The Inheritance

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Extract

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Jan braced herself as the spooled-up engines gave an enormous roar and the 737 charged down the runway.

'I hate this bit,' she thought as the plane left the ground and climbed steeply towards an iron-grey canopy of cloud. From her seat by the window she watched the earth below as it turned from a landscape to a table-top model; then finally the animated green and brown map disappeared as the plane entered the clouds. For a few moments it was completely enveloped in mist, before it burst through into sparkling sunshine and a serene pale blue sky. As the huge cotton-wool carpet receded below them she nudged Eddie, who was sitting beside her.

'That's more like it,' she said, pointing out through the window. 'Here comes the sun.'

Eddie didn't answer. Nor did he look in the direction Jan was indicating.

'Eddie?'

But Eddie's eyes were closed, his head was jammed back against the headrest and his cheeks were as white as the fluffy clouds below. So were the knuckles of his fingers, which were clamped tightly on the armrests.

'Hey, Eddie! What's the matter? You look terrible.'

She nudged him harder and he opened his eyes.

'I *feel* terrible,' he whispered.

'My God, you can't have the trots already. We've only just left England.'

He shook his head.

'No, no, it's not that,' he groaned through clenched teeth.

His eyes closed again and Jan stared at him. Sweat was appearing in beads on his forehead, his mouth was set tight.

'Eddie, you're not . . . ?'

She tapped him sharply on the wrist, feeling the rigid tendons bracing the grip of his hand on the seat. In the bright sunlight his handsome face was a mask of anxiety.

'You're not *scared of flying*, are you?'

Eddie nodded. 'Bloody terrified, actually. I always have been.'

Jan smiled and lightly stroked the back of his hand.

'I thought you were strangely quiet on the way down to the airport. How come you never told me when we booked the flights?'

'I'm not afraid when it's in the future. Only when I'm in the departure lounge – that's when it starts.'

'You poor old thing. It must have been hell shuttling backwards and forwards to Australia all those times.'

'It wasn't much fun,' Eddie admitted, 'but the drinks trolley helped. As it would do now.'

'Don't be daft. It's seven in the morning. You'll be all right.'

'It's just sitting here, having nothing to do but wait for something seriously unpleasant to happen.'

Jan gestured to Matty and Megan, who were sitting in the row in front. They were busy using the crayons provided by the airline to keep them amused.

'Shall I get you an activity pack? You could keep yourself occupied with some colouring in.'

Eddie smiled at Jan's withering irony.

'Don't take the piss, Jan, it's not funny. I'll be all right in a while.'

She leant across and kissed him on the cheek.

'Cheer up. They'll be round with some coffee in a minute.'

For the next hour Jan kept dozing off. Racehorse trainers are used to early rising, so today's start from Edge Farm in the dawn light hadn't seemed particularly hard. But now she felt extremely tired. Perhaps it was the release of tension: all that lay ahead, as far as Jan was concerned, was two weeks of blissful relaxation.

Jan knew she deserved this holiday, they all did. She had worked extremely hard since the dramatic events of the winter, when justice

had at long last been meted out to Harold Powell, and she'd settled accounts with Virginia Gilbert at Leopardstown – if not finally, then at least for the time being. Her reputation in the racing world, as a trainer with a small string but large ambitions, had grown steadily. There had been four or five important races in which her horses had run really well, and she'd come out on top in three head-to-head encounters with runners from Virginia's Riscombe Manor yard. True, their best young animals, her Morning Glory and Virginia's Velvet Dynasty, had not met since Leopardstown. MG had got a terrific second to an Irish horse in a novice hurdle at the Cheltenham Festival, while Velvet Dynasty had been off the course with a dreaded virus. After the Festival Jan had had a magical run of nine good-class winners in a month. Russian Eagle had missed the Grand National – Jan knew he was a bit short of work following a bout of coughing and took an easier route. In an emotional return to Fairyhouse a couple of weeks later, he'd almost taken the Irish National for the second time, valiantly running the winner to a neck whilst carrying a stone more in weight. Eddie hadn't been riding him, in fact he'd not sat on a horse since the car crash eighteen months ago and Jan now wondered if he ever would.

