Past Imperfect

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Extract

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Damian

ONE

London is a haunted city for me now and I am the ghost that haunts it. As I go about my business, every street or square or avenue seems to whisper of an earlier, different era in my history. The shortest trip round Chelsea or Kensington takes me by some door where once I was welcome but where today I am a stranger. I see myself issue forth, young again and dressed for some long forgotten frolic, tricked out in what looks like the national dress of a war-torn Balkan country. Those flapping flares, those frilly shirts with their footballers' collars – what were we thinking of? And as I watch, beside that wraith of a younger, slimmer me walk the shades of the departed, parents, aunts and grandmothers, great-uncles and cousins, friends and girlfriends, gone now from this world entirely, or at least from what is left of my own life. They say one sign of growing old is that the past becomes more real than the present and already I can feel the fingers of those lost decades closing their grip round my imagination, making more recent memory seem somehow greyer and less bright.

Which makes it perfectly understandable that I should have been just a little intrigued, if taken aback, to find a letter from Damian Baxter lying among the bills and thank yous and requests for charitable assistance that pile up daily on my desk. I certainly could not have predicted it. We hadn't seen each other in almost forty years, nor had we communicated since our last meeting. It seems odd, I know, but we had spent our lives in different worlds and although England is a small country in many ways, it is still big enough for our paths never to have crossed in all that time. But there was another reason for my surprise and it was simpler.

I hated him.

A glance was enough to tell me whom it was from, though. The writing on the envelope was familiar but changed, like the face of a favourite child after the years have done their unforgiving work. Even so, before that morning, if I'd thought of him at all, I would not have believed there was anything on earth that would have induced Damian to write to me. Or I to him. I hasten to add that I wasn't offended by this unexpected delivery. Not in the least. It is always pleasant to hear from an old friend but at my age it is, if anything, more interesting to hear from an old enemy. An enemy, unlike a friend, can tell you things you do not already know of your own past. And if Damian wasn't exactly an enemy in any active sense, he was a former friend, which is of course much worse. We had parted with a quarrel, a moment of savage, unchecked rage, quite deliberately powered by the heat of burning bridges, and we had gone our separate ways, making no subsequent attempt to undo the damage.

It was an honest letter, that I will say. The English, as a rule, would rather not face a situation that might be rendered 'awkward' by the memory of earlier behaviour. Usually they will play down any disagreeable past episodes with a vague and dismissive reference: 'Do you remember that frightful dinner Jocelyn gave? How did we all survive it?' Or, if the episode really cannot be reduced and detoxified in this way, they pretend it never took place. 'It's been far too long since we met,' as an opener will often translate as 'it does not suit me to continue this feud any longer. It was ages ago. Are you prepared to call it a day?' If the recipient is willing, the answer will be couched in similar denial mode: 'Yes, let's meet. What have you been up to since you left Lazard's?' Nothing more than this will be required to signify that the nastiness is finished and normal relations may now be resumed.

But in this case Damian eschewed the common practice. Indeed, his honesty was positively Latin. 'I dare say, after everything that happened, you did not expect to hear from me again but I would take it as a great favour if you would pay me a visit,' he wrote in his spiky, and still rather angry, hand. 'I can't think why you should, after the last time we were together, but at the risk of self-dramatising, I have not long to live and it may mean something to do a favour for a dying man.' At least I could not accuse him of evasion. For a while I pretended to myself that I was thinking it over, trying to decide, but of course I

knew at once that I would go, that my curiosity must be assuaged, that I would deliberately revisit the lost land of my youth. For, having had no contact with Damian since the summer of 1970, his return to my conscious mind inevitably brought sharp reminders of how much my world, like everyone else's world for that matter, has changed.

There's danger in it, obviously, but I no longer fight the sad realisation that the setting for my growing years seems sweeter to me than the one I now inhabit. Today's young, in righteous, understandable defence of their own time, generally reject our reminiscences about a golden age when the customer was always right, when AA men saluted the badge on your car and policemen touched their helmet in greeting. Thank heaven for the end of deference, they say, but deference is part of an ordered, certain world and, in retrospect at least, that can feel warming and even kind. I suppose what I miss above all things is the kindness of the England of half a century ago. But then again, is it the kindness I regret, or my own youth?

'I don't understand who this Damian Baxter *is* exactly? Why is he so significant?' said Bridget as, later that evening, we sat at home eating some rather overpriced and undercooked fish, purchased from my compliant, local Italian on the Old Brompton Road. 'I've never heard you talk about him.' At the time when Damian sent his letter, not all that long ago in fact, I was still living in a large, ground-floor flat in Wetherby Gardens, which was comfortable, convenient for this and that, and wonderfully placed for the takeaway culture that has overwhelmed us in the last few years. It was quite a smart address in its way and I certainly could never have afforded to buy it, but it had been relinquished to me by my parents years before, when they had finally abandoned London. My father tried to object, but my mother had rashly insisted that I needed 'somewhere to start,' and he'd surrendered. So I profited from their generosity and fully expected not only to start, but also to finish, there. In truth, I hadn't changed it much since my mother's day and it was still filled with her things. We were sitting at her small, round breakfast table in the window as we spoke, and I suppose the whole apartment could have seemed quite feminine, with its charming pieces of Regency furniture and a boy ancestor in curls over the chimneypiece, were my masculinity not reasserted by my obvious and total lack of interest in its arrangements.

