

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Pantheon

Written by Sam Bourne

Published by HarperCollins

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

**SAM
BOURNE**

PANTHEON



HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk
Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2012
1

Copyright © Jonathan Freedland 2012

Jonathan Freedland asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 741362 1

This novel is a work of fiction inspired by true events. Some characters are based on real people but their personalities and actions are entirely the works of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

While every effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright material reproduced herein and secure permissions, the publishers would like to apologise for any omissions and will be pleased to incorporate missing acknowledgements in any future edition of this book.

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

*For my mother, both the gentlest and
strongest person I know*

CHAPTER ONE

Oxford, July 8 1940

It hurt him, this journey, it pained him, yet day after day he came back for more punishment. Every morning, whether the skies were dark with rain or, like today, lit by searing sunshine, James Zennor would be here on the water shortly after dawn, sculling alone on the Isis stretch of the Thames.

James loved these early mornings. The air smelled fresh, the sky was empty, everything was quiet. A family of moorhens puttered by the water's edge, but even they made no sound as if, like him, they preferred to keep their counsel.

The boat was gliding now, James's wrists flat and straight, the feathering motion – twisting the oars so that they entered the water vertically before slicing horizontally through the air – all but automatic. He gazed at the river ahead, sparkling as if jewelled by the sunlight. At moments like this, when the true exertion had only just begun, when the sky was blue and the breeze was as cool as a caress, he could almost forget what had happened to his ruined body. He could almost feel like the man he used to be.

Barring that one, fateful, year abroad, he had come to this

same spot for a decade, ever since he had been an undergraduate, grateful for a place in his college team. He had even become the stroke for Oxford against Cambridge in a famously close boat race. But that was a long time ago. These days he was fighting only against himself.

He checked left and right but there was still no one else around. In term-time he might see some of the more ambitious crews on the water at this hour, readying for Torpids or Eights – younger men who reminded him of his younger self. James Zennor was not yet thirty. But he had been through enough that he felt twice that age.

He squinted upwards, enjoying the sensation of being dazzled, then returned his gaze to the job in hand. As his eyes adjusted, he could see the trees on the right-hand bank, shielding the path where he and Florence had so often walked, both before Harry was born and since. James liked bringing his son down here, fondly imagining he would fall in love with the river the way he had as a boy, just by being near to it. But in recent months Harry had become nervous, anxiously clinging to his mother's hand if they inched too close to the water's edge. But that would pass. James was sure of it. On a day like this, he felt that anything was possible.

He imagined how his son would look at this very moment. Still two months short of his third birthday, Harry would be fast asleep, one hand clutching Snowy, the little white polar bear who accompanied him to bed every night. Just the way James had seen him this morning before creeping out for his rowing practice. Whatever else he and Florence had been through, they had made a beautiful child together.

Now, as James reached Iffley Lock again and turned around, the inevitable happened. His left shoulder began to scream for attention. The pain was no less sharp for being familiar, both burning and piercing, as if he were being stabbed by several thick, white-hot needles. Each day would begin with

the hope that this time it would be different, that the pain would come later, that it might not come at all. Today, with the weather so perfect, that hope had shone brighter than usual. But as he rowed towards Folly Bridge he knew nothing had changed.

James tried to focus on those brief, blissful half-seconds of relief, when the blades were up and out of the heavy water: the recovery before the drive. He tried to imagine the river's coolness, the balmy, soothing effect it would have on his burning skin.

Each pull squeezed his lungs, his breaths coming as if they were the gasps of someone faraway; but his heart was as loud as the engine of a motor car revving too fast.

The boat scythed through the water, parting it silently, its bow lean and narrow. He knew that, viewed from the bank, the motion would look effortless. Team rowing, done well, always looked like that; human beings turned into a single, mighty machine, all their energies harnessed towards a single objective. If you had selected the right men, the strongest and best, the water seemed powerless to resist.

Single-sculls rarely looked so pleasing; a man on his own could not generate the same momentum or sense of order. James was certain his own rowing looked especially inelegant. His ruined left shoulder made sure of that. Fated now to be forever weaker than his right, his left arm could not keep up; perfect symmetry was out of reach. He pictured his boat zigzagging its way down the river, even though he had been told a dozen times that it did no such thing.

He gulped for oxygen, looking up as he did so. Folly Bridge was just visible in the distance. Once there, he would have rowed himself along the Isis stretch, to Iffley Lock and back, three times, a distance of four and a half miles. His body was demanding to stop; he had already done his usual morning circuit. But he could not help thinking about the men – his

own age or younger – in combat on the continent, or the pilots preparing to defend the skies over England, giving their all for what the new prime minister had warned would be a ‘Battle of Britain’. With each stroke, he contemplated how feeble were his exertions compared to theirs, how if they could carry on doing their part, the least he could do . . .

But now the perennial shoulder pain suddenly sharpened as if something had splintered. He wondered if perhaps a shard of bone had cracked out of place. The agony was unspeakable.

