
The Paradise Room

Belinda Jones

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'I could be wrong, but I think you might be the only girl in the world who doesn't want to go to paradise.' Hugh rubs his bewildered brow. 'I suppose if I was proposing the North Pole you'd be jumping up and down with glee.'

I go to speak, but the prospect of a pair of swishy-furred Yeti boots and pom-pom earmuffs temporarily slackens my jaw.

'Or better yet Seattle!' he crows. 'That's got to be your dream destination, hasn't it Amber - all that miserable drizzle.'

I can't deny it, I love rain. I love how it warps wood, mists up windows, makes windscreen wipers squeak and drag, kinks fringes and besmirches the cheeks of even the most stylish women with Pierrot tears of mascara. I like rain hats that divert the occasional trickle of water down the back of your collar causing you to wince and rotate your shoulder blades so the now warm drip races down your spine. I like splashing through puddles and cowering at the heavy menace of charcoal-grey thunderclouds. I like how pavements take on a gun-metal sheen after an afternoon sluicing. I like the silent camaraderie of sheltering in a shop doorway when the wind gets so gusty you can no longer use your umbrella as a shield against the stinging tacks of rain.

And then there's all the cosy paraphernalia that partners the wet and cold: fleecelined gloves, hats with Bassett-hound ear-flaps, scarves you can wrap around your neck three times and still have enough dangling to catch in the spokes of your bicycle. I like layering jumpers and cardis until I look like I'm wearing a comedy fat suit and can no longer rest my arms by my side. I like faux-fur hot-water-bottle covers and knitted bedsocks with individual toes.

I even like that disconcerting feeling when water seeps in through the sole of my shoe, especially if I'm wearing wool socks and there's that distinct aroma of wet sheep.

Oxford may not be the wettest city in the UK (statistically that would be Swansea, and I hope one day to retire to a sodden clod there), but it offers me sufficient licence to wear my most toggly cagoule, and that makes me happy.

'Well, I can certainly offer you a lot of moisture.' Hugh resumes his wooing. 'Eighty-four per cent humidity according to today's weather report!' He jiggles his brows temptingly at me.

'Not interested - there's never anything to do in those places except go brown.'

'You say that like it's a bad thing,' he frowns.

'It is to me,' I shrug. At age thirty-two I've basted enough chickens to question the wisdom of cooking your own skin.

'You don't have to lie out in the sun all day.' Hugh is sounding impatient now. 'There's snorkelling, kayaking-' He halts himself. 'Something tells me I may as well be suggesting unnecessary dental work.'

I give an affirmative nod. He's got that bit right - the only water sport that appeals to me is fishing wet leaves out of our guttering. The fact is I just don't do holidays. There's something about the pressure to be carefree and relaxed that rankles with me. Plus I'm not a big fan of having all that free time to think. In my experience thinking leads to questioning and questioning leads to . . . Well, I just don't want to go there.

'I felt sure I could get you on the art angle,' Hugh continues, harking back to his opening gambit. 'I mean, you went to Giverny to see Monet's gardens. I don't understand why you're not gagging to see Gauguin's Tahiti.'

I shake my head. 'That Monet trip was research for a specific exhibit and more importantly a mere three hours on Eurostar. You're talking about nearly twenty hours' sky-time - and you know I hate to fly.'

'You went to Boston with Abigail last year,' he grumps.

'Six and a half hours,' I contest. 'Tahiti is practically all the way to Australia!'

'I could have sworn you were really into Gauguin.' Hugh says, unable to understand why he's not gaining any ground.

'If you remember correctly I always preferred the earlier work he did in Brittany,' I counter.

For me his Tahiti work is too lurid, too unreal. Pink sands, purple mountains, red lizards - an overexcitement of colour, and yet the poses of the natives appear languid to the point of apathy. Paul Gauguin made a pilgrimage to these remote South Pacific islands to fulfil a craving for a more primitive existence, and consequently depicted his barebreasted teenage lovers sprawl in a lush natural idyll, only occasionally showing them as they actually would have been dressed at the time: all gussied up in the starched high-necked tent dresses foisted upon them by the missionaries. Aside from the moral issue of him abandoning his wife and children, I always felt this made him part con man - he wasn't painting things as they really were, just an escapist fantasy of how he wished things could be.