At the time of the letter incident, Bridget FitzGerald was my current . . . I was going to say 'girlfriend' but I am not sure one has 'girlfriends' when one is over fifty. On the other hand, if one is too old for a 'girlfriend,' one is too young for a 'companion,' so what is the correct description? Modern parlance has stolen so many words and put them to misuse that frequently, when one looks for a suitable term, the cupboard is bare. 'Partner,' as everyone not in the media knows, is both tired and fraught with danger. I recently introduced a fellow director in a small company I own as my partner and it was some time before I understood the looks I was getting from various people there who thought they knew me. But 'other half' sounds like a line from a situation comedy about a golf club secretary, and we haven't quite got to the point of 'This is my mistress,' although I dare say it's not far off. Anyway, Bridget and I were going about together. We were a slightly unlikely pair. I, a not-very-celebrated novelist, she, a sharp Irish businesswoman specialising in property, who had missed the boat romantically and ended up with me.

My mother would not have approved, but my mother was dead and so, in theory, out of the equation, although I am not convinced we are ever beyond the influence of our parents' disapproval, be they dead or alive. Of course, there was a chance she might have been mellowed by the afterlife, but I rather doubt it. Maybe I should have listened to her posthumous promptings, since I can't pretend that Bridget and I had much in common. That said, she was clever and good-looking, which was more than I deserved, and I was lonely, I suppose, and tired of people ringing to see if I wanted to come over for Sunday lunch. Anyway, whatever the reason, we had found each other and, while we did not technically live together, since she kept on her own flat, we'd jogged along for a couple of years quite peaceably. It wasn't exactly love, but it was something.

What amused me with reference to Damian's letter was Bridget's proprietorial tone when referring to a past of which, almost by definition, she could know little or nothing. The phrase 'I've never heard you talk about him,' can only mean that, were this fellow significant, you would have talked about him. Or, worse, you *should* have talked about him. This is all part of the popular fantasy that when you are involved with someone it is your right to know all about them, down

to the last detail, which of course can never be. 'We have no secrets,' say cheerful, young faces in films, when, as we all know, our whole lives are filled with secrets, frequently kept from ourselves. Clearly, in this instance Bridget was troubled that if Damian were important to me and yet I had never mentioned him, how much else of significance had been kept concealed? In my defence I can only say that her past, too, like mine, like everyone's in fact, was a locked box. Occasionally we allow people a peep, but generally only at the top level. The darker streams of our memories we negotiate alone.

'He was a friend of mine at Cambridge,' I said. 'We met in my second year, around the time when I was doing the Season at the end of the Sixties. I introduced him to some of the girls. They took him up, and we ran about together in London for a while.'

'Being *debs' delights*.' She spoke the phrase with a mixture of comedy and derision.

'I am glad my early life never fails to bring a smile to your lips.'

'So what happened?'

'Nothing happened. We drifted apart after we left, but there's no story. We just went in different directions.' In saying this I was, of course, lying.

She looked at me, hearing a little more than I had intended. 'If you do go, I assume you'll want to go alone.'

'Yes. I'll go alone.' I offered no further explanation but, to be fair to her, she didn't ask for one.

I used to think that Damian Baxter was my invention, although such a notion only demonstrates my own inexperience. As anyone knows, the most brilliant magician in the world cannot produce a rabbit out of a hat unless there is already a rabbit *in* the hat, albeit well concealed, and Damian would never have enjoyed the success that I took credit for unless he had been genuinely possessed of those qualities that made his triumph possible and even inevitable. Nevertheless, I do not believe he would have made it into the social limelight as a young man, in those days anyway, without some help. And I was the one who gave it. It was perhaps for this reason that I resented his betrayal quite so bitterly. I put a good face on it, or I tried to, but it still stung. Trilby had turned traitor to Svengali, Galatea had destroyed Pygmalion's dreams.

'Any time on any day will be convenient,' the letter said. 'I do not go out now or entertain, so I am completely at your disposal. You will find me quite near Guildford. If you drive, it may take ninety minutes but the train is quicker. Let me know and I will either arrange directions or someone can meet you, whichever you prefer.' In the end, after my fake prevarication, I wrote back suggesting dinner on such and such a day, and named the train I would catch. He confirmed this with an invitation for the night. As a rule I prefer, like Jorrocks, to 'sleeps where I dines,' so I accepted and the plan was settled. Accordingly, I passed through the barrier at Guildford station on a pleasant summer evening in June.

I looked about vaguely for some Eastern European holding a card with my name mis-spelled in felt tip pen but instead of this, I found myself approached by a uniformed chauffeur – or rather someone who looked like an actor playing a chauffeur in an episode of *Hercule Poirot* – who replaced his peaked cap after introducing himself in low and humble tones, and led the way outside to a new Bentley, parked illegally in the space reserved for the disabled. I say 'illegally,' even though there was a badge clearly displayed in the window, because I assume these are not distributed so that friends may be met off trains without their getting wet or having to walk too far with their luggage. But then again, everyone deserves the odd perk.

