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The Spa Decameron

Fay Weldon

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Extract

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Yule Tide Break
Special offer for High Achievers

Ten days of peace and tranquillity at world famous Castle Spa.
Join us in beautiful Cumbria on Christmas Eve, leave us on January 2nd.
Special Bargain Price £5000 all treatments inclusive.
Join Lady Caroline Evercreech and others of like mind for a low calorie Xmas lunch. Women only.
Recoup from the past, prepare for the adventure of a brand new year refreshed and inspired…

The advertisement was in November's *Vogue*. Finding myself disastrously homeless and partnerless, I read it with attention. An out-of-date *Vogue* – we were three days before Christmas – is not my usual reading, but I was at the hairdresser. My name is Phoebe Fox, I am a woman of a certain age, and blondish. My roots needed doing and I wanted extra streaks. I had to have somewhere to go, as a matter of urgency. And wherever I was going I had to get there with good hair.

'Call up Castle Spa, then,' said Pauline of the Hair Salon. 'Find out if they have a space. Book yourself in. Treat yourself. You work hard enough, God knows.' It was pleasant to have this from someone who has been working on their feet five days a week for more than twenty years. I am a writer: at least I can sit down while I work. She can't. She must stand and bend, and it is hard on the feet, and the back. I have known Pauline for years. She is my guide and my confessor; she is buoyant, strong, hard-working and noble, and usually right.

I called Castle Spa on my mobile while I waited for the colour to take. The receptionist took my name and number and said she'd call back in five minutes.

'Perhaps she's checking you out to see if you're enough of a high achiever,' said Pauline. 'But I daresay you are.' I thought I would be too. Last time I looked I had 523,000 hits on Google. I write literary novels which get studied in US universities: it is not exactly fame but it is attention. Pauline's next appointment had failed to turn up. We had the place to ourselves, and poured ourselves some wine.

Castle Spa's receptionist, who introduced herself as Beverley, Bev to her friends, got back to me in four and a half minutes. Yes, they had one vacancy left for the special-offer ten-day break: someone had just dropped out. Yule was a magical time at Castle Spa: only sixteen guests instead of the normal forty, to allow staff time off with their families – the work/life balance being so important at Yuletide – but the very best world-class beauticians in attendance, and a brilliant White House chef as locum –

'Yes, yes,' I said, 'anything. Just book me in.'

The day before, our kitchen ceiling had come down, the bath having been left to overflow. The bath came down too. By 'having been left' I mean my husband Julian had left the tap on and gone away, but I am not one to apportion blame. I have done worse myself. Electricity throughout the house had shorted. There was no heating. I could not use my computer, and worried in case the 'save' facility had failed when the power went off. It was with mixed feelings that I cancelled the Christmas Dinner for twenty-two – family and friends – and with pleasure that I booked with Pauline for the next morning, knowing that at least with her I would find comfort, warmth and sympathy.

Even as Julian and I had tried to find plumbers, builders and electricians and failed, Julian's stepfather called from Wichita, Kansas, to say that his mother had had a nasty fall and broken a hip; it wasn't looking good and Julian should go at once. Flights at this peak time were full – there was a place for Julian though

not for me. He had an hour to get to the airport. We were parted: a rare, terrible but rather exciting event.

I cried a little. Friends were away, or busy. Neighbours were indifferent. I spent that night with my head under the duvet, cold without Julian. The house peeped electronically for hours, warning me that the power was off and stand-by batteries were running low. I was conscious of food rotting in the freezer, milk souring in the fridge. A miserable night might be no more than I deserved – my first reaction, when the Wichita phone call came, having been to hope that my mother-in-law had died: a mean and wretched thought, if fleeting – but I could not put up with another.

I had thought I would have to push my way through seething crowds to get to the Hair Salon in St John's Wood High Street but the streets were quiet. The group soul of the consumer crowd around Christmas is unpredictable. A mass of spending humanity will surge through the street and then suddenly withdraw, like the tide before a tsunami. It had withdrawn now and the pebbles were showing, unnaturally bare and dry, and my instinct was to turn and run – but where, nowadays can one run to? Other than, for the likes of me, at least, to Pauline's Hair Salon.

I gave Pauline my house key so she could go and empty fridge and freezer and take what she wanted. Waste not, want not. I confessed my evil thoughts about my mother-in-law, my relief at not having to cook Christmas lunch for twenty two – I have three grown sons, Julian has three grown girls, and most are partnered, and some have children – and the sense of mixed panic and joy at the thought of days on my own, with nowhere to go, and no roof over my head. She absolved me. I read the advertisement while she mixed the bleach, and she gave me permission to go to Castle Spa and indulge myself.