'Anyway . . .' I ruffle Hugh's shiny caramel hair, losing my train of thought as I watch the thick layers flick back into place while my fingers groove along his scalp. (This man always smells so clean, so good - my mother would have approved: £80

haircuts, hot- flannel shaves, paraffin wax manicures . . . Well, you would too if your nails were under the microscope on a daily basis.)

'Anyway what?' he asks, looking up at me.

'Anyway you'll be working most days. What would I do with myself?' I blink myself back on track. 'Learn a thousand and one ways to slice a papaya?'

'Maybe you could come with me. It's not all negotiations and money-talk. There's definitely one excursion to a pearl farm. You'd like that - getting to see how those mini-masterpieces are made.'

Hugh is a jeweller. His actual speciality is diamonds (no raggedy cuticles permitted when handling a fortycarat sparkler), and consequently his trips typically take him to South Africa and Brazil. This Tahiti gig has fallen into his lap on account of Piers the Pearl Guy breaking his ankle playing polo. (Or so he says. The rumour going round is that a Pimms-blurred game of croquet is actually to blame. One thing I know for sure is that the man is such a braying know-it-all I would have welcomed the opportunity to give him a good thwack with a mallet myself.)

Initially Hugh tried to wriggle out of the trip as pearls have never been his passion. He'll grant that in their heyday they were positively iconic - who doesn't revere Audrey Hepburn's très chic triband in Breakfast at Tiffany's. Jackie O's infamously baubled collar, even Madonna's flapper ropes circa 'Like A Virgin' - but he cannot be convinced of a viable revival. Moreover, pearls frustrate him with their wayward, determinedly individual behaviour. Diamonds you can cut and polish and define; pearls grow and form as they darn well please. They cannot be modified, even those cultivated at pearl farms; whatever their flaws, you have to accept them as they are.

It's not that Hugh's a control freak, but he is a big fan of precision. And professionalism. And preparation. And two days just isn't enough time for him to become a pearl expert. Or more specifically a black pearl expert. Piers's specific prediction is an upsurge in demand for these lesser-known dark pearls, referencing both the latest collection from Jean-Paul Gaultier and the recent eye-catching outing by 'fashion forward' Sarah Jessica Parker at a NYC fund-raiser. Hugh's having none of it, maintaining that all black pearls look like ball bearings. But the fact is Piers has already garnered substantial pre-orders from several of his regular Hey Big Spenders, including a commission for a high-profile engagement ring (ideally featuring the most expensive solo pearl that money can buy), and there is no way he can risk letting these people down. (A disappointed billionaire is not a pretty sight.)

The deal must be made by the end of the month, and it must take place in the only place in the world that black pearls call home - the French Polynesian islands of Tahiti.

I have to admit the location does seem oddly fateful considering it was a French restaurant with the fearsomely pretentious name of Quand l'Artiste Mange that brought Hugh and I together for the first time four years ago. Just thinking about it I experience an inner twang, remembering the other less palatable things that were

going on in my life at the time. Thank goodness he appeared when he did, on that brittleboned November night . . .

We actually spoke first on the phone when he called to make the reservation. I had misheard his name, writing down Garnet instead of Garner, and when he subsequently arrived (with a group of five work colleagues) he laughed and pipped, 'That's funny, because I'm actually a jeweller!'

I didn't even respond, let alone laugh along with him - I had yet to master the art of meet-and-greet small talk and was sullenly preoccupied with a family matter that night, so I kept strictly to business, seating his party, handing out the palette-shaped menus, draping each pinstriped lap with a paint-spattered napkin, then returning eight minutes later to take their order. Smooth sailing until he took his turn.

'So, what would you recommend?' He looked directly at me, commanding a personal response.

In the three weeks I'd been working at Quand l'Artiste Mange I'd heard a lot of jokes about 'tartes' and endured many an extended pause between the order of 'coq' and 'au vin', but never once had anyone appeared to be so earnestly intent on hearing my opinion. Without thinking I found myself babbling, 'Well, the duck with plum compote is a little stickysickly in my opinion, and I'd steer clear of the fish in general but it's worth getting the caramelised veal sweetbreads just for the cauliflower and roasted hazelnut purée.'

Cue the sound of bemused muttering at the table. Had I gone too far?

'Gosh,' he blinked. 'I've been coming here for two years and you're the first person who hasn't said, "Everything on the menu is excellent, sir."'

