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Ordinary Thunderstorms

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Extract

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I

LET US START WITH the river – all things begin with the river and we shall probably end there, no doubt – but let's wait and see how we go. Soon, in a minute or two, a young man will come and stand by the river's edge, here at Chelsea Bridge, in London.

There he is – look – stepping hesitantly down from a taxi, paying the driver, gazing around him, unthinkingly, glancing over at the bright water (it's a flood tide and the river is unusually high). He's a tall, pale-faced young man, early thirties, even-featured with tired eyes, his short dark hair neatly cut and edged as if fresh from the barber. He is new to the city, a stranger, and his name is Adam Kindred. He has just been interviewed for a job and feels like seeing the river (the interview having been the usual tense encounter, with a lot at stake), answering a vague desire to 'get some air'. The recent interview explains why, beneath his expensive trenchcoat, he is wearing a charcoal-grey suit, a maroon tie with a new white shirt and why he's carrying a glossy solid-looking black briefcase with heavy brass locks and corner trim. He crosses the road, having no idea how his life is about to change in the next few hours – massively, irrevocably – no idea at all.

Adam walked over to the high stone balustrade that curved the roadway into Chelsea Bridge and, leaning on it, looked down at the Thames. The tide was high and still coming in, he saw, the normal flow of water reversed, flotsam moving surprisingly quickly upstream, heading inland, as if the sea were dumping its

rubbish in the river rather than the usual, other way round. Adam strolled up the bridge's wide walkway heading for midstream, his gaze sweeping from the four chimneys of Battersea Power Station (one blurred with a cross-hatching of scaffolding) to the west, past the gold finial of the Peace Pagoda towards the two chimneys of Lots Road Power Station. The plane trees in Battersea Park, on the far bank, were still some way from full leaf – only the horse chestnuts were precociously, densely green. Early May in London . . . He turned and looked back at the Chelsea shore: more trees – he'd forgotten how leafy some parts of London were, how positively bosky. The roofs of the grand, red brick, riverine Victorian mansion blocks rose above the level of the Embankment's avenue of planes. How high? Sixty feet? Eighty? Apart from the susurrus of ceaseless traffic, the occasional klaxon and whooping siren, he didn't feel as if he were in the middle of a huge city at all: the trees, the quiet force of the surging, tidal river beneath his feet, that special luminescence that a body of water throws off, made him grow calmer – he'd been right to come to the river – odd how these instincts mysteriously drive you, he thought.

He walked back, his eye held by a clearly defined, attenuated triangle of waste ground to the west side of Chelsea Bridge, formed by the bridge itself, the water's edge and the four lanes of the Embankment. It was bulked out with vegetation, dense with long grass and thick unpruned bushes and trees. He thought, idly, that such a patch of land must be worth a tidy fortune in this location, even a thin long triangle of waste ground, and he built, in his mind's eye, a three-storey wedge of a dozen bijou, balconied apartments. Then he saw that in order to achieve this he'd have to cut down a huge fig tree, close to the bridge – decades old, he reckoned, drawing nearer to it, its big shiny leaves still growing, stiffly fresh. A venerable fig tree by the Thames, he thought: strange – how had it been planted there and what happened to the fruit? He conjured up a vision of a plate of Parma ham and

halved fresh figs. Where had he eaten that? On his honeymoon in Portofino with Alexa? Or earlier? On one of his student holidays, perhaps . . . It was a mistake to think of Alexa, he realised, his new mood of calm replaced at once by one of sadness and anger, so he concentrated instead on the small surges of hunger he was experiencing, and felt, thinking of the figs and Parma ham, a sudden need for Italian food: Italian food of a simple, honest, basic sort – insalata tricolore, pasta alle vongole, scallopine al limone, torta di nonna. That would do nicely.

He wandered into Chelsea and almost immediately in the quiet streets behind the Royal Hospital found, to his considerable astonishment, an Italian restaurant – as if he were in a fairy tale. There it was, tucked under yellow awnings badged with a Venetian lion, in a narrow street of white stucco and beige-brick terraced houses – it seemed an anomaly, a fantasy. No shops, no pub, no other restaurant in sight – how had it managed to establish itself here amongst the residents? Adam looked at his watch – 6.20 – a bit early to eat but he was genuinely hungry now and he could see there were already a few other customers inside. Then a smiling, tanned man came to the door and held it open for him, urging, 'Come in, sir, come in, yes, we are open, come in, come in.' This man took his coat from him, hung it on a peg and ushered him past the small bar through to the light L-shaped room, shouting genial instructions and rebukes at the other waiters, as if Adam were his most cherished regular and was being inconvenienced by their inefficiency in some way.