Thus it was that Bev booked me in for the ten days of Yuletide. I was to be expected late Christmas Eve. I would miss a few treatments by arriving after the others but I must understand this was my responsibility and there would be no discounts. She asked me

if I wanted to sign up for the nature ramble on Friday. It booked out quickly and was all inclusive. I said no, appalled. I am not good with nature, preferring indoors to out at the best of times, and it was midwinter. What kind of indulgence was this going to be? All lentils, health, no discounts and chakras? And I had envisaged high achievers as sophisticates from the world of business, high finance and fashion. People who competed to ramble in the middle of winter were not my kind of people. And I knew those White House chefs: there is a rapid turn over: they get fired for incompetence. What had I done? The days ahead would be desperate, bleak, hungry, and lonelier than if I had stayed home. But it was too late now. Bev had my credit card number, and as I held the line the bill was validated.

Bev waited until it was done to tell me that since the break was all about perfect peace and relaxation, ladies were asked not to bring in phones or laptops during their stay.

'Of course,' I said. 'Of course. Anything.' They would hardly do a body search. So that, for good or bad, was settled.

Pauline washed my hair and then set about the business of turning my head into a porcupine of silver foil spikes. That was when I asked her for the latest in the Nisha/Eleanor/Billy saga and got more than I bargained for.

The next ten days were to be full of stories. My real life being on hold, other lives seemed to rush in to fill the void. This, the terrible tale of the Bitch Witch, had revealed itself little by little over the last six months, installment by installment, a new one every time I visited Pauline. The drama had been safely distant in time and space – today it was to become alarmingly close, horribly real.

The Tale of the Bitch Witch

Nisha was one of Pauline's favorite clients, and Eleanor the least favoured of all. Nisha was a sweet, domesticated, dark-eyed heiress from Bollywood, married to Billy, a bluff Northerner, financial director of a media conglomerate. Eleanor, the bitch

witch, was a lean, pale, bloodless, feminist set designer, and she was having a torrid affair with Billy. She worked from home.

Eleanor would tell Pauline all about it over the wash basin every Monday morning. Billy was most likely to stop by early in the week, so she always came in on Mondays. Nisha would come in on Fridays, to look good for Billy during the weekend. Nisha had no idea about the role Eleanor played in Billy's life. Though many of Pauline's other clients did. Word got round and Eleanor seemed happy enough that it did.

Pauline's clients tended to be in the media: her salon was in NW1. She was popular: she could get customers in and out while the taxi waited on the way to a meeting. Twelve minutes for a wash and blow-dry was her record. She could make you look as if you'd come straight from Harrods, or were just off to Crufts, depending on the image you wished to present.

Nisha stayed home and looked after her home and her husband Billy. She had a sweet face, a soft voice, and thick, long, dark, glossy Asian hair with a tendency to greasiness. It took a long time to blow dry. Nisha never complained. Eleanor's hair, by contrast, was so fair, soft and fine it was dry almost before it was out of the basin. The problem was giving it volume, and shape. Eleanor sometimes asked Pauline to start again from the beginning, even if she had other clients waiting. Eleanor, in other words, could be a real pain.

And then every second Wednesday Billy would come in for a cut. Pauline confided in me that he was immensely vain: but then, she said, men who go to their partners' hairdressers often are. They like to compete. Pauline would squirm as Billy would boast to her about the two women in his life, and how they adored him. She would remonstrate with him, as she wielded the clippers, but could make no impression.

'My wife doesn't know. She's a sweet girl but frankly not very bright,' Billy would confide. Or, 'I have the most amazing sex with Eleanor, she'll do anything.' Or he'd complain about his wife. 'Nisha put my shirt through the wash and now it's a rag. And at

night she just lies there, and I keep thinking how much shorter her legs are compared to Eleanor's.' Or, in favour of the mistress, 'Eleanor's so creative. She's making quite a name for herself in the industry. Frankly, the trouble with Nisha is that she has no brain. We're not right for each other.' It would go first one way and then another. 'But Nisha adores me; she'd be heartbroken if I left. I don't want to hurt her. What am I to do?' And then he'd talk about how a man had to be practical: his wife's father was a power in the international media, and would probably send a hit man after him if he ditched Nisha. 'You have to be careful with these Indian moguls. At the same time a man has to be authentic to his feelings. You're a woman of the world, Pauline, what am I to do?'

But he didn't really expect a reply, or want a solution. He just wanted to talk about himself.