'Everything on the menu is excellent, sir,' I chanted obediently.

'Oh, don't spoil the moment!' he scolded. 'I wanted an informed opinion - that's why I asked you.' Then he smiled, looking deep into me like he knew me. 'So go on, tell me, what would you choose?'

It was a policy of mine to retain a careful distance from strangers, but somehow this man had already found a way to slip under the barrier.

'Probably the corn-fed squab cooked in a salt crust,' I replied, slightly dazed, 'with a side of sugar snap peas.'

'Then that's what I'll have.' He closed the menu and returned it to my care, adding, 'Though I suspect you could cook it better yourself?' while raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

I turned away before he could see me smile. I have always loved to cook, revelling in the magical fusion of tastes and aromas and, most of all, the intricacy of recipes - I find the detail involved in food preparation so absorbing that all my other concerns

just fall away. At twelve I retired my mother from all kitchen duties, though I did resent the frequency with which my teen gourmet dinners were left uneaten because my dad would come home and spontaneously decide to whisk my mum out to dinner 'somewhere fancy'. Sometimes I'd call my best friend Felicity and she'd come over and have a second dinner with me (her mum was too keen on steamed veggies slathered in margarine for her liking). She'd tell me that there was no way my parents could be eating anything as delicious as I'd cooked wherever they were, and that made me feel better. Having Hugh sense my culinary potential was like him knowing my secret password. When I returned to his table with the plates, he was engaged in a debate about the computerised colour-grading of diamonds, but he still managed to give me a whimsical look that seemed to say I'd much rather be dining with you. I couldn't help but be flattered, yet when I arrived the next night and found he'd dropped by and left his card for me, I put it straight in the bin. It was not a good time for me. It never was.

'Are you crazy?' Maître d' Genevieve scabbled to retrieve his platinum-embossed details before they got slurried under an avalanche of tripe. 'That man is such a catch!'

'We're not a good match,' I said simply as I secured my hair in the customary uptwist with a decorative paintbrush.

'What are you talking about - you'd be great together!' she protested, reaching out to jiggle some sense into me via my elbow. 'And what beautiful children you would have: eyes twice as hazel, hair twice as golden-' She stopped suddenly. 'Or is there someone else?' Now she looked confused. 'Would you look at that - I'm the nosiest person in the whole of the Thames Valley and I don't know the first thing about your personal life!'

I gave a 'C'est la vie!' shrug and headed into the dining room.

There really was no other man in my life. And Genevieve was right: Hugh was lovely - smart, clean, employed. Also handsome and possibly even rather rich. Quite the perfect man to take home to meet your parents. Any parents, that is, but mine. I hardly knew him, but I'd seen enough to know I could like him. How could I knowingly lead him into the lair? Or my parents into temptation, for that matter? Let's just say his career was incompatible with theirs. It was for his own good that I had made the decision to avoid him.

But three weeks later our paths crossed again, this time at a corporate event evening at the Ashmolean Museum. I had been elected to make the presentation on the new French Impressionist exhibit and was just about to move on from Renoir to Cézanne when I noticed him. He was there with a group of male friends, one of whom had got stinking drunk on the complimentary Shiraz and, obviously having seen Jerry McGuire a few too many times, kept shouting 'Show me the Monet!'

It was Hugh who gracefully man-handled him out into the frosty night and barked white-breathed reprimands at him before returning, pink-nosed, to find me when the talk was over.

'I'm so sorry . . .' he began, looking fraught.

I shushed him instantly. 'It could have been worse,' I assured him. 'He could have smeared tapenade on the Degas.'

He smiled lovingly at me. Lovingly, even though we'd only spent minutes of our lives together. 'So you're a woman of many careers,' he marvelled, tapping my prompt cards. 'What is it that you actually do?'

'Well, obviously waitressing is my greatest love,' I told him, once again surprisingly bold in his presence.

'Obviously,' he confirmed with a serious nod.

'But I also give talks here at the museum, basically to supplement my earnings at the restaurant.'

'Break a lot of plates, do you?' he chuckled.

I nodded. 'I'm like a one-woman Greek wedding party.'

