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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Water Theatre**

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Published by Alma Books Ltd

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# The Water Theatre

1  
*Fontanalba*

A late-September afternoon, some time before the turn of the century, and all the hills of Umbria were under cloud that day.

I had flown to Italy at short notice on a mission for a friend and was driving a hire car southwards at speed along the shore of Lake Trasimene, when a violent release of lightning flapped out of the sky like a thrown sheet before crashing shut again in a close collapse of thunder. The squall gusted towards me across the lake, erasing the island first, and then the pleasure steamer making for the quay at Passignano. Moments later the reed beds nearer inshore had gone and the tiny Fiat shuddered under the impact of the rain.

I braked to a crawl. Lightning seared the clouds again, its glare prickling across my skin. With the windscreen awash, I could make out only the tail lights of the vehicle ahead, so at the first exit I swung off the *autostrada* to park by the flooded edge of a road overlooking the lake. Rain pummelled the car's thin roof. It sprang in flets from the drenched asphalt. Through a streaming side window I watched a horse prance nervously across its field.

When I checked the map, counting the kilometres past Perugia and Foligno, up a steeply winding road into the hills, I reckoned on at least another hour's drive to Fontanalba. My plan had been to get to Marina's house quickly, say what I'd come to say, and then hurry back to London before my life unravelled. The whole trip was supposed to take two days if I was lucky, three at the most. Either way it was going to be an emotionally expensive time. Meanwhile this storm showed no sign of abating. So I sat there in the heat, watching the lightning pitch and strike its lurid canopy across the lake.

I remembered how Marina had once told me that lightning bolts, like kisses, are mutual affairs. They strike only when the descending charge is met by a stream of energy rising upwards from an object on the ground – a tree perhaps, or a person, one who might be utterly unconscious of the way his metabolism has been flirting with the idea of an electrical embrace. Yet the flash, when it comes, always happens by assignation.

So I was thinking about thunderstorms. I was thinking how Marina had understood such acts of dalliance instinctively. She had been born in a tempest as a liner rounded the western bulge of Africa in the month before the Second World War began. Lightning heralded her arrival. It imprinted its tiny fern-like sign, the colour of coral, in the cleft of her infant chest. And as long as I had known her, she had always loved thunderstorms. So if this storm reached as far as Fontanalba, and the years had not sobered her beyond recognition, Marina would be out there, watching the thunder roll around the hills, inciting the universe; whereas I...

I knew that lightning strikes about ten million times each day. I knew that at any given moment more than two thousand thunderstorms are crackling across the planet. We can watch them from our satellites and calculate their number. We can estimate the voltage carried by each of the hundred, inch-thick lightning bolts that leap for many miles through the atmosphere every second. I knew that they singe the air, briefly, at temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun. But what I mostly knew was that in a thunderstorm the inside of a metal vehicle is a safe enough place to be. I'd once been told as much by a US Army medic as we rode out a storm of stupefying violence in a helicopter over Vietnam. That had been a long time ago, yet the memory retained the precise, epileptic clarity that warfare sometimes brings. Picked out of a firefight near the Perfume River only to be tossed about in a helicopter that felt ready to burst its bolts, I had been shaking with fear. But if the chopper got hit by lightning, the medic assured me with a

grin, its metal shell would harmlessly soak up all the discharged energy like a Faraday Cage.

Now, I'd never heard of a Faraday Cage before, and I suspected that the medic might be lying to me as he had certainly lied to the black soldier with a throat wound over whose bloody field dressings he held a saline drip, but the theory met the moment's need, and I chose to believe it. Later I exalted it to a kind of principle, a law even – Crowther's Law – which had only a single clause: before entering a tricky situation check out the nearest Faraday Cage. In my work it was stupid to do otherwise. You calculated the risks and then took all precautions that didn't make the job impossible. It was how you survived. It was how you made the risks make sense. Though Marina, I guessed, would scorn such calculation.

As for her brother Adam, who was now living with her here in Italy and had once been my closest friend, I had no idea who he might be these days.