He sat Adam down at a table for two with his back to the street outside. He offered to look after Adam's briefcase but Adam decided it would stay with him as he took the proffered menu and glanced around. Eight tourists – four men, four women – sat at a large round table, eating silently, all dressed in blue with identical blue tote bags at their feet, and there was another solitary man sitting two tables away along from him, who had taken his spectacles off and was dabbing his face with a tissue. He looked

agitated, ill at ease in some way, and he glanced over as he replaced his spectacles. As their eyes met the man gave that inclination of the head, the small smile of acknowledgement – the solidarity of the solitary diner – that says I am not sad or lonely, this is something that I have happily chosen to do, just like you. He had a couple of folders and other papers spread on the table in front of him. Adam smiled back.

Adam ate the house salad – spinach, bacon, shaved parmesan and a creamy dressing – and was halfway through his scallopine al vitello (green beans, roast potatoes on the side) when the other solitary diner leant over and asked him if he knew the exact time. His accent was American, his English flawless. Adam told him – 6.52 – the man carefully adjusted his watch and they inevitably began to talk. The man introduced himself as Dr Philip Wang. Adam reciprocated and supplied the information that this was his first trip to London since he had been a child. Dr Wang confirmed that he too knew very little of the city. He lived and worked in Oxford – paying only short, infrequent visits to London, a day or two at a time, when he had to see patients taking part in a research project he was running. Adam said he'd come to London from America, was applying for a job here, wanting to 'relocate', to come back home, as it were.

'A job?' Dr Wang asked, looking at his smart suit. 'Are you in finance?' His speculation seemed to carry with it a tone of disapproval.

'No, a university job – a research fellowship – at Imperial College,' Adam added, wondering if he might now be vindicated. 'I just came from the interview.'

'Good school,' Wang said, distantly, then, 'Yeah . . .' as if his mind was on something else, then, collecting himself, asked politely, 'How did it go?'

Adam shrugged and said he could never predict these things. The three people who had interviewed him – two men and a woman with a near-shaven head – had given nothing away, being

almost absurdly polite and formal, so unlike his former American colleagues, Adam had thought at the time.

'Imperial College. So, you're a scientist,' Wang said. 'So am I. What's your field?'

'Climatology,' Adam said. 'What about you?'

Wang thought for a second as if he wasn't sure of the answer. 'Immunology, I guess, yeah . . . Or you could say I was an allergist,' he said, then glancing at his newly adjusted watch said he'd better go, had work to do, calls to make. He paid his bill, in cash, and clumsily gathered up his papers, spilling sheaves on the floor, stooping to pick them up, muttering to himself – suddenly he seemed more than a little distracted again, as if, now the meal had come to an end, his real life had recommenced with its many pressures and anxieties. Finally he stood and shook Adam's hand, wishing him luck, hoping he had got the job. 'I have a good feeling about it,' Wang added, illogically, 'a real good feeling.'

Adam was halfway through his tiramisu when he noticed that Wang had left something behind: a transparent plastic zippable folder under the seat between their tables, half obscured by the hanging flap of the tablecloth. He reached for it and saw that on the front was a small pocket that contained Wang's business card. Adam extracted it and read: 'DR PHILIP Y. WANG MD, PhD (Yale), FBSI, MAAI', and under that 'Head of Research & Development CALENTURE-DEUTZ plc'. On the reverse there were two addresses with phone numbers, one in the Cherwell Business Park, Oxford (Unit 10) and the other in London – Anne Boleyn House, Sloane Avenue, SW3.

As he paid his bill, pleased to remember his new pin code, tapping it without hesitation into the handset, Adam asked if Dr Wang was a regular customer and was informed that he'd never been seen in the restaurant before. Adam decided he'd drop the file off himself – it seemed a friendly and helpful thing to do, especially as Wang had been so enthusiastic about his career prospects – and asked directions to Sloane Avenue.