James firmed his jaw against the pain. In a bid to distract himself, he forced his mind to recall what he had heard on the wireless last night. The main news remained Britain’s sinking of the French fleet in Algeria. Typical Churchill, that. Bold and brazen with it. Unlike that damned fool Chamberlain, Churchill understood there was no room for messing around, no time for niceties. Now that Paris had been conquered, France’s ships would fall into German hands. Better they were destroyed altogether. Not that the French saw it that way: they were furious, the recriminations still rumbling on.

His shoulder was sending shockwaves of hurt through him now. He refused to listen. What had come next? The BBC generally tried to begin the broadcast with something positive to offset the bad news that was to follow. What pill was the discussion of the sinking of the French fleet meant to sweeten last night? The agony tugged at his nerves, but he refused to succumb. That was it. The Channel Islands. Sark had surrendered to the Nazis, two days after Alderney: the Channel Islands were now entirely under German rule. The idea was shocking. He had never been there, but he had grown up on the English south coast knowing that Jersey was just a ferry ride away. The people there spoke English. In just the last few weeks the swastika had been raised over Norway, France,

Belgium, Holland; and now a little corner of Britain. Hitler was getting closer.

James shipped the oars to let the boat drift on the unruffled water and let out what he thought was a gasp of relief. It was only when a flock of coots scattered wildly that he realized the sound he had made was a scream. A man on the towpath opposite turned suddenly and then, alarmed, walked briskly away.

James took himself to the bank, as close to the boathouse as he could manage, then hauled himself out onto dry land and braced for the most demanding moment in his morning routine. Bending low, he tugged at the loop of cord on the bow of the boat, to bring the scull out of the water and onto his good shoulder. One, two, three and, with a strain that made him want to howl, it was out and up. He staggered the few yards to the boathouse and dropped the scull into its rack.

Then he stood for a few seconds, catching his breath, gazing up at the sky. The glorious cornflower blue of it struck him as a kind of lie. The skies over Britain were becoming a battlefield, the air-raid sirens sounding in cities night after night. German planes had bombed Cardiff just a few nights ago. What right did they have now to look so peaceful?

James walked quickly past the college boathouses, one each for St John's, Balliol, New and the others, all now locked up and empty. And though that owed more to the Long Vacation than to the war, he silently cursed his fate once again.

Reaching the post where he had left his bicycle, he threw one long leg over the saddle and began to pedal hard, savouring the kinetic change for his body after the relentless back-and-forth of the river. He pushed himself over the little bridge, as steeply arched as a rainbow, then across Christ Church meadow, noting both the grazing cows – who, since

the onset of rationing, looked useful rather than merely decorative – and the patches that had been ploughed up for growing potatoes. That was happening all over Oxford now, even the smallest private garden or square of lawn turned into a vegetable patch to boost the nation's food supply.

He pedalled between Merton and Corpus, up past Oriel and onto the High Street. The colleges were deserted at this hour, though many of them would soon fill up for another day of requisitioned wartime service. Turning right towards St Giles, he did his best to avoid a glimpse of the Martyrs' Memorial, and headed north for home.

It was not yet seven, so there were not many cars on the road. But even when rush hour came there would be fewer today than there had been a year ago: petrol rationing had seen to that. James knew of one adventurous fellow who had found a solution, filling up his tank with a brew of whisky and paraffin – he complained his car now smelled like a 'lamp-lighter on the piss' – but by the looks of things most of Oxford's motorists preferred not to take the risk. Those that did would now encounter checkpoints guarding the exits north, south, east and west of the city – roadblocks designed to ensure the authorities knew exactly who was coming in and out, as if Oxford were a military base rather than an ancient university town. There was even a roadblock between Pembroke and Christ Church. But they tended to be rather less bothered by a chap on a bike.

Not that you could ever forget it was wartime, no matter how you got around. There were the traffic lights cloaked in their monk-like hoods, one of the countless little transformations demanded by the blackout. But stranger still was the complete absence of street signs and signposts, removed in order to give a headache to any future occupying army. Let Jerry find his own damned way around Oxford.

The pain in his shoulder had returned. He glanced at his

watch and began to make the calculations that might distract him from the agony. If he cycled at full strength, he should be back at the house in four and a half minutes.

As he powered along Banbury Road, the wind rushing past his ears, he became conscious of a roaring appetite. A meagre four ounces: that was his entire bacon ration for the week. He could wolf all of that down this instant, in a single breakfast! And what good to anybody was one egg every three and a half days?

At last the turning for Parks Road was just ahead of him, a large black car parked on the corner, its engine humming.

Florence looked over at her son, sitting at the kitchen table, his chair piled high with cushions so that he could reach his plate, though his toast and margarine were barely touched. Harry was instead hunched over his drawing pad, a stubby red crayon in his hand.

'Not long now, Harry, I promise.' Yet again she opened, rummaged through and closed every drawer in the kitchen. Where the hell had it gone?