A week earlier I had returned from covering the civil war in Equatoria. The memories that came back with me were fixed in my head like the cutlass blade I'd seen in the skull of a bewildered tribesman who was walking away from his town along a dirt road. The death stench of that town was with me still – so many deaths, the rotting harvest of a labour of killing so immense it must finally have proved tedious. And when, two days after I'd got back to London, a call summoned me urgently to Yorkshire, to visit Hal Brigshaw, I was sure I knew what it was about. Hal must have been following the news from Equatoria, and would be anxious to hear more about the fate of his friends and allies, the men and women with whom he'd helped build that nation more than thirty years earlier.

Knowing that almost everywhere he looked these days Hal was confronted by the failure of his hopes and ambitions, I'd driven north in dread of telling what I had to tell. This wasn't the first time I'd made that journey filled with trepidation,

but nothing had prepared me for what was waiting at High Sugden.

Hal sat blanketed in a wheelchair with his housekeeper, Marjorie Cockroft, fussing over the lopsided sag of his body. “Another stroke,” she said, “only worse. It happened not long after you’d left last time. I did try to phone, but they said you’d gone abroad again. Anyway, he’s mostly being very good.” Dabbing a tissue at the corner of Hal’s mouth, she spoke about him dotingly, as though he were deaf. “You’re not to think we’re not coping.”

Hal sat desperate-eyed at the indignity of his condition. His right hand lay palm upward across his narrow thigh, while his head tilted to the left in a slack loll, so it looked as if he was straining to examine something filmy and delicate between the thumb and the forefinger of his defunct hand. Meanwhile, the air of what had once been the dining room of the grange hung motionless around him. At his back, by the mullioned window with its view across the Pennine slopes, a single bed stood on castors. It felt distressingly provisional.

I brushed a kiss across the old man’s brow and tried to rally his spirits with a bluff joke, but I was appalled by the wreck of the once burly figure. Then still more so by the slovenly garble of Hal’s speech.

Mrs Cockroft took it on herself to act as interpreter. “It’s that war in Africa. We always watch the news together, though I’m not sure how much he understands these days.”

Hal’s eyes made it clear that he understood every intolerable word. Yet that wasn’t why he’d summoned me. With scowling jerks of his good hand he dismissed the woman from the room. He wanted us to be left alone. The housekeeper sighed – she was only trying to be helpful. But her parting glance demanded that I appreciate the claims made on her patience.

Once she was gone, Hal tried to speak again. Marina’s name emerged, buckled almost beyond recognition by the struggle of his tongue, and then Adam’s followed. I should have caught on

sooner to what he wanted, but Hal had spoken about neither of them for years. Only when I deciphered the word “Italy” did I grasp that he was asking me to go there and try to bring back his son and daughter.

I said: “It wouldn’t work, Hal. They wouldn’t come.”

“For you,” I heard him mumble. “They’ll come for you.”

“I’m the last person...” I began, but his damaged voice spoke over me.

“Been thinking... You’ve done it before... Got them to come home for me.”

“More than thirty years ago,” I protested. “And that was before...”

Again, even before that moment of hesitation, he raised the hand of his good arm and shook it as though to erase my protests.

“They’ll come,” he repeated stubbornly. “For you they’ll come.”

I did not share his confidence. And there were many reasons why I could have refused and perhaps should have done so. Circumstantial reasons, emotional reasons, reasons clamouring out of the present and even more strongly out of the disastrous past. Nor was there any need to scavenge for excuses. I had promised Gail, my American lover, that we would spend time alone together in the Cascades after the African assignment was complete. That time was now. The flight was already booked. I badly needed that respite. But in these desolate circumstances how to dash the last hopes of a man to whom I owed almost everything that mattered in my life? A man who had always put his trust in me, and who had once been far closer to me than my father had ever been? So I glanced away, casting about, wishing there were some other means to repay that debt of gratitude. But there was no way to say no to what Hal was asking.

And so it is, I was thinking now, as time and space shifted round me and lightning flared again above the lake, that, less in ignorance of our desires than out of fearful knowledge of

how they might consume us, we send our streamers up into the storm. I sat in the hot car with thunder rolling round me. My thoughts drifted. I must have dozed. And thinking of thunderstorms, I fell into a dream.

