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Opening Extract from...

Milan Briefcase

Written by Graham Fulbright

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THE MILAN BRIEFCASE

Graham Fulbright



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'Three things cannot hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth.' Gautama Buddha

For Tamara and Guy

Events would have taken a different turn, had Justin not hailed that London minicab. But let's not get ahead of things, because, despite the fashion for shuttling the reader in and out between past, present and future corridors, it makes more sense to begin at the beginning in a corner of north-western Europe familiarly known as Luritania.

They started out as a quartet: three men (Tich – the group's founder and doyen – Justin and Craig) and one woman (Vanessa). The habit of meeting for Sunday morning breakfast in Luritania's Lenfindi Airport passenger terminal was Tich's idea. Why there of all places? Perhaps, suggested Justin, because of the contradictory pull of escapism and rootedness: while others thronged to board aircraft to distant places, the quartet dropped anchor in a breakfast island remote from acquaintances for whom eight o'clock on a Sunday morning was an ungodly hour to be up and about.

On this particular Sunday, the advent of Rashid Jabour, a young development finance banker, brought the group to the desired complement of five, prompting Craig, once everybody had settled down, to make a recommendation.

'I propose celebrating Rashid's arrival by giving our club a name.'

Humphrey Robert Hobart aka Tich, a broad-shouldered, forty-year-old bear of a man with a well-tended auburn beard, reacted to Craig's idea by ruffling demurral from his thatch of red hair.

'Is that really necessary? I trust you're not thinking of The Famous Five. Atrocious and somebody else's intellectual property.'

'Apart from which,' said Vanessa Curtis, stirring powdered cinnamon into her cappuccino, 'who gives a fuck about fame?'

If Rashid, the newcomer, was taken aback by this bluntness from the mouth of the raven-haired young woman to whose charms he felt far from insensitive, Tich and the others failed to bat an eyelid. It was a further element for the young banker to digest in his character reading of the female time-study engineer recruited by the European Executive Committee to spearhead its rationalisation drive. Before Vanessa and Justin arrived at their breakfast table, Craig had imparted three other nuggets to Rashid: Vanessa was a gifted amateur theatrical director; the only person in present company entitled to call her Van was Tich, owner of Luritania's sole secondhand bookshop; she and Justin had been and probably still were more than close friends.

'A jest, Van,' said Tich, raising his stentorian voice above the ceaseless chatter of a nearby group of South Koreans competing with the din of the latest flight departure announcement. 'Your tender generation will not, I suppose, have heard of a children's writer by the name of Enid Blyton, who incorporated that title into a number of her tales. Another reason why it wouldn't suit us is that Blyton's group comprised two lads, two girls and a dog.'

'Enid. Not quite in the same category as *The Aeneid?*'

Tich cut himself a slice of almond croissant.' 'No, epic poems were not Miss Blyton's forte.'

Justin broke away from his fixation on the logo on the tail wing of a *Dragonair* Boeing taxiing prior to take off for Hong Kong. 'What was the dog called?'

For once, the book buff looked as if he might have been stumped, but it took only a moment's hesitation to correct that impression. 'Timmy. Rhymes with your ferret, Pliny.'

Rashid expressed surprise. 'A ferret?'

'Yes,' said Craig. 'A likeable creature. Justin occasionally brings it along to our meetings – draped around his neck.'

Justin eased himself back in his seat. 'But, Rashid, I spare people the spectacle of feeding time. Pliny's preferred diet consists of live mice and young rabbits. They keep him healthy. And sociable. When awake. Ferrets spend a good part of the day sleeping. Not as long as a Koala bear but a respectable second.'

'Talking about down under,' said Tich, 'I had a couple of Sheilas in my shop yesterday. Upbraided them for never having heard of Patrick White. Got paid back by being told I'd have more customers if I sold BLTs and milk shakes.'

Craig looked up from his green tea. 'You never thought of doing that?'

'To be honest, yes. But as it would mean employing a full-time help, which I am not prepared to do, and cutting back on space better given over to books, I prefer attracting into my emporium solely those hungering and thirsting after literature.'

Vanessa turned to Rashid. 'Tich lures customers into his dusty realm with the occasional themed window display. Last month, it was Indian literature. Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipul, Arundhati Roy – joss sticks all over the place, four Kamasutra-rated statuettes – unnoticed by the decency commission – , posters of Vishnu and Shiva …'

Tich dusted icing sugar from his fingers. 'No one can accuse me of not trying. Perhaps my next move should be to teach punters to discriminate between a BLT and BLM.'

Justin leant forward. 'Don't tell me. Mayonnaise?'

'You disappoint me, my friend. Yet another untutored hick more familiar with bacon – I am, of course not referring to the philosopher and essayist but to the offcuts of a farmyard quadruped – than with Byatt, Lessing and Murdoch, that trio of giants among Britain's female literary luminaries.'

Vanessa rolled her eyes. 'I doubt whether Antonia, Doris or Iris would thank you for calling them giants.'

Craig tugged at both ear lobes. 'We've drifted off course. No naming suggestions?'

Vanessa brushed crumbs from her skirt. 'Please not *Solidarity*, already accounted for. And not *Ocean's Five.* Unless we're planning on robbing the casino down by the river. I don't think we are, are we?'

'Wouldn't one of you,' said Rashid, 'have to be called Ocean?'

Tich smoothed down a crumpled shirt front. 'Van's taking a dig at me. My grandfather's first name was Sinbad.'