Everything else was ready: the suitcase, methodically packed, coats for the journey, sturdy shoes. She had been careful with the passport, deliberately placing it at the back of the second drawer in her dresser, tucked in among her underwear, a private realm James was unlikely to probe. And yet when she had checked for it nearly an hour ago it had not been there. It had been the first thing she had done, after a long time spent in bed, her eyes closed feigning sleep, as she heard James wash, dress and head out to the river. Unmoving, she had lain there listening to his routine, waiting for the sound of the front door closing behind him. She had waited another two minutes after that, timing it by the bedside clock, just in case he had forgotten something and turned back. Then, when the coast was clear, she had got out of bed,

her mental checklist clear and straight. But when she opened the second drawer, there had been no sign of her passport. Had James somehow twigged, and hidden it from her? Had somebody revealed her secret? If her husband did know, why had he said nothing? What trap was he setting for her?

She glanced over at Harry again. His head was down, intent on his drawing. She moved to stand behind him, peering over his head, and abruptly felt a hardness in her throat. 'What's that, darling?'

Harry looked up, his eyes two round blue pools. Florence saw in them a terrible melancholy, before realizing it was a reflection of herself she had glimpsed in her son's eyes.

'It's our house,' Harry said, his voice low and husky, so different from other children his age and yet so like James. 'Inside, there's me,' he said, pointing at a shape that vaguely resembled a window. His chubby finger pointed at another shape: 'And there's you and Daddy.'

Florence felt her eyes smarting. 'It's lovely, Harry,' she said, trying to sound jolly. 'It's lovely.' It was the third house he had drawn in the last twenty minutes.

She resumed her search, trying not to think about Harry or his picture. She didn't want to dwell on anything that might corrode her resolve. Where in heaven's name had she put the passport?

Perhaps in her panic she had missed it. Determined to be more methodical, she returned to the kitchen drawers for the third time, now removing the cutlery tray from the top one and then proceeding to the next. Tea cosies, napkins, a wooden spoon, a spare torch and a fresh set of batteries. Finally the bottom drawer, full of James's man things: screwdrivers, pliers, a spanner, a can of bicycle oil and more batteries for the torch. Since the war began, there seemed to be torches and batteries in every corner of the house. But it wasn't there.

Florence glanced at her watch. Six forty-five am. They had to be out of here by seven at the very latest. James was never back before seven fifteen. She just needed to keep her head.

She ran into his study. Such an awful mess, tottering piles of papers, books and what appeared to be a complete set of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. Lifting the biggest tower, she moved it gingerly onto the chair. Then she removed the February issue of the *New Statesman*, its cover marked by the ringed stains of multiple cups of coffee, a copy of *Tribune* underneath. More letters, a heavily dog-eared copy of *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell – though her husband always referred to him as Eric, after meeting him in Spain – a thick copy of *Wisden*, but no sign of the passport. A weeks-old clipping from the *Daily Sketch*: ‘Conscription extended to age 36’, read the headline. It was five minutes to seven.

‘Mummy!’ A shout from the kitchen.

‘Not now, Harry.’

‘Mummy.’ More insistent.

‘Mummy’s busy.’ She worked her way through a desk drawer full of typewriter ribbons, paperclips and a spare blotter. ‘Why don’t you make sure Snowy is comfortable in your satchel?’

‘There’s a man at the door.’

She froze. Could James be back already, so much earlier than usual? It made no sense; if he were here, he would let himself in. Why would he be standing outside? Unless he had left his keys behind. And he was refusing to ring the bell, lest he wake up Harry. Good God, what should she do?

She crept into the hall. Instantly, through the coloured glass at the top of the door, she could see that it was Leonard, the outline of him tall and taut. Her shoulders dropped with relief. She opened the door.

His brilliantined hair was still in place but his face was flushed with exertion. 'He finished early. I saw him just now.'

'What?'

'I came as fast as I could. James has stopped rowing: I think he must have been quicker than usual today. Or I timed it wrong. But he's finished. He'll be back here in ten minutes, fifteen at the most.'

She grimaced and, as if he had misinterpreted her expression, he added sharply, 'Remember, there are too many people depending on this, Florence. There's too much at stake.'

'Just wait there a minute.'

Desperate, she tore at the rest of the desk drawers, foraging through the cigarette papers, used up matchboxes and foreign coins, most of them Spanish. She turned to the bookshelves, pulling out volume after volume, then whole blocks at a time, including the entire Left Book Club stretch in orange, throwing them to the floor. Still no passport.

Harry had begun to cry, maybe at the sight of Leonard, a stranger, at the front door. Or perhaps because of her barely-contained frustration. But she would have to ignore him. She ran back into the bedroom. Breaking one of the tacit taboos of their marriage, she had already peered inside James's wardrobe, but now she would do a thorough search. She swept past the two or three suits and dark cloth jackets hanging on the rail then sank to her knees, padding the hard wood at the base of the cupboard. She felt something and snatched at it.

A shoebox. She tore at it hopefully. But inside were just two black leather brogues, still wrapped in tissue paper, the ones, she realized with a stab of guilt, he had worn for their wedding or, rather, the wedding party they had had nearly six months later in England.

A shadow fell over her and she turned to find Harry, escaped from his chair, standing in the doorway trembling. 'Mummy?' Tears streaked his cheeks.