I did know that Damian had done well, though how or why I knew I cannot now remember, for we shared no pals and moved in completely different circles. I must have seen his name on a *Sunday Times* list or maybe in an article on a financial page. But I don't think, before that evening, I understood quite *how* well he had done. We sped through the Surrey lanes and it was soon clear, from the trimmed hedging and the pointed walls, from the lawns like billiard tables and the glistening, weeded gravel, that we had entered the Kingdom of the Rich. Here there were no crumbling gate piers, no empty stables and lodges with leaking roofs. This was not a question of tradition and former glory. I was witnessing not the memory but the living presence of money.

I do have some experience of it. As a moderately successful writer, one rubs up against what Nanny would call 'all sorts,' but I can't pretend this was ever really my crowd. Most of the so-called rich I know are possessed of surviving, not newborn, fortunes, the rich who

used to be a good deal richer. But the houses I was passing belonged to the Now Rich, which is different, and for me there is something invigorating in their sense of immediate power. It is peculiar, but even today there is a snobbery in Britain when it comes to new money. The traditional Right might be expected to turn up their noses at it I suppose, but paradoxically, it is often the intellectual Left who advertise their disapproval of the self-made. I do not pretend to understand how this is compatible with a belief in equality of opportunity. Perhaps they do not try to synthesise them, but just live by contradictory impulses, which I suppose we all do to some degree. But if I may have been guilty of such unimaginative thinking in my youth, it is gone from me now. These days I unashamedly admire men and women who have made their pile, just as I admire anyone who looks at the future mapped out for them at birth and is not afraid to tear it up and draw a better one. The self-made have more chance than most of finding a life that truly suits. I salute them for it and I salute their bejewelled world. Of course, on a personal level it was extremely annoying that Damian Baxter should be a part of it.

The house he had chosen as a setting for his splendour was not a fallen nobleman's palace but rather one of those self-consciously moral, Arts and Crafts, rambling warrens that seem to belong in a Disney cartoon and are no more convincing as a symbol of Olde England than they were when Lutyens built them at the turn of the last century. Surrounding it were gardens, terraced, clipped and criss-crossed with trim and tended paths, but seemingly no land beyond that. Damian had not apparently decided to adopt the ancient model of imitation gentry. This was not a manor house, nestling in the warm embrace of farming acres. This was simply the home of a Great Success.

Having said that, while not traditional in an aristocratic sense, the whole thing had quite a 1930s feel, as if it were built with the ill-gotten gains of a First World War profiteer. The Agatha Christie element provided by the chauffeur was continued by the bowing butler at the door and even by a housemaid, glimpsed on my way to the pale oak staircase, in her black dress and frilly apron, although she seemed perhaps more frivolous, as if I had suddenly been transported to the set of a Gershwin musical. A sense of the odd unreality of the adventure was, if anything, confirmed when I was shown to my room without

first having met my host. There is always a slight whodunnit shiver of danger in this arrangement. A dark-clad servant hovering in the door and muttering 'Please come down to the drawing room when you are ready, Sir,' seems more suited to the reading of a will than a social call. But the room itself was nice enough. It was lined with pale-blue damask, which had also been used to drape the high, four-poster bed. The furniture was stable, solid English stuff and a group of Chinoiserie paintings on glass, between the windows, was really charming, even if there was the unmistakable tinge of a country house hotel, rather than a real country house, about it all, confirmed by the bathroom, which was sensational, with a huge bath, a walk-in shower, shiny taps on tall pipes coming straight up out of the floor, and enormous towels, fluffy and brand new. As we know, this kind of detail is seldom found in private houses in the shires, even today. I tidied myself up and went downstairs.

The drawing room was predictably cavernous, with a vaulted ceiling and those over-springy carpets that have been too recently replaced. Not the shagpile of the minted club owner, nor the flat and ancient rugs of the posh, but smooth and sprung and *new*. Everything in the room had been purchased within living memory and apparently by a single purchaser. There was none of the ragbag of tastes that country houses are inclined to represent, where the contents of a dozen homes, the amalgamated product of forty amateur collectors over two or three centuries, are flung together into a single room. But it was good. In fact, it was excellent, the furniture largely from the early years of the eighteenth century, the pictures rather later, all fine, all shining clean and all in tip-top condition. After the similar experience of my bedroom, I wondered if Damian had employed a buyer, someone whose job was just to put his life together. Either way, there was no very tangible sense of him, or any other personality really, in the room. I wandered about, glancing at the paintings, unsure whether to stand or sit. In truth it felt forlorn, despite its splendour; the burning coals in the grate could not dispel the slightly clammy atmosphere, as if the room had been cleaned but not used for quite a while. And there were no flowers, which I always think a telltale sign; there was nothing living, in fact, giving a staleness to its perfection, a kind of lifeless sterility. I could not imagine that a woman had played much part in its creation,

nor, God knows, that a child had played any part at all.

There was a sound at the door. 'My dear chap,' said a voice, still with the slight hesitance, the suspicion of a stammer, that I remembered so well. 'I hope I haven't kept you waiting.'