'Seafaring blood in your veins?'

'Not the Samuel Taylor Coleridge variety. The nearest the old boy got to salt water was competing in sand yachting. As for me, the moment the sea turned choppy on a cross Channel ferry trip, my parents had one sick parrot on their hands. I'm a Eurotunnel shareholder.'

Craig looked across to Justin. 'Any ideas?'

'Not off the top of my head. But since you raised the matter, you've obviously thought of something.'

'Right, but I wanted to give the rest of you the chance to have a say first.'

Vanessa set down her coffee cup in order to add butter to a madeleine.

'Nonsense, Craig. Come on. Out with it.'

Before Craig could answer, Tich intervened. 'Hold on, Van. Your Proustian moment. Unless you've killed those memories stone dead with cow paste.'

'Memories? Fuck all in my case. Seeing as how I was raised on rock cakes and lemon meringue pie.'

'Good on you. Mind you, to be fair to Marcel, whose parents were no less miserly with Christian names than was their son with words, he got carried away by more than unbuttered sponge cake.'

'The Groundbreakers.'

Craig's sudden suggestion froze Vanessa's butter knife hand. 'Seriously, Craig? You see us as groundbreakers? Let's keep it unpretentious. The Sunday Quintet.'

'Sounds too much,' said Tich, 'as if we're into chamber music.'

'All right,' said Rashid. 'Since I seem to be responsible for upsetting the applecart, how about the Quondam Quartet?'

'Now,' said Vanessa in rapt admiration of Rashid's dense head of hair, which had something of the plushness of moleskin about it, 'that's real abnegation. Which is to say it stinks.'

'And what,' said Justin, 'would you suggest?'

'The Quarrelsome or bloody Quibbling Quintet.'

'I think,' said Tich, 'that the Quicksilver Quintet would be kinder for a club aiming to pull the rug from under the feet of civilisation as we know it. How about you, Justin?'

'The Quintessential Quintet? No, too much of a mouthful. Something simple – the Spoilers.'

'I agree,' said Craig. 'Groundbreakers is over the top. As we always meet here, why not the Lenfindi Quinte*t*?'

'Well, hardly mind-shatteringly original,' said Tich. 'But closer to my idea, which was the Sunday Club.'

'And both,' said Vanessa, 'avoid the fucking grandiose. I mean, who are you kidding, Tich? Civilisation's got nothing to worry about from us.'

'I fear you are right, Van. Allowed the occasion to go to my head. If we're all agreed, let it be the Lenfindi Quintet.'

In fact, despite his concession to Craig's proposal, stubbornness would not permit Tich, the group's founder, to think of the five as anything other than the Sunday Club.

'Fine,' said Rashid. 'But, tell me, why did you advertise for additional members in Justin's newsletter?'

'We may have made it sound like that,' said Justin. 'But we wanted only one. To help break the decision-making deadlock we find ourselves up against whenever we're two for, two against a new idea.'

'Yes,' said Tich, 'perhaps I ought to explain the ground rules. We alternate on a monthly basis between matters of levity and enterprises of great pith and moment. You have joined us, you will be glad or upset to learn, at the beginning of a month of levity. Last month we started out by debating whether the Council of Europe was a waste of taxpayers' money. Motion carried three to one. Then we moved on to considering whether, if we had a vote, we would cast it in favour of America's answer to Golda Meir. Motion failed – all four against. That was followed by Brexit. Two for, two against. Abstentions, you will have understood, are taboo. And finally, one of us tabled the motion that neither Ukraine nor Turkey should be let anywhere near the European Union until they had radically cleaned up their acts. Motion carried unanimously.'

'I see. And how many responses did you get to your ad?'

'Eight.'

'Wow. And what, pray, caused you to choose me?'

'We're sorely lacking in advanced IT skills for enterprises of great pith and moment.'

'Come again?'

'Another of my jests. No, we welcomed the idea of widening our horizons with a Lebanese graduate of Caius College Cambridge.'

'And how did you come to form your club in the first place?'

'Tich's idea,' said Craig. 'I was a latecomer after bumping into Justin in the football stadium, where we were watching Luritania getting thrashed by France.'

'And Van and I first met,' said Tich, 'years ago, when she wandered into my shop one morning to ask my late wife if we had anything on Gurdjieff. That alone, aside from her rough-hewn vocabulary, convinced us that here was a woman after our own hearts.'

'Yes,' said Vanessa. 'But not to the extent of drooling over *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*.'

'Justin and I,' continued Tich, 'were already friends. When Craig arrived here to manage running of a fitness centre, I made the mistake of agreeing to play him at squash. The bastard ran rings around me. After that, I retreated into the weightlifting room. My more comfortable arena. Anyway, it was upon learning about Craig's refreshingly anti-establishment views over a free yoghurt and honey that I hit on the idea of our club, bringing together a quartet of likeminded, unattached individuals opposed to the status quo.'

'With an action plan?'

'It's early days for that, Rashid. But perhaps your arrival will get the revolutionary juices flowing in the right direction. Next month. Since all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, this month is, as I said, reserved for levity.'

'And what does that mean?

Vanessa looked up from inspecting a damaged mother-of-pearl finger nail. 'When we're lost for ideas, Tich sets us homework. For instance, today Justin agreed to entertain us with howlers picked up over the past week in the press, on the net and elsewhere, with each of us offering a side contribution. Very little in my case, I'm afraid, since I've had my hands full.'