She felt her own eyes pricking. Despite all her preparation, weeks of it, she was about to fail. 'Don't cry, darling. Everything will be all right.'

One last chance. She grabbed the stool by the bathroom door, stood on it to look into the top shelf of her husband's clothes cupboard. Two thick sweaters sat, unworn, on the shelf. She pushed them apart. Nothing there. She was about to give up when a faint outline caught her eye. It was barely visible, brown against brown. She reached out and felt the touch of leather. Her heart sank: another damned book, with musty-smelling pages and no words on the cover. When she opened it a picture slipped out. Harry snatched it up, gazing at the handsome young man in uniform surrounded by pals, a rifle in every hand, before crying out with happy recognition: 'Daddy!'

Florence felt defeat settle in her bones. James must have found the passport and taken it to the river with him. What a cruel trick.

Only desperation sent her back to the place where she had started her search: her underwear drawer. She emptied it of the remaining items one by one, as if in a final show of thoroughness. As she lifted up a pair of black stockings, her heart jumped. She pulled at the material and there, somehow caught inside, was the hard black leather booklet. How on earth had she missed it? Her passport was there, exactly where she had left it, all along.

'What did Mummy tell you, Harry? You see, everything's going to be all right.' She could hear the crack in her own voice as she lifted her son in a single move, settling him onto her right hip. With her left hand she picked up the suitcase she had placed in the hallway, in readiness for this

moment, nearly an hour ago. She walked out of the front door to join Leonard. There was no time to look back. In his small hand, Harry was still clutching the picture of his father.

CHAPTER TWO

Barcelona, four years earlier

James saw more of Florence's bare flesh the first time he laid eyes on her than he did until the day they were married. Which was not strictly true, but became a line he liked to use – though rarely in mixed company.

They met in Barcelona, in the heat of July 1936. He had never been to Spain before. In truth, he had never been anywhere before. He walked around the city, along its gorgeous wide avenues, round-eyed, his chest tight with excitement and pride. Hanging from the buildings with their strangely-shaped, weeping-eye windows were banners and bunting welcoming him and some six thousand other foreigners to the Olimpiada Popular: the People's Olympiad. The event's official flag depicted three heroic, muscular figures in red, yellow and black clutching a single standard. It took a while for James to realize that at least one of the notional athletes on the emblem was a woman; the second was a red-skinned man and a third figure was quite clearly negro.

He should not have been surprised: this was the alternative Olympics, designed to steal the thunder of the official games taking place a week later and more than nine hundred miles

eastward in Berlin. While those games would be a showcase of Aryan supremacy, the People's Olympiad would be a festival of socialists, idealists and radicals who had refused as a matter of conscience to take part in Herr Hitler's Nazi carnival.

'Well, we're not going to win, I can tell you that much,' James had said the very moment he and his friend Harry had arrived, off the train after a journey that had begun nearly eighteen hours earlier at Victoria Station. 'Not in this heat. We're used to freezing dawns and Cherwell fog. This is the bloody tropics.'

'Now, Zennor, you listen to me. If I'd wanted a gloom merchant, I'd have brought Simkins or that other twit, Lightfoot. I brought you for your *rhetorical* powers. You're supposed to be here to lift our spirits, to exhort the team to victory!'

'I thought I was here because I'm a bloody good oarsman.'

'And so you are. So no more of that defeatist talk. We won't lead the masses to revolution with soggy English pessimism now, will we?'

Harry Knox, Winchester and Balliol, hereditary baronet and one-time lead organizer of . . . now what was it? James thought it was the ILP, but it might have been another socialist group with another set of initials: it was hard to keep up. Coming to Barcelona had been Knox's idea, a way to make up for missing the real Olympics – as he insisted they *not* refer to them – and a chance to take a stand against Fascism. James had been tipped to row stroke in the Great Britain boat in Berlin; this was to be his consolation prize.

Along with all the other foreign athletes they were put up at the Hotel Olímpico in the Plaza de España, where the lobby was already teeming with fresh arrivals from the United States, Holland, Belgium and French Algeria. Most were just like Harry and James, there with the backing of a workers' association, a socialist party or a trade union, rather than their government. James rather doubted the selection process had

been as athletically rigorous as it was for the official Games. But, as Harry had said, 'That's hardly the point, is it?'

The atmosphere was raucous and did not let up for a week. The door of their room remained open, as Marxist Danish hurdlers or anarchist French sprinters came in and out as they pleased. The entire building seemed to host a single, unending party. James had barely put down his suitcase when a huge Italian shot putter, who later turned out to be a communist exile, thrust a bottle in his hand, urging him to knock it straight back, no sipping. James read the label – *Sangre de Toro*, 'bull's blood' – and did as he was told. It tasted musky and heavy with fruit. He hadn't much liked it at the time but thereafter he would forever associate the taste of that Catalan wine with freedom.

At last they had spilled out onto the street, wandering from one tapas bar to another. James had no memory of paying for either his food or his drink, as if all the Barcelona bar-owners were grateful to the visiting Olympians for supporting their infant republic, for doing exactly what the International Olympic Committee had refused to do five years earlier – choosing Barcelona over Berlin.

