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A Foreign Country

Written by Charles Cumming

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CHARLES CUMMING

A Foreign Country



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'There's just one thing I think you ought to know before you take on this job . . . If you do well you'll get no thanks and if you get into trouble you'll get no help. Does that suit you?'

'Perfectly.'

'Then I'll wish you good afternoon.'

W. Somerset Maugham, *Ashenden*

'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Tunisia, 1978

1

Jean-Marc Daumal awoke to the din of the call to prayer and to the sound of his children weeping. It was just after seven o'clock on an airless Tunisian morning. For an instant, as he adjusted his eyes to the sunlight, Daumal was oblivious to the wretchedness of his situation; then the memory of it took him like a shortness of breath. He almost cried out in despair, staring up at the cracked, whitewashed ceiling, a married man of forty-one at the mercy of a broken heart.

Amelia Weldon had been gone for six days. Gone without warning, gone without reason, gone without leaving a note. One moment she had been caring for his children at the villa – preparing their supper, reading them a bedtime story – the next she had disappeared. At dawn on Saturday, Jean-Marc's wife, Celine, had found the au pair's bedroom stripped of its belongings, Amelia's suitcases taken from the cupboard, her photographs and posters removed from the walls. The family safe in the utility room was locked, but Amelia's passport, and a necklace that she had placed there for safekeeping, were both missing. There was no record at Port de la Goulette of a twenty-year-old British woman matching Amelia's

description boarding a ferry for Europe, nor any airline out of Tunis with a passenger listing for 'Amelia Weldon'. No hotel or hostel in the city had a guest registered under her name and the few fresh-faced students and ex-pats with whom she had socialized in Tunis appeared to know nothing of her whereabouts. Presenting himself as a concerned employer, Jean-Marc had made enquiries at the British Embassy, telexed the agency in Paris that had arranged Amelia's employment and telephoned her brother in Oxford. Nobody, it seemed, could unravel the enigma of her disappearance. Jean-Marc's only solace lay in the fact that her body had not been discovered in some back alley of Tunis or Carthage; that she had not been admitted to hospital suffering from an illness, which might have taken her from him for ever. He was otherwise utterly bereft. The woman who had brought upon him the exquisite torture of infatuation had vanished as completely as an echo in the night.

The children's crying continued. Jean-Marc pulled back the single white sheet covering his body and sat up on the bed, massaging an ache in the small of his back. He heard Celine saying: 'I am telling you for the last time, Thibaud, you are *not* watching cartoons until you finish your breakfast' and it took all of his strength not to rise from the bed, to stride into the kitchen and, in his fury, to smack his son through the thin shorts of his Asterix pyjamas. Instead, Daumal drank from a half-empty glass of water on the bedside table, opened the curtains and stood on the first-floor balcony, gazing out over the rooftops of La Marsa. A tanker was moving west to east across the horizon, two days from Suez. Had Amelia left by private boat? Guttman, he knew, kept a yacht out at Hammamet. The rich American Jew with his contacts and his privilege, the rumours of links to the MOSSAD. Daumal had seen how Guttman had looked at Amelia; a

man who had never wanted for anything in his life desired her as his prize. Had he taken her from him? There was no evidence to support his baseless jealousy, only the cuckold's fear of humiliation. Numb from lack of sleep, Daumal settled on a plastic chair on the balcony, a smell of baking bread rising up from a neighbouring garden. Two metres away, close to the window, he spotted a half-finished packet of Mars Légère and lit one with a steady hand, coughing on the first lungful of smoke.

Footsteps in the bedroom. The children had stopped crying. Celine appeared at the balcony door and said: 'You're awake,' in a tone of voice that managed to harden his heart against her still further. He knew that his wife blamed him for what had happened. But she did not know the truth. Had she guessed, she might even have comforted him; her own father, after all, had consorted with dozens of women during his married life. He wondered why Celine had not simply fired Amelia. That, at least, would have saved him from this season of pain. It was as though she wanted to torment him by keeping her in the house.

'I'm awake,' he replied, although Celine was long gone, locked in the bathroom under her ritual cold shower, scrubbing the child-altered body that was now repulsive to him. Jean-Marc stubbed out his cigarette, returned to the bedroom, found his dressing-gown discarded on the floor and walked downstairs to the kitchen.