'That's a relief. The thought of having to produce a remedy for society's ills on my first appearance was starting to give me the jitters.'

'Yes, let's lighten the Lenfindi Quintet's mood,' said Craig. 'What have you managed to unearth, Justin?'

Justin pulled a sheet of paper from his breast pocket, unfolded it and cast his eyes over the list of quotations.

'I quite liked the story about a C E R E A L killer brought up during a Google search. It suggested a *modus operandi* a tad more novel than poisoning. Such as using a double-barrelled shotgun loaded with grape nuts.

'Then there was this web news item about a poor fellow who tried to immolate himself, according to which by the time the paramedics got to him "he was conscience and barely breathing".

'Ah, here's something from a murder mystery: *While learning to light campfires on the thirteenth green, the Horowitz's chauffeured limousine would be waiting outside the scout hut*. A remarkable feat for a limo.

'Another one here: *His speech was compounded of equal parts conjecture and speculation*. Bertie Russell would probably have passed that on for untangling to A.J. Ayer.

'On a slightly different note, how does the idea of a Filipino prelate named Cardinal Sin grab you?

'But my two nicest pieces come from a pen friend in Saint Petersburg, where she has been attending a Shakespeare festival. Apparently, all the advertisements on roadside lamp posts and in the underground were quoting Hamlet's exhortation to the players to hold the mirror up to nature. The Russian versions rendered this as holding the mirror up to the environment. They made the bard of Avon out to be paving the way for Greenpeace rather than an acute observer of human nature.

'My friend's second contribution let me know that in her Russian version of Shakespeare's Richard III, the king left defenceless on Bosworth field cries out, "A horse! A horse! Half my kingdom for a horse!" It begs the question, was the translator a Jew?'

Tich's expression altered from restrained approbation to pained disbelief. 'A pen friend, Justin. Are you telling me that in this day and age there are still good people who prefer quill to keyboard?'

'Yes, Tich. One thing on which Poe's raven failed to put the kibosh. Our

correspondence helps brush up my Russian cursive. But perhaps you have something for us? I sense you straining at the leash.'

'Indeed, it would be remiss of me to let this opportunity pass without drawing on the cornucopia provided by a lesser, present-day William. As it happens, a charitable donor dropped by last week with a load of books, including a guide for writers and editors compiled by this popular scribe. In flicking through this, it occurred to me that the author had fallen prey to the temptation of teaching his grandmother to suck eggs.'

Tich cleared his throat, before reading from a notebook that had seen better days. 'Let me explain. Our Bill gives "*Quod est demonstrandum*" for "What was to be demonstrated". He talks about the infinite mood. Might this be the mood of preference for verbs intended to perpetuate, immortalise or filibuster? He clarifies pronunciation of names some might find baffling, but omits Castlereagh. He socks the reader with a plethora of geographical proper nouns, forgetting to mention that we English refer to Vlissingen as Flushing. He likes shooting his linguistic cuffs, but trips over the turn-ups of literalness in informing us that *objet trouvé* means found object and *noblesse oblige* nobility obligates. He's choosy with etymology, so gives no explanation of the origin of the verb to mesmerise. He offers us ROM but not RAM. The list is longer than your arm. Finally, he uses that atrocious semi-Teutonic adverb *respectively* to single out for praise his proofreading daughters. They would appear to have nodded off on the job.

'How about you, Van? If I understand correctly, not sweet F.A.'

'A close second, because I've been working on pruning the cast list of *Camino Real* by lumping together secondary roles.

'So, all I had time to note on the side was a bit of adverbial bombast and a linguistic *non sequitur*.

'The bombast came from a Westminster MP following the fashion for Russian bashing: "The Russian Federation," he announced, "brazenly flouted international law in annexing Crimea, whereby it brought down upon its head widespread international condemnation". Whereby? Instead of saying goodbye to whereby, it looks as if Harrow and Eton still encourage their progeny to lard their waffling with wherebys.

'And the *non sequitur* is not unrelated to Crimea, home to close on one and a half million Russians but fewer than half a million Ukrainians. It struck me as ironic that, when Ukraine's national netball team came to play our side in Luritania last week, their women were heard speaking to each other exclusively in Russian. So much for insistence on purifying Ukrainian tongues of a barbaric language.'

Tich ruffled his hair. 'Well, thereby hangs a political tale, Van. Material methinks better suited to next month's debates. But if that's all you could manage, let us be grateful. A case of something from Van being better than nothing, whereas nothing is indubitably better than something from that MP of hers. Now Craig, perhaps you can go one better?'

'Not with only two mentions from the Internet. The first from Eurosport's betting commercial: "Life is a game". And here I'll join Vanessa by straying into

politics. Try telling "Life is a game" to countless refugees and those left behind under bombardment in Syria.

'My only other Internet video sound borrowing has to do with fruity English pronunciation of Peugeot, the carmakers sponsoring Roland Garros. Lady and gents, I give you Pewgo.'

Tich inclined his head. 'Not quite as rich a crop as usual, I'm sorry to say, Rashid. Obviously, a busier week for some than for others. Never mind. Another bit of nonsense we get up to when the well runs dry is to take a word and, by association, match it to, say, a book and its author and keep going round the table until, horror of horrors, we reach a dead end and call it a day or, praised be the Lord, come full circle.

