
Opening Extract from...

The Flying Man

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THE
Flying
MAN

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He'd fly through the air with the greatest of ease,
That daring young man on the flying trapeze.

George Leybourne, 'Champagne Charlie'

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate . . .

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee . . .
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

extract from William Shakespeare, Sonnet XXIX

Biarritz, France – 2012 – Showtime

HE'S WRITING A LETTER HE NEVER INTENDS TO POST, BUT which he knows will one day be found. It might be in his jacket pocket or in his suitcase, or maybe here just moments from now (why not?) on the vinyl-surfaced bureau of the cheap hotel, once his pills finally stop working, once that whirling gang of his old-man maladies finally catch up with him and drag him down, jackals tearing into their prey on the ground. After he's found lying there, twitching and helpless, the letter will be discovered, carefully unfolded, and it will answer all their questions, that motley crew of the casually abandoned, the tearful and indifferent, the largely harmless and charmless. (He pities them, now, in the ambiguous way one would pity a slow, defective child that you know deserves affection more than pity, in the way that one would pity the brave and brittle smiles of the parents of that same child who must offer the affection, the protection, that the world does not.) His unfortunate tribe. His

Family and Friends. This humble letter, on hotel stationery, is misleadingly dated the day after tomorrow – he can't help himself, little deceits such as these remind him that for the moment, at least, he is alive, and this deceit in particular promises that he will still be alive in two days' time. He has always made his promises for the day after tomorrow; after all, tomorrow comes too quickly to fob off whoever is after him – his former business associates, his latest wife, his children, his creditors, his doctors, Death – but the day after tomorrow is neither so close that he has to make plans to actually do what he promised, nor so far that people will suspect that he will do nothing at all. This flimsy scrap, scrawled by his ancient hands, gnarled with stiff bones and bulging veins, his paper skin dotted with brown spots and broken by roughly red eczema, his once impetuous and slapdash handwriting now simply scratched and barely legible, may be the most important thing he has ever written. It will bear witness when they finally get him – when they beat him up and slap him down, those yobs in the shadows of an alley – it will say what he no longer can, and pay his final debts. It may even provide salvation of sorts, and ensure his immortal legacy – in this world, if not the next.

He realises, as he struggles to read back what he has written, that it is getting dark, that the streets outside are silent apart from the occasional lonely car, and the dog barking in the distance. That he is an old man beginning to write the letter of his life in the failing light, in the quiet dignity of the bare room, where plastic wallpaper peels up from the painted skirting in scrolls. A timeless pose, something to be brushed on paper, preserved in paint. An image of quiet dignity himself. He is suddenly furious with his preposterous posturing – he is no firefighter trapped in a burning building, calling out to his wife that he loves her, he is no family man on a crashing commercial

jet bidding a tearful farewell to toothy kids called Sport and Scout, he is no military hero telling his men it was an honour to serve with them amidst the sound of sniper fire – he despises his pretension, rejects the inevitable pity they will feel for him when they find him. Perhaps he should abandon the letter, or just leave the hotel to trace it out in the coarse moonlit sand the full length of the Biarritz Grande Plage, and then sit back on a wrought-iron bench and watch the waves swarm in to lick over it like flies on a wound, blurring the lines and finally lifting it away into the Atlantic.

'That's the trouble with pity. You can give it out, but you can't take it yourself,' says a voice, amused rather than adversarial. He knows that the voice is his, that it must be, one way or another; he is alone in the room. He supposes that it is the voice of his dementia, his swansong into senility, his chirping cricket of a conscience. It is a voice that comes from somewhere deeper than his conscious mind. From his hollow chips of bone. From his smears of stubbornly clinging marrow. From his doubtful soul. He hears it so often, these days, that it has started to irritate the hell out of him. He has had enough of posing as the subject of a muted watercolour. He flicks the switch, and drowns the cell-like solemnity of the room in a flood of harsh electric light, the furniture suddenly orange and lurid green, as bright and sinister as a clown at a children's party. The silence is still unnerving, it leaves too much blank space for the voice to fill, and so he flicks on the TV as well, bolted high on the ceiling where it can't be stolen or spat upon, and fills the air with canned laughter instead. It's an American comedy – one of those generic, successful ones with a fat husband and skinny wife – expertly dubbed into French. He had hoped for an inoffensive quiz show, he has recently developed a mild addiction for the French version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, but his disappointment passes. After all, the skinny wife is quite

