo's face appear on the screen. Luckily my father considered television plebeian, so he never watched it. For the remainder of the evening I had sat in painful suspense by the telephone in the hall in case one of my father's cronies at the Army and Navy Club should have seen the news and be stirred by curiosity to ring him up on the pretext of condoling with him. No one had. Perhaps they too were a little frightened of him.

I cannot explain why I was afraid of my father. I could not remember a time when I had not heard his approach with apprehension. Even when he was in a jovial mood, there was something combative in his voice and manner. And I knew how rapidly the joviality could turn to rage. I could be coldly analytical behind his back and sarcastic, even defiant, to his face, but none the less I dreaded his anger.

The moment had come. I had braced myself inwardly and pretended to be busy with the marmalade while he cut the rind from his bacon, buttered toast and poured himself a second cup of tea before picking up the newspaper. I heard the abrupt cessation of crunching as his eyes fell on the offending photograph. He had let out a sudden roar of fury that made me drop my knife.

'*What!* . . . No! . . . I don't believe it!' My father's voice, usually distressingly loud, had an ominous strangled sound. He clutched the edge of the table as though unseen hands were attempting to drag him away.

My heart, which had been pounding more or less continuously for the last few days, skipped a couple of beats. But I forced myself to look indifferently, even coldly, at him. We were alone in the dining room – my mother being an invalid now and Oliver unable to get up before noon. My father's small brown eyes were watering with shock and he was making a gobbling sound in his throat. I watched him, wondering with a frightening detachment if he were about to

have a stroke. He threw his napkin to the floor, clapped his hands on to the arms of his chair, stood up, strode round the table to where I sat and prodded energetically at the front page of the *Daily Chronicle*.

'*Well?* Is there a *word* of truth in this?'

I stared up at him dumbly. He seemed to interpret my silence as denial.

'I want you' – my father was breathing heavily and his eyes were bulging and crazed with red lines – 'to tell me why anyone should . . . want to make up this dis*gust*ing farrago of lies.' I noticed with a detached part of my mind that a blob of spit had landed on the butter. I made a mental note of exactly where so I could scrape it off afterwards.

'Well? *Well?*' He tried to shout but violent emotion had divested him of strength. 'Are you going to give me some sort of . . . hah! . . . explanation?'

I stood up, perhaps subconsciously to give myself the advantage of height. I was three inches taller than he. I wiped my fingers slowly with my napkin while schooling my face into an expression of challenge and defiance. 'If you mean, have I been having an affair with Burgo Latimer, yes, I have.'

He landed a smack on my jaw that knocked me sideways and made my teeth rattle. 'Whore! *Bitch!* Shameless *whore*!'

I shut my eyes to prevent tears falling and though my cheek immediately began to throb I remained outwardly calm. I braced myself for a second blow but it did not come. Probably it was the undeniably proletarian flavour of domestic violence that saved me.

'By *Christ*!' he said at last. 'That ever a child of mine . . . behaving like a bitch on heat . . . common little *tart* . . . the dis*grace* . . . never live it down . . . sacrifices for my country . . . my own *daugh*ter . . . how am I going to hold up my head in the club?'

I knew it would be pointless to attempt an explanation. I let him rave uninterrupted to get it over with as soon as possible.

'I blame your mother,' he concluded, in a tone into which some of the bittersweetness of having been deceived and betrayed was beginning to trickle. 'She's filled your head with sentimental claptrap. I suppose you fancied Latimer was in *love* with you. I hope he was good enough in bed to justify compromising the first decent government we've had for years. Don't imagine you were the only

one! He'll have had his leg over every party worker under forty. What *fools* women are!'

'You kept your word, I see.' Kit evolved from the darkness and stood before me, laden with bulky objects. 'Feeling better?' He dropped a pile of blankets on the bench beside me and proceeded to wrap me in them. A man in uniform approached with a tray.

'Just put it there. We'll help ourselves, thanks.' Kit put something into his hand and he slid away with a respectful murmur. 'Now.' Kit began to unwrap packages. 'Never let it be said that we English can't enjoy a picnic whatever the weather, even in the middle of the night on a ship trying to stand on its head. Cheese sandwich, madam? Or would you prefer cheese and pickle? Or there's cheese and egg, and, for the connoisseur, cheese and sausage.'

'I thought you said something about a mill-pond.' Suddenly I found I was even a little hungry.

'So I did when it was. As smooth as. But we've got out beyond the point now and it's blowing up. No' – as I turned my head to look – 'just take my word for it. Now have some hot coffee and if you eat up your sandwiches you can have a treat afterwards. I managed to commandeer the last two jam doughnuts. When in my extreme youth we had them for tea, Nanny used to wash them under the bathroom tap to get rid of the sugar because she feared for our tooth enamel. Ever since then, when things have looked on the bleak side, I've found there are few things more comforting than a dry, plump, sugary doughnut. Other men may hanker for *foie gras* but I thank God my tastes are more easily satisfied.'

Warm within my nest of blankets, with a strong breeze in my face, looking up at the stars while I ate the sandwiches and sipped the cooling coffee, I began to feel the truth of the saying that stuffing holds out a storm. It would be too much to say that I felt cheerful but while Kit was talking nonsense and when I was not thinking about Burgo I began to feel a little less miserable.