'To give you an idea of what I mean, let me start the ball rolling by taking as our trigger Justin's *conscience,* but as in "thus conscience does make cowards of us all".

'*Hamlet*. Shakespeare. Your turn Craig.'

'*L'homme est un roseau pensant*. Pascal.'

Vanessa: *Death in the Afternoon*. Hemingway.

Justin: For heaven's sake, Vanessa. Challenge.

Whereas Craig, as much in the dark as Justin, seconded the objection, Tich, trusting to Vanessa's fecund imagination, remained silent, convinced that both men stood to lose out on their challenge.

Vanessa: Bulrushes.

Justin: Shit. Okay. *In Cold Blood*. Truman Capote.

Tich: *Gorky Park*. Martin Cruz Smith.

Craig: *Ice Station Zebra*. Alistair MacLean.

Vanessa: *Green Hills of Africa*. Hemingway. Twins.

Justin: *Roots*. Alex Hayley.

Tich: *The Tree of Life*. Patrick White.

Craig: *East of Eden*. John Steinbeck.

Vanessa: *Genesis*. Cain and Abel. Holy Moses.

Justin: *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoyevsky.

Tich: *Hamlet.* Will Shakespeare. Twins. That was quick. It's not often that neat, ending up with the originator, but Justin handed it to me on a plate.

Rashid scratched the back of his head. 'What was "twins" all about?'

'Something Tich forgot to explain,' said Justin. 'Don't imagine for one moment that the scribbling he's been doing there with that chewed up pencil represent the makings of his long promised Ode to Luritania. He's been keeping the score. The starter is worth one point. Thereafter, every correct follow-on earns the contributor two points. Author repeats – twins, triplets and so on – are worth ten points. Repeats of the same work are penalised by four points. Tich will have docked Craig and me two points each for faulty challenges. And the reward for coming full circle is fifteen points, which royally offsets the starting singleton.'

'And the purpose of all this?'

'The holder of the highest score at the end of the month pockets five euros from each of the rest of us.'

Alert to Tich's devouring glances at her plate, Vanessa offloaded her second pat of butter onto the man whose doctor regularly cautioned him against abusing cholesterol intake, then turned to Rashid.

'How do you think you would have taken this little pastime of ours forward, Rashid? It would have been your turn after my *Genesis*.'

'Maxim Gorky. *The Lower Depths*.'

'Smart operator. Almost twins.'

'It would also, 'added Justin, 'have been the perfect prompt for *Crime and Pun*ishment, again allowing Tich to come full circle. But you would have done better, Vanessa, to ask him the lead-on from *Death in the Afternoon*.'

'No problem,' responded Rashid. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Gabriel García Márquez. If I remember correctly, that would have helped you with *In Cold Blood*.'

Vanessa decided to change tack. 'Truth to tell, I'm more interested in learning a thing or two about our new friend. I understand you work for Europe's latest banking brainwave, MEDRIMCOMB? Not, I take it, selling toxic paper to the Libyans and Egyptians?'

'No, not with a title as portentous as Mediterranean Rim Countries Modernisation Bank. Our remit is to mobilise private and public-sector finance to shore up the Med's southern and eastern rim economies. Primarily with infrastructure loans generating work for the vast number of young unemployed.'

Craig turned away from eying the well-turned calves of a bevy of air stewardesses trundling their roll-ons towards the departure gates. 'You mean deter them from migrating from the southern to the northern rim?'

'That as well.'

'Does the Lebanese connection explain your involvement?'

'Only to the extent that I speak Arabic. My job as loan officer has the potential to take me all over the region.'

'That's a shame,' said Tich. 'Does that mean here today gone tomorrow?'

'Not for the first six months. I'm a new boy, learning the ropes.'

'That's good,' said Justin. 'Six months should give the Lenfindi Quintet enough time to set the world to rights.'

'Couldn't agree more,' said Tich, clapping Rashid on the shoulder. 'Out of the lower depths, Rashid, into the light of a new dawn.'



Craig Roberts had just finished towelling down in his club's shower room following the departure of the last of his spin cycling class. It was one o'clock and most members had headed off for a snack lunch prior to resuming work behind their desks. His few pensioners, one of whom never tired of telling Craig that his days were fuller now they had ever been before, had also peeled off, some for a vegetarian sandwich and juice in the downstairs health bar, others for more serious sustenance in the form of the three-course *menu du jour* on the garden patio of the neighbouring restaurant.

Craig opened his locker and reached for the Swatch given him as an unbirthday present by an old flame. Just time to dress, verify that his new training software had registered that morning's chest and wrist pulse rates and related endurance data, check how many people had signed up for his two afternoon step classes, grab a bite to eat in the ground-floor office behind the bar, head out to the bank and be back by three p.m. for more aerobic training.

After dressing, he remembered to make sure that all the rubber heart rate and wrist pulse monitor straps had been put back clean and dry in their place. Not every one of his cyclists was sufficiently committed to have bought his or her own. But, in fact, he had been pleasantly surprised that morning to greet a newcomer to his class, who had come fully equipped. And pleasantly surprised in more ways than this one, because the young woman in question was a natural blonde with grey blue eyes and one of the most gracefully athletic bodies he had seen in a long time. Serious women cyclists tended to develop unbecomingly muscular or bowed legs. Not that Isabelle Meunier struck him as one-dimensional in terms of her exercise and health interests: she had already lost no time on her first morning at the sports club to sign up for other courses, step and yoga, given by two of his colleagues.