There is a moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet catches sight of her sister who has returned with the dastardly Wickham, rescued from disgrace by the efforts of Mr Darcy. 'Lydia was Lydia still,' she comments. Well, Damian Baxter was Damian still. That is, while the broad and handsome young man with the thick curls and the easy smile had vanished and been replaced by a hunched figure resembling no one so much as Doctor Manette, I could detect that distinctive, diffident stutter masking a deep and honed sense of superiority, and I recognised at once the old, patronising arrogance in the flourish with which he held out his bony hand. I smiled. 'How very nice to see you,' I said.

'Is it?' We stared at each other's faces, marvelling simultaneously at the extent, and at the lack, of change that we found there.

As I looked at him more closely I could see that when he had talked in his letter of being 'a dying man,' he had been speaking the literal truth. He was not just old before his time but ill, very ill, and seemingly past the point of no return. 'Well, it's interesting. I suppose I can say that.'

'Yes, you can say that.' He nodded to the butler who hovered near the door. 'I wonder if we might have some of that champagne?' It didn't surprise me that even forty years later he still liked to wrap his orders in diffident questions. I was a veteran witness of this trick. Like many who try it, Damian imagined, I think, that it suggested a charming lack of confidence, a faltering but honourable desire to get it right, which I knew for a fact he had not felt since some time around 1967 and I doubt he knew much of it then. The man addressed did not seem to feel any answer was required of him and I'm sure it wasn't. He just went to get the wine.

Dinner was a formal, muted affair in a dining room that unsuccessfully crossed William Morris and Liberty's with a dash of the Hollywood hills. High, mullioned windows, a heavy, carved, stone chimneypiece and more of the bouncy carpet added up to a curiously flat and unevocative result, as if a table and chairs had unaccountably

been set up in an empty, but expensive, lawyer's office. But the food was delicious, if quite wasted on Damian, and we both got some fun out of the Margaux he'd selected. The silent butler, whom I now knew as Bassett, hardly left us for a minute and, inevitably, the conversation played out before him was desultory. I remember an aunt once telling me that when she looked back to the days before the war, she was astonished at some of the table talk she'd witnessed, where the presence of servants seemed to act as no restraining force at all. Political secrets, family gossip, personal indiscretions, all came bubbling forth before the listening footmen and must presumably have enlivened many an evening in the local pub, if not, as in our more greedy and salacious times, their published memoirs. But we have lost that generation's sublime confidence in their own way of life. Whether we like it or not – and I do like it really – time has made us conscious of the human spirit in those who serve us. For anyone born since the 1940s all walls have ears.

So we nattered on about this and that. He asked after my parents and I asked after his. In actual fact my father had been quite fond of him but my mother, whose jungle instincts were generally more reliable, sensed trouble from the start. She, at any rate, had died in the interim since we last met and so had both of his, so there wasn't much to be said. From there, we discussed various others of that mutual acquaintance of long ago, and by the time we were ready to move on we had covered an impressive list of career disappointments, divorces and premature death.

At last he stood, addressing Bassett as he did so. 'Do you think we could have our coffee in the library?' Again he asked softly, as a favour that might be denied. What would happen, I wonder, if someone so instructed should take the hesitant question at face value? 'No, Sir. I'm afraid I'm a bit busy at the moment. I'll try to bring some coffee later on.' I should like to see it once. But this butler knew what he was about and went to carry out the veiled command, while Damian led the way into the nicest of the rooms that I had seen. It looked as if an earlier owner, or possibly Damian himself, had purchased a complete library from a much older house, with dark, richly shining shelves and a screen of beautifully carved columns. There was a delicate chimneypiece of pinkish marble and in a polished steel basket a fire had been lit for our

arrival. The combination of flickering flames and gleaming leather bindings, as well as some excellent pictures – a large seascape that looked like a Turner and the portrait of a young girl by Lawrence among them – gave a warmth notably lacking elsewhere in the house. I had been unjust. Obviously it was not lack of taste but lack of interest that had made the other rooms so dreary. This was where Damian actually lived. Before long we were equipped with drinks and cups of coffee, and alone.

'You've done very well,' I said. 'Congratulations.'

'Are you surprised?'

'Not terribly.'

He accepted this with a nod. 'If you mean I was always ambitious, I confess it.'

'I think I meant that you would never take no for an answer.'

He shook his head. 'I wouldn't say that,' he said. I wasn't completely sure what he meant by this but before I could delve he spoke again. 'I knew when I was beaten, even then. When I found myself in a situation where success was not a possible outcome, I accepted it and moved on. You must grant me that.'

This was nonsense. 'I won't grant you that,' I said. 'Or anything like it. It may be a virtue you achieved in later life. I cannot tell. But when I knew you your eyes were much larger than your stomach and you were a very poor loser, as I should know.'

Damian looked surprised for a moment. Perhaps he had spent so much of his life with people who were paid, in one way or another, to agree with him that he had forgotten not everyone was obliged to. He sipped his brandy and after a pause he nodded. 'Well, be that as it may, I am beaten now.' In answer to my unasked question he elaborated. 'I have inoperable cancer of the pancreas. There is nothing to be done. The doctor has given me about three months to live.'

'They often get these things wrong.'

'They occasionally get these things wrong. But not in my case. There may be a variant of a few weeks, but that's all.'