I dreamt I was back in the old north on a day of bright June sunlight, certain from the idle air and the warm smells drifting from the terraced houses that it was Sunday morning, a little before noon, when all the mills and factories were still. There was no sound of traffic in the valley, no clank and rattle from the shunting yard, though distantly I could hear a peal of bells. Sunday then, and I was with my father and we were stepping out in the quiet morning to try the beer of a few pubs together. Over the next hour or two we would down three or four pints before making our boozy way back to where my mother would be waiting to lift the roast onto the table. And it was a good, warm feeling to be out with him like this, to feel the pleasure he took in showing off his son to his mates from the mill where he worked, for things had not always been so. Even in the dream, part of my mind stood aside, marvelling that things should be this easy between me and the father who, for too much of my early life, had been my most intimate enemy. But here, for once, we were at peace. I'd get in my rounds at The Royal Oak and The Golden Lion and enjoy the easy ritual of bar-room conversation. I'd listen and laugh, trade jokes and opinions about sport, about women, about the always unsatisfactory state of the world. Or that was how it should have been, for that was the feel of the dream at first, but then I saw that my father had fallen silent and was suddenly very weak. His limbs were so flaccid that he was unable to carry his own lax weight and I had to support him now, I had to get him home.

With one hand round his waist and the other holding his wrist at my shoulder, I was half carrying, half dragging him round the steep rim of the quarry on the hill above the town. We were making for the recreation ground on the brow. I could hear the

swings squeaking in their iron chains. Not far now, but I was panting from the effort of it; and when, pausing for breath, I looked down at his face, I saw that the eyes were sightless and opaque, that he had been dead for some time, that his body was still as wasted and naked as I had seen it on the narrow death bed when I'd laid him out. I could feel the bed sores on his back. And the ringing I heard was the inane carillon of the ice-cream van which, on the hot day of my father's dying, had been the only passing bell.

When I woke in Italy to the thunder stroke, I was still carrying my father's dead body from pub to pub round the silent streets of the town, and there was no one near to help or carry him away.

Dusk was falling when I reached Fontanalba. The hillsides teemed with cloud. When I stopped at a crossroads to look for a sign, my headlights picked out a wayside shrine to the Madonna, dressed in her peeling blue robe. Some distance away, a street lamp glimmered through the mist. Having no idea where Marina's house might be, I turned the car in that direction and parked outside a tall stone house.

A small dog ran barking from a barn beside the house to yap at my shoes. Two small boys appeared. They stood on thin legs, their glossy hair cropped short over faces which stared aghast as I cobbled together a question in Italian; then they fled into the house. Somewhere above me clanged a single bell. Wooded mountains came and went among clouds the colour of burnt tallow.

I was about to turn away when a woman in a black frock came out of the house, wiping her hands on an apron. She called off the dog, then asked something – presumably what business I had frightening her children in the dusk. I tried again. She tipped an ear and lifted a thin, worried hand to her cheek. “*Ah, la signora inglese,*” she exclaimed at last. “*Marina! Sì, sì.*”

“*Sua casa?*” I pressed. “*Dove?*”

Her wrists twisted. Her tongue sped. As best I could I picked my way through the torrent of help and, when I thought I'd got things clear, she added more. Only later, as I braked in the narrow yard outside what I hoped was Marina's cottage, did I realize she'd been trying to warn me that no one was there.

By now the bell had stopped ringing. A wind had got up and was blowing holes in the mist. A single lamp revealed how perilous was the track along which I'd just rattled my car. It was so narrow that the wheels must have passed within an inch of where the edge sheered away in a six-foot drop to an olive grove. Looking up again, I met the dark, refusing silence of the house. The shutters were closed. I tried the handle on the double door, which barely moved. Under a bamboo awning built into a recess at the side of the house four chairs stood at a circular table. The dusk smelt of rain and draughty space.

There was no room to turn the car, and I was considering how best to back out of that dead end when the elder of the two boys appeared through the tatters of mist. He walked past me without a word, making for the low wall under the awning, where he tipped a plant pot and turned, pointing at me with a straight arm stiff as a duellist's. His small hand clutched an old pistol key.

A smell of dust and dried thyme. Then the frescoes emerging from white plaster in panels no larger than foolscap sheets. They showed turbaned merchants, sailors and cowed monks; a single-masted ship with two tiers of shining oars; an angel standing guard before a sepulchre; a woman praying in the desert, her nakedness covered by silver-white hair hanging like a shawl to her knees; a lion vigilant on a rock in blazing wilderness. It was as though the walls were trying to remember a dream and could recapture no more than these haunting fragments.