Craig was manager of the *All The Right Moves Wellness and Fitness Centre* owned by a Dutchman who gave him pretty much of a free rein, within set budgetary limits, as to equipment purchases and hiring and firing of personal trainers. However, Craig had been given no say in the club's name. Not only did 'Wellness' strike him as an abomination, coined no doubt by some nerdish American who must have thought this the perfect antonym of illness, but Craig would have laid the stress on fitness first. All the same, having employed two full-time physiotherapists and a nail cosmetician and run a no expenses spared campaign advertising the centre's saunas and health bar, Piet van der Meulen had stamped the club with the seal of his authority. Hence, his new manager had no choice but to go with the flow, especially when Piet made it known that the weight training rooms, two squash courts and Craig's spin cycling were all very well for exercise freaks but hardly star attractions for saner health enthusiasts. And who was Craig to argue with the man holding the purse strings?

Nevertheless, Piet had not hesitated in his choice of the man to take over from someone who, after passing Luritania's civil service exam, had left to join the Ministry of Sports, where he had been charged with overseeing the Tour de France's upcoming *Grand Départ* from home soil. Craig had brought with him a membership motivational tool in the form of his home-grown software programme for detailed performance measuring. He had also gone up a notch or two in Piet's estimation after recommending Saturday and Sunday morning exercise classes for the very young in a room with plenty of soft rubber mats under the eyes of those parents who cared to stay to keep track of their infants' fun and games through the upstairs health bar's observation window.

Craig's most uphill battle with his boss had been to convince him of the good publicity to be had from offering spin cycling facilities to the residents of Luritania's

home for the blind. Although this had been Vanessa Curtis's brainchild, Craig set about promoting it in earnest with his employer. Piet van der Meulen baulked at the idea of investing in an extra six *fietsen* (bicycles) used under supervision for only three days a week while installed on somebody else's premises outside the capital, Schönschlucht. Unwilling to take no for an answer, Vanessa, who spoke passable Luritanian, promptly booked an appointment with the Ministry of Health, and with Craig in tow succeeded in negotiating an appreciable subsidy with an unexpected bonus in the form of the unconditional backing of Luritania's female sports minister. In the light of this news, Piet dropped his original proposal to charge rent for the down time of half a dozen bicycles, the thought of which threatened his cash register mind with sleepless nights.

After checking the time once again on the wall clock opposite his desk in the main gym equipped with treadmills, rowing machines and exercise bikes, Craig decided that he could spare a few minutes to go through the morning's data input and print out the more interesting profiles. Then he trotted downstairs to the health bar, where he ate a tuna salad whole wheat roll and gulped down a freshly squeezed orange juice.

Picking up the small package that he had carried down from his changing room cubicle, Craig tapped his trouser pocket in search of the key to his red Jaguar XJS convertible and, after assuring the secretary on the front reception desk that he would be back in time for his first class of the afternoon, stepped out into the fresh air.

Slipping behind the wheel and placing the package by his side on the brown leather passenger seat, Craig paused to weigh up the pros and cons of storing this small item in his safety deposit box. The package contained an 1871 first edition of *Alice through the Looking Glass* complete with illustrations by Tenniel. It had been a gift from Tich on the occasion of Craig's 28th birthday three months ago. Appreciating its value, Craig had initially kept the book in his workplace filing cabinet, but Sunday's get-together with that 'Life's a game' mention had jogged his memory about Charles Dodgson and the need to find a more secure permanent niche for Tich's present.

Yes, he thought, as he turned on the ignition, the bank was the best solution. Motoring down the hill leading away from the club into the nearest village, Craig remembered Tich's praise of the second Alice tale, the one, he said, less well known than its predecessor but a fable with magic touches to it. And Craig had enjoyed rereading after all these years the story of Alice's adventures negotiating her creator's fantasy chess board.

When he reached the front of the local BLR Paribas branch, he found every parking place accounted for. But, as good luck would have it, just as he was about to swing the steering wheel around and head for the rear of the building, four rows ahead of him a BMW's reverse lights came on, and Craig pulled out to head off a less committed driver approaching from the other side whose chances of beating him to it were greatly reduced by the fact that the BMW would bar its way, allowing Craig to slip effortlessly into the vacant slot.

With the bank's entrance doors locked and the antechamber to the counter area unoccupied, Craig pressed the button activating a slow release mechanism allowing, at the most, two people at a time access to a cramped compartment with an exit door whose button stayed on red until the first door had come to a complete close. He waited for the warning light to turn to green, stabbed the button and watched the second door grind slowly open onto the inner sanctum, where he tapped on a touch sensitive screen's 'routine banking operations' flag and collected a numbered ticket placing him next in line in a queue already eight deep. However, with four of the six counters manned, Craig did not expect a long wait.

It was then that he recognised the young blonde spin cyclist from that morning's class sitting behind the bullet-proof glass of one of the counter windows. A further surprise, since he had never seen her in this branch before let alone known, when she had shaken hands with him, that BLR was her paymaster. He quickly decided to take two more tickets in the event that his first number was flashed up over another counter clerk or things got delayed at Mlle Meunier's counter by someone with a complicated transaction involving telephone calls to head office. And if this ploy failed to work, he would push in front of some unfortunate with the excuse that he had missed his number.

But mother fortune smiled on him: by the time he reached the front of the line his first number, 666, appeared above Isabelle Meunier's position.