attractive, even with her nasal whine, and the persistence of the laughter is curiously compelling; after writing a few more lines, he lets his pen roll aside, and sits on the bed to watch. Looking up gives him a crick in the neck, and he is soon forced to ease back into a more comfortable position, leaning against the plastic padding of the headboard, his feet up on the bed, still in his newly polished shoes. The bedspread is bobbled, and orange and green as well. That fat man won't live too long, thinks Maqil, watching the skinny wife reward his various witty insights with meatloaf and doughnuts; the man shovels the food in with a gusto that seems as much to do with appetite as acting. How many takes of the scene before this one that made the final cut? How many plates of meatloaf and doughnuts did the actor digest? He'll be dead in his fifties, Maqil reflects drily. He'll certainly die before his skinny screen wife, even if she has cigarettes for supper and a coke habit. He might even die before me; he considers this last possibility with a certain satisfaction.

This cheerful train of thought reminds him of something he told his son a little while ago – an unremarkable young man who swapped his school uniform for a banker's suit in his teens, and has never changed since. Harmless and charmless. His son is married to a pious American girl whose parents are from the Punjab, and has recently become a father himself. He has a safe job, a solid house of brick, a wife and a child; his life is conventional, respectable, deplorable. Perhaps Zamir is aware of his father's poor opinion – he seems to be in permanent mourning for something, with that dry-cleaned charcoal suit and that dry-cleaned sober expression; he travels in black limos from the Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports for business in Paris, and makes a point of seeking out his father when he's in town, and arranging to meet him to serve up his concern over aperitifs. Sometimes Maqil is vain enough to think that his son doesn't have meetings in Paris at all; that Zamir simply turns up

to check up on him, because he still cares, and isn't brave enough to admit it. He had told his son, he had boasted even, Everyone Thinks I'm Dying, But I'm not Dead Yet! Zamir had sipped his coffee rather nervously (he no longer drank; he had rediscovered his Muslim roots since his marriage), but hadn't commented, which had annoyed Maqil into listing all those he had outlived – those younger and healthier than he, those who had never been chased down by debt or angry pike-bearing villagers, those who weren't being systematically choked by the creeping vines of heart disease, high blood pressure and everything else. 'What about Akbar? Do you see him much?' Zamir finally asked, mentioning Maqil's old friend from the sixties who had moved back to Paris some years ago, a flamboyant Egyptian queer who had once insisted on entertaining Zamir and his wife in one of the greasiest Chinese restaurants in his arrondissement, fondly telling Maqil's daughter-in-law that the duck was to die for. 'I'm sure someone has,' she had muttered under her breath to her husband, looking around with obvious disapproval at the grubby walls, discoloration blooming with mould on the rising damp, and for some reason Maqil was insulted by her lack of manners, even though he had been thinking exactly the same thing himself. When she just bobbed her head as the waiter dumped the steaming baskets on their table, acknowledging the service with the barest of condescending smiles, Maqil snapped at her, 'What, you can't say thank you?'

'I nodded, I smiled,' she had said defensively, glancing quickly at Akbar, who was obliviously flirting with the restaurant owner, and then between her husband and her father-in-law, suddenly embarrassed that she had fallen into that subtly offensive group, the moneyed middle class who dress well and perform public charitable acts but who are rude to receptionists and people who work in restaurants. She was pregnant at the

time, with Maqil's first and only grandchild, and placed a hand protectively over her bump, as though this provided her with an excuse.