I took the paintings for medieval work at first, but a closer look showed them to be more recent, handled in an archaic

style that somehow finessed pastiche and found simplicity. The Marina I'd known would have lacked patience with such obvious narrative intent. Yet if she hadn't painted these pictures, who had?

The boy smiled up at me and crossed the room towards the fireplace, where he pointed out a picture unrelated to the rest. A cheap, unframed reproduction, printed on board, it was a head-and-shoulders portrait of a jug-eared monk with hooded eyes and an unsatisfactory beard.

"San Francesco," he announced. I took in the golden nimbus around the tonsured head. The local saint, of course, St Francis of Assisi. Now the boy was pointing at his own chest. "Franco. Franco Gamboni."

I nodded, tapped my own chest. "Martin. Martin Crowther." Neither sound meant much to him, so I tried a variation – "Martino" – which elicited a nod. I opened a door onto a little kitchen. "Well, Franco Gamboni," I said, "I can't think there's a restaurant in this village of yours, so let's see if we can get some grub together."

Remembering forgotten instructions, the boy drew in his breath, gestured widely across the paved floor. "*Attenzione, ci sono scorpioni!*"

"Ah, grazie, grazie."

"Prego." He stood, smiling, with both hands clasped on top of his head, swaying from side to side. Then he turned and ran back up the track through the gloom.

Generations of olive growers must have scratched a living here before the house fell empty and Marina purchased it for next to nothing. She had intended to use it as a holiday cottage, but once life in England became intolerable to her, she had settled here in Fontanalba, living simply and cheaply, painting outdoors, content to be alone with her child. Then, much later, when he had nowhere else to turn, her brother Adam came to join her there.

The chimney corner of the frescoed living room had become a small study alcove. Beside it, an upright piano stood against one wall, its panels inlaid with fretwork patterns of foliage and masks. The trellised backs of two chairs were painted in peeling gold. A blue throw covered an old couch. On the desk in the alcove stood a paraffin lamp, a portable typewriter, a pencil case with a brass hasp and three books. *A New Pronouncing Dictionary of the English & Italian Languages* had been published in 1908 when, according to the table on page iii, a twenty-lira piece had been a gold coin worth fifteen shillings and ten pence farthing. Next to it leant a *Rough Guide to Italy*. It occurred to me that an entire civilization had vanished down the gap between those two volumes. Beside them lay the only other reading matter in the room – a skimpily bound book with the title *Umbrian Excursions* stamped on its spine.

The alcove would have been the obvious spot for a telephone if Marina had not refused to have one installed. Thinking of this, I took out my mobile phone and was about to dial Gail. But I was tired and fractious, the conversation would too easily go wrong, so I put the phone away again, knowing the call might now prove all the harder when I came to make it.

In the small kitchen at the back of the house I found the wine rack and enough bits and pieces for a scratch meal. I sat puzzling over those anachronistic frescoes as I ate. Surely monks and angels had no role in Marina's universe? If she had rejected everything else about her father, his atheism had gone unquestioned. Like oxygen or sex, it was a fact of life with which it made no sense to quarrel. So what were these paintings doing here along with an image of St Francis? They reminded me of the illustrations to the copy of Grimm's *Fairy Tales* that my mother had bought for me when I was small. In the stillness of the room I recalled the smell of that book and the way its pictures were like windows on a world utterly different from the grimy industrial landscape in which I grew up.

Then I remembered how I'd lain in bed with Marina once, chaste as a fabled knight, telling her one of those stories to still the rage of her grief. That state of almost innocence possessed me again in all its adolescent sensuality as, with a catch of the heart, I recalled the gift she'd given me later – a painting she'd made of a boy riding on a fox's back. These frescoes were more expertly done, but the same enchanted imagination was active here.