My friend Annie, also a client of Pauline's – short chestnut curls – had been to parties at Billy and Nisha's, and had reported back. They were wealthy, and the house a triumph of Harrods' taste. Nisha would insist on preparing the nibbles herself – which was seen by some as cute and by others as eccentric – and drift through rooms full of hard-bitten media folk like an angel of grace in a pink sari, smiling and obliging. Eleanor would be there, posing as Nisha's dearest friend. Annie said she once overheard her advising Nisha on what underwear to wear to make her legs seem longer. And everyone knew what was going on, and no one had the courage to tell Nisha. Eleanor would tell everyone how before Billy she never knew what love was meant to be: she was the veritable queen of the land of Orgasma. Billy would fondle Eleanor in public when Nisha was out of the room. On one occasion they sloped off together for a ten minute shag in a cloakroom before turning up again, Billy smirking, Eleanor licking her lips like a cat after cream, just before Nisha returned from the kitchen with a tray of quail eggs and avocado dip. And when Nisha came back into the room and saw Billy, her whole face would light up with joy. She really loved him: could never get over the pleasure of being married to him, and living in London away from a stultifying home life.'

I had met Eleanor; I often came in on Monday mornings after a hard weekend. She lived just around the corner from the Salon. When she ran round from home to the salon, she'd often throw on a long brown knitted coat with wide sleeves and appliquéd yellow flowers. I quite liked it and asked her once where she got it from, and I forgot, and then felt I couldn't ask again. In summer she'd wear long denim dresses which no one could get away with unless they had a model's figure, which she did, and she would've had a model's face, only her chin receded and her teeth were bad. She would be against cosmetic surgery.

'You have to say something to Nisha,' I'd say to Pauline. 'Someone just has to.'

'Me? I'm only the hairdresser!' she would say. 'I'm not going to be the one to make her unhappy, break the spell.' Pauline feels she has the duty of the priest or the doctor to hear but not to intervene, and besides, getting personal is the way to lose clients. Any unpleasantness and they're off. She doesn't mind much if she loses Billy – and he'll never leave anyway: he loves talking about himself too much. She'd be happy to lose Eleanor. But she wouldn't want to lose Nisha. She likes her too much, and loves the feel of that heavy, happy hair. And Nisha was happy, you could tell by her hair, Pauline said. It was glossy and shiny. Unhappy women get rough, starey hair – the way dogs' coats go when they're ill. Mine, I am glad to say, is in reasonable condition.

'Who cares about truth?' Pauline would say. 'Relationships are sustained by lies!' Which I always found somehow shocking.

But it couldn't last. One Friday Nisha came in for her appointment distraught, tearful and wailing, tearing at her beautiful hair. Billy came back from having a haircut, packed a suitcase, said Nisha would be hearing from his lawyer, and left to go and live with his mistress. Eleanor, her best friend. It had been going on for months: everyone had known, except Nisha. She had thought people were her friends and they weren't. She was humiliated, betrayed on all sides. Her life was over.

'I expect you knew too,' said Nisha to Pauline, and when

Pauline had nodded apologetically, had gone for Pauline tooth and nail there and then, in the salon, in front of clients. Pauline's trainee had called Nisha's sister, who came round in a taxi and took her away to the doctor.

'And then on the Monday,' Pauline had said, ' just three days later, Eleanor came in, bright as a button and cheerful; and not even wearing that awful brown coat. She'd lost the kind of sly look, and I thought well at least someone's happy. But then she said "You know what? I've booted Billy out. Living with men sucks. I cut up his suits and threw all his bags out the window. Five days and I was going mad. When he wasn't trying to drag me into bed he was trying to get me to make chapattis. What do I want with her leftovers anyway? I can get my own man, if I so choose."'

'You should have thrown the bitch out there and then,' I said, when I heard.

'I am not my sister's keeper,' Pauline observed. 'I am only the hairdresser. And I have the scratches to prove it.'

'It's appalling,' I'd said. 'Eleanor's a bitch witch. She was never interested in Billy, just in trampling Nisha. It's a type. In love with Daddy, wanting to usurp Mummy: when she succeeds she feels so guilty she throws Daddy out.'

Then it was Billy's turn to come in. He could hardly look at himself in the mirror for misery. Pauline had known kicked dogs look better. He'd been asked to resign because of his 'inappropriate behaviour.' He'd thought he was top dog, pack leader, and could do what he liked, but he'd found out he couldn't. People had closed ranks behind Nisha. There were bigger dogs than him out there, and they didn't like how he'd behaved, and had found his cloakroom behaviour distasteful. So it was out of the door with his belongings in a black plastic bag, and nowhere to go, because Daddy's lawyers were already in the house and the locks had been changed. And it was no good going to Eleanor because she had changed her mind and thrown him out. 'Gone insane,' as Billy put it, 'kicked me out of bed as soon as I tried to get into it.'