She yawned, stretched and checked the children. They'd both dozed off, their colouring half-finished. Beside her, Eddie was emptying a miniature brandy into a cup of coffee on the hinged table in front of him. An empty bottle already stood next to it: the medicine was obviously beginning to work as something resembling his normal colour had returned to Eddie's cheeks. He looked at Jan, his smile still a little half-hearted, and raised the cup.

'Medicinal,' he mouthed.

She smiled back and shook open her paper at the racing page.

'Here, Jan, why don't you, Eddie and the kids have my place in the Algarve for a couple of weeks?' Bernie Sutcliffe had said in an expansive manner. 'It's great there – sun, sand, sangria, the lot.'

It was back before Easter and they were in the owners' and trainers' bar at Ludlow racecourse, drinking a bottle of what seemed to be Bernie's favourite brand of champagne – the cheapest

available. Jan had happened to mention that she'd never once taken her family away for a seaside holiday.

'Oh, Bernie, we couldn't possibly,' Jan countered automatically. Instinctively she shrank from being beholden to any owner. But at the same time she was curious, wondering what Bernie's place in Portugal was like.

'Yes, you could,' Bernie pressed her again, sounding even more enthusiastic about his brilliant idea. 'It's free the last two weeks of July. Take it then.'

'Well, that's *very* generous of you,' Jan conceded.

Smirking, Bernie poured another glass of champagne.

'Not generous at all, but when I say "free" I mean it's not reserved or anything. I usually go myself in July and I can let you have it at cost. You just pay the staff while you're there. It's a snip in value terms, but it's not expensive anyway, Portugal.'

'Is it near the sea?'

'Course it is, just a few minutes' walk, beautiful beaches and anyway it's got its own pool. Lovely place. Very classy. Very exclusive. Villa Lagoa Azul. In other words: the Blue Lagoon Villa.'

Driving home in the horsebox, Jan had asked Eddie what he thought about Bernie's suggestion.

'The Blue Lagoon? It sounds like a hot Kim Basinger film. Saxophone jazz and sex in the sun are good enough for me.'

'As Bernie would want it to be, I'm sure.'

'Well, I'm completely in favour. The villa sounds dead romantic. And the kids would love the beach.'

In Jan's eyes this was by far the best argument for taking up the offer. Megan and Matty's classmates were always going off on foreign holidays. Several had been to Spain and the Greek islands last year and one had even been to the Gambia, which sounded impossibly distant and exotic. Why should her children be deprived? She chewed her lip for a moment. The question was could she afford it.

'Oh, to hell with it, let's go,' she said loudly, banging the steering wheel with her hands. 'July's our quietest month. The amount Bernie said he'd charge for the villa sounds very reasonable, and a flight to Faro can't be that dear.'

Eddie sat back in his seat, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction.

'It'll be great, babe, I know it will.'



The heat at Faro airport was stifling. Eddie showed the address of Bernie's villa to the taxi driver, who nodded his head vigorously.

'I know this place. We go. Twenty minutes.'

They drove for forty. At first the road was a busy dual carriageway, with glimpses of the sea on one side and of scrubby, heat-parched countryside, with vineyards and olive groves, on the other. Just as Jan was about to ask the driver if he knew where he was going, they turned off the main road and raced down towards the seafront. It was a twisty, narrow street, lined with white-painted houses whose doors and shutters were picked out in bright reds, greens and blues. Cats and chickens jumped out of the way as the taxi flew past. After a few minutes the brakes squealed and the car swept under an arched gateway in a cloud of dust. Jan caught sight of a faded sign on a sun-cracked wooden panel. It read Villa Lagoa Azul.

The taxi driver pulled up on a dusty forecourt in front of a substantial but water-stained concrete building whose main feature was a plethora of balconies rising up several storeys, each identically angled to face in the direction of the sea. Jan, Eddie and the children got out of the cab and looked around.

'This can't be right,' said Jan, squinting up at the building. 'These look like apartments.'

She tried to make the driver understand that he must have taken them to the wrong place, but he insisted he hadn't.

At that moment a couple emerged from the building and strolled towards them. 'Hi, I'm Jim and this is Eileen. You look lost. Can we help?'