'Nodded and smiled,' he repeated loudly, and then, spurred on by her apparent discomfort, added, 'Who do you think you are, the bloody Queen?' He had said it in French, with calculated malice, knowing that everyone in the restaurant would understand perfectly, apart from her, who would barely understand at all. No wonder his son now made these visits on his own; he probably used work as an excuse to hide them from his wife altogether.

'Akbar died earlier this year,' Maqil finally answered, with a little pride glittering inappropriately in his voice. 'He was almost twenty years younger than me. Twenty years! I could have been his father, but one little heart attack, and pop.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that,' his son said. His tone was much more appropriate, but he sounded polite rather than sorry; in fact, it seemed to Maqil that he was motivated as much by his eagerness to sound polite as by politeness itself. He wondered whether his own death would merit these same words from his family members, with the same banal formality. Sincerity, he supposed, would be too much to ask for.

'Pop!' he repeated, as though the word itself was somehow delightful. He found himself putting on his Chacha Zafri's Punjabi accent in subtle mockery, just to goad a reaction. 'I've had heart attacks all over the world. London, Rome, Hong Kong. And a bypass. Ugly great cut down my chest. I might have joined the zipper club, but I never went pop . . .'

'I remember the heart attack in Rome,' said his son thoughtfully, as though determined to reminisce, as though their roles had been suddenly reversed, and he was the old man at the table, recalling a golden childhood from a simpler age. 'We threw coins in the Trevi Fountain. And I remember the bypass

operation, you had that back in London. We went walking with you in Hyde Park afterwards. The daffodils were out.'

'The daffodils . . .' Maqil repeated despite himself; he remembered them too, impertinently yellow and stiffly upright against the mushy green of the park. He had only ventured to Hyde Park a few times that year; his hay fever had been particularly bad, and had bothered him after the surgery. He began complaining truculently: 'And who was that bullshit bastard who sent all those flowers to the hospital – trying to kill me in my sleep with the bloody pollen? Why didn't he just come in with a pillow and smother me then and there?'

'Those flowers were beautiful,' said his son, 'Amma managed to fill every vase in the flat with them.' Maqil's eyelids flickered briefly as Zamir mentioned his mother; this happened rarely, as they did not discuss her with tacit agreement. Maqil never asked his son how she was doing, as they both knew that no answer would satisfy him; he did not want to think of her alone and unhappy, he certainly didn't want to think of her happy with someone else. In fact, Maqil tried not to think of Samira at all, but there was a guilty pleasure whenever he did, a little like a recovering alcoholic inhaling the dregs of wine left in a stranger's glass at a bar, a sensation as grubby as nostalgia, as delightful as eavesdropping. Samira, a slap in the face, and the love of his life, eloping with him to the mountains, singing with him off-key in the wilderness, casually signing an assumed name with him at the Ritz, and stalking society by his side; Samira, the mother of his children, walking away from him with the click of her smart heels, and never glancing back. She had always known him so well; she had beaten him at his own game. He liked to think that wherever she was, she was trying not to think about him either. 'I don't know who sent them, but it was a lovely gesture, whoever it was,' added Zamir, a touch reproachfully, obviously unaware of his faux pas. There was something rather

womanish in the way he said 'beautiful' and 'lovely'; but then there had always been something womanish about his son generally; possibly, it was that telltale propensity of his to care. It was the way he cared as much for *how* something was said as for what was said; as a child, it had been frustratingly easy to reduce him to tears with a careless turn of phrase. Zamir wasn't tearful now, at least, but seemed tired and a little disappointed; finishing his coffee with a long sigh of a sip, he glanced over at his father's empty glass of pastis. 'So, are you ready?' he asked. Maqil ignored him, and carried on as though he hadn't spoken.