Pauline was opening up the basement area of her salon for

treatments: manicures, eye-brow shaping and botox, and had taken on two assistants to run it. There was a juice bar too. It was as busy as can be.

'Nothing like a good scandal for encouraging trade,' I said to Pauline.

'It's an ill wind,' she said. They were all talking about it. Poor Nisha, bad Billy, stylish Eleanor. The latter was in great form, in and out all the time chattering, reborn as a feminist only with a 1930s air: a waved bob-cut (platinum, which her fine hair wouldn't stand for ever), bosomless (which was easy), and a red red lipsticked mouth, talking about the villainies of men, getting to go to a whole new set of glam parties.

'She came in for an eyebrow dye,' said Pauline, 'and all she could talk about was how she'd met Sam Klines, the film producer.'

I knew Sam Klines – I'd worked with him once – and was friends with his wife, a nice girl called Belinda. Very thick red hair. I laughed and told Pauline Eleanor wouldn't stand a chance. Sam and Belinda as good as went round hand in hand. We remarked on how the tables had turned: once women got the blame when things like this happened, were ostracized for failing to keep their man: now men got the social spurning, and the victorious woman approbation.

Then Nisha's sister – an elegant, taller and slimmer version of Nisha, who ran her own business and didn't look as if she'd ever cooked a chapatti in her life – had came by to say she'd just put Nisha on the flight to Mumbai, complete with an attendant. Nisha was unbalanced: tended to be violent and aggressive to other women, and was being sent home to live with her mother and sisters. That put up the sales of cranberry and pomegranate juice no end. Then everything quietened down.

But next time I was in, for a quick blow dry before lunching with my agent, Pauline said that Sam Klines' wife Belinda had just been in. 'Eleanor recommended her so I fitted her in. Lovely chestnut hair. I gave it a good cut: it needed it. 'Belinda confided that she'd asked Eleanor, albeit a little reluctantly, to stay with her and

Sam for a week or two to help her get over the debacle with Billy. Eleanor had been feeling depressed. Nisha had hanged herself and she felt people were blaming her, unfairly. Nisha had always been unstable and it was all Billy's doing, anyway. 'He as good as stalked me,' she'd said. 'Why did she have such crap taste in men? Why was it she couldn't sustain a relationship? Was there something wrong with her?

'What could I do but take her in?' Belinda had said to Pauline. 'She kept saying she just wanted to be part of something secure and cosy and for a bit: a loving household. And I like to help. What are friends for?'

At that I'd picked up my mobile and phoned Belinda, in spite of Pauline's warning that I would merely look stupid if I did. I told Belinda she should on no account let Eleanor over the threshold. Eleanor was bad news. Look what had happened to poor Nisha. 'Eleanor is a bitch witch and her evil eye is on Sam and that is why she is so suddenly your best friend. She was Nisha's once.'

Belinda was polite but cautious. She said I misjudged Eleanor, who was seeing lawyers about a possible sexual harassment suit against Billy, and she'd be glad if I would put the record straight wherever I could. Eleanor was a good and generous friend. Presumably I had got the gossip from Pauline: she, Belinda, wouldn't be going to that hotbed of gossip again! A good cut was worth a lot, but not that much. Belinda thanked me for the warning, and appreciated that my motives were of the best. In other words I was an interfering bitch, go away. We exchanged a few pleasantries and I put the phone down.

'Told you so,' said Pauline. 'That didn't go too well, did it! Now she's insulted because you're suggesting Sam's seducible. And I'll bet you've lost me a client. My general experience is that if people can take things the wrong way they will. So least said, soonest mended.'

'You're a fine one to talk,' I said. And then the story had gone quiet and two months had gone by, during the course of which Belinda failed to ask me to her birthday party, and failed to return

to Pauline for a booked henna rinse, Eleanor kept away from the salon, poor Nisha was no more, and the trail had apparently run its painful course. And here I was, just before Christmas with no Christmas in sight, homeless, husbandless, just booked into a Spa in the distant north where high-achieving women line up to go on nature rambles.

My head was in the basin, when Pauline's phone went. She excused herself and answered it. Fortunately it was the last rinse and I could grab a towel.

Pauline turned pale: she sat down. Eventually she put away the phone and spoke to me. Her voice trembled.

'Eleanor is dead,' she said. 'Murdered while she was asleep, lying next to Sam Klines in the marital bed. Knifed to death by Belinda. She didn't touch Sam.'