Jim was bald and his peeling red skin showed that they, too, were recent arrivals. Relieved to hear English voices, Jan asked if they spoke any Portuguese.

'Not a word,' said the man cheerily in a Lancashire accent. 'Never seem to need it. Not round here, anyway.'

'I'm trying to get the driver to understand that he's brought us to the wrong place.'

'Let's have a dekko at the address.'

Jim took the letter Bernie had sent to Jan, which she had been trying to show the cabbie.

'Oh yes, this is the place all right. I see you've got the apartment above ours. Are you friends of Bernie's? This is one of his fortnights. As it is one of ours too, we see him most years.'

'One of his fortnights? I don't get you.'

'Most of us get three or four fortnights a year here – you know, that's our share. I believe he has three.'

'You mean . . . this is a *timeshare?*'

'Well, the Portu-geezers call it a *mulitpropriedado*, but it's exactly the same thing.'

'Oh!' Jan and Eddie exchanged looks.

'Why's it called a villa, then?' Eddie asked.

The Englishman shrugged.

'Well, there probably was a villa on this site once upon a time. Maybe it was bulldozed to make way for this.'

Jan sighed. Bloody Bernie with his fantasies of grandeur.

'OK,' she said, looking up at the building again through new eyes. 'Where do we find the keys?'



Bernie Sutcliffe's timeshare apartment was on the fifth floor and, though boasting two box-like bedrooms and a small family bathroom, was largely made up of an open-plan living area with kitchen space and breakfast bar, a Formica-topped dining table with four upright chairs, and a three-piece suite made of bent cane. A sliding plate-glass door separated the room from a triangular balcony at the front. Nor did it have a swimming pool of its own, there was a busy communal pool shared with all the other apartments.

After Eddie had dragged the luggage in, he flopped into one of the cane easy chairs, breathing heavily for a few moments. Then he started laughing.

'And I'd dreamed of a hacienda-style villa with white-coated staff seeing to my every need.'

Megan and Matty were running in and out of the bedrooms screaming. Feeling rather vexed, hot and dusty, Jan wandered onto the balcony, where a few parched geraniums in pots were lined up begging for water. She leant on the balustrade. Between the huge buildings she caught a glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean washing against a sandy beach at least half a mile away.

She nodded towards it. 'I bet that's more than a few minutes' walk, or my name's Christopher Columbus.'

Eddie came out to join her, placing his hand over hers on the iron rail.

'Bernie's special rate doesn't look quite so special now,' Jan said. 'What do you think the going rate is for a place like this? I bet he's charging us that and a bit more. The mean bastard.'

Eddie slipped his arm round her waist.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'We're all together for our first foreign holiday. It'll be fine.'

'What I really hate is always having to think about money. When is it ever going to come right, Eddie? When are we going to be able to do the things we want to do without counting every sodding penny?'

He leant across and kissed her ear.

'Soon. Now come on. The kids and I'll take the cases into the bedrooms, then we'll get out the beach kit and go off to explore a bit. It will be all right, I promise.'

They strolled through the village and followed signs to the *praia*. Eddie timed the walk on his watch and found it took them all of twenty-three minutes to get there. But the effort was worthwhile. The beach was long and wide, with plenty of space between the other holidaymakers, who clustered in family groups under their big blue parasols. It seemed these were rented from a sun-wizened old local who also ran an unofficial-looking beach bar, where they bought crusty rolls and fizzy drinks for lunch. After their tiring journey the sea was delightful. The children scampered around on the beach, in and out of the waves, and with Eddie's help made complicated sandy defences against the tide, which they watched slowly crumble away as the water inevitably overwhelmed them. They were almost the last to leave in the evening. On the way back

to the apartment they noted a small restaurant, called enticingly A Churrascaria Alcatraz, where they went later for a dinner of fresh grilled sardines and vegetables, washed down with Coca-Cola and ice-cold *vinho verde*. It was a hot, stuffy night and back in the apartment, before bedding down, Jan threw open all the windows.

At three a.m. she woke with a start. Her skin felt hot and dry. She'd known that the offshore breeze could double the burning, despite lavish applications of sunblock – but this was not what had woken her. She'd heard something. She strained for the sound again and there it was, that thin whine like a miniature buzz saw close to her ear. Suddenly the sound stopped and she knew the insect had landed and was enjoying its meal. She slapped her cheek, but had no idea if this was the place where the mosquito had chosen to picnic.