He was munching on a plate of *calcots*, charcoal-grilled spring onions that, had you offered them to him in England, he would have rejected as terrifyingly exotic, when Harry, already sunburnt, the sweat patches spreading under his arms, turned to him with a lascivious grin. 'Rumour is the ladies' swimming team are having a late night practice session.'

'Harry, even you can't be that desperate,' James replied, doing his best to sound like a man of the world. He had some experience with women, more certainly than Harry. He had spent most of his second year at Oxford stepping out with Daisy, a blonde, long-necked Classicist from St Hugh's, fumbling his way towards a familiarity with her body, albeit through her clothing, but he had lost his innocence with

Eileen, studying at a secretarial college on the Woodstock Road. She lacked Daisy's fine features, but her edges were softer and she was more like him: provincial, from Nottingham. He would see her every Wednesday evening with the occasional Saturday night trip to the pictures. He kept her entirely separate from his college friends, so that she was more like a mistress than a girlfriend. It slightly shamed him now to think of the secrecy he had maintained about their affair, but she had never questioned it. Instead, on Wednesdays at around 6.30pm, when her room-mate was at choir-practice, she would usher him into her digs – and into her bed.

'Well, don't come then, James,' Harry said, feeling his friend's scorn. 'I'm sure there's an exciting new academic monograph you could be reading.'

'Since it's clearly so important to you, old chum, I'll come and keep you company.'

For once, Knox's gossip turned out to be accurate. By the time they arrived at the outdoor baths a crowd had already gathered. Mostly men, but also families out for an after-dinner stroll on this steaming night, young children, ice-creams in their hands, some on their fathers' shoulders – all watching the moonlit swimmers.

Knox elbowed his way through the three-deep throng in order to get closer. But James, at six foot four, had a clear line of sight to the start podiums at the right-hand end of the pool – and he saw her straight away.

Her hair was hidden by a swim cap, but he could see that she was dark, or at least darker than the rest of the girls. There were two fine black lines above her eyes – eyes which even at this distance seemed to sparkle: later he would discover that they were a jewel-like green, as if illuminated from within. Her nose was perfect, not tiny, not a button like some of the other girls', but somehow strong. She was the tallest among them, her legs long, lean and, thanks to the

Catalan sun, bronzed. But it was the animation of her face, her laughter, the way the other women looked to her that marked her out as singular, the natural leader of the group. He was transfixed.

He watched as she organized the team, assigning each of the six a lane. They were giggling, aware of their audience. The white of their swimsuits was almost florescent in the searchlight-bright moon, their figures defined in silhouette. As she turned side on, stepping onto the starting block readying for her dive, he marvelled at the shape of her, and when she bent her knees, her arms forming into an arrowhead, it struck him that this was probably how the ancients imagined Diana the huntress, a goddess of perfect strength and beauty. With the moonlight on her and her hair swept up into the white swim-cap, she could have been made entirely of marble.

The races went on for a while, the crowd eventually dwindling. But Harry didn't want to leave and James was only too happy to let him think that staying on was his idea. Once the women were out of the pool and had pulled on their robes, the two of them headed over, trying terribly hard to saunter.

'I say, you all did terribly well,' Knox offered as his opening gambit, his voice plummier than usual – a nervous tic which, James recognized, surfaced whenever Harry came face to face with what he called 'the fairer sex'. James could feel his own heart rate had increased: rather than risk a joke that fell flat or some other gaucheness, he said nothing.

Two of the ladies laughed behind their hands, a third stared intermittently at her feet, stealing shy glances upward. James noticed that five of the six girls were looking at him rather than Harry, a pattern that, he had to admit, he had seen before. All that spoiled the moment was that the goddess was paying him no attention, instead rounding up the equipment and collecting a stopwatch left hanging on the back of an

observation chair. Finally she walked over and, assessing the scene, extended her hand immediately towards Harry, bestowing on him a thousand-watt smile.

'Miss Florence Walsingham,' she said. Her voice was confident and melodic but with a gentleness that surprised. As Harry stammered a reply, she nodded intently, her eyes only for him. James might as well have not existed. But, curiously, he did not mind. It meant he could stare at her, savour her smile, listen to that voice which instantly suggested the West End at night, dinner on the Strand, cocktails in Pall Mall and a thousand other delights he could only guess at.

As she turned to him, she reached up and removed her swimming cap, allowing long, glossy curls of dark brown hair to fall to her shoulders. Not all of it was dry: the damp ends clung to her cheekbones. Involuntarily, he found himself imagining how this woman would look when she was sweating, while she was making love. His outstretched hand had to remain suspended in mid-air for a second or two before she took it. But when she did, fixing him with that high-wattage gaze, he was over-run. By desire, of course, but also by an urge he had never known before: he wanted to lose himself in her, to dive inside and let the waters close over him.

James and Florence spent every moment of the next four days together. She watched him row, he watched her swim. Both tall, dark and striking, they became one of the more recognizable couples around the Plaza de España. They accompanied one another to the permanent parties in the hotel, on his floor and on hers, but mainly they just wanted to be with each other.