'She wouldn't,' I said. 'She loved him.'

'Then Belinda turned the knife on herself,' Paula said. 'Died on the way to the hospital.'

The life of the world must go on. My hair was wet: Pauline blow-dried it. We said very little.

'Sam's in hospital with shock,' she said.

'Must have been a blood bath,' I agreed.

'The paparazzi are already there. Ghouls,' she said, and brought me the mirror so I could look at the back of my hair.

'Very nice,' I said.

It is strange how other people's deaths affect us. A close colleague dies, and for some reason we feel nothing. A distant aunt is no more, and we are devastated. There are no observable rules. I had never met Nisha, knew Eleanor only to be irritated by her; the tragedy could remain a story; fair enough. But Belinda? My erstwhile friend? Why did I feel so little? Perhaps the unfortunate phone call and her rejection had humiliated me more than I thought. Perhaps being left off her party list had hurt more than I pretended. I felt shocked, and flat, but I could not grieve for poor Belinda, silenced and quiet forever, and was ashamed of myself for this reason.

2

I stayed the night on my son Alec's lumpy sofa, but slept well enough. His wife Miranda insisted on checking out Castle Spa on the Internet. It had a five-star rating and mixed write-ups from its customers. Five thousand pounds for ten days was such a snip Miranda wondered over decaffeinated coffee what was going wrong up there. I did not care, I said. I was tired, and looking forward to a rest, a holiday, a massage and a manicure. And I was still in a degree of shock as who would not be? It was all over the newspapers the next morning. 'Tragedy hits London's la-la land', one columnist wrote. 'Knife crime spreads its social base', wrote another. Eleanor had come to stay. It had taken her only two weeks to get Sam to the marital bed. Belinda had come home unexpectedly to find them both in it. She had walked out, taking nothing. Came back the next day to find the locks changed. Sam and she were not legally married: there had been a ceremony in Barbados but they had not bothered with the civil one. The house was in his name. She had no rights, only Sam Klines' love and that was gone. Eleanor had looked out the window and laughed. The next week Belinda had broken into the house with the knife.

But I had my own troubles. Miranda said she would try and find me an agency which would restore the house to health over the holiday, while warning me it would cost a lot. But if I could afford Castle Spa presumably I could afford anything. She didn't have to add that £5000 would have paid for quite a number of non-lumpy new sofas. I knew what she was thinking. I have the novelist's gift for hearing other people's thoughts. It's fine on the page but horrible in real life.

But she forgave me and said she hoped I wasn't too upset by

what had happened to my friends. Murder and suicide! I said I only knew about it by hearsay: they were not friends anyway, just colleagues, not close to me. And in that moment I denied them – shut them out of my thoughts. I knew I shouldn't but I did. And then Miranda conceded that I could probably do with a rest and a change, everyone could. She was a teacher and a mother of two, she should know. I hugged her; I am not given to physical demonstration, and I think she was rather surprised, but I am very fond of her.

It was a four-hour train journey from London to Carlisle. Alec drove me to Euston to catch the early train. As we turned into Camden Road my mobile rang. It was Julian in Wichita, saying his mother was looking good: there had been a fright but in the end no broken hip, just a nasty bruise. Wichita, he said, was now six feet deep in snow: getting home might be a problem. No worries, I said, I'd booked myself in to a spa until after the New Year and wouldn't be home anyway. There was a short silence from Julian. He seemed slightly shocked.

'That being the case,' he said, 'I might as well take my time coming home.'

His mother, he said, would be happy for him to stay; he was getting on with his stepfather okay. He might even take a couple of days in New York meeting up with old friends. The phone beeped a warning and went dead. We had hit a patch where the buildings are tall and there is no network coverage. And then when the signal returned I couldn't get back to him. This time the fault was his end – like leaving the bath running and going away.

The streets were quiet this morning too: there were few early shoppers about. I didn't mention my tsunami parallel to Alec because he and Miranda and the children had been in Sri Lanka on that Boxing Day morning, 2004, and had had to run for their lives. It would be tactless to remind him. I just remarked on the emptiness of the streets and he looked at me curiously and said

hadn't I been keeping up with the news? I said frankly, what with one thing and another, no.

Alec, who works in computers, said YouTube and other Internet video sites were spreading rumours of a flu epidemic. Sumatra flu was a variant of bird flu and a distant relative of the plague. It was said to attack the young rather than the old, and had a five per cent mortality rate. There was official denial but blogs were advising people to stay home and avoid contact with others. On the Marylebone Road a cyclist wearing a mask crossed the lights at red and narrowly missed death by bendy bus. I gasped, and took in a breath of hot exhaust air. The grim reaper could come at any time, I said, not bothering with Sumatra flu. Pollution would get you, if a bus didn't.