'Oh.' I nodded. It is hard to know how to respond suitably to this kind of declaration because people's needs can be so different. I doubted that Damian would want wailing and weeping or suggestions of alternative cures based on a macrobiotic diet, but you never know. I waited.

'I don't want you to feel I am raging at the injustice of it. My life has, in a way, come to a natural conclusion.'

'Meaning?'

'I have, as you point out, been very fortunate. I've lived well. I've travelled. And there's nothing left in my work that I still want to do, so that's something. Do you know what I've been up to?'

'Not really.'

'I built up a company in computer software. We were among the first to see the potential of the whole thing.'

'How clever of you.'

'You're right. It does sound dull, but I enjoyed it. Anyway, I've sold the business and I will not start another.'

'You don't know that.' I can't think why I said this, because of course he did know exactly that.

'I'm not complaining. I sold out to a nice, big American company and they gave me enough money to put Malawi back on its feet.'

'But that's not what you're going to do with it.'

'I don't think so, no.'

He hesitated. I was fairly sure we were approaching what they call the 'nub' of why I was here, but he didn't seem able to progress things. I thought I might as well have a shot at moving us along. 'What about your private life?' I ventured pleasantly.

He thought for a moment. 'I don't really have one. Nothing worthy of the name. The odd arrangement for my comfort, but nothing more than that for many years now. I'm not at all social.'

'You were when I knew you,' I said. I was still transfixed by the thought of the 'odd arrangement for my comfort.' Golly. I resolved to steer clear of any attempt at clarification.

There was no further need to keep things moving. Damian had got started. 'I did not like the world you took me into, as you know.' He looked at me challengingly but I had no comment to make so he continued, 'but, paradoxically, when I left it, I found I didn't care for the entertainments of my old world either. After a while I gave up "parties" altogether.'

'Did you marry?'

'Once. It didn't last very long.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I only married because I'd got to that age when it starts to feel odd not to have married. I was thirty-six or -seven and curious eyebrows were beginning to be raised. Of course, I was a fool. If I'd waited another five years, my friends would have started to divorce and I wouldn't have been the only freak in the circus.'

Was she anyone I knew?'

'Oh, no. I'd escaped from your crowd by then and I had no desire to return to it, I can assure you.'

'Any more than we had the smallest desire to see you,' I said. There was something relieving in this. A trace of our mutual dislike had surfaced and it felt more comfortable than the pseudo-friendship we had been playing at all evening. 'Besides, you don't know what my crowd is. You don't know anything about my life. It changed that night as much as yours. And there is more than one way of moving on from a London Season of forty years ago.'

He accepted this without querying it. 'Quite right. I apologise. But, truly, you would not have known Suzanne. When I met her she was running a fitness centre near Leatherhead.' Inwardly I agreed that it was unlikely my path had crossed with the ex-Mrs Baxter's so I was silent. He sighed wearily. 'She tried her best. I don't want to speak ill of her. But we had nothing at all to hold us together.' He paused. 'You never married in the end, did you?'

'No. I didn't. Not in the end.' The words came out more harshly than I intended but he did not seem to wonder at it. The subject was painful for me and uncomfortable for him. At least, it bloody well should have been. I decided to return to a safer place. 'What happened to your wife?'

'Oh, she married again. Rather a nice chap. He has a business selling sportsware, so I suppose they had more to build on than we did.'

'Were there any children?'

'Two boys and a girl. Though I don't know what happened to them.'

'I meant with you.'

He shook his head. 'No, there weren't.' This time his silence seemed very profound. After a moment he completed the thought. 'I can't have children,' he said. Despite the apparent finality of this statement there was something oddly unfinal in the tone of his voice, almost like that strange and unnecessary question mark that the young have imported

from Australia, to finish every sentence. He continued, 'that is to say, I could not have children by the time that I married.'

He stopped, as if to allow me a moment to digest this peculiar sentence. What could he possibly mean? I assumed he had not been castrated shortly before proposing to the fitness centre manageress. Since he had introduced the topic, I didn't feel guilty in wanting to make a few enquiries, but in the event he answered before I had voiced them. 'We went to various doctors and they told me my sperm count was zero.'

Even in our disjointed, modern society, this is quite a taxing observation to counter with something meaningful. 'How disappointing,' I said.

'Yes. It was. Very *disappointing.*'

Obviously I'd chosen badly. 'Couldn't they do something about it?'

'Not really. They suggested reasons as to why it might have happened, but no one thought it could be reversed. So that was that.'

'You could have tried other ways. They're so clever now.' I couldn't bring myself to be more specific.

He shook his head. 'I'd never have brought up someone else's child. Suzanne had a go at persuading me but I couldn't allow it. I just didn't see the point. Once the child isn't yours, aren't you just playing with dolls? Living dolls, maybe. But dolls.'

'A lot of people would disagree with you.'

He nodded. 'I know. Suzanne was one of them. She didn't see why she had to be barren when it wasn't her fault, which was reasonable enough. I suppose we knew we'd break up from the moment we left the surgery.' He stood to fetch himself another drink. He'd earned it.

'I see,' I said, to fill the silence, rather dreading what was coming.

Sure enough, when he spoke again his tone was more determined than ever. 'Two specialists believed it might have been the result of adult mumps.'