Ironically, it was entirely due to my father's passion for interfering with other people's lives that I had met Burgo.

By my own reckoning I had removed myself from my father's sphere of influence years before. As soon as I was capable of living independently (that is, the summer after I left school), I had spent

three months living in a bed-sitter in Earls Court and working in an antique shop. That autumn I had enrolled at London University to read History of Art and after graduating I took a poorly paid but interesting job at Boswell's, one of the smaller auction houses. I shared a tiny house with two friends, Sarah and Jasmine, in an enchanting cul-de-sac near the river in Chelsea. To help pay the rent I spent some of my spare time writing articles for periodicals about things like embroidered textiles, fans, silhouettes and custard pots. For relaxation I was entertained by my share of the large, fluctuating collection of men friends about whom Sarah, Jasmine and I speculated endlessly over bottles of cheap wine in the intimacy of the shabby but pretty sitting room of 22 Paradise Row.

Jasmine was in love with a married man called Teddy Bayliss. Though Sarah and I had told her (until we were in danger of sounding like evangelists for the Divine Light through Abstinence and Purity) that this was asking for trouble and bound to make her miserable, it was impossible to be anything other than sympathetic when one saw her lovely face ravaged by grief. Naturally, after the first wild rapture of romance with Teddy had passed, all our predictions came true. There were long lonely evenings in thrall to the telephone, broken dates because of wifely comings and goings or the demands of his children, the misery of imagining him sitting by a Christmas tree unwrapping presents with his family while Jasmine sat in a suite at the Savoy, watching her mother drift into a gin haze. Though the trials of her situation were commonplace, even hackneyed, this did nothing to alleviate the unhappiness they created.

I could not understand the attraction. Jasmine was sweet-natured, gentle, generous and half-Chinese. Her waist-length hair was black and lustrous, her skin golden, her features childlike and enchanting. Teddy was middle-aged, had mean little eyes, scant hair, an undersized chin, an oversized stomach and a self-conceit that seemed entirely unfounded. To see him treating Jasmine with a careless assurance that seemed to take her devotion for granted made us furious. We did everything we could think of to release her from the spell that made her blind to his ass's head – lecturing her as mentioned above, telling her that Teddy was a boring and pompous bastard, introducing her to nicer, more attractive men – but she remained enamoured.

Sarah, who owned the house in Paradise Row, and to whom Jasmine and I paid rent, had her own theory about this.

'Jazzy sees her father twice a year. He kisses her politely, gives her an inscrutable smile and a cheque and asks her to call him a cab. Ergo, she's looking for a father substitute.'

On the sole occasion Jasmine's father and I had met, he had shaken my hand and told me that Communism had been the end of civilization as far as China was concerned. Then he had whipped a book from his pocket and removed himself to the far end of the room to read. He held some diplomatic post at the embassy in Paris. It did not seem to me a position for which he was particularly well suited.

'But would you say that Teddy was exactly an ideal father figure? Having an affair with a girl half his age would seem to me to disqualify him from the start.'

'Don't be so literal, you fathead!' Sarah was a forthright girl, a barrister-in-training. She enjoyed polemic. 'Jazzy doesn't want a bloke smelling of pipe tobacco with slippers and a woolly waistcoat. She's looking for an authority figure to lead her through the maze of life and instruct her in every instance, including sex. Surely you know that all little girls have powerful sexual feelings about their fathers?'

I looked at Sarah's round brown eyes in her round face, framed by straight brown hair.

'I can say with absolute certainty that I never did.'

'You're afraid to admit it to yourself, that's all.'

'Afraid would be the word, all right.'

'Anyway,' Sarah continued with energy, 'Jazzy's still in many ways a child. She doesn't understand cause and effect. She refuses to take responsibility for her actions. Like a baby, she simply responds to the most pressing physical need.'

'I still don't see why that makes the repulsive, chinless, paunchy Teddy—'

'What a dunce you are! There's nothing special about Teddy except his age and his unavailability. She has to struggle to engage his attention. That feels familiar, therefore comforting. Those of us who've had reasonable relationships with our fathers can move on from there to seek men who satisfy our grown-up emotional and intellectual needs as equals.'

'So far we don't seem to have had much success.'

It was true that there were men of all kinds turning up on the

front doorstep of Number 22 to take us severally out to lunch, dinner, the theatre, the cinema, exhibitions, home to meet their mothers, and sometimes to bed. But neither of us had so far met anyone who met all our requirements for more than a few months. Sarah had had a string of lawyer boyfriends who were unsatisfactory because they much preferred sex to arguing. My boyfriends tended to be artistic and unsatisfactory because they were self-absorbed, neurotic, unreliable, and always borrowing money. Once I had got as far as announcing an engagement in *The Times* before I came to my senses and called it off. The unpleasantness this engendered and my own deep regret for causing pain had put me off such conventional behaviour for good. After the tremors had ebbed I decided that if I met someone I wanted to marry I would do it at once and without more ceremony than the register office provided. No one had so far tempted me to put this plan into action.

None the less, it would be true to say that my life was continuing satisfactorily until one morning not long after the above conversation – 22 April 1978, to be precise – a telephone call from my father had come as a rude blast shattering the idyll.