After debating whether to address her in French or English, the language he had heard her use fluently to the Irish cyclist on the bike next to hers and with a fetching accent which, if anything, only increased his attraction to this young woman with not a single ring on her finger, Craig opted for English.

'What a happy coincidence. We meet twice in one morning. But I had no idea you worked here.'

'I'm on secondment from head office, covering for a girl on maternity leave.'

'How long for?'

'Could be up to six months, but you never know. You're a *pion*- I've forgotten how you say that in English – on their chessboard.'

Lewis Carroll's Alice, thought Craig. But more enticingly adult. 'A pawn? That's not a nice way to treat employees.'

She laughed. 'I was joking. What can I do for you, Craig?'

First name terms did not go unappreciated. He placed his ID and numbered deposit box key in the tray in the bottom of her window. 'I need to put something in safekeeping.'

'Hang on, then. You'd better go over to the end counter, while I get the ledger for you to sign.'

Craig followed her directions to the counter on the far right fitted with a door giving onto to the clerks' working area beyond which lay the bank's safety deposit room. Moments later, she appeared at and raised the counter window for him to sign the ledger and leave her to register the date and time of his use of the room. After which she opened the window to Craig's left, raised the fold-over counter above a half-door, ushered him inside and secured window and door back in place.

Craig followed Isabelle Meunier to another door, where she entered a series of figures into a keypad. The door opened onto a narrow corridor to the right of which stood the vault. While waiting for the vault's heavy-duty steel door to slide open on its ceiling and floor runners, his nose alive to the delicate fragrance of perfume sparingly applied, the headiness that had temporarily overcome him in the presence of his svelte five foot nine companion prompted him to have recourse to a quip.

'Certainly no pawn if they've already entrusted you with the keys to the kingdom.'

'Look at those doors. Would you call that fast track? That's what I'm supposed to be. Can I have your key, please? We won't get far without it.'

Craig covered his embarrassment with a smile. 'Here, of course.'

She preceded him into the vault lined on two sides by row upon row of numbered safety deposit boxes of different sizes. But Craig's attention was elsewhere, for he was amazed to see the roller shutter doors of the compartment opposite him wide open, displaying an abundance of bank notes of every denomination and row upon row of coins.

'Remind me of your number,' said Isabelle.

'Three hundred and eighty-four. Top right. Two rows down.' Craig's disbelieving eyes remained fixed on the horn of plenty.

Isabelle Meunier first inserted the bank's key into the left-hand lock on box 384, then Craig's key into the right-hand lock, turned both, opened the door and removed the bank's key. 'There we are,' she said. 'You know how to operate the outside door, I take it, after I lock you in? The button on the side wall.'

Craig had difficulty tearing his eyes away from the bank's treasury. 'Shouldn't that be closed?'

'You're not feeling tempted are you?'

'Hell, yes, I am,' he joked.

'Well, resist. See those cameras trained on you up there? You're on candid camera.'

'Isabelle, if you'll excuse my saying so, cameras or not, it's pretty irresponsible to leave clients in here with so much loot at their fingertips.'

'I couldn't agree more. But then it wasn't me who left it open. Another colleague is responsible for liquidity. Perhaps he got called away. Or had a bad day. Too much on his plate. Forgot all about it.'

'You're going to tell him, I hope.'

'As soon as I leave you. So be a good boy.'

'You should know that this goes against my better instincts.'

'I'm sure you'll do nothing stupid.'

It was hardly worth her leaving him alone for the little time it took him to store the first edition away into his deposit box. Craig had elected to pay over the top for the hire of a medium-sized box, which, he calculated, had enough room in it to accommodate a small fortune in 500 euro bank notes. He stared up at the two overhead cameras and winked.

'Not this time, guys. Too high a suicide rate in the prison down the road.'

However, after leaving the vault and standing aside for a security guard to open the end-counter door admitting him into the foyer, rather than making straight for the exit, Craig turned back towards the position no longer occupied by Isabelle Meunier. No doubt she had gone to iron out the fiasco in the vault.

As he was on the point of touching the button on the first of two doors leading to the street, some sixth sense made him turn around. Sure enough, Isabelle was returning to her seat. Furthermore, he had suddenly become the sole potential client left in the waiting area.

Craig seized the opportunity to rejoin Isabelle Meunier at her window.

'I hope you didn't leave you key inside,' she said. 'Because I can't let you back in there right now until a colleague has taken care of you know what.'

'No, Isabelle. The key's here in my pocket. And you'll be pleased to know I was as good as gold. Look, would you happen to be free for dinner tonight? There's a great menu on offer at the Château Vaugruge this week. I don't know if you know the place, but the open-air restaurant looks right down over the vineyards above the river. Quite something at this time of year.'

'Provided I can take you at your word. I'd rather not get caught sharing a meal with a wanted criminal.'

Craig could not have hoped for a more welcome answer. 'Perish the thought. Would eight o'clock suit you? You know the château?'

'Of course.'

'Fine. Let's meet in the parking lot below the steps leading up to the restaurant.'

'Very good. I look forward to an evening without Big Brother.'

Not an easy word for the French to pronounce that fraternal one. But for Craig, it was music to his ears.



After taking a Monday morning snack lunch behind her office desk, Vanessa caught the bus into town to visit Tich in his bookshop, *Bibliopole,* situated in a prime location behind the central post office, a national architectural heritage building.