He laughed in that 'I like you so much I'm going to burst!' way. I'd never before seen anyone look so happy while they were looking at me. It reminded me of how I look at a masterpiece when I see it for the first time - with a mixture of wonder and admiration and delight

'Truthfully, this is my world,' I confessed, taking my eyes on a tour of the grand, high-ceilinged room with its chunky belt of ornately carved frames and all the precision dots and ticks and sweeps of paint within.

'Art?'

'Yes.'

'You paint?' he enquired, a common enough response.

'No.' I shook my head. 'Not really. Not professionally . . .'

'A life model?' He looked hopeful.

I smirked. Nice try. 'I'm actually a research assistant.'

He looked blank.

'Otherwise known as an art historian.'

'Wow, for a seventy-year-old crone you're looking pretty good.'

'It's a façade,' I confided. 'When I go home I take off this ridiculous blonde wig, reach for my tweed slippers and pop on a pair of pince-nez-'

'Pince-nez?' he snickered, looking incredulous.

'You know, those little glasses.' I gave a demonstrative pinch to the bridge of my nose.

'I know what they are,' he smiled, gently lowering my hand away from my face. 'It's just . . .' He shrugged, looking happily at sea. 'There are some words you don't hear too often nowadays.'

'No, I suppose you're more used to chatting about polariscopes and refractometers.'

'You speak jeweller jargon?' He reeled back, clapping his hands together as if to say Bravo!

I gave a nonchalant shrug, raising my eyes to the ceiling in what I hoped was an enigmatic manner. When I looked back I found he'd stepped forward; his face was closer to mine than any man's had been in a long time. I could trace the slight scent of garlic back to the crostini, and identified his aftershave as Van Cleef & Arpels Pour Homme. A classic. (I once bought a bottle for my father in a bid to coax him away from the pimp-daddy scent of Fahrenheit, but he just wasn't happy unless potted plants wilted in his presence.)

'Tell me,' he whispered hypnotically.

'My parents . . .' I began, letting those two outlawed words slip out before I regained my senses and aborted the sentence.

'Your parents?' he prompted, looking expectant.

'My parents live in Florida.' I gave a curt, automaton reply, preparing to shut down and move on.

'Oh,' he said, confused by this irrelevant announcement.

'I have to go.' I pulled away from our shared space, back into my own world.

'Wait, um, can we . . .?' he called after me.

'I'm sorry.' I was already on my way, but he hurried in front of me, blocking my path.

'I know this great little arty café.' His eyes pleaded with mine.

'If you're thinking of the place where you paint your own cups-'

'And have you show me up?' he tutted. 'I don't think so.'

He got me again - got me smiling. Did I really want to walk away from this man? Something about him was suggesting an option, a different way to live. After so many years alone, was this my chance to be with somebody? I knew from his job he must be trustworthy and reliable. His clothes and grooming suggested care but not flamboyance. He was the one who had quelled the earlier scene, not created it. Was it possible, after all, that a man could make you feel safe? Still wary, I nevertheless found myself curious enough to ask, 'Where were you thinking of?'

'Do you know the Noble Savage?'

I gaped. This was just too much of a coincidence. Had someone told him about my weakness for their mini croque-monsieurs? I looked around the gallery for a guilty face among my co-workers, but they were all busy flourishing at artworks and oblivious to my questioning stare.

'I do know it . . .' I faltered, deciding that if he could answer my next question I'd dare myself to go. 'That's actually the nickname of a famous painter - do you know which one?' I tried to sound more casual than quiz-show-host but failed.

He shook his head.

'No, I don't.' My heart sank. It was too much to hope for.

'But if you made me guess I'd have to say Gauguin.'

My heart sprang back to life.

'Am I right?'

I nodded vigorously.

'Huh! I always wondered why they had his portrait over the espresso machine and now I know. You're a very enlightening woman!' he teased. 'Tomorrow, then, for lunch?'

'One o'clock,' I asserted, strangely thrilled at the prospect.

'You know the address?' he checked before turning to leave.

'Yes I do,' I confirmed. 'Actually I thought I was the only one who did. I can't believe you know that place, it's so hidden away.'

He gave me a giant smile. 'I live above it.'

And now I live here too.