Walking along the King's Road, still busy with shoppers (almost exclusively French or Spanish, it seemed), Adam thought suddenly that perhaps Wang had deliberately left his file for him to discover. He wondered if it was a way of seeing him again: two lonely men in the city, wanting some company . . . Was it, even, a gay thing, a ploy? Adam had sometimes wondered if there was something about him that gay men found attractive. He could recall three precise occasions when he had been flirted with and another when a man had waited for him outside the lavatory of a restaurant in Tucson, Arizona and had forced a kiss on him. Adam didn't think Wang was gay – no, that was preposterous – but he decided it would be wise to phone ahead and so eased Wang's card out of its tight plastic niche, sat down on a wooden bench outside a pub, fished out his mobile phone and made the call.

'Philip Wang.'

'Dr Wang, it's Adam Kindred. We just met at the restaurant—'

'Of course – and you have my file. Thank you so much. I just called them and they told me you had it.'

'I thought it'd be quicker if I dropped it off.'

'That's so kind of you. Please come up and have a drink – oh, there's someone at the door. That's not you, is it?'

Adam laughed, said he thought he was five minutes or so away and clicked his phone shut. Come up and have a drink – perfectly friendly, no sexual innuendo there – but perhaps it was the American accent, professionally flat, giving away nothing, that made Adam think that Wang had been insufficiently surprised to hear he was on his way round . . .

Anne Boleyn House was an imposing, almost fortress-like 1930s art deco block of service flats with a small semicircle of box-hedged drive-in and a uniformed porter in the lobby sitting behind a long marble-topped counter. Adam signed his name in a register and was directed to Flat G 14 on the seventh floor. After his phone call he had thought over the necessity of seeing Wang again – he

could have safely left the file with the porter, he now realised – but he had nothing else to do and he didn't particularly want to go back to his modest hotel in Pimlico: a drink or two with Wang would kill some time and, besides, Wang seemed an interesting and educated man.

Adam stepped out of the lift into a wholly featureless long corridor – dark parquet, pistachio walls, identical flush doors differentiated only by their number. Like cells, he thought, or, in a film, it might have been a lazy art director's vision of Kafkaesque conformity. And there was an unpleasant nose-tickling, odorous overlay – of wax polish mingled with potent, bleachy lavatory cleanser. Small glaringly bright lights set into the ceiling lit the way to Flat G 14, where the corridor made a right-angled turn to reveal another length of soulless, service-flat perspective. A glowing green exit light shone at its end.

Adam saw that Wang had left his door slightly ajar – a sign of welcome? – but he rang the bell all the same, thinking that it wouldn't do simply to walk in. He heard Wang come through a door, heard a door close, but no call of 'Adam? Do come in, please.'

He rang the bell again.

'Hello?' Adam pushed the door slightly. 'Dr Wang? Philip?'

He opened the door and stepped into a small, boxy living room. Two armchairs close to a coffee table, a huge flat-screen TV, some dried flowers in straw vases. A small galley kitchen behind two louvred half-doors. Adam set his briefcase down by the coffee table and placed Wang's file beside a fan of golfing magazines, all smiling men in pastel colours brandishing their clubs. Then he heard Wang's voice, low and urgent.

'Adam? I'm in here . . .'

The next room. No, please, not the bedroom, surely? Adam thought to himself, urgently regretting coming up as he stepped over to the door and pushed it open.

'I can only stay five min—'

Philip Wang lay on top of his bed in a widening pool of blood. He was alive, very conscious, and a hand, flipper-like, gestured Adam towards him. The room had been trashed, two small filing cabinets up-ended and emptied, drawers from a bedside table tipped out, a wardrobe cleared with a swipe or two, clothes and hangers scattered.

Wang pointed to his left side. Adam hadn't noticed – the handle of a knife protruded from Wang's sopping sweater.

'Pull it out,' Wang said. His face showed signs of a beating – his spectacles distorted but unbroken, a trickle of blood from a nostril, a split lip, a red impact-circle on a cheekbone.

'Are you sure?' Adam said.

'Please, now . . .'

With fluttering hands he seemed to guide Adam's right hand to the hilt of the knife. Adam gripped it loosely.

'I don't think this is the sort of thing—'

'One quick movement,' Wang said and coughed. A little blood overflowed from his mouth down his chin.