After Florence's morning swimming practice, they would walk and walk. The swimming baths were in Montjüic, a

raised area that had once been a fort and a jail but which had been revamped in time for the International Exhibition seven years earlier. They would start at the newly-landscaped gardens, soaking up the view, then stroll down the hill past the pavilions built for the 1929 exhibition, stopping at the Poble Espanyol, the model Spanish village, and eventually gazing in awe at the fabulously elaborate Magic Fountain. In the warm sunshine, he in a white shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, she in cotton dresses that seemed to float around her, they told each other how they had come to be fraternal team-mates at the People's Olympiad.

'Blame Harry and his pals in the ILP,' he had said, during their first proper conversation.

'The Independent Labour Party?'

'Yes, that's it. Independent Labour Party.'

'Are you a member?' she asked.

'No. I'm what Harry calls a fellow traveller. You?'

'Well, I'm certainly a socialist if that's what you mean.' Hers was an accent he had never heard before he went up to Oxford, certainly not in his home town. It wasn't the received pronunciation you'd hear on the Home Service. It was the voice Harry lapsed into towards the bottom of a bottle of wine or when he spoke to his mother or, of course, when he was around young ladies: James supposed it was the accent of the upper class, or something close to it. 'Inevitable, really, given my field.'

'Your *field*.' He marvelled at the arrogance of a twenty-one-year-old girl, four years younger than him, speaking of herself as if she were some kind of expert. 'And what is your "field", Miss Walsingham?'

She turned her face up to catch the sun. 'I'm a scientist, Mr Zennor.'

'A scientist indeed.'

She ignored his condescension. 'I've just completed my

degree in natural sciences at Somerville. I'll be returning there next year.'

'Whatever for?'

'To get my doctorate, of course. I am specializing in biology.'

He considered making a joke – something about undertaking practical research – but wisely changed his mind.

'What's that got to do with being a socialist?'

'You're a scientist, aren't you?'

'Well, some would dispute that, as it happens. Some call psychology "mental philosophy". Others say it's the newest branch of medicine.'

'I don't care what "some" say.' She clutched his arm. 'I want to know what *you* say.'

He wanted to kiss her there and then, in front of all these people. She only had to look at him like that, with that electric-light smile, and he fell several hundred leagues deeper. 'All right then,' he conceded. 'I say that it's science too. The science of the mind.'

'Good. So we're both scientists.' She squeezed his hand and he felt her energy flow into him.

He forced himself to concentrate. 'You still haven't explained what any of this has to do with socialism.'

'It's obvious, isn't it? Science is reason. It's about seeing what's *rational* and eliminating everything else. Socialism aims to do the same thing: to organize society rationally.'

'But human beings are not rational, are they?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Just look at us. Here.' He glanced down at his forearm, on which lightly rested Florence's slender fingers. 'What's rational about this?'

A worried look fleetingly crossed her face, like a wisp of cloud passing the sun. It was gone almost as soon as it had appeared. He could not tell whether she had been concerned at the blow to her argument or at the thought of what she

was doing, walking arm in arm in a foreign land with a man she barely knew.

‘Oh, I would say this is *perfectly* rational,’ she chirped, her enthusiasm recovered. ‘But to persuade you I would have to blind you with science.’

Their love affair continued for the rest of that hot July week, preparing for the start of the Games on the nineteenth. They stayed up late at the street corner bar, listening to Harry play his ukulele along with his impromptu band – two Americans on trumpet and bass, one of whom turned out to be Edward Harrison, eminent foreign correspondent, with a gymnast from Antwerp as the singer – but they remained inside their own cocoon. James wanted to know everything about Florence, and was prepared to tell her more about himself than he had ever told anyone before.

‘So what’s Zennor then? Is that foreign?’

He laughed. ‘Cornwall originally.’

‘Not now?’ she asked, as if disappointed.

‘My ancestors headed east,’ he said. ‘To Bournemouth.’

‘Bournemouth. I see. I thought from “Zennor” you’d have at least, oh, I don’t know, some pirate blood. From Zanzibar—’

‘Or Xanadu.’

‘Cheat,’ she said, giving him a mock slap on the back of his hand, which was in truth another excuse to touch.

He said, ‘Bournemouth is not very exotic, is it?’

‘Not really, I’m afraid, my darling. No foreign blood at all?’

‘My parents are Quakers, if that counts. Both schoolteachers and both Quakers. Maths for him, piano for her. Two more solid, provincial people you could not hope to meet. They’re not quite sure what to make of me.’

‘Aren’t Quakers pacifists?’

‘That’s right.’ He watched as Florence did some rapid mental arithmetic.

‘Does that mean, your father was, you know—’

‘A conshie? Right again.’

‘Heavens. Did he go to jail?’

‘Nearly, but not quite. Sent to do “work of national importance”. In his case, farming.’

‘I see,’ she said, biting her lower lip in a gesture he was already coming to love. ‘So that’s why they moved away from Cornwall. They couldn’t return home after the war: too shaming.’

