

Gregory NORMINTON
3 stories and a novel chapter

1.

GOOD LIVING

Ensnconced in the yellow dinghy, Al Capone dabbed at the salt-water in his navel. Bonnie and Clyde called to him from the beach, where they were buying ice-cream. Capone waved lazily and flapped his feet over the water, wiggling his toes to work up a spray. He was in no hurry to get back to the shore: the saline zest revived in him instincts that had wilted under the effort of helping old ladies across the street, of cooing at babies and tending the stalls at the weekly fête. Boy, those fêtes. How he despised their fake merriment, the monopoly-money, the woeful quips of the Keepers. *Well, Al,* they'd say, *I guess this is what fête intended.* The only laughter he could manage was malicious and the Keepers, recognising the tone, landed him with demerits. But worse than the shame of his situation was the boredom. Capone had always suspected it, but now he knew for sure: there ain't nothing so bad as being good.

He sighed and, shutting his eyes, listened to the suck of the water beneath him. Blood, thick as crimson paint, surged over a white tablecloth. Capone smiled. Suddenly the day darkened and the heavens opened. The rain was torrential. Capone and his fellow bathers paddled back to shore, where recriminations flew like blow-flies.

'Who did that? Who had the *thoughts*?'

'Man, that was stoopid!'

'Hey Adolf, when you gonna realise Nuremberg's over?'

Capone ran up the beach towards shelter; his ample cheeks burned with shame; the sand, heavy as clay, clung to his wet legs. Two Keepers awaited him at the spot where, moments earlier, Doctor Crippin had been combing doughnut sugar from his moustache. Capone observed the Keepers' immovable smiles and trim centre-partings. His eyes glowered under damp lids. He wished he was dead – which of course he had the luxury of doing, since he was.

Capone dared not hope for punishment. He sat in the waiting-room and scowled at the muzak: 'On with the Motley' arranged for synthesised pan-pipes. Everyone, of course, heard different muzak, each track being specially suited to individual tastes. Napoleon, for instance, wept at a steel-guitar rendition of the *Eroica* symphony, while fascists wailed at *Die Walküre* for soprano sax and drum-machine. The muzak was considered a great success by the Keepers: it was one of their more recent innovations, along with catchphrases like 'Go on, give yourself a hug', or 'Smile, it might never happen'.

The door opened. 'Al, can you pop in please, pet?'

Five pairs of eyes darted for cover behind jaundiced copies of *Punch*. Capone straightened his standard-issue woollen jumper, checked the turn-ups in his jeans and walked into the next room.

'Hullo, Al,' said the Keeper cheerily. He sat in an Eden of pot-plants and consulted his clipboard. In the distance, 'Celeste Aida' for harp and glockenspiel.

'I didn't do nothin' wrong,' said Capone eventually. But the look of bonhomie on the keeper's face made him feel sheepish. 'Okay, okay, so maybe I remembered something from my past –'

'Something – ?'

'Something not altogether absolutely moral.'

'No,' agreed the keeper. 'Quite.'

'But it's not *my* fault.'

'Oh?'

'Listen,' said Capone. 'I'm meant to be purged, right? Of my past sins, I mean. I was promised brimstone, eternal thirst, agonies and torments beyond human endurance.' He paused dramatically. 'Something to keep me *occupied*.'

Shaded by his plants, the Keeper looked aghast. 'But that would be *horrible*,' he said.

Capone was given four demerits for Recidivist Recollections. He asked for something physical, pleaded for the whip, begged for a good kicking. But it was no use. Two Keepers, Correctional Branch, came into the room and sighed. Capone, his eyes brimming with tears of self-pity, followed them to the correctional chamber – otherwise known as the Tea-Room. Its curtains were pink and flowery; childish scrawls lined the walls to give a domestic effect; there was a coffee-table laden with crisps and cakes and pies. Capone sat down, trembling. One of the Correctionals held out a dish of cherry bakewells.

'Al,' he said. 'Can we call you Squidgy?'

'Squidgy,' said the other, insinuating a crumbly Battenburg, 'you don't look happy. What's the matter?'

'You can tell us, Squidgy. Get it off your chest.'

'Go on, Squidge. Take my hankie.'

Capone wanted to kick their goddamn dumbass teeth down their goddamn dumbass throats till they rattled like maracas. He took the handkerchief and evacuated his nose.

The Tupperware party was in full swing. The Mongol hordes were moving through the crowd, offering fishpaste blinis; Stalin's secret police did the rounds with spinach and ricotta vol-au-vents; a group of estate agents unenthusiastically swapped pancake recipes. Capone chewed at his cheese-and-pineapple stick. Everywhere he looked he saw killers, rapists, dentists and lunatics, the scum of the earth, sipping flat cola from small plastic cups. It was a disgrace, to treat such filth so kindly.

Some duke or prince, his crown clashing with his cardigan, sidled up to him. 'Ghastly weather, what. Still, one mustn't grumble. All part of afterlife's rich pageant. One's baked some apple-crumble. Care to taste?'

Capone declined the offer with the minimum of manners, but the count took him by the arm and leaned towards him saying, in hushed tones, 'We recognise you for one of us.'

'We?'

'One.'

'One?'

'Me.' The prince cast his eyes about him. 'What are you in for?'

Capone grimaced. 'Tax evasion. You?'

The duke fingered an olive in his cocktail. 'Oh, some business in Whitechapel. *Filles de joie* and whatnot. Rather messy but there you have it. Now listen to me. One is not alone.'

'Who?'

'You.'

‘Oh.’

‘Do take some crumble, one mustn’t look suspicious.’ Capone noted the friendly attention of a Keeper at the far end of the room. He took a piece of apple-crumble and breathed on it.

‘Now listen here,’ whispered the prince. ‘One has had more than one can take. All this frightful jollity. Hugging and cake and whatnot. It’s shameful. Profoundly humiliating. In many ways, it’s deeply revolting. One has seen what is termed evil –one has even dabbled in it in one’s time. But nothing, no single deed conceivable to the foulest sinner even scratches the surface of this infernal *niceness*.’

Capone crushed his apple-crumble in his fist. It was so true. They were heartless, hard-working criminals; they had their self-respect; they wouldn’t take all this knitting and D-I-Y lying down. ‘Okay, okay,’ he said. ‘I’m with you. Tell me what you want to do.’

The duke took a deep breath. ‘One is going to start up a petition...’

He ducked low behind the stalls of the fairground. An arrangement of ‘Vissi d’Arte’ for harmonium and sleigh-bells buzzed in his ears. His face gave nothing away; as he set about his dark mission he worked hard to disguise his thoughts. Orgies of blood and money were tucked away behind visions of tea-cosies and porcelain ducks and lawnmowers. The Keepers would never get past the diversion.

On the platform, a Keeper was preparing to open the tombola. Capone crouched and waited. His plan was perfect, his saliva bitter with expectation.

‘Friends,’ said the keeper. ‘I am pleased to announce the winner of today’s prize-draw.’

Applause. Capone tensed his muscles, set to pounce on stage as soon as the winner appeared to collect the prize.

‘And the winner is – Number 344.’

Al, filled with dread, rooted about in his pocket and looked at his ticket. In a daze, he climbed onto the stage, holding high the fated scrap of paper.

‘We have a winner, ladies and gentlemen. A round of applause, please!’

Damply the crowd clapped. Muscles twitched in Capone’s face.

‘Well done,’ said the Keeper. ‘You win the shampoo *and* conditioner.’

But Capone pushed him roughly aside and seized the microphone. The crowd applauded this novelty.

‘Shut up,’ Capone screamed. ‘Listen to me you lousy, low-down stinkin’ do-gooders, I’m through with all this *decency*. My name is Al Capone. I am the Black Shadow that falls across cities. I am the Angel of Terror, the Fear in your hearts, the Panic of your nights. And I’m not going to take it any longer!’

With which, he lowered his jeans and spitefully relaxed his bowels.

This time there would be hell to pay. His crime had been revolting enough to summon Management. At last he would suffer in the manner to which he was entitled. There was a flash and a burst of celestial music. The angel’s hair was the colour of gold, his eyes shone like silver. He wore a tee-shirt with the words ‘You don’t have to be dead to live here but it helps’ emblazoned upon it.

‘Al Capone?’ said the angel.

‘That’s my name.’

‘Would you like a mint?’

Capone glared.

'I think,' said the angel, 'we need a little chat.'

'What for? You just have to punish me. I mean, what I did was so bad, I deserve demons with pitchforks, fires burning my flesh, the anguished screams of the damned.'

The angel looked pained. 'Now Al, don't be so hard on yourself. It's not *your* fault.'

'Whaddaya mean, not my fault? Of course it's my fault. I did something wicked, disgusting, shameful – I deserve everything I get.'

'Don't blame yourself. It's too cruel.'

'But don't you realise, these things have been on my mind for years!'

'Al – we've always known about your troubles. About those *awful* memories that plague you. And how you try to overcome them by thinking of your favourite things.' The angel held him with one arm and swung the other back, in an expansive gesture threatening song. 'Armchairs. Kitchen utensils. BBC Radio Two. Oh, we know how hard you try. And, Al, we love you for it. We really, really do.'

Capone felt the first twitches of panic in his gut. 'Then why – why didn't you stop me?'

The angel lifted a golden eyebrow. 'Because, Al, sometimes people have got to make their own mistakes. We want you to be your own therapist. We're setting up coffee-mornings for that very purpose.'

'But what I did was no mistake!'

'You were nervous. In all the excitement you lost control of your functions. Lots of people get caught short. We don't think any the less of you for it.'

Capone was lost for words. He was trapped in a net and he knew it. They had waited until he'd damned himself, lowering his pants to crap on his own bad name. Confronted now by the immaculate and celestial niceness of the angel, he felt himself breaking. He actually heard his resolve snap. It made a small sad noise inside his belly, like an overstretched elastic band giving up the ghost.

'I'm – I'm finished,' he said.

The angel winced sentimentally and pulled him into a fierce, forgiving bear-hug. Capone's face was pressed into the angel's tee-shirt. There was the faintest smell of sulphur beneath the peppermint. And Al Capone began to tremble, for he knew he was in Hell.

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2.

LOVERS AND A BLUE CAT

1.

Six years into his unwanted celibacy, Miguel Carlos entered a Paris bookstore to admire a Picassian cunnilingus. The store, one of those bargain basement places, was brightly lit and muggy like the public toilets of Seville. With an affected swagger he made his way towards

the district labelled *Beaux Arts* and pretended for a while to browse. When he was satisfied with his imitation of a blameless shopper, Carlos touched a thick, glossy volume with trembling fingers. A brown tip of tongue wetted the edge of a dark, sleeping-slug moustache and his stubby fingers parted the pages. Briefly he stopped at an etching of Salome dancing: in an off-white empty space, a corpulent Herod glimpsed the cephalomaniac's holiest of holies as she performed a perfect standing split. Carlos's eyes wandered momentarily to the commentary –*classical allegory effects of lust* – and then back to the picture. Salome's back was turned and this irritated him: only a grotesque and some concubines got to see the goods. When, moving on, he encountered a woman being tickled intimately by the coiling red tongue of a fish, Carlos squirmed beneath his anorak to accommodate the itching bud in his trousers. He leaned forward as the pages flipped to their destination. At last! 'Two Lovers and a Blue Cat' – full-frontal oral sex, from the century's greatest artist! Oh bohemian luxury! The freedom of it, the adult happiness of it! Carlos feasted his eyes; if ever the gendarmerie swooped he had a finger poised in the *Guernica* centrefold.