Fatima, one of two maids assigned to the Daumal residence as part of the ex-pat package offered by his employers in France, was putting on an apron. Jean-Marc ignored her and, finding a percolator of coffee on the stove, prepared himself a café au lait. Thibaud and Lola were giggling with one another in an adjoining room, but he did not wish to see them. Instead he sat in his office, the door closed, sipping

from the bowl of coffee. Every room, every smell, every idiosyncrasy of the villa held for him a memory of Amelia. It was in this office that they had first kissed. It was at the base of those oleander trees at the rear of the property, visible now through the window, that they had first made love in the dead of night, while Celine slept obliviously indoors. Later, Jean-Marc would take appalling risks, slipping away from his bedroom at two or three o'clock in the morning to be with Amelia, to hold her, to swallow her, to touch and manipulate a body that was so intoxicating to him that he actually laughed at the memory of it. And then he heard himself entertaining such thoughts and knew that he was little more than a romantic, self-pitying fool. So many times he had been on the brink of confessing, of telling Celine every secret of the affair: the rooms that he and Amelia had taken in hotels in Tunis; the five April days that they had spent together in Sfax while his wife had been in Beaune with the children. Jean-Marc knew, as he had always known, that he enjoyed deceiving Celine; it was a form of revenge for all the stillness and ennui of their marriage. The lying kept him sane. Amelia had understood that. Perhaps that was what had bound them together – a shared aptitude for deceit. He had been astonished at her ability to finesse their indiscretions, to cover her tracks so that Celine had no suspicion of what was going on. There were the mischievous lies at breakfast – ‘Thank you, yes, I slept *very* well’ – combined with a studied indifference towards Jean-Marc whenever the two lovers found themselves in Celine’s company. It was Amelia who had suggested that he pay for their hotel rooms in cash, to avoid any dubious transactions appearing on Jean-Marc’s bank statements. It was Amelia who had stopped wearing perfume, so that the scent of Hermès Calèche would not be carried back to the marital bed. There was no question

in Jean-Marc's mind that she had derived a deep satisfaction from these clandestine games.

The telephone rang. It was rare for anybody to call the house before eight o'clock in the morning; Jean-Marc was certain that Amelia was trying to contact him. He picked up the receiver and said: '*Oui?*' in near-desperation.

A woman with an American accent replied: 'John Mark?'

It was Guttmann's wife. The WASP heiress, her father a senator, family money stinking all the way back to the *Mayflower*.

'Joan?'

'That's right. Have I called at a bad moment?'

He had no time to lament her blithe assumption that all conversations between them should be conducted in English. Neither Joan nor her husband had made any attempt to learn even rudimentary French, only Arabic.

'No, it is not a bad time. I was just on my way to work.' He assumed that Joan wanted to arrange to spend the day at the beach with his children. 'Do you want to speak to Celine?'

A pause. Some of the customary energy went out of Joan's voice and her mood became businesslike, even sombre.

'Actually, John Mark, I wanted to speak with you.'

'With *me?*'

'It's about Amelia.'

Joan knew. She had found out about the affair. Was she going to expose him?

'What about her?' His tone of voice had become hostile.

'She has asked me to convey a message to you.'

'You've *seen* her?'

It was like hearing that a relative, assumed dead, was alive and well. He was certain now that she would come back to him.

'I have seen her,' Joan replied. 'She's worried about you.'
Daumal would have fallen on this expression of devotion like a dog snatching at a bone, had it not been necessary to sustain the lie.

'Well, yes, Celine and the children have been very concerned. One moment Amelia was here with them, the next she was gone . . .'

'No. Not Celine. Not the children. She's worried about *you*.'

He felt the hope rushing out of him, a door slammed by a sudden wind.

'About *me*? I don't understand.'

Another careful pause. Joan and Amelia had always been close. As Guttman had entrapped her in charm and money, Joan had played the caring older sister, a role model of elegance and sophistication to which Amelia might one day aspire.

'I think you do understand, John Mark.'

The game was up. The affair had been revealed. Everybody knew that Jean-Marc Daumal had fallen hopelessly and ridiculously in love with a twenty-year-old au pair. He would be a laughing stock in the ex-patriot community.

'I wanted to catch you before you went to work. I wanted to reassure you that nobody knows about this. I have not spoken to David, nor do I intend to say anything to Celine.'

'Thank you,' Jean-Marc replied quietly.

'Amelia has left Tunisia. Last night, as a matter of fact. She's going to go travelling for a while. She wanted me to tell you how sorry she is for the way things worked out. She never intended to hurt you or to abandon your family in the way that she did. She cares for you very deeply. It all just got too much for her, you know? Her heart was confused. Am I making sense, John Mark?'

'You are making sense.'