He stared at her, wondering if he had been the victim of some kind of confidence trick. He had never told anyone that story, not even Harry. But she had intuited the truth.

This is how it was for that short, heady week, the two of them peeling off layers from each other. Sometimes it took the presence of another person, like the night they stayed at the tapas bar long after the rest of the rolling Olympics party had moved on elsewhere.

‘I do hope we’re not keeping you,’ Florence had asked the manager, a rotund man probably twice their age, as he began wiping the tables around them, sometime around two am. He insisted they were not and thanked them for being in Barcelona. In a fractured, bartered conversation – a bit of pidgin English in exchange for a phrase of broken Spanish – they began talking, he explaining that Spain would soon be a model for the world, a communist utopia.

‘Well, if that’s what the people vote for, then that’s what it should be,’ Florence said.

‘Quite right,’ James added. ‘That’s what the army and the church need to get into their heads: the government was elected by the people of Spain. If you don’t like it, vote it out at the next election.’

‘No, no, no,’ the man said, rag still in hand. ‘No voting out. Once we have communism here, it stay that way. Forever.’

‘Even if the people vote against it?’ Florence had asked, her brow furrowed.

'They won't vote against it.'

'Yes, but if they do.'

'They won't. They shouldn't be allowed. Once the revolution is secure, then they can vote.'

'And how long will that take?' James asked, picking up where Florence had left off. 'How long till the revolution is "secure"? That could take decades. Just look at Russia.'

'The Soviet Union is the greatest democracy in the world!'

Florence and James looked at each other, before Florence said, 'I don't think Mr Stalin has to face the voters too often, do you?'

The man looked puzzled.

'Communism is all very well but only if it's democratic. Otherwise it's just as bad as all the other rotten systems, if you ask me,' James said.

The man resumed his clearing up, then rebuffed James's repeated attempts to pay the bill: 'You are guests in my country and you support the republic!' When James produced a bank note, he shooed them out.

'It's like boycotting Berlin,' James said as they walked slowly back towards her digs. 'You don't have to be a communist to detest Hitler and the Nazis. You just have to be a half-decent human being. The man's a vile brute.'

They were speaking of politics and the world, but really they were exploring each other, discovering with every conversation, every new encounter, how well the curves and contours of their minds fitted together. Then, at stolen moments in the mid-afternoon or late at night, they would do the same with their bodies – cautiously at first, with Florence teasing more than he could bear, then surprising him with sudden passion. His strongest memory was of her face close to his in the dark, their mouths sometimes speaking to each other in a lovers' hush, sometimes kissing.

The result was a fever for the taste, touch and smell of the

other that shocked them both. Merely walking beside Florence, close enough for her scent to reach him, was enough to make him ravenous for her. What was more, and this he had never experienced before – even with sweet, giving Eileen – Florence seemed to feel the same: her desire was equal to his.

And so, while the political skies over Barcelona began to darken, and as the welcoming faces of their Barcelona hosts turned to distracted anxiety, James and Florence focused on the deadly serious business of falling in love.

Only when they heard about the broadcast of a coded message – ‘Over all of Spain, the sky is clear,’ was the plotters’ signal to each other over the radio – did they understand that a coup d’état was underway, fascists and nationalists bent on overthrowing the republican government that had invited the flower of international radical youth to Barcelona, to thumb its nose at the Nazis on parade in Berlin.

Suddenly the notion of sprints, heats and semi-finals seemed horribly irrelevant. Even those who thought the coup would be rapidly put down, who did not imagine the country was about to plunge into a vicious civil war, could see that this was no time for a pretend Olympics. When the rumour spread through the Hotel Olímpico that the games had been cancelled, few waited for confirmation.

James was packing his bag when Harry, his skin fire-engine red, found him. He had, James saw instantly, sobered up fast.

‘Where are you going, Zennor?’

‘Don’t tell me you haven’t heard. The Games have been—’

‘Cancelled, I know. But where are you off to?’

‘Well, I thought . . . if there are no Games. That is, I was going to ask FI—’

‘You’re not proposing to leave, are you? In the republic’s hour of need?’

James scanned Harry’s face. He seemed entirely in earnest. ‘What are you suggesting?’

'A few of us are staying on. To defend the republic.'

'But . . . but, you're not a soldier.'

'I can train. The point is, Zennor, we've been enlisted, whether we like it or not.'

'Enlisted?'

'History is enlisting us.'

James stopped stock-still, holding the lid of his suitcase. It was quite true that, since the day he had arrived, he had understood that something much larger than a sports tournament was at stake. He knew it was easy to romanticize a gathering of fit and handsome young people coming together in the sunshine in a noble cause – but it was not just romance. Barcelona with its People's Olympiad had become the focus of international opposition to Adolf Hitler and his nasty so-called Third Reich. It was here that the world had said no, taking a stand not only against the Berlin games but against the entire Nazi project. And so an attack on the republic led by ultra-nationalist army officers and backed by fascist thugs was not solely a domestic matter for Spain. It was an attack by fascism itself. There would be a new fault-line now, running through Spain, yes, but dividing all of Europe. Hitler and Mussolini would doubtless be on one side of that line and those who believed in democracy and free speech and all the promise that the twentieth century held in store would be on the other. James Zennor found that he was asking himself a question: whose side are you on?