Reader, perhaps you are shocked (on your own, are you ever?) by Carlos's behaviour? Art which elevates the soul of Man, a long lifetime's genius to choose from and he lingers *here*? But where else can a cultured man turn, if not to the sanctioned images of Civilisation? After the anti-porn tirades of his parents (secular and spiritual) had followed the anti-porn tirades of his left-wing student friends. The danger of masturbation, the danger of rape: first his soul had been imperilled, then his social conscience. Carlos's shyness – and the cherry pie nebula of acne on his back – made live women unapproachable and his memory, having precious little footage to work with, was able to provide only the most perfunctory of mental stimuli. Never in his life had he possessed a pornographic magazine, dirty novel or saucy comic book. So it was that Picasso's pencil-sketch of a lover tenderly ensconced between his partner's legs – the woman serenely focused, an impartial blue/grey cat near by – came to him as a revelation. At last, he had found a legitimate source of erotic material. Art was to be his inspiration and his refuge.

'Exquis, n'est-ce pas?'

Carlos started at the voice in his ear. The liver-spotted brow of the bookseller loomed over his shoulder and Carlos fumbled at the book to shut it. But the bookseller's arm reached across to trap the incriminating page, crushing Carlos' finger like a bug in a diary.

'Vous aussi, cher monsieur, vous appréciez ce chef-d'oeuvre, les Saltimbanques?'

Carlos frowned and looked back at the book. There, occupying the entirety of the neighbouring page, stood harlequin and children, a flower-hatted maid and a dough-fleshed scarlet clown, marooned on an arid, Andalusian plain. Carlos grunted, afraid of discovery, disbelieving his luck – for the man who had exposed his crime seemed entirely blind to it. The bookseller exposed a row of gold teeth. *'Belle édition,'* he said. *'Seulement cent francs.'*

Carlos bought the book. On the métro he hugged it to his chest and watched, with uncustomary benignity, a young couple necking on the opposite seat.

2.

When Browning's Duke of Ferrara exposes the portrait of his deaded wife (allow the neologism: although we cannot say the duchess was murdered, she does seem to have been assisted out of life), the imperious aristocrat illustrates the crux of my defensive argument. His last duchess, suspected of flightiness in life, is now wholly obedient in life's mockery: that portrait so skilfully executed by Frà Pandolf. She has become a possession, in the

strictest, material sense of the word; and we should note the primitive belief in the soul-catching properties of an image, for a sophisticated version exists in the duke's cruel triumph. Like a voodoo waxworker, an anti-Pygmalion, he has imprisoned her self in her body and her body in the aspic of art. It is an example of what De Lagueulier terms the Sexual Possession-Preservation Impulse (or SexPopImp for short). According to this law, the ageing Sultan can – as a patron of the arts – restore his sagging harem to lithe nubility and remind the world of his erstwhile prowess. Similarly, King Charles II, having commissioned Sir Peter Lely to paint Nell Gwyn as Venus, exposes her charms to the sparks who share his sport. *See this work of Art*, he implies, *I can have her any time I please*. Pygmalion again! And though the material is rarer, how far is this SexPopImp from the greasy gloating of the Reader's Wives supplement?

A glib soundbite: everybody but the expert knows that 'Art' reeks of sex. The popular folklore that turns writers into flinty alcoholics (they are, in truth, pale domestic tyrants) paints the artist as the sexual ogre, spattered in oils and shagging in a garret. Picture that space: the scattered books, the works-in-progress about the walls, ashtrays replete, coffee cups stained with tannin and gouache. Enter the artist (that exalted and execrated beast of fable) to immortalise his Muse (a jobbing actress). Where does this slow silting of strokes and blots – the sun churned vermilion in jamjars, the easy breathing of the model on her heap of ethnic cushions – inexorably lead? As sure as day follows night, the fantasy goes, to avid and contorted copulation. And is it any surprise that we should make these associations, when we consider Botticelli's Venus, the *Maja desnuda* or Bonnard's uxorious nudes? Sight, our primary contact with the world, offers us the possibility of sensuous pleasures beyond compare; in the gallery it is all we go by; we taste and hear by association. Our fingertips itch but all touch is denied us. We fall back on our imaginations: to fantasy, where no creature is sad after coition.

Miguel Carlos was such a fantasist. We know from his diaries that his dream-life consoled him for the greyness of his waking hours. We read of the Chinese princess whose lips tasted of lotus-flowers; of autumnal walks in the Parc Monceau with a tender, cool-fingered blonde; how the wife he did not have guided him into slow, big-hearted love. Is it any wonder that a man so blessed with what the Elizabethans called *fancy* (and so cursed in every practical sense) should have evolved a passion for the effusions of other refined erotic imaginations? He was not so much a pervert (the tabloids' "Penis de Milo") as a dreamer who failed to awake.

Today, under guard and medicated, like Caliban he cries to dream again.

3.

After the Picasso incident, Miguel Carlos made regular purchases at the bargain bookstore. For two weeks he pored over a set of postcards from Indian temples: maddeningly curvaceous, smooth-stone lovers, coiled in serene and ancient pleasure. Then came his Modigliani period, those orange-fleshed Montmartrian beauties angled naked across the canvas. What tender lust he felt for these lyrical-lined bohemians; how assiduously he peered through his magnifying glass at their pubic curls or the aureolas of their breasts. These were women to fall in love with, women to kill and die for. They represented the grand passion that Carlos, like so many millions the world over, knew to be forbidden him.

When one thinks poorly of oneself, no prospective partner is likely to do otherwise. And Carlos was deadly timid: he lacked the courage even to consult the wild-haired onanists of Rodin's sketches. When he flipped a volume of Japanese erotic woodcuts onto the

salesdesk (sandwiched between prints from Hokusai and Hiroshige), the purchase corroded his limbs with fear and he had to grip the desk's edge as though afraid for his verticality. Back at home, the locks bolted, he panted through the book. On snow-licked balconies pale geishas received their lords and lovers. Carlos gasped at depictions of orderly group sex; he wondered at the contortionists grappling in flurries of blossom; he cooed at the perambulations of a young girl as she straddled the glossy flanks of horses, invented new tricks in archery, suffocated squid and hid treestumps without a thought for splinters. This was a culture that placed our intimacies on their rightful scale, finding as much pleasure in documenting the natural world as it did in the happy figures who inhabited it. The scenery is no coy aesthetic alibi for arousal: such tokenism was alien to the old Japanese illustrators, who would have lamented their descendants' hybrid of Western misogyny and Asian license. Yet the latter registers (however faintly) within us, brought up as we are on junkfood and junkfilms, on trashTV and bogjournalism. Manga-style porn has its hooks in us, we are its reluctant yet passive acolytes. Making Carlos, perhaps, the very antithesis of a modern wanker.

4.

To list our voluptuary's growing proclivities would take up much time, which commodity is in short supply to the modern browser. Suffice to say that our hero was happy for a time in his new wonderland. Like the infamous erotomaniac Abbé Wórjcky (executed in 1573 for his *De Genitalis Deae*, a masterpiece of cod-theology that transsexualised the Holy Trinity), Carlos was to

become the victim of his own inventions. In some deep seam of the imagination he forged an alternative 'reality' wherein the loveless might seek requital of the flesh sanctioned by a maternal and all-forgiving *Himmelskönigin*.

(Loos Kårel – *Abbé Wórjcky: Catholicism's Forgotten Sexfiend*, p. 175)

We shall concentrate for the moment on mining the seam; the outcome cannot help but follow and is known well enough as it is. Miguel Carlos became an art lover, quite literally. His eclecticism is laudable, even if it does include a taste for the sausage-pink flesheries of François Bouchard. Well, he had no manifesto, after all, and the autodidact must be allowed his mistakes. And perhaps we can concede some charm to those dimple-kneed Rococo nymphets, plumped on their stagy mosses discussing chiffon and prophylactics. At least with the French bouffant-and-chintz schools there is no ambiguity of artistic intent. It was the same nation which offered Carlos the *fin-de-siècle* whorehouse and the glowing amplitude of Renoir's bathing redhead, the lush, sap-celebrating glory of his *Nude in Sunlight*. There was exoticism, too, in Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse*. He rejoiced at the subject's dark nobility; the classical pose translating African grace to European eyes; the sensuality of firm, shameless breasts as they escaped the disposable whiteness of a Regency dress.

Soon the sensitive mind that had lain dormant for years of low-grade service at the Spanish Embassy began to animate the art it contemplated. Thus the lovers of *The Kiss* came together in marble embrace, the crashing of their loins filling the air with the dust of their passion. Thus Fragonard's swing snapped from its bough, catapulting its charge, legs akimbo, into the lucky lap of her admirer. Thus Gauguin maids, renouncing palmleaf

drapery, wasted perfectly good mangoes under the shade of the Banyan trees and Prud'hon's Empress Josephine took advantage of her hubby's absence to disrobe for her panting admirer. The more hidden a woman's mysteries, the more ardently she struggled to expose them. French royalty, Italian nobility, English country wives all tumbled greedily from their bodices. Carlos became a grand seducer. The list of his conquests would make a lothario blush. Don Juan himself might flinch with envy on hearing it. His wildest fantasy – of ejaculating copiously in the face of Ingres' Mademoiselle Rivière – shocked even Carlos in the still, sad minutes after Kleenex.

After ecstasy the gaudy scenery turns to ashes and a grey light, like the dawn, chills our mortal pores. With few friends to speak of (even now he is alone, his would-be confidants the hacks and harpies of the gutter-press), Miguel Carlos had to voice his anxieties to someone. And so, one evening in the embassy *excusado*, he made his confession to Francisco Tenorio, a self-proclaimed womaniser unfazed by every sexual predilection. Tenorio, amused by his colleague's innocuous obsession, took him to a tapas bar where, sufficiently lubricated, Carlos launched into a full-colour exegesis. Was he not sick? Should he not seek help?

'This is no crime,' said Francisco Tenorio. 'A man has needs. Often he ignores them because they are inconvenient. But even if it is less bothersome, the chaste life can never make a man happy. Only content. You, my friend, are taking the first step towards fulfilment.'

They parted late and Carlos, newly extravagant, travelled home by taxi.

A few days later he was back in the maelstrom of his solitary passion. Seated, a little like the *Thinker*, in his overheated bathroom, he gazed longingly at Manet's *Olympia*. Admiring the starkness of the girl's naked flesh, he noted the awkward pride in her eyes, dark like the choker on the ivory of her neck. As her Spanish was poor, she let Carlos speak for her.