'Maybe it'll take a pillow, in the end. Everyone's expecting me to die, everyone thinks I'm going to die any minute now, but I just go on. Living. Outliving. Everyone. Even Akbar. They all say, "Come home, Bhai, Come home, Bhai",' he whined, now imitating his almost-as-elderly sister. ' "Come home to Pakistan, we'll treat you like a king." What they really mean is, come home to die, so you don't inconvenience us by dying abroad and alone. Come home to die, so we don't have to pay the shipping fees for your withered carcass in a wooden box. Come home and die! Everyone thinks I'm dying, but I'm not dead yet!'

'So, are you ready?' his son repeated, looking at his phone. 'My limo's here. You're still sharing my ride to the airport, right?' He looked around the railway-station café, and scribbled across the palm of his hand when he finally caught the eye of the waitress. She brought the bill over, and he pulled his credit card out of his wallet.

'Tch, put that away,' Maqil muttered, suddenly offended. He emptied a shrapnel of coins out of his pocket, and paid the bill himself, with a generous tip. The waitress nodded with approval at this fulfilment of parental duty, but he noticed as he glanced at his son's card that Zamir shut his wallet swiftly, and then put it firmly back in his pocket with a bit too much emphasis.

Someone must have warned him, his sister most likely. Maqil saw his daughter much less often than his son, and she always treated him with politely edged caution – as though he were a guest at a house party suspected of stealing the silverware. It amused Maqil that his children thought he'd go to the trouble of card fraud; it flattered him that they thought he could still learn sixteen digits by glancing at them; the truth was that his memory wasn't what it used to be.

'I'm not ready,' he said eventually. 'There's a problem with my prescriptions, I need them to show the doctors in Pakistan. They're not done as yet.'

'When will they be done?' asked his son. 'I could get a different flight and wait. I could even stay in a hotel tonight and go in the morning – I'd just need to call home, and clear it with work.'

'Day after tomorrow,' Maqil said.

Zamir looked straight at him. 'Day after tomorrow?' he repeated. His clean-shaved face rippled briefly with a wave of disbelief; his mouth twitched unexpectedly with something that could have promised the onset of tears after all, or even rueful amusement. But then his face set back into place, smooth and sinless, with a heavy, familiar sigh. Disappointment, yet again. Maqil wondered how many times he could keep on disappointing his children and get away with it. He'd spent his life getting away with it, and getting away from them. His son was shaking his head, but then he got up and straightened his jacket, before asking quietly, 'I guess you're going back to Biarritz, then? Tonight, on the fast train.' Maqil nodded. He didn't know why his son sounded so reproachful – Zamir must have known that he wasn't really going to the airport with him, that he wasn't going back to Pakistan to die; he must have known the moment he had seen his father turn up at the café without his case. Unless Zamir had simply assumed he had left his luggage

at the hotel, so he could skip out without paying the bill. It wouldn't, admittedly, have been the first time.

Maqil held out his hand, with the instinctive politeness he would show to anyone, but his son put his arms around him instead, carefully, as though aware of his fragility, his hollow bird-bones. They had never been much for hugging in the past, but every time they said goodbye these days, his son chose to hug him with ceremonial deliberation, as though it might be the last time. It both touched and exasperated him. 'Not dead yet,' he said. 'Remember.'

'I guess I'll email the folks in Pakistan, and tell them to expect you . . . day after tomorrow.' Zamir said this lightly, shaking his head again, like a careless actor about to break role with a laugh, winking to the audience. But he didn't laugh, he didn't wink; he remained resolutely calm, as though keeping a private vow. Maqil wasn't sure why this illusion was so important to his son, after all that had happened between them; the unconvincing little play they put on at each meeting, that he was a dutiful son hugging his father, that he was an ordinary father behaving as might be expected, paying for drinks, taking prescription medication and planning to go back to his family home in Pakistan. He didn't really understand his son's dogged refusal to acknowledge out loud that he was a corrupt old hobo, dying in debt, in cheap digs in a glamorous seaside resort that was less than glamorous out of season. Who had given him those flowers, all those years ago, the extravagant hand-tied bouquet from Harrods? The flowers that his son remembered, and had thought were beautiful. It was possible that the bouquet hadn't been delivered to his hospital room by his enemies, after all, but the truth was that he disliked acknowledging the existence of friends. Real friends. Stormy-weather, thick-and-thin friends who sent flowers on appropriate occasions and who didn't just hang around when he had money to spare. He had