Jan soon dozed off but, by morning, serious damage had been done. Her face, shoulders and legs were covered in angry mosquito bites.

'God, just look at me,' she called from in front of the bathroom mirror. 'I've been bitten before, but they've never swollen up like this. I look like I've got the plague.'

Eddie, whose blood annoyingly the little blighters had found relatively unappetizing, did his best to be sympathetic. He used calamine lotion to soothe the bites, then made a pot of tea. Back in bed Jan sipped her tea while Eddie leant on the windowsill, staring idly out into the area behind the apartment block.

'Hey,' he said after a moment. 'Come over here.'

Jan put down the mug and joined him at the window. Eddie pointed into the space below them, a patch of bare, sandy earth, strewn with builders' rubbish – broken breeze blocks, lumps of hardened cement and several rusty rolls of steel mesh. Beyond this an assortment of miserable shrubs and cacti struggled for survival around the edge of a pond, about twelve feet across. She saw that its water was sludgy and stagnant, with a sickly turquoise tinge.

'Jan, I think we've found the blue lagoon,' Eddie said. 'Mosquito paradise.'

Two hours later a wrinkled local woman, who must have been well into her seventies, arrived at their door. Her head was covered by a scarf and she was wearing an old print dress. She spoke no English but pointed to her chest and said, 'Maria', then took them laboriously round the apartment, pointing out the rooms and the fittings like a proud guide.

'*Quarto vivo . . . quarto da dormir . . . refrigerador . . . balcão . . .*'

Finally, Maria indicated a cupboard – '*armario*' – which she opened, dragging out a mop and bucket. She waved the mop in the air before rubbing it a few times across the floor, as if to demonstrate her skills. Then she dumped it back into its bucket, shoved them both back in the cupboard and shuffled towards the wall, where a calendar hung. She rapped with her finger on the next day's date, then headed back to the front door.

'*Até amanhã!*' she croaked, waving goodbye, and they all waved back.

Maria was clearly the 'staff' Bernie had referred to.

Following her departure, Eddie went into the village to buy bread, milk, eggs and other supplies at the *minimercado*, and came back with an extra item in a lurid red and black cardboard box.

'What's that?' asked Matty.

'This is the hi-tech answer to Mum's prayers,' Eddie said grandly as he unpacked his purchase. 'It's the famous, patent Moziradicator.'

'What does it do?'

'What the name says. You plug it into the electricity socket and, with the addition of a chemical pill that sits on top, it spews out something really nasty into the air that mosquitoes can't stand. With this baby doing its stuff we won't get bitten again.'

Matty twisted his face.

'Yeugh! But what about the nasty stuff in the air?'

'Don't worry: to us it's odourless, colourless and harmless. But to a mosquito it's like the worst stink bomb you ever let off.'

It would be fair to say that the Moziradicator was the saviour of their holiday. From that night on the miniature doodlebugs, which were breeding like fury on the Blue Lagoon, kept well away from Jan's window and the rest of the fortnight passed in lazy, and occasionally energetic, contentment. She and Eddie lounged by the

communal pool while the children splashed happily in the shallow end for hours. Or they all trekked to the beach and played cricket, frisbee and football with other families and drank beer and Orangina under the blue parasols. At night they had drinks by the pool then ate simply in the apartment, or they went back to the churrascaria for fish, spicy sausages, succulent pork and even on one occasion, to Eddie's great delight, grilled octopus.

Megan pulled a face when he suggested she try it.

'I'm not a *cannibal*, Eddie,' she said with prim firmness. 'It looks like worms.' He grinned at her childlike remark.

All to soon, it was the evening before their last day.

Eddie said to Jan, 'Let's go out after dinner. There's a fado house in the next village. The bloke in the beach bar says everyone should hear fado before they die.' With the help of Jim and Eileen, he had found a teenager from one of the other apartments who was willing to babysit Megan and Matty.