At the station Alec opened the glove box and sweet papers and crayons fell out – the children are four and three. He picked out a slightly grubby surgical mask and suggested I wore it on the train if I was scared. I handed it back to him, haughtily. I was not chicken, and too old to die anyway. He did not get the joke.

I said again I was sorry about there being no family get together this Christmas, and Alec said actually the children were rather pleased. They would get to open their presents at home. I tried not to feel offended.

The train to the north was standing room only so I pushed my way to First Class through festive and good-humoured crowds. As Miranda said, if I could afford Castle Spa I could afford anything. Empty lager cans already bounced on the floor: beautifully wrapped Christmas gifts overflowed from the laps of pretty girls. Everyone liked going home for Christmas except, apparently, my grandchildren. The weather was unseasonably warm but the rail company had been told it was winter and the heating was full on. One or two people were wearing surgical masks, but they were of the cycling kind, lank-haired and serious, and probably fearful of the common crowd at the best of times. Nothing to do with Sumatra flu.

I eventually found the one seat left in first class. I averted my eyes from headlines about the Eleanor/Belinda horror. I would put it from my mind: I would live in the present. Something had happened that could not be undone: the press would forget about it soon enough, so must I. I must concentrate on having a rest and polishing up my chakras. I had not had time at the station to buy a paperback. Four hours without reading matter! What was I to do? I studied the woman opposite. She was staring out of the window and took no notice of me. Why should she? She was strikingly handsome: around forty-ish, I supposed, with a toughened skin which suggested cigarette smoking, hard-living and tropical climes rather than the passage of time. Her hair was short and sun-bleached; she wore a denim skirt, a slightly grubby white shirt and a blue and white spotted scarf, and carried it off with style. I felt hopelessly bourgeois by comparison, in my neat taupe coat and discreet gold jewellery. I tried to guess her occupation. It would be glamorous and involve travelling. She had the look of a Kate Adie, a male competence allied to a female attractiveness: just too busy to get her shirt to the dry cleaners. She was brooding about something, and muttered to herself; she saw me watching and firmed her lips together.

Then a tear actually appeared on her cheek. She brushed it away and sniffed, and tried to swallow the sniff, and gulped. Women who cry on public transport are usually women in love, overcome by self-pity. I changed my mind about her. No exotic foreign correspondent she – more like a farmer's daughter going back home for Christmas, having been dumped by her boyfriend. I was disappointed.

My upgrade cost £213. I argued in vain with the guard: the women opposite got involved and egged me on in protest. Her voice was husky, as with whisky, cigarettes and hard, hard living. By the time we were finished I was £213 poorer but at least well-disposed towards my neighbour. When she took out her ticket a leaflet fell out of her wallet. It was a flyer for the Yuletide break at Castle Spa. Was she going there too? She was. We had a four hour

journey ahead of us. To chat or not to chat? I had no book. She was upset. We chatted.

Her name was Mira Miller, she said. She was a journalist. The name was familiar, I said, truthfully enough.

'I used to be a foreign correspondent,' she said. 'A war journalist.' And she named a popular daily newspaper with a right wing bias and a taste for scandal. 'Now I am relegated to features. The cost of insuring me abroad is too high. Or that's the official version.'

I told her my name was Phoebe Fox. She said I looked familiar. I said it was true I did occasional late night cultural programmes for TV but had the kind of face shared by many. She accepted that, rather to my chagrin. People have only a fitful memory for those who appear on TV, unless they are newsreaders or weather girls.

She offered me a swig from her water bottle. I accepted. We settled in to talk. I asked her if there was any truth in the rumours about Sumatra flu – she should know, if anyone did – and she laughed and said none. Emergency services and doctors surgeries were running as normal. Coughs and sneezes, nothing worse, to all accounts.

'Mind you,' she added, 'journalists tend to report what their editor wants them to report, and if the Internet says one thing, Alistair' – her editor, I assumed – 'will want to hear the opposite, on principle. So I imagine we'll be feeding the panic.'

Something about the way she said 'Alistair', with a kind of appreciative lingering, made me think he was responsible for the tears when she thought no one was looking. Thirty years of feminism, and this?

'Isn't it kind of sad,' she lamented, 'going to spend these particular ten days in a Health Spa? What does that suggest about someone's life?'