always preferred to buy his friends; it seemed cleaner and more honest than tricking people into messy affection, reeling them into emotional dependence with his charming conversation and apparent interest in their personal concerns; these days, however, conversation was all he had to offer, it was the only bait on his hook, because talk, at least, was cheap. Talk was what he brought with him to the marble-topped café table, sitting with his son in these stilted little interviews, each one slightly shorter than the last. Each one leading inevitably closer to the shortest meeting of all, a hello followed by a final goodbye. Perhaps this is what he wants from him; this is why he maintains the illusion of propriety: Zamir is waiting for a final goodbye, a valediction to expiate all the times his father left him without saying a word. A magic closing line to their story that might illuminate and justify all that has happened before; a door closing on a clean, bright room.

His son walked him to his train, which was already waiting on the platform. It was no coincidence; Maqil had timed their meeting to his convenience. Zamir stood at the barrier, watching him as he made his way down the length of the train to the second-class carriages; aware of his son's gaze, Maqil was suddenly too conscious of his cane, and found himself trying to use it as little as possible. He thought Zamir would have gone by the time he finally climbed the steps to the carriage, an overly helpful middle-aged lady dashing forward to assist him, despite his waved protests; he clearly appeared much more feeble than he felt. But when he turned, he saw that his son was still there, a blurred figure in the distance, his sensible grey overcoat buttoned over his suit jacket, falling to his knees. There was something about the set of his shoulders in the coat, something a little sad, and defeated – perhaps Zamir was thinking the same of him, his ailing father in his once-presentable raincoat. He knew that he had failed his son, in unique and various ways, but now he was

suddenly wondering whether his son thought he had failed him in his turn, on this unremarkable afternoon. He had lied, and his son had accepted his lie without criticism or comment; Zamir had failed to argue, failed to strong-arm him into a limo and on to the plane. He had failed to prolong his father's life. Maqil unreasonably resented his son's infuriating acceptance. His dumb acquiescence. It took almost all the fun out of lying in the first place.

Maqil has dozed off briefly; he only realises that the comedy has finished when he hears that voice again: 'You can give it out, but you can't take it yourself.' Sometimes the voice echoes unbidden into a chorus around him. It speaks all the languages that he speaks – although on occasion he thinks it speaks better Spanish than he ever did. He tries not to let it bother him unduly; he knows it is just a symptom, an addition to that tiresome list of diseases and maladies, something to be managed and medicated along with his weak heart and high blood pressure. It is occasionally entertaining, but he still wishes it could just be switched off, like the television, and he could be the man he was before it took him over.

He moves off the bed, awkwardly, as his limbs and back are stiff. He is beginning to feel weighed down by his thin, saggy body; sometimes he supposes that he deserves the sunken face and the flimsy flesh he has ended up with. But sometimes it feels unfair; sometimes, deep inside, he feels every bit as vital as when he was a young man, with a song in his heart, careless and utterly carefree. Leading a life as light as a bird in flight. Cycling through the dry, dusty streets of Lahore, pungent with fruit sellers and the sticky sweetness of ice-cream vendors, walking animatedly through his college halls in New York, through the bone-white light of Cairo, the damp elegance of Paris, the indifferent smartness of London, the humid smog of Hong

Kong, and finally here, the siren song as strong as ever in his triply attacked and once bypassed heart, the song itself unchanged. 'Everything changes, but I have not,' he says out loud, unembarrassed to be addressing himself in the mirror, pleased with the way the words sound. He has declared what he has always suspected, that he is more consistent than Everything, he who has been so often criticised for changing so frequently: his home, his country, his profession, his spouse. His name.