'So perhaps you might tell Celine that this was Amelia on the phone. Calling from the airport. Tell your children that she won't be coming back.'

'I will do that.'

'I think it's best, don't you? I think it's best if you forget all about her.'

The Present Day

2

Philippe and Jeannine Malot, of 79 Rue Pelleport, Paris, had been planning their dream holiday in Egypt for more than a year. Philippe, who had recently retired, had set aside a budget of three thousand euros and found an airline that was prepared to fly them to Cairo (albeit at six o'clock in the morning) for less than the price of a return taxi to Charles de Gaulle airport. They had researched the best hotels in Cairo and Luxor on the Internet and secured an over-60s discount at a luxury resort in Sharm-el-Sheikh, where they planned to relax for the final five days of their journey.

The Malots had arrived in Cairo on a humid summer afternoon, making love almost as soon as they had closed the door of their hotel room. Jeannine had then set about unpacking while Philippe remained in bed reading Naguib Mahfouz's *Akhénaton le Renégat*, a novel that he was not altogether enjoying. After a short walk around the local neighbourhood, they had eaten dinner in one of the hotel's three restaurants and fallen asleep before midnight to the muffled sounds of Cairene traffic.

Three enjoyable, if exhausting days, followed. Though she had developed a minor stomach complaint, Jeannine managed five hours of wide-eyed browsing in the Egyptian Museum, where she declared herself 'awestruck' by the treasures of Tutankhamun. On the second morning of their trip, the Malots had set off by taxi shortly after breakfast and were astonished – as all first-time visitors were – to find the Pyramids looming into view no more than a few hundred metres from a nondescript residential suburb at the edge of the city. Hounded by trinket-sellers and under-qualified guides, they had completed a full circuit of the area within two hours and asked a shaven-headed German tourist to take their photograph in front of the Sphinx. Jeannine was keen to enter the Pyramid at Cheops, but went alone, because Philippe suffered from a mild claustrophobia and had been warned by a colleague at work that the interior was both cramped and stiflingly hot. In a mood of jubilation at having finally witnessed a phenomenon that had enthralled her since childhood, Jeannine paid an Egyptian man the equivalent of fifteen euros for a brief ride on a camel. It had moaned throughout and smelled strongly of diesel. She had then accidentally deleted the picture of her husband astride the beast while attempting to organize the pictures on their digital camera at lunch the following day.

On the recommendation of an article in a French style magazine, they had travelled to Luxor by overnight train and booked a room at the Winter Palace, albeit in the Pavilion, a four-star annexed development added to the original colonial hotel. An enterprising tourism company offered donkey rides to the Valley of the Kings that left Luxor at five o'clock in the morning. The Malots had duly signed up, witnessing a dramatic sunrise over the Temple at Hatshepsut just after six a.m. They had then spent what they later agreed had

been the best day of their holiday travelling out to the temples at Dendara and Abydos. On their final afternoon in Luxor, Philippe and Jeannine had taken a taxi to the Temple at Karnak and stayed until the evening to witness the famous Sound and Light show. Philippe had fallen asleep within ten minutes.

By Tuesday they were in Sharm-el-Sheikh, on the Sinai Peninsula. Their hotel boasted three swimming pools, a hairdressing salon, two cocktail bars, nine tennis courts and enough security to deter an army of Islamist fanatics. On that first evening, the Malots had decided to go for a short walk along the beach. Though their hotel was at full occupancy, no other tourists were visible in the moonlight as they made their way from the concrete walkway at the perimeter of the hotel down on to the still-warm sand.

It was afterwards estimated that they had been attacked by at least three men, each armed with knives and metal poles. Jeannine's necklace had been torn away, scattering pearls on to the sand, and her gold wedding ring removed from her finger. Philippe had had a noose placed around his neck and been jerked upright as a second assailant sliced through his throat and stabbed him repeatedly in the chest and legs. He had bled to death within a few minutes. A torn bed sheet that had been stuffed into her mouth had muffled Jeannine's screams. Her own throat was also slashed, her arms heavily bruised, her stomach and hips struck repeatedly by a metal pole.

A young Canadian couple, honeymooning at a neighbouring hotel, had noticed the commotion and heard Madame Malot's stifled cries, but could not see what was happening in the light of the waning moon. By the time they got there, the men who had attacked and murdered the elderly French

couple had vanished into the night, leaving a scene of devastation that the Egyptian authorities quickly dismissed as a random act of violence, perpetrated by outsiders, which was 'highly unlikely ever to happen again'.