I said briskly it could suggest all kinds of things. It could mean your bathroom floor had fallen through into the kitchen just before everything closed down for the holidays. It could mean you were a business woman and liked to fill in your time construc-

tively: party time being over, and offices closed for deals and counter deals, and you having had enough of people and friends and just wanting to relax, you might well want a dose of Castle Spa. Then you could rejoin the fray in the New Year, half a stone lighter and with your tattered chakras robustly restored. Or perhaps people just liked a bargain – £5000 for ten days sounded a lot, but it was nothing by the standards of the rich.

'It could mean,' she said bitterly, 'that your editor gave you this assignment, ten days of Christmas manicures, because he knew you had no one and nowhere else to go and he pitied you.'

I thought I was probably right about this Alistair. More, that it wasn't so much that he pitied her as he wanted some peace over the holiday. He would have a wife and children tucked away and be playing happy families and the last thing he'd want was his mistress calling to offer seasonal greetings.

'Or there could be people running away from stalkers, serial killers or the supernatural,' I said, 'or women just divorced, or recuperating after release from prison, or worn out by importunate lovers and just plain tired, or girls who have won the prize in a Charity auction of wishes. Who knows? We will see.'

And see we did.

3

Castle Spa, for all its magnificence, is to the architectural eye way over the top. Based round the foundations of what had once been a Roman bathhouse, then a convent, then a fortified mansion, it had been renovated in the mid-nineteenth century by William Burges, he of the extravagances of Cardiff Castle. He had added a moat, a working drawbridge with heavy chains, turrets, gargoyles, cannons, a couple of Landseer lions and an excellent Orangerie. The place stood in isolation. Its nearest village was Limmus – little more than a crossroads in the valley set between craggy, unrounded hills, with a general store and a cluster of mostly new houses – was a mile walk from the Castle across fields, marshes and streams, three miles if you went by road.

Mira and I shared the taxi from Carlisle, a ten mile run and only fifteen pounds. Just when the eye had got accustomed to the damp greens and pale browns of the Lake District in winter, and the dramatic swooping shapes of hills and craggy rock, we rounded a bend and the elaborate man-made structure of Castle Spa loomed in front of us. It seemed something of an affront: one feared draughts at best, rats at worst.

But once inside the great oak doors it became apparent that we were safe. Someone had spent millions, and quite recently at that, to bring the interior up to what Mira's brochure described as 'the most eloquent standards of contemporary taste.' In other words the baronial hall which we expected to enter was no different from the lobby of a new hotel in any cosmopolitan city.

Bev was there to welcome us. She had her best face on, as we were to find out. She swiftly persuaded us that her entire ambition

in life was to greet special and important guests to Castle Spa. Meeting interesting people made her job worthwhile. She was tall, slim, neat, colourless and sexless. Euan the spotty boy porter would take our bags to our rooms: she would show us round. So we had met on the train: how nice; shared a taxi: how sensible. We were the last guests to arrive: too late for any treatments to day, she was sorry, but in good time for the welcome dinner with Lady Caroline, who was running late but due in at any minute. Even as she spoke there was a sudden roaring, beating noise from the back of the castle which made us jump. The last rays of the evening sun were blotted out, as if some giant bird was hovering overhead.

'No worries,' said Beverley. 'Lady Caroline likes to take the helicopter, not the train.' And if her determined smile suddenly seemed a little thin lipped and rictus, it was not our place to notice it. I didn't quite hear her add '*that fucking fat cow and her carbon footprints!*' I pretended it had not been heard, or said. Lady Caroline swept through the lobby almost before the rotors had stopped: a cool grunt to Beverley, a nod to Mira and me, and she vanished inside a door marked PRIVATE, slamming it behind her. One had no time to pick up details – just had the impression of a large, rather blowsy, bad tempered Madame of a suburban brothel, annoyed because business was bad. She wore hoop earrings.

Beverley – I had decided I could not think of her as Bev, she was too major a player – recomposed herself and wanted to be certain that we had not brought laptops or mobile phones with us, and we reassured her.

'There's no network coverage here anyway,' she said. 'During our time at Castle Spa we focus on our chakras and our spiritual balance sheets, no nasty electronics to disturb us. If we don't learn to live at one with nature, the planet will soon find ways of taking her revenge.'

She went ahead and Mira and I tried not to giggle behind her back. The New Age blanket had grown wider and heavier since last I looked. Lift its edge and more things than ever peeped out at

you: not just chakras, crystals and meditation, but organic food, work/life balance, global warming and a vengeful Gaia herself. E-mail, computers and all things digital: bad; spiritual balance, whatever that was: good.