'I thought that was a myth, used to frighten nervous, young men.'

'It's very rare. But it can happen. It's a condition called orchitis, which affects the testicles. Usually it goes away and everything's fine, but sometimes, very occasionally, it doesn't. I didn't have mumps as a boy and I wasn't aware I'd ever caught it, but when I thought it over, I was struck down with a very sore throat a few days after I got back

from Portugal, in July of nineteen seventy. I was in bed for a couple of weeks and my glands certainly swelled up, so maybe they were right.'

I shifted slightly in my chair and took another sip of my drink. My presence here was beginning to make a kind of uncomfortable sense. In a way I had invited Damian to Portugal, to join a group of friends. God knows, in the event it was more complicated than that but the excuse had been the party was short of men and our hostess had got me to ask him. With disastrous results, as it happens. So, was he now trying to blame me for being sterile? Had I been invited here to acknowledge my fault? That as much harm as he had done to me on that holiday, so had I done to him? 'I don't remember anyone being ill,' I said.

He did, apparently. 'That girlfriend of the guy who had the villa. The neurotic American with the pale hair. What was her name? Alice? Alix? She kept complaining about her throat, the whole time we were there.'

'You have wonderfully perfect recall.'

'I've had a lot of time to think.'

The image of that sun whitened villa in Estoril, banished from my conscious mind for nearly four decades, suddenly filled my mind. The hot, blond beach below the terrace, drunken dinners resonating with sex and subtext, climbing the hill to the haunted castle at Cintra, swimming in the whispering, blue waters, waiting in the great square before Lisbon Cathedral to walk past the body of Salazar . . . The whole experience sprang back into vivid, technicoloured life, one of those holidays that bridge the gap between adolescence and maturity, with all the attendant dangers of that journey, where you come home quite different from when you set out. A holiday, in fact, that changed my life. I nodded. 'Yes. Well, you would have done.'

'Of course, if that were the reason, then I could have had a child before.'

Despite his seriousness I couldn't match it. 'Even you wouldn't have had much time. We were only twenty-one. These days every girl on a housing estate may be pregnant by the time she's thirteen, but it was different then.' I smiled reassuringly, but he wasn't watching. Instead, he was busy opening a drawer in a handsome *bureau plat* beneath the Lawrence. He took out an envelope and gave it to me. It wasn't new. I

could just make out the postmark. It looked like 'Chelsea. 23rd December 1990.'

'Please read it.'

I unfolded the paper gingerly. The letter was entirely typed, with neither opening greeting nor final signature written by hand. 'Dear Shit,' it began. How charming. I looked up with raised eyebrows.

'Go on.'

> Dear Shit, It is almost Christmas. It is also late and I am drunk and so I have found the nerve to say that you have made my life a living lie for nineteen years. I stare at my living lie each day and all because of you. No one will ever know the truth and I will probably burn this rather than send it, but you ought to realise where your deceit and my weakness have led me. I do not quite curse you, I could not do that, but I don't forgive you, either, for the course my life has taken. I did not deserve it.

At the end, below the body of the text, the author had typed: 'A fool.'

I stared at it. 'Well, she did send it,' I said. 'I wonder if she meant to.'

'Perhaps someone else picked it up from the hall table and posted it, without her knowledge.'

This seemed highly likely to me. 'That would have given her a turn.'

'You are sure it is a "her"?'

I nodded. 'Aren't you? "My life has been a living lie." "Your deceit and my weakness." None of it sounds very butch to me. I rather like her signing it "a fool." It reminds me of the pop lyrics of our younger days. Anyway, I assume the base deceit to which she refers comes under the heading of romance. It doesn't sound like someone feeling let down over a bad investment. That would make the writer female, wouldn't it? Or has your life steered you along new and previously untried routes?'

'It would make her female.'

'There we are, then.' I smiled. 'I like the way she cannot curse you. It's quite Keatsian. Like a verse from 'Isabella, or The Pot of Basil': "She weeps alone for pleasures not to be."'

'What do you think it means?'

I wasn't clear how there could be any doubt. 'It's not very mysterious,' I said. But he waited, so I put it into words. 'It sounds as if you have made somebody pregnant.'

'Yes.'

'I assume the deceit she refers to must be some avowal of a forever kind of love, which you made in order to get her to remove her clothing.'

'You sound very harsh.'

'Do I? I don't mean to. Like all of us boys in those days, I tried it often enough myself. Her "weakness" implies you were, in this instance, successful.' But I thought over Damian's original question about the letter's meaning. Did it indicate that he thought things were not quite so straightforward? 'Why? Is there another interpretation? I suppose this woman could have been in love with you and her life since then has been a lie because she married someone else when she'd rather have been with you. Is that what you think it is?'

'No. Not really. If that's all she meant, would she be writing about it twenty years later?'

'Some people take longer than others to get over these things.'

'"I stare at my living lie each day." "No one will ever know." No one will ever know what?' He asked the question as if there could be no doubt as to the answer. Which I agreed with.

I nodded. 'As I said, you made her pregnant.'

He seemed almost reassured that there was no other possible meaning, as if he had been testing me. He nodded. 'And she had the baby.'