In the drawer of a bedside table upstairs I found an English translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Propped against a fat pillow, I opened the pages, and an old sky-blue envelope fell out onto the bed. To my astonishment, I saw that it was addressed to Adam in my own handwriting. Its postmark dated from the late '50s, at a time when we were both second-year undergraduates. During the bitter January of that year, Adam had suffered a brief episode of nervous breakdown. He'd been kept under supervision in a local mental hospital for a few days before being sent home to recuperate. I'd written this letter to him there, telling him how much he was missed by all his friends and trying to lift his spirits with a satirical account of our doings. Its tone was light but caring, even studiously so in its preservation of a certain northern reticence. Adam had let me know how much it meant to him at the time, but I was both touched and amazed to discover that he had valued the letter enough to preserve it across all the years between.

My first thought after reading it through was that this mission to Italy might not be quite as hopeless as I'd feared. Then came a second, less optimistic thought. Hailing as it did from a time when things were still good between us, this letter might simply have been tucked between the pages of a book he'd been reading more than forty years ago and then forgotten. Thinking about it further, I could imagine no other reason why it would have escaped destruction.

I was about to switch out the lamp when a sweep of headlights brightened the bedroom window and a car approached across



the valley, pulling to a halt somewhere close by. Unless the night had bounced the sound from elsewhere there must be another house, just below this one, on the side of the hill. A man and a woman got out of the car, laughing together. I caught a shushing sound, and then something muttered in a whispered exchange that ended in a brief contralto giggle. Perhaps they'd been surprised by the light in Marina's cottage? A key turned. There was more suppressed laughter before the door closed again and the lock clicked shut. Not long afterwards came the sounds of exuberant sex.

There are few more isolating experiences than that of lying alone in earshot of loudly rutting strangers. My mind illustrated the event, mingling fantasy and memory, and when at last all three of us were done, I lay in the silence thinking about the previous night in the Camden flat with Gail – how after the row over my decision to go to Italy we had struck an unsatisfactory truce and adjusted our plans to allow for time alone together. But that assignment in Africa had sickened my desire. Our lovemaking had been incomplete. It felt wistful as a fall of snow.

Later, her eyes grave among the mass of her dishevelled hair, Gail had asked me again not to go.

"I've made promises," I said.

"You made promises to me."

"I *will* keep them."

"They're broken already."

"But mendable. I'll make them good."

"It's the way you talk about them," she said after a time. "The people there, I mean. As if you were still in thrall to them somehow. Particularly Marina."

"It's more years than I can remember since I even saw her!"

"But you were in love with her once? She was the first, wasn't she?"

I said, "Marina left my life a long time ago. You have to understand: these are old loyalties. I'm doing it for Hal."

"No," she said, "I don't think so."

"If you had any idea how much I'm dreading this trip..."

"Then don't go."

"I have to, Gail. For Hal."

She shook her disbelieving head again. "No, Martin. Like always you're doing this for you."

And as if in ironic fulfilment of her declaration, here I was, alone in Marina's house under the Umbrian night, regretting that I'd come, knowing there were many reasons why I'd allowed myself no choice, and aching with memories of Hal Brigshaw's children who, together or apart, had long been capable of opening up a war zone in my heart.

I remembered the pain of my last encounter with Marina. I remembered the bleak hour in which Adam's friendship had turned to hostility. I thought about Hal stricken in his wheelchair and about the piled bodies of the dead in Equatoria. Again I shrank beneath the burden of my father's corpse, a limp, decaying load that I could not put down.

Knowing these things must keep me from sleep, I reached for the copy of Virgil. It fell open at the page where the letter had lain, and I saw at once that someone – Adam presumably; the book was his – had underscored three lines:

*Your ghost, Father,*

*Your sad ghost, often present in my mind,*

*Has brought me to the threshold of this place.*

The night swung like lock gates around me, letting more darkness in.

I woke in a rose-madder room already steeped in warm mid-morning light. Pushing back the curtains, I saw a plump hill of olive groves topped by a cluster of houses, impasto pink and white, with terracotta roofing tiles. Sunlight flashed from a chimney cowl. In the hazier distance two thickly wooded hills

saddled the horizon. Nothing moved. Even the swallows were silent on the wires, though somewhere a solitary cowbell clanked every now and then, jolting dry air that smelt of rosemary and thyme. Beyond the bamboo awning, a closer olive grove sloped steeply away down the hillside. The shadows of stone terraces tumbled in soft cataracts between the rows.