'Carlito: amor de mi vida. Te quiero, guapo. ¡Hombre, te quiero mucho!'

Rapt in her affection for him, the courtesan flicked the espadrilles from her naked feet, startling the scrawny kitten at the foot of the bed. Behind her the bouquet-bearing maid ululated in admiration, her plump brown lips parting for a flickering pink tongue. Red-faced, Carlos watched as Olympia's fingers awoke from their provocative modesty and wriggled like rapturous eels into the tender folds of her sex. With a brutal sweep of the bouquet, the Negro maid chased the kitten from the frame and jumped upon the bed to devour her mistress tit to toe.

A knock at the door startled Carlos. He dropped the book onto the floor and scrambled at his trousers, hoisting them over his enraged loins. Flushed and cursing, he made for the frontdoor. For an instant, as he fumbled with the locks and chains, it occurred to him that he was absurd, that his whole life had been building-up to a joke of cosmic proportions.

He opened the door. In the rank gloom of the corridor stood the Mona Lisa.

5.

Weightless with astonishment, Miguel Carlos felt himself eased backwards into the room. The Mona Lisa shut the front-door and placed an elegant finger to her lips.

'Turn off the light,' she said, 'or my image may fade.'

The Gioconda gazed into Carlos' eyes and offered her enigmatic smile. Reaching up she removed the delicate veil from her head, liberating the soft dark curls of her hair. 'Ask

no questions,' she sighed. 'I know your passion, Carlo. What do you see in those girls? Is not mine the most celebrated face in the world?'

'Um,' said Carlos.

La Gioconda pressed a soft, cool hand over his mouth, heaving her chest into his sternum. 'Do not speak, my love. Words can only hurt us.' Carlos mumbled. The moist alien skin pressed upon his lips; he felt the weight of her breasts crushed against him. There was a fanfare in his blood.

'I've escaped, Carlo,' La Gioconda whispered silkily into his palm. 'It was difficult to get away but I managed somehow.'

Carlos pictured Da Vinci's painting without her in it: a murky, lunar landscape shambling its way towards an empty chair. It was like gazing at a cloudless sky and finding no moon.

'Quickly, Carlo. We have so little time together. If I'm with you when the museum opens, there'll be hell to pay.'

Half-mad with desire, baffled and intoxicated, Carlos stumbled from couch to bed as in a dream. Mauled by his impossible lover, he was in that neverland between states when reason bolts like a rabbit down a hole. How else can the mind comprehend intimate adult acts with a famous portrait? When it was over, however, and Carlos watched la Gioconda return, gargled, from the bathroom, the wonderment began to fracture.

'Ere,' she said in a broad Marseilles accent, 'at least yours is original.'

'My what?'

The Mona Lisa's face distorted into a plump, big-toothed grin. In the orange glow from the streets below, Carlos could discern her features more clearly. Every detail, from the folds of the dress to the faded sepia of her skin, had been observed and adhered to. But now Carlos could see the dissimilarities as well. The face was too round, the jaw heavier and the over-sensuous lower lip was dark and bruised. It is a commonplace that the Mona Lisa's face never belonged to a living being: an universal likeness of no-one, she is a masterpiece wherein fancy outworks nature. Now that the mist of lust had lifted, this face, this perfumed body was too particular, too real.

'Oh no,' moaned Carlos. 'This must be a joke.'

La Gioconda groped inside her handbag. 'You've had fun.'

Panic thudded at Carlos' heart. 'How can you talk that way?' he cried, knowing the answer. 'This is a nightmare. It can't be happening.'

La Gioconda's face darkened. 'Don't get shirty with me, monsieur.'

'Tell me who sent you. Who set me up?'

La Gioconda stepped backwards towards the door. When in his passion Carlos rose and followed her, she whisked from her handbag a neat little aerosol canister. 'This is a pepper-spray. I'm not scared to use it.'

Carlos concentrated very hard on mastering his emotions. He summoned his neglected skills of self-control and sat down. La Gioconda fumbled for the doorhandle.

'Wait,' said Carlos. 'I'll – I'll pay you – if you stay a little longer.'

'If you want me naked, it'll cost extra.'

'I don't want you naked. I just need to talk.'

After much pleading and the exchange of bank notes, the Mona Lisa conceded the name of Carlos' benefactor. 'Me and Francisco go back a long way,' she said. 'In the back of his Renault mainly.'

Carlos thumbed his eyeballs in mortification.

‘He told me about you. He wanted to help out in some way: this was his idea. I’ve known worse.’ Proudly she demonstrated her talent for mimicry. Like a politician, she could be all things to all men. She could be Marilyn for breakfast, Marlene over lunch and Mata Hari after dinner. Her repertoire included novelists and philosophers (for the Left Bank), interns and ministers (for Matignon) and a number of figures from history. She had a by-line in French starlets but it was difficult to keep up to date. She barked and mewed to perfection. She made a very convincing corpse.

‘You have to be flexible,’ she said, ‘in the global economy.’

‘Flexible how?’

Blithely, the Gioconda listed the everyday perversions of Parisian manhood. How ordinary men – *petit bourgeois* to a fault, with their sharp-faced wives and expensive children, their apartments and diesel cars – left their offices in the afternoons to smear themselves in excrement. With mounting horror Carlos heard how some had their manhoods chafed with sandpaper and scouring-pads; how others dressed her in a school uniform and chewed her soiled panties.

‘Except for asphyxiation, my only rule is there are no rules. If you want me to piss on your head, that’s fine with me.’

Carlos blinked the sweat out of his eyes. A sound like an injured fly came from somewhere in his throat. The Mona Lisa lit a cigarette and heaved the smoke into her lungs. Her eyes wandered diffidently about the room, taking in its dearth of personality. Carlos hated her, knowing her for a travesty, mere artifice. The real Gioconda would never have worn such vulgar scent or stood with legs so crassly parted. When at last her eyes met his own, he recognised the unbridgeable distinction between the hygiene of fantasy and the foulness of action.

‘Um,’ he said. ‘Can you get out now please, or I may have to kill you.’

6.

Contrary to officialese, facts without interpretation are worthless. God help us if we cannot separate madness from badness, insanity from vanity. The Cabinet Minister robbed at knifepoint by his pick-up – the surgeon caught in flagrante with a willing ulcer case – the filmstar arrested with a dollar bill up his nose and a fan in his lap – all can be explained as the rotten harvests of humdrum urgings. But Miguel Carlos’s mental collapse has more to teach us than any commonplace of human weakness. However, since naked facts retain their atavistic appeal, here are a few, as confirmed to me by Carlos himself during a momentary lapse of unreason.

On the morning of 16 June last year, Miguel Carlos arrived at work nursing a headache, which he attributed to his unhappy encounter with the Mona Lisa the night before. Had he been unprincipled he would have called in sick. But Carlos had never missed a day’s work in his life and not even the voices susurrating in his head could keep him from his duties. Perhaps he hoped to find normality at the keys of his computer? Alas, Francisco Tenorio was as promiscuous with secrets as he claimed to be with women and Carlos had to negotiate his way to his desk through a bastinado of sniggers and innuendo. His ears blushed furiously at the silence of twelve held breaths. When a pair of tortoises began copulating on his monitor, he arose calmly and climbed out the nearest open window.

Deaf to the shouts of his alarmed colleagues, Carlos half-paced, half-ran towards the nearest Métro station. At the prompting of Pablo Picasso, who had taken up lodgings behind his left eyeball, he bought himself a single ticket to the Louvre. It was, of course, impossible

for Carlos to ignore the entreaties of so great a genius; but it was the prankster Marcel Duchamp who, squatting between two back molars, planned the phases of his heroic undoing.

On admittance to the Louvre museum at 10:32 precisely, he went at once to the men's room, where he removed all of his clothes bar trousers, shoes and greatcoat. The discarded items he folded neatly into a toilet-bowl.

Under the continued navigation of Marcel Duchamp (joined now in his head by Gauguin, cussing, and Magritte muttering non-sequiturs), Carlos hurried to the Denon wing, where he exposed himself briefly to the Venus di Milo, goddess of love and paragon of Classical nubility. Unnoticed by mere mortals, Carlos left the *salle* and proceeded through the Sully apartments until he found himself on the ground floor of the Richelieu wing: home to French and European sculpture. After a momentary struggle against the artists screaming obscenities in his head, Miguel Carlos shed his remaining garments and began passionately to fondle the cold hard buttocks of Pradier's *Three Graces*. For a few shocked seconds, the *salle* contained warm, living statues of tourists. But when Carlos inserted his tongue into one of three delicate clefts, a security guard offered chase. The combined vocal attack of the painters in his head gave Carlos sufficient energy to run from the scene of his *amours*, his proud manhood nodding like a woodpecker. He had in that maniacal moment more energy, more crazy glee than ever before in his existence. A few seconds later he was tackled to the ground. With a flaccid 'slap' he fell, in view of Augustin Pajon's *Psyché abandonnée*; a neat irony that might nestle in the prose of a fancy-stylist, for the statue depicts Psyche weeping at the flight of Eros, having accidentally woken him despite the prohibition of the gods ever to look on Love.

7.

Paris is not a city famed for her modesty. From the peepshows of Pigalle to the concupiscence of Montmartrian legend, she labours under a reputation, is diminished by the twin clichés of sex and gastronomy (as clichés diminish us all, our loves most cruelly). Like so many of Europe's glories, Paris is the victim of her own success, worn threadbare by exposure to photography, debased by her own iconography. And yet, as anybody will concede who has lived there free of the Dantesque fate of *métro-boulot-dodo*, Paris retains an innate, unsynthesizable sexual charge. No amount of trademarking or patenting can entirely pollute the source of commerce's profanities.

One can say much the same of Europe's artistic inheritance. What an ocean of bathos between the vapid perambulations of the gallery-goer and the pain, the passion, the anxious procrastination that are locked into the paint, present but invisible, like amoebic fossils in amber. We are, almost all of us, immune to the visceral power of manufactured beauty. Critics and contemporary artists – cerebral, celebrated or self-loathing – are likewise insensate (I do not say insensible: they feel no *physical* sensation in their study). Their stomachs are not for turning, their occipital lobes are dry as craters on the moon. But Miguel Carlos, the *petit homme minable sensuel*, came alive to the sexual energy of the city; and his lust awoke in contemplation of her treasures.

To those who would accuse the author of sophistry, let us clarify at once our terms. The fetishist eroticises that which is unsexual. But Carlos did nothing of the sort. Whenever a painting aroused him, one must assume that such a response was the artist's *intention*. And the pattern of Carlos's enthusiasms makes perfect sense. He preferred the Louvre to the

National Gallery simply because the French enjoy naked flesh more readily than the British. A generalisation perhaps. But Carlos is a man of the south: the Protestant north, gleaning less pleasure from a flesh too infrequently exposed to sunlight, furnished him with little material. Had he devoted his attention to the pasty humanity of Rembrandt, the tortured gristle of Grünewald or the animated necrophilia of Rubens (those flesh-mountains inflated like so many waterblown corpses), then our hero might have spared himself much trouble. But can we blame him for preferring the Pacific idylls of Gauguin, the steamy arabesques of Ingres and Delacroix? Is not the foamy erotica of Fragonard more viscerally appealing than the lifelike lobster of Kalf or Cranach's etiolated Venus?