Every time she visited Tich's shop, Vanessa was reminded of her Saturday coffee mornings with her close friend Gwyneth Hobart, who had died four years previously. Tich and Gwyneth had been married for just over ten years when she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. It took her life six months later.

Gwyneth (Tich's 'Gwyn') had been a professional photographer specialising in nature and wildlife. She worked for several top-flight magazines and exhibited in the Tate Modern before being invited to Luritania after winning an international competitive tender sponsored by the Ministry of Culture at the behest of Grand Prince Philippe Étienne. The sovereign wanted to put Luritania on the map at *National Geographic* level by way of fêting the country's National Parks centennial celebrations in tandem with inauguration of a zoo, 'setting the benchmark for

ecologically responsible management', home to a number of endangered species, including two giant pandas gifted the country by the Chinese ambassador.

Gwyn was charged with producing a photo-book presenting the principality's nature preserves in the best possible light. Chosen to write the captions and complementary text, Justin invited Tich to the *vernissage* (private viewing) showcasing Gwyn's work, which was how the two first met. At the time, Tich was teaching English as a foreign language to the local Chinese community. When North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate's state authorities commissioned Gwyn on the strength of her Luritanian project to produce something similar for them, she decided to stay on in Schönschlucht. This led to the odd piece of photojournalism for Justin, another exhibition in Schönschlucht's showpiece museum, designed by China's renowned green architect Yang Changsong, and a contract with Luritania's *Naturbeschutzgesollschuft* (Nature Protection Society).

Because Gwyn and Tich shared the same love of literature, Tich, who was cheesed off with TEFL, decided to throw that job in and went along with Gwyn's proposal to compete with the mainstream book trade by offering people works at affordable prices. After Schönschlucht's mayor gave his blessing to the couple's civil marriage, Tich and Gwyneth managed to scrape together sufficient start-up capital to convert a disused bakery opposite the post office into the premises which Vanessa was about to enter.

On reaching the pavement outside the shop, Vanessa saw that its owner had been busy over the weekend arranging one of his themed monthly window displays: Our Environment – Our Future.

Tich had given pride of place to a variety of secondhand publications targeting man's mismanagement of the planet's natural resources and national economies: Nicolas Hulot's *Pour un pacte écologique*, Serge Latouche's *La planète des naufragés*, Stefan Rahmstorf's *Wie bedroht sind die Ozeane?*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Al Gore's *Earth In The Balance* … These were, in turn, backed up by charts, graphs and posters illustrating the alarming rate of planetary deforestation, the indecent volume of toxic ocean waste, and a long list of species on the verge of extinction. According to one graph, the level of ongoing soil degradation brought about by a combination of intensive farming and erosion represented a time bomb set to exhaust the planet's topsoil within the next sixty years – with catastrophic consequences for the food supply chain.

'Nice end-of-days' work,' commented Vanessa, strolling through the open shop door, where she found Tich, a mug of coffee in one hand, the fingers of the other navigating his laptop's early afternoon news web site.

'Van, good to see you.' Tich set down his mug. 'Nice what?'

'The window.'

'Depressing, if you ask me. Looks like twenty years from now there'll be nothing left of the Great Barrier Reef, fifteen years later not a single glacier in the Alps.'

'Tell that to the multinationals. So, have you sold anything vaguely ecological?'

Vanessa cast a critical eye at the hyacinths presented to Tich the week before with a view to adding freshness to the bookshop's musty interior. 'Their water needs changing. And while you're at it, prune the stems – diagonally.'

Confronted by nothing other than cheerless news, Tich clicked across to Sport. 'Monday mornings rarely bring the punters out in droves. Had a young mother in. Bought *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*. A low-key, environmentally-friendly start to the week. She commented on your hyacinths. Said they looked droopy. Perhaps the water does need changing. But to what do I owe this honour? You in search of something specific? Or taking a breather from the daily grind?'

'A bit of both. Time-study engineers are not exactly everyone's favourite aunt, particularly when management's latest buzzword is rationalise. Everyone I interview sees me as Miss Downsize.'

'Offer you a coffee? The percolator's still warm out back.'

'No thanks, Tich. You really think corporate enterprise gives a fuck about the ordinary citizen's environmental gripes?'

The bookseller got up from his swivel chair, rubbed his lumbar region with clenched fists and cast a rueful glance at the window display.

'If you put it like that, no. But the important thing is not to let up. Ask *Fortune 100's* CEOs, do they really want their grandchildren to curse their memory?'

'From the mare's mouth, brave but futile, Tich.'

'O ye of little faith. That's fair trade coffee I'm drinking here.'

'And the chocolate on the biscuit?'

'Let's change the subject. How's your play coming on?'

'That's the other reason why I dropped by. I need two more copies of *Camino Real.'*

'Two of anything's asking a lot. Let's have a look.'

Vanessa followed her guide towards the back of the shop, where one section of nine rows of ceiling-high shelving given over to English literature was devoted to drama.

'Williams is going to be at the end,' said Tich.

He bent down to peer more closely at titles along the bottom row. '*Orpheus Descending*. Your namesake, Miss Redgrave, was great in the role of Lady under Peter Hall's screen direction.'

'Well, this Vanessa needs *Camino Real*.'

'If I have it, it should be here in front of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, that is if nobody wandered off with that and stuffed it among the pet handbooks.'

Tich straightened up, rubbing his back again. 'Sorry, Vanessa, looks like we're out of luck.'

'Then I'll take you up on that coffee.'