I was showering when I heard a sound beyond the clatter of water at my feet. When I called out to see if someone was there, a woman's voice lifted from the foot of the stairs. "I think maybe I have come at a bad time. Forgive me." I knew at once that it was not Marina. So whose was it then, this cloudy foreign voice that added, "I shall return again when you are dressed?"

I reached for a towel, calling, "Hang on, I'll be with you in just a minute. Don't go away." But the sitting room and kitchen were empty when I went down, though a newly filled bowl of fruit stood on the table in the dining area. Towelling my hair, I stepped outside and saw the woman sitting in the shade at the circular blue table. Sunglasses masked her eyes. A wide-brimmed straw hat with a silk ribbon hid most of her dark curls.

"Good morning," she said, "I had not meant to discompose you," and rose, offering a firm hand. Slim, in her late forties, she wore a shirt of lavender-grey silk hanging loose over ivory-coloured linen trousers. "I heard only this morning that you are arrived. If I knew last night..." Her ringed hands made a deprecating flourish. "There was no food in the house, I know. I have put milk and butter in the refrigerator and there is now bread in the box." With a hint of reproach she added, "We were not expecting you."

I took note of that familiar "we".

"There's no phone here," I explained. "I had to come at short notice and couldn't let Adam and Marina know. I thought I'd find at least one of them here."

"I see. You wished to jump a surprise on them!"

"Spring."

"Excuse me?"

"Spring, not jump."

"Ah yes. Forgive me... my English... I am Gabriella. And you?"

I told her my name, there was a brief beat of hesitation before she opened her mouth and said simply, "Ah!"

"They've spoken of me?"

"Of course." Her eyes, which had been briefly averted, returned now, bright with renewed affability.

"Do you know where Adam and Marina are?" I asked. "Is there any way to contact them?"

She gazed brightly up at me. "For the moment I don't think so."

"It's rather urgent. I don't have much time."

Somewhere higher up the hill a bell counted eleven in tinny chimes. We stood by the blue table in the fragrant day while she considered her response. A white sports car gleamed beside the shrine at the junction, where she had parked it. The morning basked in dry light.

She said, "I think you must wait for them."

This woman was no peasant, but the statement had a peasant's obstinacy. It assumed that waiting was the usual condition here. Things might once have happened; one day something might happen again; in the meantime, waiting was the thing.

But the prospect of kicking my heels in this uneventful place held no appeal. I said, "Perhaps the neighbours know where they are? I heard them last night. Down here." Crossing to the wall beyond the table, I looked over onto the salmon-coloured pantiles of a low-pitched roof. Another cottage was stacked on the side of the hill below Marina's, neater, in better repair.

"Ah," Gabriella smiled, "so Capitano Mezzanotte is back! But I doubt he can help us." I was about to suggest that it might at least be worth a try when I heard her chuckling softly at my back. "Of course that is not his true name," she said. "It is our joke, yes? He makes use of the place only occasionally. Adam

called him by that name because he comes by night and always leaves early.”

“They,” I corrected.

“Yes,” she smiled.

“Captain Midnight. I see.”

“He is a very private man.”

“Public enough to keep me awake.”

She nodded, her lips pursed, but smiling still. It occurred to me that she and Adam must be on intimate terms to share such a joke. Were they perhaps lovers? If so, this woman might be just as resolute to protect him from the past as he had been to sever all ties with it. She wouldn’t want me “jumping” any surprises on him.

I said, “You really don’t know when they’ll be back?”

Frustration must have shown in my face, but with a wry tilt of her head she evaded my question. “Things don’t always work out as we expect. You must not be dismayed.” Abruptly she brought her ringed fingers together at her lips. “I have some small business to perform this morning. It will take me perhaps one hour or so. After then I will give you lunch at the Villa, yes? If you are agreeable, I will pick you up at, say, twelve thirty.” The smile was warm.

Lacking options, I decided to be “agreeable”, thanked her and asked whether it would be too far for me to walk.

She opened her hands and brought them together lightly at her chest as though catching a moth. “No, not far. But the road is steep,” she said. “It will be a hot walk.”

“I’m used to heat. I was in Africa a week ago.”