Whatever we make of Carlos' existential exhibitionism in the Louvre, we must applaud the good taste (which *is* a moral matter) of his fantasies. There was nothing 'unhealthy' about his enthusiasms. Let us consider, by way of illustration, the Victorian vogue for female slavery in the works of Edwin Long or Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. This is pornography of the worst kind masquerading as art. It allowed our forebears to be titillated and confirmed in their moral standing at the same time. For the slave-owners were pagans and so morally irresponsible; there is nudity, yes, but the Romans were a decadent lot – consider what happened to their empire. In Jean Léon Gérôme's *The Slave Market*, four Arab men inspect a girl's pale naked body. The merchant holds back the filly's head; the prospective buyer, parting her lips with brown, virile fingers, inspects her teeth for wear and tear. She is no more than a horse, her face expressionless, neither pained nor pleased. It is SexPopImp (see 2.) turned bad: more Duke of Ferrara than Nell Gwyn. To suggest any emotion behind this violated innocence would be to humanise her. It would be an 'affront to decorum', a 'scandal'.

Such was the nature of Manet's offence when he presented Parisian society with *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* in 1863. It was an *échec de scandale*. Even the Emperor Napoleon III declared it indecent – and he knew much on that subject. Yet Manet's figures borrowed by a circuitous route from the most-sanctionable Raphael. Why the outrage? Because the model is not a nude but a naked woman. Seated with two clothed, faintly bohemian young men, she is strikingly unabstracted. Her nakedness is volitional, her expression (only she meets our gaze directly) one of comfort and calm. She finds her companions – and her public – on equal terms. Likewise, Manet's *Olympia* is nobody's slave. She looks at us as herself: intelligent, imperfect, luminous. Much has been made in the serious press about the dehumanising implications of pornography. And yet Carlos preferred *Olympia* to anonymous sex-toys like Ingres' languorous and pliable odalisque. Both of Manet's modern women are *present* in their portraits. By watching *us* they expose the voyeurism that underlies our appreciation. It is this frankness that shocked the élites of the Second Empire but charmed our loveless hero. For Carlos had no interest in the punctilious misogyny of Classical and Romantic art. I have shown him countless bleeding Lucretias, a score of swan-raped Ledas, a dozen Satyrical violations. I have shown him Dalí's autosodomized young virgin (fatal buggery the just punishment of the chaste). He has seen Cleopatras suckling asps, witches frigged and dragon-licked, medieval mutilations. In all of these admired works, Miguel Carlos finds nothing of erotic interest.

It is for this reason that I have elected myself Carlos' defender. It is not enough for him to enjoy a defending counsel in court: his case must be fought before the greater jury of public opinion. He has been condemned and vulgarised by culpable, vulgar people. For the same commentators who call Carlos 'sexually unhinged' long ago turned the sexual revolution on its head, so that, for ratings alone, to sell bread or chocolate, our outlook on sex is more prurient, more lubricious than ever. It is *we* who have no sense of proportion; we

who, on our screens, drop everything into a sexual context. Rather than just getting on with it, and liberating our minds for other things, we trawl respectably through the gutter, hunting down dissenters to save ourselves from seeing our own reflections in what they do. Oh, Miguel Carlos is an enemy of society, all right. An enemy of our clichés, a subverter of tired cultural responses. By engaging libidinally with art, he has restored its life blood, making it loom large at last over our drab, empty lives.

*

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3.

TRIGGER AND BABE

1.

This is a love story, right? And a touching one at that. I can assert this with confidence as it has touched me personally. Not that I am, in this story, a figure of great importance. Don't worry about me. Make like I'm not here. My name is Reggy Mark. As proprietor and foremost artiste of *Mythopeia* I've had occasion to observe Passion in full flow. And the one universal quality of Passion is how quickly it passes. It's more of a match than a candle. You can't eat it, drink it, sell it – not the *real* thing, not really. Passion is the fart of every heart: an exhaust for untenable pressure. Everyone knows it. But humanity kids itself, generation after generation, that this time, *this* time – and for us – things will be different.

Tris was the finest pair of thinking fists in London. He trained as a boxer and in his club down the Isle of Dogs he was known as Trigger. Oddly perhaps for a kid with such reflexes he was also reflective, pensive even, when he wasn't fingerprinting people's faces that is. The first day I saw him, puff-puffing at the bag in that smelly old gym, I formed an instant rapport with the lad. As his elder and better I looked to him as a kind of son. He looked to me, less as a father, more an indulgent uncle. *Mythopeia* was just starting up at the time and I was on the lookout for a team. I offered him a job on the door: well paid work, sociable in its way and it got you out in the open. At first Tris was uncertain. He owned an electric guitar, see, and a burning ambition to make sweeter sounds than bone-crunching.

'Trigger,' I said, 'Trigger, I hate to watch native talent go to waste – it's my artistic temperament. What if Hamburg had turned away the Beatles or Beethoven had gone deaf? There'd be a gap in the world. We'd be grieving without knowing why.'

Bolstered by a cash-in-hand advance, these words worked wonders on the lad and within a week he was on board. Because Tris was bantam-weight and – let’s face it – what you might call pretty, the odd sod fancied his chances. I witnessed one of these encounters on Tel’s CCTV-bank upstairs. Tel and me, over a lager, replayed the tape for ten minutes, it was that good. Next time that punter picked a fight, he’d have to choose someone his own strength – a dwarf say, or a toddler. Now perhaps it’s nostalgia on my part but I look back on those months as amongst the happiest of my adult life. There’s a word I came across in the dictionary which says it best. *Halcyon*. Beneath the stormy surface we felt a deep calm – we meaning myself and the lads. After the night’s struggles, the days brought peace and balm. Our sleep was the sleep of the blessed.

I put my arm round Tris’s shoulder and walked him to the bar. ‘How’s it going, son?’ Tris nodded, wincing at the volume. God, it gets you in the bowels, that ground bass. Stomping in the throng, in the thrum of it, the beat’s so big it becomes you, is the pumping of your blood, the thumping of your heart. We clinked drinks.

‘I’m enjoying it,’ Tris said.

‘The fights, of course.’

‘Na man – the music.’

‘The what?’

‘With cash coming in I can support my music. I got three songs written already. Best shit I ever done.’

I was glad for him. A happy meeting of commerce and culture. We patted each other on the back and I sent him onto the dancefloor to claim his bonus.

Wealth, women and song. Everything in abundance.

Halcyon nights.

2.

The first time I saw her she was just a speck on camera 3. But even then you could tell she was fresh, I mean ripe to burst from her stretch sequin boob tube. It was Tel who pointed her out in the fight. He’s like that is Tel: keen to get a human angle on violence. I should explain. Isolde had been queuing very nicely when her boyfriend, Hugo-or-Henry, tried to jump the queue. Tris took exception, of course, and I mean this is still England. Isolde tried to make the peace but her boyfriend was under several more persuasive influences. I don’t know all the details but suffice to say the words *black* and *oik* were spoken. A bit of patty-cake followed before Tris transformed to Trigger and broke the boyfriend’s nose.

How’s that for an inauspicious start?

Isolde seemed outraged enough as she nursed her bleeding lover. But the following night she was back. Alone. In black velour trousers, snakeskin Mules and a lace camisole top you’d like to eat without dressing.

‘Remember me?’ she asks Tris at the door. ‘You broke my ex’s nose.’

‘Sorry,’ says Tris.

‘I’m Isolde. What’s your name?’

‘Tris.’

‘Nice to meet you Tris.’

She comes into *Mythopeia*. Enters my kingdom. Dances like a blue flame.

A week later she returns. Alone again, this time in a leopard print dress with lace trim and a choker to bring tears to your eyes. How girls suffer to make boys suffer.

‘Hallo Tris,’ she says at the door. ‘Broken any noses recently?’

‘Not recently.’

‘Still,’ says Isolde, slipping a finger under her choker. She makes to move but Tris bars her way.

‘Won’t you let me in, Tris?’

Tris avoids the question of Isolde’s eyes. He glances at the queue spilling out onto the street. ‘You don’t pay,’ he says. ‘As our millionth clubber you get in free.’

Isolde smiles. ‘Oh Tris, you shouldn’t have.’

‘Compliments of Reggie Mark.’

‘Who?’

‘The manager. Reggie Mark? The D-J?’

Isolde accepts the prize and Tris opens the door for her. She places her hand on his arm. ‘You will join me, won’t you.’ It isn’t a question. And Tris doesn’t answer, good lad. You could call it a conflict of interests. Of course, that night I only have time to make a brief appearance: shake her hand, light her fag. Her skin is expensively soft. Her name? No, it’s very nice. Home is? Esher. And Daddy? Blimey, your honour. Isolde smiles and my chest hurts. It’s painful like an adrenaline shot. But I gotta go, it’s my turn on the table. Be our guest again tomorrow. Cheers.

Saturday night and Tris’s balls are twitching. I swear, every time I see him on the screen he’s adjusting himself. From behind he looks like a bobby in panto: bend at the knees, hand to the belt, straightening at the shoulders. The beautiful people – and many not so beautiful – start queuing. Tel settles beside me and we wait. Is the suite ready, Tel? Ready. Champagne on ice? Yep. What does he fancy, a tenner on less revealing or more? Tel bets less. I say black bra and microskirt. Tit strip and hiptowel. Midnight passes. Tris crouches over a girl puking by the bins. One a.m., two a.m., three. Tel sprawls asleep on his *Penthouse*, his nose bent over the centrefold. Pixellated Tris comes and goes, looks, waits. At half-three his shift is done, he blends into screen-fuzz and disappears. Four o’clock. Cold blue dawn silhouettes the city. Isolde doesn’t come.

3.

Fucking is a funny thing. If you watch a couple *at it* (without softporn touches) your most likely impulse is to laugh. The lovers take it all so seriously, they find each others’ private bits so interesting, which at rest are a snail fallen from its shell, an overgrown mussel in seaweed. (If this sounds like self-contradiction, know at once that I love seafood.) But it’s a good point, right? When you get to brass tacks as often as I do, sex seems unworthy of all the attention. It’s for Christmas, not for life. If you want love, look to your mates. And there’s a principle where Tris and I grew up that loyalty is uppermost. So when Tris and Isolde start screwing I don’t feel my usual charming self. How do I find out? Not from the horse’s mouth. It’s Tel who, splicing the highlights, calls me up to the batcave. The girl throwing up, remember? Watching the film in extreme slowmo, we see her slip something into Tris’s pocket. Her number. Her keys, perhaps. A split-second frame shows her face in profile. It’s Isolde.