'Sounds like it. Though that in itself makes the whole affair something of a period piece. I wonder why she didn't get rid of it.'

At this, Damian gave his unique blend of haughty look and dismissive snort. How well I remembered it. 'I imagine abortion was against her principles. Some people do have principles.'

Now it was my turn to snort. 'I'm not prepared to take instruction from you on that score,' I said, which he let pass, as well he might. The whole thing was beginning to irritate me. Why were we making such a meal of it? 'Very well, then. She had the baby. And nobody knows that you are the father. End of story.' I stared at the envelope, so

carefully preserved. 'At least, was it the end? Or was there some more? After this?'

He nodded. 'That's exactly what I thought at the time. That it was the start of some kind of . . . I don't know . . . extortion.'

'Extortion?'

'My lawyer's word. I went to see him. He took a copy and told me to wait for the next approach. He said that clearly she was building up to a demand for money and we should be ready with a plan. I was in the papers a bit in those days and I'd already had some luck. It seemed likely that she'd suddenly understood her baby's father was rich, and so now might be the moment for a killing. My offspring would have been about twenty then—'

'Nineteen,' I said. 'Her life was a living lie for nineteen years.'

He looked puzzled for a moment, then he nodded. 'Nineteen and just starting out. Cash would have come in very useful.' He looked at me. I didn't have anything to add since, like the lawyer, I thought this all made sense. 'I would have given her something.' He was quite defensive. 'I was perfectly prepared to.'

'But she didn't write again.'

'No.'

'Perhaps she died.'

'Perhaps. Although it seems rather melodramatic. Perhaps, as you say, the letter got posted by accident. Anyway, we heard nothing more and gradually the thing drifted away.'

'So why are we discussing it now?'

He did not answer me immediately. Instead, he stood up and crossed to the chimneypiece. A log had rolled forward on to the hearth and he took up the tools to rectify it, doing so with a kind of deadly intensity. 'The thing is,' he said at last, speaking into the flames but presumably addressing me, 'I want to find the child.'

There didn't seem to be any logic in this. If he'd wanted to 'do the right thing,' why hadn't he done it eighteen years before, when there might have been some point? 'Isn't it a bit late?' I asked. 'It wouldn't have been easy to play dad when she wrote the letter; but by now the "child" is a man or woman in their late thirties. They are what they are, and it's far too late to help shape them now.'

None of this seemed to carry any weight whatever. I'm not sure he

even heard. 'I want to find them,' he repeated. 'I want you to find them.'

It would be foolish to pretend that I had not by this stage worked out that this was where we were headed. But it was not a task I relished. Nor was I in the least sure I would undertake it. 'Why me?'

'When I met you I had only slept with four girls.' He paused. I raised my eyebrows faintly. Any man of my generation will understand that this was impressive in itself. At nineteen, which is what we were when we first came across each other, I do not believe I had done much more than kiss on the dance floor. He hadn't finished. 'I knew all four until well into the early 1970s and it definitely wasn't one of them. Then you and I ran around for a while, and I kept myself fairly busy. A couple of years later, when that period had come to an end, we went to Portugal. And after that I was sterile. Besides, look at the writing, look at the paper, read the phrases. This woman is educated—'

'And histrionic. And drunk.'

'Which does not prevent her being posh.'

'I'll say.' I considered his theory some more. 'What about the years between the end of the Season and Portugal?'

He shook his head. 'A few, mainly scrubbers, and a couple left over from our times together. Not one who had a baby before that summer.' He sighed wearily. 'Anyway, nobody lives a lie who hasn't got something to lose. Something worth holding on to, something that would be endangered by the truth. She wrote to me in 1990 when the upper and upper middle classes occupied the last remaining bastion of legitimate birth. Anyone normal would have let the secret out of the bag long ago.' The effort of saying all this, plus the log work, had depleted what remained of his energy and he sank back into his chair with a groan.

I did not pity him. Quite the contrary. Suddenly the unreasonableness of his request struck me forcibly. 'But I'm not in your life. I am nothing to do with you. We are completely different people.' I wasn't insulting him. I simply could not see why any of this was my responsibility. 'We may have known each other once, but we don't now. We went to some dances together forty years ago. And quarrelled. There must be others who are far closer to you than I ever was. I can't be the only person who could take this on.'

'But you are. These women came from your people, not mine. I

have no other friends who would know them, or even know *of* them. And in fact, if we are having this conversation, I have no other friends.'

This was too self-serving for my taste. 'Then you have no friends at all, because you certainly can't count me.' Naturally, once the words were out I rather regretted them. I did believe that he was dying and there was no point in punishing him now for things that could never be undone, whatever he or I might wish.

But he smiled. 'You're right. I have no friends. As you know better than most, it's not a relationship I could ever either understand or manage. If you will not do this for me I have no one else to ask. I cannot even hire a detective. The information I need would not be available to anyone but an insider.' I was about to suggest he undertake the search himself, but looking at his shaking, hollow frame, the words died on my lips. 'Will you do it?' he asked after a brief pause.