The smile broadened, the narrow shoulders wriggled a little beneath the silk. “I am forgetting. You are famous for your *ardimento*. Very well, go round the hill and take the road to the left, past the *convento*. You will see. Cross a bridge and in perhaps three kilometres there comes a gate with birds. Mythological birds. *Grifoni*?”

“Griffins, yes.”

“The drive will bring you. The door is open. Come through. I will expect you.” Again she offered her hand and quickly slipped it free.

From the dappled light of the awning I watched the sports car accelerate away around that steep, heat-stunned theatre of olive groves.

I breakfasted on coffee and fruit with the *Rough Guide* open on the blue table. Fontanalba was of too little consequence to feature in its pages, so I picked up the slim volume called *Umbrian Excursions* and was about to open it when I decided I’d better call Gail. Only the machine answered me. I left a message telling her what had happened, gave a satirical account of the conversation with Gabriella and insisted that I had no intention of hanging about in Umbria for more than another night.

“You were right,” I conceded, “I shouldn’t have come. I’ll make it up to you.”

Then I sat, staring at the olive groves, marooned by the silence.

For want of anything better to do, I picked up the book again. The title was embossed on the cover, though neither the author’s name nor the publisher’s colophon appeared there. Only when I turned to the title page did I discover that it had been written and privately published by Laurence Stromberg.

That extravagant man had been my contemporary at Cambridge, though I’d seen nothing of him since we bumped into one another in the crush bar of a West End theatre at some point in the mid-’60s. “But you’re looking so well,” he’d crooned. “Quite the figure of the rugged hack, all tanned and rangy and doubtless badged with scars!” Then, with a wicked nudge he’d added: “Or has journalistic pribble-prabble merely deformed you into a cliché of your trade?” But Larry’s style had already begun to feel anachronistic, and his own career as a theatre director was faltering. The last I’d heard

of him was a rumour that he'd been initiated into a secret order practising sex magic in South Kensington. It was the sort of gossip he might have started himself, which did not necessarily make it untrue. And the pages of his book revealed a familiar quirkiness now, for its various excursions were as much through the painted chambers of the author's mind as through the landscape of Umbria.

I skimmed through his account of the ancient augurs of Gubbio who'd read signs in the flight of birds, and then dipped into another on the oracular springs of Clitumnus. But I soon lost patience and put the book down. After a time I set out for Gabriella's villa.

Because Marina's cottage was perched halfway down the hill, some distance outside the medieval walls, I got my first real sight of the town when I looked up from the roadside shrine. Hunkered down behind its defences, Fontanalba was curled on its summit like a snail. Only a single bell tower and the crowns of two plane trees rose above the pinkish ramparts. The lane to the villa curved on round the hill, past the gate and a complex of buildings under a square tower topped by a Turk's cap dome.

The armorial carvings on the bastions of the town gate were hidden behind rough scaffolding, though I could see no sign of anyone at work. The dark archway opened onto a small piazza where the crown of the hill had been cobbled over. Houses sloped away along two narrow alleys, their roofs held down by top-heavy chimneys and flat stones. As far as I could see, there were no shops or bars, but midway down the wider alley an ornate niche had been built around the basin of a fountain. At the edge of the piazza, under the white glare of the Romanesque church, six plastic chairs waited for the shade.

Unaware of my arrival, a woman berated an old man from her vine-slung balcony. He brandished a bottle, stammered something back at her, and then slumped in the shade beside

the fountain. Not wanting to get caught up in a neighbourhood wrangle that might have been going on for a decade or two, I backed away, out of the gate, wondering what else people could do in such beleaguered proximity but bicker in the heat.

I followed the lane past the *convento* down to where an ancient bridge spanned a river that tumbled among stones through a green glen. On the far side, a steep climb brought me to a wooded ridge, and from there I looked back down on Fontanalba. The air was heady and resinous, the noon light a somnolent blue shimmer punctuated by the shrilling of cicadas. I saw no one as I walked.

The griffin-guarded gates stood open. The last turn of the long, winding drive through trees revealed the palatial scale of the house. At the centre of a wide court with a parterre garden, water plashed from an elaborate fountain. Beyond it, a loggia shaded a number of doors at ground level. All of them were locked, so I climbed a sweep of stairs to the terrace above. From there, with its ochre stucco peeling in the sunlight, rose the main body of the villa.