They couldn’t help it, you understand. Something got whacked in their circuitry, there was a pheromone meltdown, an oestrogen blow-out. Breathe quickly into your chest and hold it there for fifteen seconds. Remember the feeling? Off-camera, their heads drew close. Then the connection, a wet electric spark. (Exhale.) Their faces locked and mauled. Natural uppers coursed through their veins, their synapses sparked like a million gas-rings.

I kept Tris on board. I still valued his skills. But when the cops found powder wrapped in a condom in his glove compartment, despite his protestations of innocence I had to let him go. Bouncers who deal on the door can close a place like *Mythopeia* down.

'I'm sorry for you, son,' I said, slipping him two fifties on the sly. 'What'll you do after service?'

Tris didn't seem too heartbroken. 'I'm goin' steady with this girl,' he said.

'Oh yeah?'

'She's got money comin' in. We're gonna live together. Make music?'

'I bet you are, son.'

'Seriously, man. I'm gonna cut an album.'

It's wonderful to be young and believe in your fictions.

4.

When Isolde told her folks she was living in sin with an unemployed black boxer, she lost her allowance and her MG overnight. Mummy and Daddy disowned her in order to get her back. Them that's got shall have, they say, and Isolde was used to having. But she didn't need polo and society balls. She had Love's Young Dream.

Their council flat overlooked a wasteland of rubble, a brownfield site with a cardboard comprehensive squatting on its margin. The winter was past, the rains were gone and the sound of the digger was heard in the lounge. They spent their strawberry-moon in bed, on a mattress in a field of lint. The blue sky looked in at the window. Shadows crouched in the midday sun. Tris kissed Isolde's pomegranate lips, he fawned over her pert breasts and sipped nectar from the goblet of her navel. He was a pilgrim at the shrines of her uniqueness: the chocolate mole on the valley of her thigh – the smooth pastures beneath her armpits – the wholly desirable dimples at the base of her back. What better expression of their happiness than these lyrics from one of Trigger's songs?

Ooh yeah baby baby
I really love the way you do me
Do me do me do me (x3)
Girl I wanna do you truly
'Cos it's love I got inside.

Troubadour Tris sang his lays to his lay. Isolde (the long-haired, the light-footed) planned their future as they rested, Ying and yang, in the evening cool.

'I'll paint the flat with frescoes,' she'd say. 'We'll get drapes for the window and a four-poster bed.'

In the small hours he would watch her sleeping. He burned for her. His limbs ached for her limbs and her breathing lanced him with such tender pain that he lived forever on the verge of tears. He told her none of this, of course. He didn't need to. It was Love – and Love means unspoken grace.

5.

In my past life, before my vocation found me, I was a paper-muncher at the GLC. It was the Great Lady who taught me: if you act according to your lights, they'll shut you down, fumigate your premises and flog you off to the nearest Japanese consortium. The course of

all creeds is down. So when necessity got the better of our cash-strapped lovers, Tris came to me for help. A tender scene followed, with me all avuncular, serving bourbon and sympathy in my Hampstead garden. Tris played a tape of his music. And though I don't care much for melody, it wasn't half bad. Fuzzy bedsit mono but beneath the hiss and crackle I heard a soulful new sound. And a voice you wouldn't squeeze from a heavyweight.

I looked at Tris. He frowned, pressing his knuckles into his cheek.

'I wrote 'em for Isolde,' he said. 'Without her Reggie I'm nuffink. I stay in all day singin'. And she listens and we shag and watch the money go.'

I told him I could take him back but he refused. 'It fucks with the soul, man. I ain't made for fighting.' (How love ennobles us!) 'There's no central heating, no phone. We only got body warmth.' (I stamped on my fag.) 'We gotta buy food and shit. Isolde's a great girl but she got no skills, like four GCSEs and good fuckin' manners. She can't work, it does her head in. But she don't understand *need*.'

I gave him two hundred in notes. But there wasn't much more where that came from, things being tight. My advice was to get a job, any job.

'Remember Michelangelo's mantra, Tris. 'Compromise in all things.' You can't live on music alone, can ya?'

Two weeks later he was a clerk at the Queen's Chevaliers Regiment. Without breaking the Official Secrets Act (as Tris has, through Isolde) I can tell you that the highlight of his day was visiting the bog. Over the weeks, he spent hours in a cubicle, peering above the smoked-glass pane at a strip of sky. Not even the smell (the sergeant had explosive bowels) could keep him away. He timed his calls with itchy zeal, going every hour until Warrant Officer Zephaniah sussed him out and gave him a colourful earful.

'Do some fuckin' work, bwoy, this ain't no holidee camp.'

But Tris wanted work, he craved it. Just once a day, to achieve a task (in the sense of finishing it) would have sufficed – anything instead of this clock-watching, pound-counting paperchase. The barracks' integrated data system had no system and was only integrated over a thirty yard radius. Once, say, med-docs for 60 Squadron were updated, it was Tris's duty to print them off and take them one block to the infirmary – where they were three weeks overdue and four weeks out of date. Isolde, sprawled at home fanning herself with the jobs pages, could see the funny side. A writer might have made something of it – but a soul singer?

Some days Tris headed for work buzzing with ideas, snatches of music that burst in him like fireworks. But at the office nobody seemed to notice him and he sat at his desk congealing. Poor Tris, it really got to him: the hum of neon lights, the plastic potplants, the grey heads like wintry bushes above the partitioning. Momentum oozed out of him like acid from a battery. His eyes didn't so much move as slide, like those bios you tilt to drop the tart's knickers. By lunchtime he was fading fast. Come evening he was crumpled, heavy-limbed and thick-lidded. Then the Tube home, getting intimate with armpits. The train shuddered through darkness and Tris saw himself in the window, too tired to commiserate. Back at the flat Isolde enfolded him in chiffon and perfume. Her breath was bitter with boredom. They ate ravioli, jacket potatoes, beans and toast.

'Take me to bed,' said Isolde. 'Ravish me, you lovely bastard.'

Tris ravished Isolde for a couple of minutes, creaked to his side of the mattress and sank into deep dreamless sleep.

After weeks of this they came to see me. Tris *and* Isolde. *Isolde* and Tris. I treated them to lunch at Marco's where they stated and restated their deep commitment to each other in spite of everything. Tris, it transpired, was the sole breadwinner. Isolde had

interviewed for some horsy magazine but confessed that she couldn't type, didn't ride and hated hunting. (Love takes away all our deceit.) Tris meanwhile found his music in pre-production hell. He felt bruised by the industry's deafness. Couldn't I pull some strings? I promised him I would. And I did.

Three months later my efforts had got him nowhere.

6.

I became a regular visitor at 37A Avalon Towers, bowling down on free afternoons to keep Isolde company. Because of the detour I made a meal of it and came bearing gifts. Nothing fancy: bottles of bubbly, music freebies, the odd fifty.

'Don't tell the boy,' I'd whisper as she kissed my cheek in gratitude. 'He's so proud he'd send the lot back. And none of us wants that to happen.'

But Tris knew. Isolde had no magic lamp and her genie lived in no bottle.

That summer the wasteland sprouted bricks. The din from the works juddered in Isolde's ears like dental machinery. Her hair grew wild; there were blotches on her neck where she pinched herself. As for her lover, his horizons were shrinking. The little energy left him at the end of the day – that's meant for living and loving – went into his music. You can only admire the work ethic: hours spent on an album nobody wanted to hear, days cutting a demo on caveman technology. We Brits love a struggle against the odds. Scott in Antarctica – Raleigh seeking Eldorado – that Branson in his balloon. In pursuit of his grail, Tris subjected his lyrics to major surgery. Out went Isolde (the peerless, the fair), in came the abstract squeeze. Privately I applauded his acumen but when Isolde buried her face in my shoulder I had to commiserate, didn't I?

'We never go out,' she lamented. 'We get all the worst of London and none of the best.'

'Museums?'

'Clubs, Reggie.' A moment in the dark pools of her eyes. '*Mythopeia*.'

That night Tris came home to find Isolde stripped to her finery, whistle and Evian at the ready. Before a word was spoken it was obvious – Tris had lost his pleasure gene. They stayed at home instead, watching the joy trickle from their lives. Isolde, needing an argument, chased Tris about the flat until the topic of yours truly cropped up. Tris bruised the table with his fist. Isolde went out on the town.

At three in the morning I drove her home. Twice her elegant hand flopped sleepily into my lap. When we arrived she squished her nose into my arm. The only hope, I advised her, was a reconciliation with Mummy and Daddy. Short term difficulties could be solved by a visit to Branken van Loo, purveyor of stimulants animal, chemical and vegetable and a close personal friend of mine.

A week later Isolde packed her bags for Chamonix. Mummy had been a wall of rage but Daddy'd crumbled like a cake. Isolde could hardly keep from laughing as she hid the thin orange vial of aphrodisiac ('Honey, he'll be a horse, you'll be a whirlpool') behind her moisturisers. She meant to return in a blaze of glory ('Some of my girls are still coming at their desks on Monday morning'), to catch him off-guard, unprepared for the force of his passion.

At the terminal, they kissed as though tasting their last of each other.

7.

It was never made clear to Isolde how her parents knew. Maybe they'd hired a private detective (like most American trends, it's catching on). In their five-star suite, Mummy wept as Daddy read a list of Trigger's misdemeanours. Previous convictions for stealing an amp in Croydon – for ABH – for possession. Didn't she know, poor girl, that her boyfriend was a brawler, that he bought top-shelf pornography, smoked marijuana and lied about his age as a teenager in pubs?

'I know you think you love him,' said Mummy. 'But he's *underclass*, darling, it's congenital.'

Isolde's defiance swelled like a sail. She was too much in love to hate her parents for their blindness. Yet something got under her armour, some primitive, ancestral fear. When the day came for her to fly home she had four hundred in notes, slipped her on the paternal sly – and no peace of mind.

Things got worse when Tris failed to meet her at Heathrow.

She saw him in strange faces, speaking Swahili, Nigerian, posh Etonian. He made startled or curious eyes at her, edged away or made the best of the misunderstanding. Isolde was a child again, lost in a shop and clutching at skirts. When I reached her she pirouetted into my arms.

'Reggie!'

'It's all right, love, I'll drive you home.'

'Where is he?'

'I thought I'd miss you. Give us your bag.'

In the Jag I tried to look relaxed: you don't want to come back from holiday needing a holiday. I explained gently about Tris's relapse. How Tel had found him in the bogs smacking the donkey. In the office we'd frisked him for an ounce of Belize, two Doc Roberts, three bacharachs and half an ounce of garfunkel. He'd been too cheefed to stand, so we'd flushed the gear and driven him home.

'He's all right now,' I assured Isolde, who was trembling. The Jag swallowed the road beneath us. 'There's just one thing...'

'What?'

'Na, it's nothing.'

'Reggie – what?'

'I don't know for sure, I've got no proof.'

'Proof of what?'