He snapped his suitcase shut and went to find Florence.

James had to fight a throng of athletes flooding out of the Hotel Olímpico lobby, stampeding for the railway station, to reach her. He was bewildered to find her standing outside, bags already in hand.

'I was just coming to see you,' she said. She bit her lip in

a way that instantly resolved him not to say what he had planned to say.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to Berlin.'

'Berlin?'

'If I leave now, I can make it.'

'Berlin? Why the hell would you be going there?'

'It's not how it looks, James. You have to trust me.'

'But, what about—' he gestured at the crowd shoving and pushing around them, at the banners and the bunting.

'I know, but I have—'

'All that talk about the "wicked Nazis" and how the Olympics will be just a "glorified Nuremberg rally". That was all rubbish, wasn't it? You meant none of it!'

'That's not fair.'

That cloud that he had once seen pass across her face so briefly was lodged directly above her now, darkening her eyes. The light within seemed to be faltering. But he could not stop. "I refuse to play any part in it". That's what you said. Just talk, wasn't it? Cheap talk.'

'How dare you talk to me like that?' She was glaring. 'This is beneath you, James. And it's certainly beneath me.'

'Listen—'

'No, you listen. I don't know what kind of women you've been with before me but this one' – her index finger tapped her breastbone – 'makes up her own mind, OK? I will not be told what to do by any man. Not by my father and certainly not by you. You can decide to do whatever you like. But this is my decision. I've realized I need to make my point in my own way.' She paused. 'Besides, I haven't done all this training for nothing.'

'Oh, so that's it, is it? You don't want your precious training to be in vain? You want the glory of a bloody medal!'

'No, that's not it,' she said in a low voice, her eyes not

meeting his. She was briefly knocked off balance by a group of women hurrying to cross the road and board a bus. 'I have to leave. I'm sorry.'

He reached out and grabbed her shoulder, forcing her to turn back to face him. 'And what about this? Us.' The word tasted awkward in his mouth; he instantly regretted it. 'You and me. Has this meant nothing to you?'

She tilted her head to one side in an expression he didn't quite know how to read. Was it pity? Regret? He wondered if he could see tears in her eyes.

'You don't understand at all, do you? All that "experimental psychology" and you don't understand a thing.'

And with that, she broke free of him and disappeared into the swell of people clamouring to get out.

James stood for a while, letting the crowd shift around him, like a stream around a pebble. He could not quite believe what had happened, how quickly he had let her go. How quickly he had pushed her away, more like. What a fool, sounding off like that to a woman he had known for, what, a week? And this was not any woman. You might be able to tell an Eileen, or even a Daisy, what to do – some women positively seemed to like being bossed around. But not Florence. That much should have been obvious. She was independent, strong-willed, with a mind of her own: it partly explained why he was falling in love with her. To have attempted to control such a woman – a brilliant, beautiful woman, who could have any man she wanted – was the mark of a prize idiot.

He had embarrassed himself, there was no other word for it. He had sounded desperate, like some lovesick drip. All that talk of 'you and me', of 'us' – why, he had got it all wrong. To her, this was a holiday romance, nothing more – a casual fling. How naïve of him to have presumed it was anything more. He was like a girl in a port, stupid

enough to believe the sailor who says he loves her. She was young and gorgeous and for her this probably meant no more than a furtive kiss in the chapel during an Oxford ball.

He had a strong urge to turn around that very instant and make the long journey back to Victoria Station. But the thought filled him with cold. The very idea of England without Florence felt barren. Returning to his routine of seminars, papers and long, silent sessions entombed in the dust of the Bodleian . . . No, he couldn't do it, not after a week like this.

Perhaps he should chase after her. He could apologize, tell her he had got it all wrong. He could tell her that whatever she had decided, he was sure it was right. Maybe he should follow her to Berlin. It would be worth it, even for just one more night with her, touching her skin, smelling her hair, hearing her laugh.

But that would sound more desperate still. He would be clinging to her, like a limpet. She would soon want to shake him off. And what respect would she have for a man so ready to abandon his principles, decrying Hitler and the 'fascist circus' of the Berlin Olympics one minute, only to come scurrying to the Games the next? It was one thing for her to do it; she had her own, mysterious reasons. She had her point to make, 'in her own way'. He would have no such excuse.

Anyway, she had not asked him. If she had wanted him at her side, she would have asked, and she had done no such thing. It would be humiliating to follow her to Berlin, trotting after her like a devoted little spaniel.

He looked upward, watching the red and yellow of the People's Olympiad banner come down, replaced by a flag of deepest red, and let himself fill up with the sensations he had felt earlier: the call of liberty, the demand of justice,

the imperative that all those who were fit and able fight the good fight, saving the republic from those who would destroy it and much of civilization along with it. The void love had left in his heart would be filled by history.