'Of course. Just keep an eye on the shop front, while I pop out back. You get all sorts in here, including shoplifters.'

'Really?'

'Really. I get people carrying shopping bags to leave them with me at the till. Mind you, it's the ones wearing Clint Eastwood long coats with deep pockets that

you need to watch out for. They can whisk half a shelf out from under your nose before you know it.'

Vanessa looked up at the ceiling. 'But you've installed CCTV.'

'Doesn't stop me from getting distracted with paying customers.'

'All the same, it's not as if your books are new. Some are tatty.'

'I'd prefer to say well used.'

'So why would anyone want to … ?' A fluttering hand made further explanation superfluous.

'The temptation of getting something for nothing. What difference is one or two books less going to make to a shop on a par with Borges's Library of Babel? And, believe me, it isn't always the penniless who try put one over on you.'

Vanessa lowered her voice. 'In that case, I had better keep my eyes open. Someone's just come in dressed up to the nines.'

Tich turned to look at the slim young woman wearing a lace-detailed dress with black side paneling and peep toe ankle strap heels preceded by a white Pomeranian on a retractable lead. 'She's okay. No carrier bag. Mutt doesn't look as if it's got fleas. If she really needs Chekhov, you know your way around. Otherwise, give me a call.'

Moments later, Tich rejoined Vanessa at the counter, bearing a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of plain biscuits. 'Spot of milk, no sugar. That right?'

Vanessa interrupted her perusal of a paperback entitled *Sex, Anatomy and Punctuation* left on the plywood counter top. 'Thanks, Tich. Your second customer of the morning pecked around the cookery shelf, before walking out as empty-handed as she came in.'

'No harm in that. It would be a poor bookseller who stopped his customers from browsing. How are rehearsals going?'

'They're a long way off. We're into the early stages. Reading through the text, helping me to cast the play. How to divide the parts up among the male leads is proving a headache. The production stands or falls on getting that right.'

'Have you thought of asking Rashid whether he'd be interested? A good-looking young man with the necessary stage presence.'

Vanessa stretched down to pick up a stray sheet of paper blown in through the entrance. It was a post office advertisement for freshly minted coins, including one celebrating a, to her mind, overrated local cartoonist. 'You think he's into amateur theatricals?'

'Can't tell until you try.'

'Certainly wouldn't make a credible Don.'

'No.'

'Justin would be ideal in that role. But he keeps fobbing me off.'

Tich noted that Vanessa felt more comfortable steering the conversation away from Rashid.

'Where are you staging this?'

'In the courtyard of the Château de l'Aubaine. On one side we'll signpost *Terra Incognita*, on the other *Aeropuerto – Fugitivo*.'

'In the open air again like *The Taming of the Shrew* you put on in the gardens of the Villa Maximilian. Handy, having two magnificent chestnut trees as stand-ins for wings.'

'The setting this time is a dead-end Latin American seafront outpost on the edge of the desert. One side of the courtyard can be used as the terrace of the *Hotel Siete Mares* complete with tables and chairs. Enough to accommodate our audience. Ideal, because the characters will be able to circulate among the spectators. I'll get the château restaurant to serve margaritas and tacos. Having a fountain in the courtyard is the real bonus, though I still have to find out whether we can regulate it.'

'Makes a change from time-study engineering.'

'Almost anything's a healthy change from that. Now then, Tich, come clean. What kind of a weird book is this?' Vanessa held up the paperback. '*Sex, Anatomy and Punctuation*.'

'Unearthed after sorting through a box dumped on me *gratis* last week by a woman who said she'd been clearing out her husband's paperback collection.

'You get much *gratis* nowadays'

'More, I'm glad to say than ones I pay for.'

'I've always meant to ask. The rent. It must set you back a pretty penny?'

'I think you mean an ugly euro. In fact, no. Gwyn and I filed our application to buy these premises on a day when the mayor happened to be doing the rounds of the city offices. He remembered marrying us. Thought launching a quality secondhand bookshop in town was a great idea, especially since most people throw their used books away in recycling centres, where they either get pulped or snapped up by market stall sellers from across the border. He even went so far as to promise us two dozen boxes of books from his attic. Said that, if we undertook to donate a portion of our earnings to a good cause, he'd get his people to draw up a favourable lease. But, as I say, that's strictly between you, me and the doorpost. And we've come a long way from *Sex, Anatomy and Punctuation*.'

Tich took the paperback from her. 'Amazing the number of loss leaders that publishers turn out. It's only the last chapter that deals with punctuation. The author suggests using punctuation marks as euphemistic substitutes for fornication, body parts and cuss words. It's a pity I can't do a Victor Borge on this.' He started reading from the text in front of him: '"Jim and Wendy liked Spanish question marks, although Jim usually went in for exclamation marks before he worked Wendy up to a row of asterisks." That believe it or not is the expurgated version of *Jim and Wendy liked 69* (or soixante-neuf as people prefer to say, because it sounds sexier in French*), although Jim usually ejaculated before he stimulated Wendy to the point of multiple orgasms*.'

'Amazing rubbish.'

'Couldn't agree more. Periods, well, the less said about them the better. A comma is really a copula. Brackets denote intertwined limbs. And apparently dashes indicate bonking, because they have their roots in the Scandinavian for bashing. Hence, dash off represents a pathetically toned down version of fuck off. Oh dear, you'll never guess what this guy uses ellipses for?'