'I could be wrong. I mean, people change, they learn.' The silence between us had teeth. 'It's just – Jesus. Look. At times of crisis, some blokes feel they gotta prove themselves. Know what I mean? You mustn't think it's personal. It's not *personal*, it's just the way he is. An artist.'

For all my efforts, the flat at Avalon Towers stank of grim debauchery. I only hovered in the open doorway. I could see Trigger in the bed. He lay very straight on his back, with his hands clasped upon his chest. Isolde stood bleakly staring down at him. When her eyes sought me out I bowed and shut the door.

In the quiet, Isolde felt calmer than the ocean's bed. Her foot struck something hard, a tumbler stained with orange scum. Close by, she found a second tumbler. A thin flue-shaped bottle lay jilted on its side. Its contents had spilled, making a sticky brown map on the carpet. If you got close enough, the stain smelled strongly of mango.

The first place she looked was the foot of the bed.

The panties were so flimsy she shredded them like Kleenex.

Which just about wraps it up, I'd say. No, I won't hang about. I'm a man of few words, when all's said and done. Of course, I've had to fill in some of the gaps along the way. It may be that not every detail is absolutely accurate in the historical sense. The sex, for instance – did you enjoy it? – was mainly guesswork. Maybe I've overplayed some of the emotion too. And I can't make promises about the dialogue. But then, like I said, this is a story: it requires a leap of the imagination.

Isolde's just coming out of the ladies. Here she comes now, look. Her walk has changed, she undulates from top to toe like a cat on a fence. Watch her watching me watching her. The punters notice, they lift their eyes from the heaving dancefloor to follow. See, it's a happy ending – why pick a fight with it? I could hang about and do some fine-tuning but you'll appreciate that tonight I've got better things to do than embroidery.

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From *Arts and Wonders*

3. Arcimboldo

In the capital city of the Imperial Province of Milan, our lives were changed utterly. Instead of notoriety (mine), we had obscurity (ours). Instead of declining wealth (the vestiges of my mother's dowry), we had jobbing poverty. And here was a climate to reckon with – those close humid summers which, at their worst, induce a universal torpor, the bladder-pinching winters, when snow creaks underfoot and everyone's mouth is haunted. Why, you may wonder, did my Tuscan father choose that northern city, from whose rooftops one can see, on a clear day, the snow-capped peaks of the Alps? Because it was a place where he could be true to his name: anonymous, like a sardine in its shoal. Because in its babel of tradesmen and travellers one might drown out one's darker thoughts. Because, in short, Milan was far from Florence and *far removed* from Florence.

Our first lodgings, in a single, foul-smelling room behind the Naviglio Grande canal, were replaced within two months by a garret on the Piazza Santo Stefano. In case this sounds like affluence regained (we were a stone's throw from the San Bernadino chapel), I should add that our two rooms were on the fourth floor, with a lonely window between them, that I never had a bed to speak of – only a mattress slung across the boards – and that we owned no privy save the street.

‘It’s not so bad,’ my father growled as we moved in. ‘Blow the cobwebs off, put down some floorboards and we’ll be bloody cosy.’

There was no room now for Anonimo to sculpt. But it did not matter: he had renounced personal ambition. Instead, to earn a crust, he cut stone on worksites along the Corso di Porta Romana, while his twelve-year-old son offered people their portraits on the Piazza del Duomo. The tedium of waiting for someone sufficiently curious or vain to sit for me was intense; or would have been, if intensity were not boredom’s opposite. Sometimes, when pickings were slim, I moved my wares (a dwarf-sized easel, paper, a couple of stools) to the Piazza Mercanti, hoping to catch some customer drifting beneath the arches. On other occasions, to stretch my legs and knock some life back into my eyes, I wandered up the Corsia dei Servi, or entered the mighty Duomo to implore – with paganish fervour – the Tabernacle of the Nail of the Cross for a solution to my misery. Behind the altar, the wooden choir was still in progress. It grew as slowly as a forest and I used to inspect it for signs of change. I also came to admire a statue of St Bartholomew – that unfortunate missionary whom the early Armenians flayed for his faith. I was appalled and enthralled by that decorticated saint, who wore his skin like a loose gown and held it over his privy parts (had they too been stripped?) while he contemplated his Salvation. How artfully the sculptor represented every muscle and sinew of the standing cadaver, so impossibly alive in its double death (of martyrdom, of marble). I wondered whether taxidermists were up to the task of mounting humans and, imagining my own pelt, lamented how little space it would take up on some ogreish Armenian’s floor.

‘Perhaps this was taken from life?’

I turned, startled. An aged gentleman behind me contemplated the statue. His steep patrician’s nose flared: I peered up cavernous and bristly nostrils. ‘Do you think the sculptor had a sly word with the hangman? Hm? On the Piazza della Vetra?’ Swaying gently on his feet, with his hands clasped behind his back, the old man looked at me closely. His eyes were dark and deeply pitted; they reminded me of the rings of grain in a tree. The face was long and faintly equine, balanced between a green skullcap and a soft ruff. I was dimly conscious of rich and elegant garments but failed to look the rest of him over.

‘What do you mean, sir?’

‘I merely wonder. How does anyone know what a flayed skin looks like? I’m told Michelangelo endowed *his* Bartholomew, in the Sistine Chapel, with his own features. Have you heard of Michelangelo?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Of course.’

‘Of course you have,’ he nodded, and a smile formed beneath the curl of his moustache. ‘It’s no use these days just imagining the human body. We must get our detail from the flesh.’ A priest, rolling on the benighted globe of his belly, eyed us with suspicion. ‘I knew a man who crucified his servant – not fatally, you understand – to see what effect it had on the human body. Perhaps our sculptor used the skin of a murderer? Or a thief? There’s a kind of immortality for you.’

‘I wouldn’t want it.’

The old man seemed to considered my reply. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘Me neither.’ With a tick of his melancholy head, he drifted away. I watched the black cloak and skullcap recede down the nave. Then I smirked ingratiatingly at the loitering priest (hoping for a good word) and left the Duomo to resume my vigil on the piazza.

At the day’s end, as weary hawkers dismantled their stalls and conjurers garroted their bags of tricks, I traipsed home to a supper of lentils and gruel. These were typically cheerless affairs, conducted in grim, masticating silence. We laughed rarely, my father and I.

Yet I recall one occasion, when I brought my father lunch at his worksite on the Corso di Porta Romana (it was his usual slab of bread and ham, with a raw onion which he devoured as one might an apple, meaning to keep strangers at bay), there was a sudden commotion, like a clap of thunder, behind my shoulder. Workmen dropped their tools and rushed to the side of the road.

‘What is it?’ I cried. ‘I can’t *see*.’

Sun-baked backs marred my view. I heard grunting and braying and thin, mousy shrieks. My father reached beneath my arms. To my delight, and not a little pain (for I carried a good deal of weight on my toddler’s legs), he hoisted me onto his shoulders, whence I could see to the centre of those bobbing, dusty heads.

Had I *heard* such a tale, I should not have believed it. A Cistercian monk, making his way by ass to the Abbey of Chiaravalle, found himself crushed between his mount and a powerfully aroused stallion. The ravished ass protested. Pressed between stud and receptacle, the monk did likewise. But no screams or invocations could deter the horse as it strained, pop-eyed with passion, towards its goal. ‘Whore!’ cried the ass. ‘Help!’ squealed the monk. And the crowd exhaled. Men laughed like bad actors, flinging their arms into the air and slapping one another’s thighs; women, falling over their bosoms, clutched and wretched. It was like some Bacchic frenzy, and I was not excluded. Never in all my childhood did I laugh so heartily – or so heartlessly. The old Cistercian’s back was broken. It took three days for him to die.

On Sundays, after Mass, my father wanted only to sleep, weighted down by brute animal tiredness and sighing with relief the instant his head touched the pillow. Abandoned, I would sneak into the Giardino della Guastalla where newlyweds strolled, ostentatiously in love, and the chaperoned daughters of aristocrats studied their copybooks. Alas, I could not revive the serene watchfulness of my younger self: that intense scrutiny which I had applied for hours to simple animal life. What was this yearning which distracted me, this hunger which mountains of cheap bread could not assuage? My eyes grew restless: they floated up whenever young girls passed. Black or fair, I scrutinised whatever each possessed of femininity. I became a collector of long-lashed glances, mentally sketching the grace of a careless gesture, the conversational tilt of a head – all that voluntary and incidental witchcraft. It was a passive occupation, however. My only physical proximity to the fairer sex occurred at the washing-troughs beside the canal. The washerwomen rocked on their knees, like damp Mahometans, their pendulous breasts lolling. I admired their strong manly arms and the toughness of their fingers embroiled in the limbs of wet linen. When I knelt among them, they greeted me as a quaint and pitiable child.

‘How’s our little dwarf?’

‘Where’s your mammy, bambino?’

‘Have you washed behind your ears?’

It seems inconceivable, I agree, that I should have found an admirer beneath those echoing rafters. And yet there she was, unquestionably watching me down the line. I felt her grave and inquiring stare: it was a magnetic force of which all my lesser senses were conscious before my eyes. The usual, beggarly ruses for escaping attention failed me. I coughed and scratched my head; I wiped my brow and applied myself to the annihilation of stubborn and imaginary stains. ‘So let her look,’ I told myself. ‘She’s probably just curious. Another gawper with a soft spot for midgets.’ But every Friday when I went to wash our clothes, she had moved one place closer to where I worked. She was quite old, at least thirty,

and bewilderingly knowing. Her eyes were dark and voracious, her mouth was – in fact I have no idea what she looked like, I was terrified, must I describe *everything*?

At last the day came when she was washing at my side. Whether by accident or design, her black curls fell across her cheek, concealing from the others our mute and exhilarating glances. There was a tempest in my belly: booming hills, groaning rocks, trees exploding. Outwardly, my left knee nodded its imbecile head. I understood, from the animation of her eyebrows, that I was to follow her behind the crumbling wall of a canal-side privy. She picked herself up and left before me; halting briefly to scratch at her heel and assure herself of my courage. None of the others seemed to suspect this earth-shattering conspiracy, and I scampered as fast as I could to our place of assignation. There we stood, face to navel. I had to balance atop a pile of bricks to reach her ample and suddenly naked breast. I must have made, at that sudden unveiling, a retreating gesture, for she clasped my ears in her wet hands and pulled me to her.

Broad-minded reader, she suckled me. Nothing in the world of art had prepared me for the astounding expanse of her aureola; it reminded me of the false eye emblazoned on the wings of certain butterflies. I was afraid of the plump blue veins that fed her breast. A coarse hair stuck between my teeth. I remember the angry nipple, as hard as a knuckle, and the shock of my erection, like a bud nudging towards the light. Eventually, she pulled away and murmured: ‘That’s enough, my pumpkin. You’ve had your lot.’ Now the breast – that glorious white moon – was gone; in its place, a black widow’s shirt and strong fingers tying strings. ‘Take that home and work on it,’ she commented, with a downward glance, as she left.

It took me a long while (humming, yawning, drumming with my fingers on my hips) to settle. Then I returned, with turmoil in my heart, to the company of washerwomen.