She told us there was a Christmas tree in the Banqueting Hall in the south wing, if we liked that kind of thing, but out of respect for other faith groups the rest of the Spa had been left undecorated. And if I heard her say under her breath '*One way for the fat cunt to save money*,' I surely imagined it. But when I am tired or stressed I do have a way of hearing, not quite with my ears but registering in some other part of me, loud and clear, what others would like to say and don't.

I took this problem to a psychiatrist once and he asked if I was a writer of fiction. When I said yes, he said he had known other novelists complain of the same thing, and he could only suggest one looked after one's general health and immune system, and stopped bringing imaginary characters to life, if one wanted it to stop – and treated it as good for business and put up with it if one had the rent to pay. There was no cure, he said, for a propensity to let the dividing line between what one invented and what was 'real' became blurred. Electrical synapses leapt between the left and right brain barrier, and that was that. I could try sleeping pills. I left and he sent me a bill for £220.

It still happens on occasion. And it can be disconcerting, indeed really upsetting, to sit at a dinner party and hear what people think as well as what they say: you wait for uproar to erupt around the table and when it doesn't, realize you are the only person who heard what was said across the table to another guest – '*What fucking rubbish you talk*,' or '*God, you're boring*.' I could see, hearing Beverley's words or non words, that I could do with a ten-day beak in a Spa, communing with Gaia, erasing carbon footprints, massaged into peace of mind.

The Oriental Room was the Spa's *pièce de resistance*. Mira and I gasped obligingly and almost sincerely. The original Burges features had been kept and restored: a vast vaulted room, a ceiling

which featured pre-Raphaelite paintings of nubile, veil-draped, well-breasted women, and which was supported by four stone Evangelistic beasts with massive paws, clawed and dangerous. Mediaeval tapestries lined the walls. In the foreground stood, incongruously but impressively, a great heart-shaped marble Jacuzzi, which hissed and steamed gently, and sent waves of scented vapours drifting into long low-pillared corridors which led off the central space, and which surely could not be good for the tapestries. Unless of course they were nylon fakes. The pillars looked like malachite and green obsidian. Perhaps they only looked like the real thing, perhaps it was only a Las Vegas version of original splendour: but it would do.

'Actually this room gives me quite a headache,' confided Beverley. 'I'm a minimalist myself. But the ladies love it. Sometimes we let it out for film productions. But they always manage to break or spoil something.'

'But then you can claim on the insurance,' I said, mindful of the destruction at home. I would have to call Alec and make sure the builders were on board.

'Too right we can,' she said.

Would my insurance company countenance overflowing baths? I realized I had no idea.

The Oriental Room was not enough. I wanted a bed, a bath and dinner. Failing a shot of vodka and some bread and cheese on our arrival, a glass of sherry and a peanut would have done. What was I doing here? It had been madness. Ten days out of my life on a whim? I am a size fourteen. Would they seize me and diet me and turn me out into the world a twelve? Please no. I need padding: my nerve endings are too near my surface for comfort as it is.

I am not, by the way, an alcoholic. The drink-driving conviction was exceptional. Julian and I had been out to a Valentine's Day dinner. I had thought he was the one not drinking, he had thought I was. By the time we realized it was too late.

Nothing would now do but Beverley took us round the treatment rooms – pale green, conventional, soft lighting, what Mira

referred to in my ear as crematorium music – music to die to. She read my mind: she slipped me a junk chocolate bar from her large and trendy bag when Beverley wasn't looking. I had a friend.

Guests who had arrived at the time most desired by Beverley drifted around the treatment area, in a silent, trance like state, bulky in white towelling gowns, faces denuded of make-up, hair damp, stunned by the shock of a sudden change in their life and times, in the transit lounge of their lives which was Castle Spa. The girls who were paid to massage them, oil them, exfoliate them, stick needles into them, and who flickered in and out of the treatments rooms – '*I'm ready for my lady now*' – seemed a special twittering race bred for the care and comfort of stronger, wilder, richer women than themselves. Lightly boned little things, with pale, delicate, indoor faces and big, startled eyes. But I knew their hands would be like iron as they kneaded and pressed reluctant flesh: they sought revenge, and why should they not?

Our bedrooms, when Beverley finally allowed us to reach them, were standard hotel rooms, executive grade, but without television, radio, clock or telephone, off a long carpeted corridor on the ground floor of the west wing. Mine faced the moat: a green algae covered the water. There was indeed no signal for my mobile. Fortunately I had a watch. Beverley said the Castle's one telephone was in her office at the top of the East Tower and would be available in emergencies. Dinner would be in fifty minutes. Most ladies liked to dress for this special occasion. Did I know anything about computers because hers kept crashing? No, I said. It was not strictly true. She went away and I fell upon my bed. The search for tranquillity can be exhausting.