I stood for a while beside a stone urn, taking in a view that reached beyond the statuary and pinewoods to the hazy plain far below. Turning back to the house, I saw that a door stood open in the portico beneath a second – and grander – upper loggia. I stepped through into the cool entrance hall.

The house was as silent as a painting of itself. Along the length of the hall's airy tunnel three chandeliers floated like tasselled marine creatures. Mellow light from a glazed door at the far end fell along walls painted with *trompe l'œil* prospects of trees and bowers and hills. I coughed to make my presence heard and, when nothing happened, walked along the hall to a central atrium, where a transverse corridor offered access to rooms on both sides. I was standing by a statue which had a missing hand, wondering whether to shock the place out of its trance by shouting, when a man wearing a white

jacket appeared down the corridor. Startled to see me there, he advanced quickly across the tiles and listened, unconvinced, as I explained I was there at Gabriella's invitation. His chin was unshaven, his mouth tight, his blue eyes menacing. He growled something that might have accused me of breaking off the statue's hand and hiding it. His own hands, which were matted with black hair, gestured extravagantly. "No, no," he decided and, in the ensuing torrent of Italian words, two were uttered with emphatic force: "*La Contessa*".

When I failed to utter any intelligible response, he grimaced, indicated that I should wait a moment and turned away into the first room down the corridor. Leaving the door ajar so he could keep an eye on me, he picked up a phone from the desk and dialled a number. I could hear only his side of the conversation and understood little, so I looked at the bookcases. Many finely bound volumes were ranked there along with other books that looked dumpy and probably dated from the early days of printing.

With a twitch of his finger the man summoned me to the phone.

"Forgive me" – I recognized Gabriella's voice above the crackle – "I am delayed longer than I thought. But I have asked Orazio to take care of you."

I said, "I think he'd rather throw me out."

"Oh dear, he can be fierce, I know, but I have told him that the fault is mine. I will come soon. Please, make yourself at home. Enjoy the pool. There are towels and robes in the pool house."

I hesitated a moment before saying, "You didn't tell me you were a *contessa*."

"Ah! You do not care to have surprises sprung on you?"

"Sprung."

Laughing, she said, "English has no pity."

On impulse I asked, "Is Adam there with you?"

"Adam? Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know. I get the feeling you're keeping something from me."

"And you feel you should have everything at once?"

"You think I deserve less? Besides, I told you, I don't have much time."

"Today is too hot to hurry," she decided. "Enjoy your swim."

I would have said more, but she was gone.

Orazio indicated that I should follow him out into a courtyard, where he opened a door concealed in the wall by a screen of boxwood. Immediately I heard the sound of water somewhere below. Descending a stone stairway, we came out into a secret garden. I caught the gleam of water issuing out of a lion's mouth to cascade down a channel cut into the steps of a small neoclassical temple which overlooked the pool. White parasols shaded two sun loungers in an arbour of bougainvillea. A long marble table flanked by marble benches stood nearby.

Orazio beckoned me inside the temple, where a stone nymph poured water down into a basin shaped like a scallop shell. It wasn't hard to imagine someone bathing there, naked as foam-born Venus, but the steward was impatient to show me how a modern shower had been fitted into one side chamber, while a refrigerator, well stocked with drink, hummed in another. He poured me a beer. I thanked him for his trouble. Mollified, he brought olives and pistachios to the table outside, then he left me alone.

I swam several lengths, took a shower, dressed and lay down on the lounger. The beer was strong, the heat of the day soporific. A line of cypresses beyond the pool stood motionless. I might have been lying in a world where sunlight spellbound all things to stillness except water. Pouring from the lion's mouth, down the stairs into a shallow slipper bath and thence into the pool, it flowed out again unseen. It was as if this green and secret garden existed solely as a thoroughfare for water. Nature and

art had consorted here to serve its purposes. The spirit of the place breathed in its sound, and now that sound was passing through me till I was left with only a diminishing sense of separate existence.

Gazing across the ornamental hedges at the mountains beyond, I thought – as so often on the chancy expedition of my life – *What the hell am I doing here?*

The pool panted in its net of lights. The sun stood still. I was recalling another arrival, in another place, as I fell backwards into sleep.