‘Bravo, piggy!’

‘Copped an eyeful, did we?’

‘Ah, leave him alone, the poor terror.’

Several women, in on the dare, winked at my seductress and nudged their neighbours. But mockery could not hurt me. I had glimpsed an unimagined future where my oddness – the curse of my childish stature – might work in my favour, to the fulfilment of female perversity and my own insalubrious gain.

Later, at home, I discovered that solitary diversion so despised of Old Testament prophets and practised it with the zeal of a recent convert. I fanned the flames of my lust with lewd and anatomically improbable drawings. Sometimes I towered above my conquests, who shivered with delight in my priapic shadow. Alternately, I was a grinning homunculus, tiny as a mouse, diving into the fragrant and uniform foreshadowing of cunt. You may smile to note that these lascivious imaginings would prove my most original work. For I was unfamiliar with any precedents. Primiticcio’s mutilating nymphs, the lubricious black masses of Hans Baldung Grien (with their fiery wombs and goaty fornications) were unknown to me. Nor had I developed – despite my humiliation at Castello della Quèrcia – that high-minded hatred of the Weaker Sex which insists upon its poisonous properties and laments to see Aristotle, that lofty intellect, ridden on all fours by a pot-bellied Phyllis. I was enflamed, certainly; but I did not blame the object of my desire. Besides, my father also suffered. I could sense the frustration build up within him. I heard his stamping foot at supper and tried not to notice his restive, loping eyes. At last he would jump up, snatch some coins from his money-box (the key to which he kept on a chain about his neck) and, without so much as a farewell, escape the building. Crouching at the window, I would watch the top of his head (so baldly innocent) as he marched his appetites to the Brera quarter. Poor man: I was the

thorn in his side – a pint-sized chaperone forbidding him erotic pleasure. Late at night he would return, kicking each step on the stairs as though testing for woodworm. He clattered about with his key in the door before penetrating, with a grunt, our stuffy chamber. At last he would discompose himself for bed, sighing like a sick old dog and trying noisily not to wake me, while I pretended to sleep on my uncomfortable couch.

It was after such a brittle night that I met Arcimboldo. Or rather, met him again. He stumbled across me in the Piazza – quite literally, since he was admiring the cathedral at the time. Profusely apologising, the aged gentleman offered me a paint-pimpled hand.

‘Well, well,’ he exclaimed as I righted my easel. ‘So our conversation was between experts. Is this your self-portrait?’ It was a clumsy dawdle, executed out of boredom and without the use of a mirror. Arcimboldo glanced from the life to its image. ‘Did you teach yourself?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Really?’

‘Completely self-taught.’

I had no idea who he was, and cast about in my mind for a polite way of inquiring.

‘Permit me to introduce myself. Count Giuseppe Arcimboldo, court painter to his Imperial Majesty and your humble servant.’

If he was a madman, there could be no harm in tempering him. So I bowed as my father had taught me. Arcimboldo flung back his left leg and revered, with his palms exposed like Christ before his disciples. ‘It is an honour to meet one so able, so young. Did you – I say, that day in the transept, did you notice the stained glass window depicting St Catherine of Alexandria? Did you like it?’

‘Um...’

‘Did you *see* it?’

‘Yes,’ I lied. ‘Very nice.’

‘What did you think?’

‘Very nice.’

Like a ruminant horse, Count Arcimboldo chewed the overdroop of his moustache. ‘People rarely pay attention to windows. Because they serve a function, they think the art of secondary value.’

‘Did you make it, sir?’

‘Lord, no. Konrad of Mochis was the master-glazier. I designed it. My father, Biagio Arcimboldo, was a painter too. Have you a father?’ The short hairs on my neck bristled. ‘He must be very proud.’

‘It’s my mother who encourages me. My brothers and sisters – none of *them* can draw – tend to get jealous.’

‘Yes, it is a consequence one may suffer.’

‘But then I give them cartoons and that makes them happy.’

Lying in this fashion to a man of reputation, I felt no shame. He listened so politely that I almost believed my own falsehoods. ‘I am going to be apprenticed to a baker,’ I said. ‘My father says there is no livelihood in painting. I must forget it and learn a proper trade.’

At this last, brazen invention, the Count clucked and shook his head. ‘But I have not asked your name. How can I be of use to you if I do not know your name?’

‘Tommaso Grilli, if it please you.’

‘Grilli? Did you say *Grilli*?’

My throat tightened. I could only nod, fearing discovery; but Arcimboldo had never heard of my father.

‘I myself am a creator of grilli,’ he said. ‘If by that we can agree that we mean fantastical creatures.’

‘Fantastrical...?’

‘Did you not know the word?’

‘But it’s me.’

‘So I understand.’

That my family name (having lately shed the blooming –o for –i’s barren stem) signified anything so apt was depressing news. Count Giuseppe Arcimboldo, on the other hand, quivered with almost boyish enthusiasm. He invited me to his house, where I would receive such assistance as might serve my unjustly endangered vocation. He seemed kind, for all his strangeness: so I packed up my equipment and followed him.

The guardian of his palazzo greeted us with a silent scream. His beard was a tangle of briars, his hair a coarse thatch braided with corn. He was a forest god – ancient already at the foundation of Rome. His lifeless eyes stared at the leafless stones, at the garish human scene. Horrified by deracination. Count Arcimboldo performed an elaborate knock on the portico’s teeth. Almost at once the grille snapped open, and a young man, trapped inside the divinity’s throat, peeped out. ‘Christ Almighty,’ he said, blinking.

‘Mind your language.’

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘That’s no way to greet your master.’

‘It’s this bloody darkness. I’m turning into a mole.’

‘You are not.’

‘Burrowing about like I was underground.’

‘Fernando, open the door. Can you not see we have a guest?’

No surprise or disgust registered on the servant’s face at the sight of me. Having unlatched and opened the door, he stepped back as he might to let pass his master’s hound. Then the front-door crashed behind us and we were plunged into gloom. My hands fluttered out at my sides; I snatched them back when, accidentally, I touched Fernando’s knee. ‘Might our *guest*, sir, not be glad of a torch to light his way?’ Unheeding, Arcimboldo wafted past the blackly looming staircase. ‘He keeps all the shutters closed,’ Fernando muttered into my scalp. ‘Blooming madness, if you ask me. A *fortune* wasted on candles.’ I distinguished the pallor of the servant’s hand and followed the direction of its pointing index. Arcimboldo passed noiselessly through a doorway. I pursued the eddies that floated from his gown and found myself inside a high-ceilinged chamber. I knew this from the hush – that way a space holds its breath when people enter. Heavy curtains were draped across the windows. There was a buzzing of flies, and I glimpsed in the rare spots of daylight decaying fruit, a yawning lily, roses on the turn. It was difficult to see where I placed my feet. Grapes burst between my toes. I crushed an apricot and nearly skidded. My host picked his way more carefully through the obscurity. I heard him murmur and fiddle a key in a lock. ‘Ah,’ he gasped, finding whatever it was he sought. There was a bristly noise, then a hiss, and a blinding light.

‘Mind your eyes.’

When I had blinked away my tears, and with an ignis fatuus still flashing on my brain, I saw Arcimboldo lighting candles. There must have been a dozen stands, each hung with spilled wax like a frozen spring. Arcimboldo carried a taper from one to the other, guarding the flame with his hand as a mother shields her child’s eyes from ghouls at a fair.

‘Here he is. The god Vertumnus.’

Arcimboldo lit the lips of an oil-lamp and took it up. There was no tremble in his arm: the long yellow flame barely flickered. Obediently, I stepped through dusty pools of light to stand beside the Count. The long shadow cast by his nose across his cheek denatured his face. He looked like a wax effigy, a depiction of the magus; but his eyes shone with child-like ardour.

‘Very nearly finished, he said. ‘Just the nose and the chin. The chestnuts are no good. Half rotten. I’ll improve them from memory.’

Alas, you that know nothing of a neglected painter will have no conception of that wondrous being, Vertumnus, the Etruscan god of bounty. He stared at me with blackcurrant eyes: animate, mythical and faintly malevolent. His cheeks were peaches and his lips red cherries. Marrows, aubergines and a radish constituted his throat and chest, to which a gown of flowers was pinned by an onion clasp. But my words are blind: a feast for the eye cannot be matched by ten volumes of prose. Crowned with fruits of the harvest, with hazelnut husks for a moustache, it was a dazzling conceit and somehow familiar, in the way of masterpieces.

Watching my amazement, Arcimboldo grinned. ‘You cannot disassemble him, can you?’

True enough. The effigy, constructed of disparate flowers and fruits, cohered as one majestic being. Each grape and marrow and ear of corn was carefully rendered as itself; yet each part belonged to the unified whole.

‘Vertumnus was also the god of Metamorphosis. He could assume any form he chose. Be careful where you *sit*, my boy.’

This was sound advice, as the studio was littered with discarding matter. It was as though Vertumnus himself, having sat for his portrait, had discarded parts of his anatomy on departure. I picked up a spray of cranberries and compared it to its image on the canvas. The copy was perfect, right down to the twin leaves and the number of berries.

‘For the fabulous image to convince the viewer,’ said Arcimboldo, ‘let its parts be copied faithfully from Nature. It is *detail* that gives life to an object. If you wander too far from Nature, nothing you paint will please. Even monsters are made of flesh.’

As though to prove his point, Arcimboldo fetched from the walls a number of small paintings – copies no doubt of larger originals. These ‘Four Seasons’ represented the ages of Man. A rosy-cheeked youth, composed entirely of Spring flowers, faced his counterpart and destiny in Winter, a gnarled tree with roots for bristles and ugly fungus lips. Summer was Man at full power, a laughing composite of fruit. He stared unfazed at Autumn, whose beard of wheat and Dionysian crown were ripe for harvest and harvest’s only end.

‘Mankind, my boy, is not apart from Nature. And Nature is a part of Man. Do you not replenish your body with fruits? So are you not *made up* of them?’ Arcimboldo sank his teeth sonorously into an apple. ‘Motif fur humus,’ he said, and swallowed. ‘Notice the humours. Siccus, calidus, humida, frigidia. Unite all four in one figure and what have you? The Universal Man.’

The painter continued in this philosophical vein while I gorged myself on his paintings. I interrupted him, foolishly, to ask why he worked with curtains closed. It should have been apparent that Arcimboldo’s paintings were executed by artificial light: it gave them their hermetic mystery, that dark and dream-like charm.

‘Why the darkness? Because I prefer it. It sharpens my focus.’ Arcimboldo sat chewing his apple, pleased to watch me as I studied his inventions. As for myself, I felt like a man who, having wandered too long in a desert, is suddenly dropped at sea. Craving what surrounded me, I was unable to possess it. ‘The painting is also a portrait of my patron –

provider of bounty to his subjects as Vertumnus to Mankind. You have *no* idea what I'm talking about, have you? Forgive me. I am old, I forget the world is not my invention. Let me tell you about the Emperor...'