'Are you absolutely sure?' Adam repeated. 'I don't know if it's the correct—'

'*Now!*'

Without further thought Adam gripped the knife and drew it out, as easily as if from a scabbard. It was a breadknife, he noticed, as a surge of released blood followed the withdrawal, travelling up the blade and wetting Adam's knuckles, warmly.

'I'll call the police,' Adam said and placed the knife down, unthinkingly wiping his dripping fingers on the coverlet.

'The file,' Wang said, fingers twitching, moving, as if tapping at an invisible keyboard.

'I have it.'

'Whatever you do, don't—' Wang died then, with a short gasp of what seemed like exasperation.

Adam stepped away, appalled, horrified, stumbled against a pile of Wang's jackets and trousers, and went back into the living

room, looking for a phone. He saw it sitting on a neat, purpose-built shelf by the door and as he reached for the receiver saw that there was still some blood on his hand, still dripping from an unwiped finger. Some drops fell on the telephone.

'Shit . . .' he said, realising this was his first articulated expression of shock. What in the name of fuck was going on?

Then he heard the window in Wang's bedroom open and somebody step heavily inside. And the terror he was feeling left in an instant. Or at least he thought it was the window – maybe it was from the bathroom – but he had heard the clunking sound of a catch being released, one of those brass handles that secured the mass-produced steel-framed and many-paned glass windows that gave Anne Boleyn House its slightly depressed, institutional air.

Adam grabbed his briefcase and Wang's file and left the flat rapidly, closing the door behind him with a bang. He looked towards the lifts and then decided against them, turning the corner and striding normally, not running, not unduly fast, towards the green exit light and the fire stairs.

He descended seven floors of the dimly lit stone stairs without seeing anyone and emerged on to a side street behind Anne Boleyn House beside four towering grey rubbish bins on sturdy rubber wheels. There was a powerful smell of decomposing food that made Adam gag and he spat, squatting down to open his briefcase and slip Wang's file inside. He looked up to see two young chefs in their white jackets and blue checkerboard trousers lighting up cigarettes in a doorway a few yards off.

'Stinks, dunnit?' one of them called over with a grin on his face.

Adam gave them a thumbs-up and headed off, still at what he imagined was an easy saunter, in the opposite direction.

He wandered Chelsea's streets for a while, aimlessly, trying to sort things out in his mind, trying to make some sense of what he had witnessed and what had taken place. His head was jangled, a shocking, fractured mosaic of recent images – Wang's battered face, the hilt of the breadknife, his twitching, tapping hand gesture

– but he was not too jangled to realise what he had just done and the consequences of his importunate, natural reactions. He should *never* have obeyed Wang's instruction, he now realised. He should never have pulled the knife out, never – he should have simply gone to the telephone and dialled 911 – 999, rather. Now he had traces of Wang's blood on his hands and under his fingernails and, even worse, his fingerprints were on the fucking knife itself. But what else could anyone have done in such a situation? another side of his brain yelled at him, in frustrated rage. You had no choice: it was a dying, agonised man's last request. Wang had practically fitted his fingers around the knife's hilt, begging him to pull it out, begging him –

He stopped walking for a second, telling himself to calm down. His face was covered in sweat, his chest was heaving as if he'd just run a mile. He exhaled, noisily, slow down, slow down. Think, think back . . . He set off again. Had he interrupted Wang's actual murder? Or was it just some robbery gone hideously wrong? He thought: the door he had heard close as he came in to the flat must have been the perpetrator leaving the bedroom – and the sound of the person re-entering must have been the perpetrator, again – the murderer, again. He must have come in from a balcony, he realised, as he now remembered noting that some of the Boleyn's higher service flats had narrow balconies. So the man had slipped out when he heard Adam come in and had waited on the balcony and then when he heard Adam leave the bedroom to phone . . . Yes, the police, must call, Adam reminded himself. Perhaps, he thought suddenly, it had been a terrible, foolish mistake to have left, to have run away down the stairs . . . But if that man had caught him, what then? No – completely understandable, had to get out, *had* to, fast, or he might be dead himself, now, Jesus . . . He reached into his jacket for his mobile and saw Wang's blood now dry on his knuckles. Wash that off, first.

He wandered into an open space, a kind of wide square giving on to a sports ground and an art gallery, oddly, where small grouped

fountains spouted from holes in the paving stones, couples sat around on low walls and a few kids whizzed to and fro on their expensive metal scooters.