It is finally dark outside, and the night looks soft and welcoming, a velvet glove to slip into. 'Showtime,' he says, to himself, to that persistent but succinct voice that frequently addresses him, and he goes to the small suitcase precariously balanced on the edge of the bureau, and flips open the lid. The case is packed, beautifully. He always keeps it packed, in case he decides to leave on a whim or in a hurry, travelling with a capsule wardrobe that fits as precisely and with as much thought to organisation as a jigsaw; if he ever needs to add something new, he throws something else out. He can pack and find any item he needs in his sleep, in the dark, with angry voices banging on a door, in the precious seconds when an aggressor is occupied with an insult or glancing at their watch or phone; he does this with the indifferent, instinctive skill of a typist letting her fingers click-clack over a keyboard – he doesn't need to think, he doesn't need to look. But tonight, the room is brilliantly lit, and the only urgency is the one he feels inside, telling him to get out on to the damp streets and put on a show, to rejoin life in the way one would wander back into a party that has been carrying on in another room. He pulls out the expensive cashmere blazer that his third wife bought him, and a fresh shirt, leaving blazer-shaped and folded-shirt-shaped holes in the interior of the case, waiting for their safe return. He shakes both out – the blazer doesn't crease, so it doesn't matter that the shirt has. The trousers that he is already wearing are smart enough, and

appear to have escaped any sauce stains from his lunch, so he doesn't bother to change them. He selects sapphire cufflinks from a small metal box, and combs his thinning hair. He is proud of his hair, still so soft and straight, and still with black among the grey – he lets it grow too long sometimes, because of this small vanity, lets it divide on his collar carelessly and elicits sympathy from young waitresses, who assume he isn't taking care of himself, and take greater care of him themselves, with an extra cup of coffee, or an extra sugar biscuit, gritty and golden as sand, on the side of his saucer. His comfortable jumper is removed, folded, replaced, and he pushes his arms through the sleeves of the shirt, linking the cuffs, putting on the blazer and brushing away an invisible speck of lint and another of dandruff; he feels just as light hearted as a woman preparing for a date with lipstick and heels. He feels just as much glittering-eyed anticipation. In his trouser pocket, the pile of notes is fastened with a fat gold clip. Tonight he might double, triple his money, or lose it all. The truth is, he doesn't mind which – it's playing the game he loves. The game won't really be lost until he stops, and he never intends to. He is a man, after all, of few vices: he drinks in moderation, he doesn't smoke except the occasional cigar out of sociable politeness, he has been faithful to each wife, and uniquely faithless in a way that has nothing to do with personal intimacy and everything to do with personal integrity. He is a man with just one vice, in fact, one true calling; he is a man with one true love.

He leaves the room, leaves the hotel, and walks to the casino, his limbs less stiff with every step, his cane less necessary and more of an accessory with every increasingly flamboyant tap. He is eighty-one, and he is eighteen, and he has refused a comfortable ride to the airport because he is not going home to Pakistan to die. Not tonight, not tomorrow, and not the day after. He is living, rudely living, and at this moment, in this

drizzle-softened starless night, he loves life, and he loves himself so much that no else needs to. He will enter the casino and be greeted with respect, by his current name, and be welcomed with the warm sincerity reserved for the big spenders. He will order dinner, and be charming, and unfailingly cordial to the people who work in the restaurant. He will go to the tables in the windowless rooms where night never turns to day, and he will play, play, play until a small crowd gathers around him, stunned by his insouciance, his audacity, his disease. That daring young man on the flying trapeze. It's showtime. It's playtime. He will not think about Samira, and he will not think about the letter he has started. The letter of his life will wait on the bureau. It is dated the Day After Tomorrow, after all. There is no need, as yet, to scratch it into the moonlit sand. There is no need to finish it tonight.