Thus I learned of the Habsburg Rudolf, in a soliloquy, distilled no doubt over many years, rich with ornate figures of speech. Arcimboldo described how the pious youth, already possessed of that famous chin, had brought Spanish manners to the Viennese court. The new monarch was blessed with a fancy of uncommon fecundity. Memories buzzed about his crown of the riches he had seen in the Escorial: all the arts and wonders assembled by Felipe of Spain as a haven from the tempests of office. Some kings hunger for temporal power, demanding vast tributes of blood and soil. The Emperor Rudolf's ambitions were gentler. He would assemble the greatest treasure-house in Christendom. To this purpose he surrounded himself with astrologers, artists and craftsmen, great talents of the likes of – (I forgot the names, they meant nothing to me). Arcimboldo had been a favourite of the late Emperor Maximilian; now he travelled with his successor Rudolf to the new seat of power in Prague. With eyes rolling as he pictured its spires and towers, Arcimboldo described the splendor of the city on the Moldau – the solemnity of a stone bridge, the imposing castle, and what apartments and cabinets were built there by the new Bohemian king. 'He has a lion, you know. It roars at daybreak. Some say the Emperor's reign is harnessed to the royal beast's fortunes.' Did Arcimboldo believe it? He could believe anything of an emperor who possessed a statue of Daphne made of red coral, who boasted a unicorn's tusk and a mandrake shaped like the crucified Christ – the simulacrum precise right down to the agony on His tiny face. 'I entertained both Emperors in turn with the sweet harvest of my labours. Masques, pageants. Studies of animals painted by hand. In gratitude Rudolf confirmed the nobility of my name. I was made a gift, on my return to Milan, of fifteen hundred and fifty florins.' Arcimboldo caught his breath long enough to be sure of my admiration.

'Why,' I asked him, 'did you leave Prague?'

'Why does a salmon return to the stream where it was spawned? I am Milanese, like you. I want to die in the city of my birth. And complete the circle of my life.' The old man leaned forward off his stool. He found on the table a colour study, on plain parchment, of a blushing pear. Watching him scrutinise it in the light from his lamp, I sensed that *Vertumnus* would be his last creation.

Over the subsequent months and years, I would relieve my father of my company to visit the painter in his benighted palazzo. A bond of affection grew between us. It was one of those delicate friendships which can flower, at either end of a life, between a child of uncommon maturity and an elder still charged with youthful enthusiasm. When the Emperor received his painting in Prague, he rewarded Arcimboldo with the title 'Comus Palatinus'. The old man seemed to rise on his pins. His nostrils flared at fragrances that wafted about the summits of his ennoblement; he caressed, with boney fingers, a new silk ruff, and paid rheumy-eyed tribute to his patron. I wonder now, had I decided already to try my luck in that far and magical Bohemia? Was the notion mooted, whisperingly, in some dark antechamber of my soul and allowed to ferment there, in the way of rebellions, until the day of action? Arcimboldo weaved tales of the Emperors that fired my imagination. Gripped as I was by growths and queasy pulsions, I ached for life to deliver its rumoured blessings. How was it possible to exist, day after day, bound to the wheel like a beast of burden, when Arcimboldo described the drolleries he had invented for his masters? Hungry for kinship, I dared not venture that I too had been a 'buffo aristocratico' – in a fashion. Instead, I maintained the illusion of a lonely and preternatural talent, which Arcimboldo felt duty-bound to nurture.

One bright morning, as sunlight, tintured by the curtains, gave the study a glaucous and pond-like atmosphere, the old Count sat me purposefully on my stool. I watched as he lifted the lid of a long wooden chest. Supporting himself with one hand on a precariously bended knee, he rooted about with the other and unearthed a squarish object wrapped in green velvet. Having straightened (with a gasp and an audible click of cartilage), he stroked back the corners of the cloth to reveal an elegant leather pouch. Arcimboldo unfastened the string that bound the boards and reverently removed a wad of old parchment. Each sheet was covered in writing, sometimes legible, often in mirror-hand. There were diagrams of fortifications viewed from the heavens, crab-like siege-engines and grotesque heads bloodlessly disembodied. I saw floating pyramids; awful revelations of flood and storm; the flowering petals of an unbuilt cathedral. I gawked at a sphere which – opened like a fruit by some anatomist’s knife – revealed a crouching fœtus. My soul quaked at this God’s-eye-view of hidden things, and I pitied the bald infant still sheltering in its defiled and studied shell.

‘The notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci,’ Arcimboldo whispered. He explained how his father had known Leonardo’s pupil, the painter Bernardino Luini; how Luini’s son had lent Arcimboldo the notebooks, which he then copied, propped on his elbow beside a mirror. ‘Leonardo’s mind was almost divinely capacious. The works of Man awaited him in the world of Forms. He had only to reach into its shadows to grasp them.’

So began my induction into the mysteries of Art. Arcimboldo weighted heavily his moral concerns. ‘Do not seek knowledge for the wrong reasons. Neither compulsion – if it lack restraint – nor the vanity of display can ever come to good. Books are useless in the hands of a fool, and misunderstood they may prove a *hindrance* to reason.’ The old man echoed Leonardo when he praised experience. ‘No matter his authority, do not believe what a teacher tells you if your *senses* tell you otherwise.’ Never again, after Arcimboldo, would I apply myself so keenly to the exercises set by a tutor. Puffing out my cheeks with effort, I came to grips with perspective and copied Leonardo’s anatomical studies. I learned to refine my shading, both in paint and charcoal, until shadows and light blended together like smoke, without strokes or borders. Arcimboldo, sitting beside me and nursing most days a wheezy cough that ascended, with a loose rattle, the rusty flues of his throat, reached over my shoulder to correct an outline or blend my cross-hatching with a blurred, rasping finger.

‘Very good,’ he murmured. ‘You are coming along.’

As soon as I had absorbed a lesson, however, I became distracted and wrinkled my nose at the faintly urinous odours that emanated from the old man. Perhaps he sensed my restlessness (once or twice my swinging heels may have struck his shins instead of the legs of my stool). Then Arcimboldo – ever the gentle master, who rewarded talent before he chastised sloth – adjourned proceedings to his unkempt garden. I was encouraged to find shapes in the most inauspicious places: staring at a stucco wall whose damp stains slowly revealed faces, exotic beasts, chimeræ. Each pattern, which the mind engendered, I fixed on paper, while Arcimboldo jauntily located the original stain. Try it for yourself, fledgling artist: it loosens splendidly the eye and limbers the fancy for taking flight. Studying the random blots made on a page by a flicked quill, you may discover most ingenious forms, because (and here I quote the great Da Vinci), “by indistinct things the mind is stimulated to new inventions.” Yet do not underestimate the rigours of this training. It is one thing, for pleasure, to find shapes on walls and in clouds – quite another to endow imagined beings with a semblance of life. Studying my master’s work, I understood what pains he had taken over it. (You cannot take the pain out of painting.) For Arcimboldo was neither capricious nor fantastical. ‘Madness is not creative,’ he said. ‘One needs a steady hand, a clear eye. Necessary distance. To dream on paper you must spend your life awake.’ Gentle skimmer,

you that mistake feigned ecstasy for actual madness, he possessed in uncommon abundance that wit which sees – and enables others, less sighted, to see – the hidden resemblance between things.

In the summer of my sixteenth year, a day came when I failed to wake the sentinel. I knocked at Arcimboldo's door until my knuckles ached but the forest god's mouth would not open. I sat on the step beneath the lintel and experimented with various postures, seeking the least uncomfortable, until I settled with elbows on my knees and my chin in my hands. A drifting cloud cast its frown across the street. In the distance vendors sang, tradesmen haggled, children shrilled and hollered. A plump widow eased her breasts onto the wall of her house and emptied a pail of slops into the street. Then there was nothing: no performance to jolt me from my stupor, only a cat mewling somewhere, invisible.

Just as I was preparing to leave, a pebble hopped and struck my shin. Somebody whistled tunelessly. It was Fernando. He fairly skipped towards me, winking with a sideways grin at the silver sky. 'You don't look yourself when you're sitting down,' he said. 'I thought you were a man kneeling on his legs.' He produced a chain from beneath his shirt onto which a key was attached. 'Come to pay your respects, have you?'

'Um... as always.'

Fernando froze with his key in the lock. 'Has nobody told you?'

'Told me?'

'Have you not heard?'

'Heard what?'

'The Count is dead.'

Fernando chafed his throat with quick fingers, as a dog scratches at fleas. Now he was assaulting the front-door with his knee. The lock must have been rusty because he had to use his shoulder against it.

'Well come on. I won't bite.'

My feet had corpsed: I dragged them unwillingly beneath me. Once inside the hallway, the syllables uttered by Fernando in the street assumed their full weight and proportion. The Count was dead. Somebody had opened all his shutters. Furnishings that until now had lurked in darkness were starkly exposed; reflective tables, convex mirrors, the gleaming peaks of the dark polished staircase – everything solid, tangible and particular.

'He left something for you,' said Fernando.

A second door yielded without resistance. I was dimly aware that I ought to be grieving; yet my eyes were deserts and, except for a vague flutter in the bowels, I cannot pretend that I suffered. Fernando, without once knocking, entered Arcimboldo's study. Here, too, the shadows had been banished. They hid in nooks and corners, squeezing themselves behind books and paintings. The heavy green curtains had been removed, leaving the windows exposed like mouths without teeth.

'Do I have to hold your hand?' demanded Fernando.

The studio had been swept clean. No trace remained of professional clutter, of the old man's leavings. Every lustrous surface – the cold blue walls and gaping chairs – awaited a new occupant.

'There's a package for you. And a letter.'

In the centre of the table, my exercise sketches had been gathered into an irregular wafer and bound together with a green ribbon. Fernando hoisted me onto a stool so that I might see, beneath the ribbon's knot and sealed with red wax, a letter addressed to His Most

Imperial Majesty. Sanguinary fire rushed to my face – I fancy the stool beneath me quivered. Was this some sort of *joke*?

‘It’s a letter of introduction,’ said Fernando, ‘for you to show to the Emperor. It’s written there, look. He said you mustn’t open it.’

Wax had formed small dark rubies on the parchment. I felt with my finger the initialed stamp of Arcimboldo’s ring. Then, briefly, I found my voice.

‘Where are Leonardo’s notes?’

‘Whose?’

‘The notebooks of Leonardo. He kept them in that chest over there. His copies of the originals.’

Fernando pouted and shrugged. He knew nothing of his late master’s affairs. I noticed a burnished silver ring on one of his fingers; his silk hose and taffeta jerkin were surprisingly handsome.

I climbed down from the stool, embracing my worthless papers. I cannot recount my short journey back through the transfigured hallway; nor with what pious platitudes Fernando expelled me from the palazzo into the suddenly populous street. My papers fluttered in the breeze. The letter slipped and fell to the ground – where I very nearly left it. I felt like a shadow player who, having spoken his lines, lingers in the wings to watch more memorable actors sweep his memory from the stage.