Initially we were squirreled away in a snug one bedroom, but now we've expanded across three floors - the two-storey above us was put on the market so we clubbed

together and bought that and created one big unit. Hugh's idea. I wouldn't have minded if it had stayed as two separate entities - I do like my own space, somewhere to stare at the wall and not have anyone ask me 'What's wrong?' - but I didn't want to be a spoilsport, and Hugh had been advised that he could greatly increase the value of the overall property with the modernisation he was planning; and the majority of the money was his, after all.

As it happened, despite losing a few walls, we have both ended up with our own dens. Right now we're in his. Since Jasper's permitted him to work from home a couple of days a month (so the commute from Oxford to London doesn't grind him down to dust) he's transformed what was a sports shrine into a sleek office done up in cool beiges and dove-greys replete with inset ceiling lighting, scoured silver fixtures and the fastest internet connection in the land.

My den, on the other hand, is unlike any other room in the house. Should we ever sell, I know it would have to be redone before it went on the market, but I appreciate Hugh letting me deviate from his ultramodern design plan. When I first asked if I could do something a bit different, I think he was expecting me to vandalise his neutral colour palette with a psychedelic mural, but what I'd always craved was fabric wallpaper - the kind of heavily textured burgundy wall-covering you might find in a stately home. It's one of the first things that registered with me as I entered the Ashmolean Museum as a schoolgirl. Most people wanted to reach out and touch the small bronze of Rodin's 'The Thinker'; I wanted to touch the wallpaper!

Hugh complains that it's too fussy and dark and oppressive, but I think it's comforting, in a decadent kind of way. Mostly I sit in the dark anyway. I look all day; at night I like to listen. I'm always in there with my headphones on, playing the records my mother left me. Even when the stereo is off, I keep the headphones on. And sometimes when Hugh calls to me I pretend I haven't heard him. I don't know why I do that.

'Wooohooo!' I'm yanked back to the present moment as Hugh bounds from his leather desk-chair and begins swinging me around in a clumsy celebratory swirl. 'Gotcha!' he hoots triumphantly. 'You can't say no to Tahiti now!' He stops to clamp my face in his hands as he delivers the words, 'It's the rainy season!'

'It is?' I manage to query through my slightly squooshed mouth.

'Look!' He pulls me on to his lap in front of the computer. 'See - bucketing down today. Nearly six inches this month alone.' He gives the screen an emphatic rap before muttering, 'Whatever that means.'

I peer a little closer at the statistics. It does look pretty wet.

'Think of all those tropical storms,' he leers, nuzzling my neck, snail-trailing with his tongue.

'Ew, get off!' I squirm away from him, wincing like I've just bitten into a lime.

'Oh, come on, just imagine it - slate-grey skies ripped apart by phosphorescent daggers of lightning . . .' he hams it up.

I roll my eyes. 'All right, Thomas Hardy!'

He presses his mouth to my ear and rumbles, 'Thunder. Deep, booming, heart-pounding thunder,' and I feel his hand slip beneath my thermal and start drumming on my breastbone.

I can see where this is going. If I don't say yes soon, we're going to end up having sex. (Not something I feel should be sprung upon my body after such a long hiatus.)

'I don't have a swimming costume,' is my feeble last stand protest.

'We'll get one out there,' he pants, knowing my acceptance is but one grouch away.

I prise myself away from him, walk over to the window and watch the panes of glass rattle and tremble as the wind buffets them. Outside, straggling shoppers shiver at the bus stop, desperately seeking asylum on the no. 2 to Kidlington. A passing pedestrian curses out loud at the winter weather as if it's being wilfully spiteful. This is my favourite time of year. I can't believe I'm considering abandoning all this for some postcard-perfect beach on the other side of the world.

'I'll talk to Gilly tomorrow,' I tell him. 'But I don't know how she's going to react to such short notice.'

Gilly is my boss. Much as I might wish to make her out to be a tyrant, she is in fact a hippy at heart and an absolute pushover. As Hugh is well aware.

'Gilly will be fine,' he soothes, holding his voice steady as if any sudden whoops or quavers might provoke a change of heart in me. 'It's only ten days - you'll be back in plenty of time for the Turner exhibition. Why don't you have a word with her first thing tomorrow, then give me a call at the office.'

He sounds so reasonable. So fair. So why do I feel so resistant in my gut? There doesn't seem to be any logical reason for it.

'Okay,' I finally acquiesce, trying to get my head around the ever-increasing possibility that, before the week is out, I could be swapping my slightly itchy polo neck for a coconut bra.