At this point, I was quite sure that I really didn't want to. Not just because of the prickly, time-wasting and awkward nature of the quest, but because the more I thought about it, the more I knew I didn't want to poke around in my own past, any more than his. The time he spoke of was over. For both of us. I had hardly kept up with anyone from those days, for reasons which involved him, as he knew, and what was there to gain by rootling around in it all? I decided to make a last attempt to appeal to his better nature. Even people like Damian Baxter must have a little. 'Damian, think. Do you really want to turn their life upside down? This man, this woman, they know who they are and they're living their life as best they can. Will it help to find they're someone different and unknown? To make them question, or even break with, their parents? Would you want that on your conscience?'

He looked at me quite steadily. 'My fortune, after death duties, will be far in excess of five hundred million pounds. My intention is to make my child sole heir. Are you prepared to take the responsibility for denying them their inheritance? Would you want *that* on *your* conscience?'

Naturally, it would have been *jejune* to pretend that this did not make all the difference in the world. 'How would I set about it?' I said.

He relaxed. 'I will present you with a list of the girls I slept with during those years, who had a child before April 1971.' This was again impressive. The list of girls I had slept with during the same period,

with or without children, could have been contained on the blank side of a visiting card. It was also very precise and oddly businesslike. I had thought we were engaged in some sort of philosophical exchange but I saw now we were approaching what used to be called 'brass tacks.' He obviously sensed my surprise. 'My secretary has made a start. There didn't seem much point in your getting in touch if they hadn't had a baby.' Which was of course true. 'I believe the list is comprehensive.'

'What about the girls you slept with who did not bear children at that time?'

'Don't let's worry about them. No point in making work.' He smiled. 'We've done a lot of weeding. There were a couple of others I slept with who did have an early child but, in the words of the Empress Eugénie's mother when challenged over her Imperial daughter's paternity, *les dates ne correspondent pas*.' He laughed, easier now that he saw his plan would come to fruition. 'I want you to know that I have taken this seriously and there is a real possibility that it could be any one of the listed names.'

'So how do I go about it?'

'Just get in touch. With one exception, I've got the present addresses.'

'Why don't you ask them to have a DNA test?'

'That sort of woman would never agree.'

'You romanticise them in your dislike. I suspect they would. And their children certainly would when they found out why.'

'No.' He was suddenly quite firm again. I could see my comment had annoyed him. 'I don't want this to be a story. Only the true child must know I'm looking for them. When they have the money it will be their choice to reveal how or why they got it. Until then, this is for my private satisfaction, not public consumption. Test one who isn't my child and we will read the story in the *Daily Mail* the following week.' He shook his head. 'Maybe we should test them at the last, but only when you have elected which of the said progeny is probably mine.'

'But suppose one of the women had a baby without anyone knowing and put it up for adoption?'

'They haven't done that. At least, the mother of my baby hasn't.'

'How do you know?'

'Because then she wouldn't have stared at her lie every day.'

I had nothing further to say, at least until I'd thought about it all

some more, which Damian seemed to understand and did not wish to challenge. He pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. 'I'm going to bed now. I haven't been up as late as this for months. You will find the list in an envelope in your room. If you wish, we can discuss it some more tomorrow morning before you go. At the risk of sounding vulgar, as you would say, you'll also find a credit card, which will cover any expenses you care to charge on it during your enquiries. I will not question whatever you choose to use it for.'

This last detail actively annoyed me as it was deliberately phrased in a manner designed to make me think him generous. But nothing about this commission was generous. It was a hideous imposition. 'I haven't agreed yet,' I said.

'I hope you will.' He was at the door when he stopped. 'Do you ever see her now?' he asked, confident that I would require no prompting as to the object of his enquiry. Which was correct.

'No. Not really.' I thought for a painful moment. 'Very occasionally, at a party or a wedding or something. But not really.'

'You aren't enemies?'

'Oh, no. We smile. And even talk. We're certainly not enemies. We're not anything.'

He hesitated, as if he were pondering whether to go down this path. 'You know I was mad.'

'Yes.'

'But I want you to understand that I know it, too. I went completely mad.' He paused, as if I might come in with some suitable response. But there wasn't one. 'Would it help if I said I was sorry?' he asked.

'Not terribly.'

He nodded, absorbing the information. We both knew there was nothing further to add. 'Stay down here as long as you like. Have some more whisky and look at the books. Some of them will interest you.'

But I wasn't quite finished. 'Why have you left it until now?' I said. 'Why didn't you make enquiries when you first got the letter?'

This did make him pause and ponder, as the light from the hall came through the now open door and deepened the lines of his ravaged face. Presumably he asked himself the same question a thousand times a day. 'I don't know. Not completely. Maybe I couldn't bear the thought of anyone feeling they had a claim against me. I didn't see how I could

find and identify them without giving them some power. And I'd never really wanted a child. Which is probably why I wouldn't listen to my wife's pleadings. It wasn't one of my ambitions. I don't think I was ever naturally paternal.'

'Yet now you are prepared to give this unknown stranger enough money to build a small industrial town. Why? What's changed?'

Damian thought for a moment and a tiny sigh made his thin shoulders rise and fall. The jacket, which must once have fitted flawlessly, flapped loosely around his shrivelled frame. 'I'm dying and I have no beliefs,' he said simply. 'This is my only chance of immortality.'

Then he was gone and I was left to enjoy his library alone.