He crouched by a fountain and washed his right hand in the cold water, a wobbling vertical column flowing upward, defying gravity. His right hand was now clean – and now trembling, he saw – he needed a drink, he needed to calm down, give his thoughts some order, then he would call the police: something was nagging at him at the back of his mind, something he had done or not done, and he just needed a little time to think.

Adam asked directions to Pimlico and set off, once sure of where he should be heading. On his way there he found a pub, reassuringly mediocre – indeed, as if 'average' subsumed all its ambitions: an averagely stained patterned carpet, middle-of-the-road muzak playing, three gaming machines pinging and gonging away not too loudly, a shabby-looking blue-collar clientele, a perfectly acceptable number of beers available and unexceptionable pub food on offer – pies, sandwiches and a dish of the day (smearily erased). Adam felt oddly reassured by this pointed decision to settle for the acceptable norm, to strive for nothing higher than the tolerable median. He would remember this place. He ordered a large whisky with ice and a packet of peanuts, took his drink to a table in the corner and began to reflect.

He felt guilt. Why did he feel guilty – he'd done nothing wrong? Was it because he had run away? . . . But anyone would have run in his situation, he told himself: the shock, the presence of a killer in the next room . . . It was an atavistic fear, a sense of illogical responsibility – something every innocent child knows when confronted by serious trouble. It had been the obvious, natural course of action to run out quickly and safely and take stock. He needed a little time, a little space . . .

He sipped at his whisky, relishing the alcohol burn in his throat. He chomped peanuts, licking the residual salt from his palm, picking the impacted shards from his teeth with a fingernail. What

was bothering him? Was it what Wang had said, his last words? 'Whatever you do, don't—' Don't what? Don't *take* the file? Don't *leave* the file? And then he thought of Wang dead and the delayed shock hit him again and he shivered. He went to the bar and ordered more whisky and another bag of peanuts.

Adam drank his whisky and consumed his peanuts with a velocity and hunger that surprised him, emptying the packet into his cupped palm and tipping the nuts carelessly into his mouth in an almost ape-like way (stray peanuts bouncing off the table top in front of him). The packet was emptied in seconds, crumpled and placed on the table where it cracklingly tried to uncrumple itself for a further few seconds, while Adam picked up and ate the individual peanuts that had escaped his immediate furious appetite. He wondered, as he savoured the salty, waxy peanut taste, if there were a more nutritious or satisfying foodstuff on the planet – sometimes salted peanuts were all that man required.

He went to the gents' lavatory, stooping down a narrow, bendy staircase – as though it had aspired to be spiral once but had given up halfway through the transformation – to a pungent basement where beer and urine competed on the olfactory level. As he washed his hands again beneath the unsparing glare of the light above the sinks he saw that his shirt and tie were freckled with tiny dark polka-dots – polka-dots of blood he assumed, Dr Wang's blood . . . Adam felt suddenly faint, remembering the scene in Wang's flat, remembering the withdrawal of the breadknife and the bloody surge that followed it. The delayed shock at what he had done and witnessed returned to him – he would go back to his hotel, he resolved suddenly, change his shirt (keeping this one for evidence) and then call the police. No one would blame him for leaving the crime scene – what with the man, the murderer on the balcony, re-entering. Impossible to remain calm and lucid under these circumstances – no, no, no – no blame attaching, at all.

He rehearsed his story as he walked back to Pimlico and Grafton Lodge – his modest hotel – pausing a couple of times to check his bearings in these near identical streets of terraced, white-stuccoed houses, and then, once he was sure he was going in the right direction, setting off again with new confidence, happy in the certitude of his decision-making process, pleased that this awful night – the terrible things he had witnessed – would have their proper judicial closure.

Grafton Lodge consisted of two of these terraced houses knocked together to form a small eighteen-bedroom hotel. Despite the overt pretensions of its name, the owners – Seamus and Donal – had a cursive pink neon sign in a ground-floor window that flashed 'VACANCIES' in best B-movie fashion and the front door was badged with logos of international travel agencies, tour groups and hotel guides – a shiny collage of decals, transfers and plastic honoraria. From Vancouver to Osaka, apparently, Grafton Lodge was a home from home.