Around nine o'clock they took a taxi and twenty minutes later were sitting at a table in what appeared to be a nightclub, with coffee and brandies in front of them. The performance was to begin at ten. Jan had heard of fado, but had never actually heard it sung and had little idea what to expect. The word, Eddie explained, meant 'fate' and the songs were almost all about love and passion.

Two guitarists came onto the small stage, one carrying a conventional Spanish guitar, the other with an unusual-looking pear-shaped instrument, which Eddie said must be the *guitarra*, an instrument his guidebook told him was unique to Portugal. A breathless hush fell in the room as the *fadista* strode to centre-stage. She was a woman of about forty, tall and slim with shiny dark hair pulled into a tight and complicated braid at the back of her head. Her mouth was painted a vivid red and her eyebrows were curved and starkly pencilled. A black tasselled shawl covered her shoulders over a tight black dress. Her face was immensely proud, her back straight, her arms bare.

'Jesus, will you look at that?' Eddie murmured in admiration. Some other members of the audience shushed him.

For a moment the singer stood surveying the audience haughtily and then the room was plunged into darkness. Out of the shadows

the *guitarra* played a short solo introduction before the other guitar joined in with rippling chords. A spotlight suddenly flashed through the gloom to pick out the dramatic figure of the singer, who breathed in deeply and began to croon. Her voice was vibrant, rich, and produced from deep in the throat, though there was nothing raucous or guttural about it. Pure and full, it swelled and faded and swelled again as the stories of her songs unfolded. Jan had no idea what these were, but she knew they were full of hope and anguish. Under the brilliant light the singer's hands clenched and opened in a convulsive manner, until she reached the final dying note of the song, when they at last came to rest against her skirt.

Like the rest of the audience, Jan listened with intense concentration. It was an extraordinary performance, so draining that the *fadista* sang sets of just three songs before disappearing for a fifteen-minute rest. She came back to sing another set and by the time she approached the end of her last sobbing, heart-rending lament Jan was as exhausted as the *fadista*, but she was also filled with a sense of buzzing exhilaration.

Emerging into the open air, a little drunk from the strong brandy and even stronger music, Jan and Eddie heard the sea breaking against the shore and realized for the first time that the fado house stood close to the beach. Eddie took Jan's hand and led her a short way down a path, until they felt the sand yielding beneath their feet. The sound of the breaking waves was clear, unmuffled by intervening dunes or buildings. Under stars that punctured the deep velvet of the night sky, they crossed to the water's edge. Holding hands, they began to stroll beside the foam.

'Is the tide going out or coming in?' Jan asked.

'Going out, you can tell by the waves. Look, they're getting shorter. By the way, what did you think of the performance?'

'I wanted to cry. I think if I'd known what she was singing about I might have.'

'What *do* you think she was singing about?'

'Oh, I don't know. Things she wanted . . . things she couldn't have, probably.'

They walked on in silence, until Eddie turned quickly to face her.

'Jan, there's something I want. Maybe it's time I found out . . .'

She looked at him. His face was now angled upwards, looking at the stars.

'Found out what, Eddie?'

He stopped and pulled her towards him.

'Found out whether I can have it.'

'Oh? And what is it you want that you can't have?' she asked teasingly.

Gently he lifted her hand, guiding it towards his mouth, briefly putting his lips to the tips of her fingers. At the same time he took her other hand in his, then with his unblinking, crystal-clear eyes locked on hers, he said, 'I want to marry you, Jan Hardy.'

Jan gasped.

The brandy and music, and all the accumulated emotion of the evening, made her momentarily dizzy, her knees felt suddenly weak. But it didn't matter. Eddie was holding her close and, as the tears of joy rolled down her cheeks, she buried her face in his shoulder.

'Hey, come on, it can't be that bad a suggestion.'

Jan stood back from him and looked into his eyes. They were fixed steadily on her face and that steadiness made up her mind.

'Well, I say yes, Edward Sullivan. I say yes, you *can* marry me, if you like.'

He reacted with a blink and his broad mischievous grin as he gathered her close again, swaying her gently from side to side. Even when the sea flowed over their feet they still did not move.

'Eddie?' Jan gasped.

'What?'

'There's one thing you've got completely wrong.'

'That is?'

'The sea.'

'What about the sea?'

'It's not going out, it's coming in.'