To be fair, Adam had no complaints about his small clean room overlooking the mews lane at the back. Everything worked: the Teasmade, the shower, the mini bar, the TV with its ninety-eight channels. Seamus and Donal were charming and helpful and solicitous about his every need, yet, as he turned up the street towards the hotel and saw its pink neon 'VACANCIES' sign flashing, he felt a small shudder of dread vibrate through him. He stopped and forced himself to think: it was now well over an hour, nearly two hours, in fact, since he had fled from Anne Boleyn House. However, he had signed his name in the visitors' register that the porter had proffered to him – Adam Kindred – and had written down Grafton Lodge, SW1, as his home address. That was the huge, catastrophic mistake he had been worried about, that was what had been nagging at him . . . The last person to visit Philip Wang before his death had obligingly left his name and address in the guest ledger. He felt a sudden nausea, considering the implications of this guileless self-identification as he approached

Grafton Lodge. All seemed well – through the decal-encrusted glass door he saw Seamus at the reception desk talking to one of the chambermaids – Branca, he thought she was called – and he could see a few customers in the residents-only lounge bar. Across the street a black cab was parked, its 'for hire' light off, its driver dozing at the wheel – no doubt waiting for one of the revelling businessmen in the lounge bar to eventually emerge.

Adam urged himself onward: go in, go to your room, change your bloodied clothes, call the police and go to a police station – bring the whole horrible business to a proper, decent conclusion. It seemed the only sensible way forward, the only completely normal course of action, so he wondered why he decided to walk down the access lane at the end of the street and try to look up at his window from the mews behind. Something else was nagging at him now, something else he had or had not done, and that act, or non-act, was spooking him. If he could remember what it was and could rationalise about it perhaps he'd feel calmer.

He stood in the dark mews at the back of Grafton Lodge and looked at the back of the hotel for the window of his room and duly found it: dark, the curtains half-drawn as he had left them that morning for his interview at Imperial College. What world was that, he thought? Everything was still in order, nothing out of the ordinary, at all. He was a fool to be acting so suspic—

'Adam Kindred?'

Later, Adam found it hard to explain to himself why he had reacted so violently to hearing his name. Perhaps he was more traumatised than he thought; perhaps the levels of recent stress he had been experiencing had made him a creature of reflex rather than ratiocination. In the event, on hearing this man's voice so close, uttering his name, he had gripped the handle of his new, solid briefcase and had swung it in a backhanded arc, full force, behind him. The immediate, unseen impact had jarred his entire arm and shoulder. The man made a noise halfway between a sigh and a moan and Adam heard him fall to the ground with a thud and a clatter.

Adam swivelled round – he now felt a surge of absurd concern: Jesus Christ, what had he done? – and he crouched by the man's semi-conscious body. The man was moving – just – and blood was flowing from his mouth and nose. The right-angled, heavy brass trim at the bottom corner of Adam's briefcase had connected with the man's right temple and in the dim glow of the mews' streetlighting he could see a clear, red, L-shaped welt already forming there as if placed by a branding iron. The man groaned and stirred and his hands stretched out as if reaching for something. Adam, following the gesture, saw he was trying to take hold of an automatic pistol (with silencer, he realised, a milli-second later) lying on the cobbles beside him.

Adam stood, fear and alarm now replacing his guilty concern, and then, almost immediately, he heard the approaching yips and yelps of a police car's siren. But this man, he knew, lying at his feet, was no policeman. The police, as far as he was aware, didn't issue automatic pistols with silencers to their plain-clothes officers. He tried to stay calm as the logical thought processes made themselves plain – somebody else was also after him, now: this man had been sent to find and kill him. Adam felt a bolus of nausea rise in his throat. He was experiencing pure fear, he realised, like an animal, like a trapped animal. He looked down to see that the man had groggily hauled himself up into a sitting position and was managing to hold himself upright there, swaying uncertainly like a baby, before he spat out a tooth. Adam kicked his gun away, sending it sliding and clattering across the cobbled roadway of the mews and stepped back a few paces. This man wasn't a policeman but the real police were coming closer – he could hear another siren some streets away in clamorous dissonance with the first. The man was now beginning to crawl erratically across the cobbles towards his gun. All right: this man was looking for him and so were the police – he heard the first car stop outside the hotel and the urgent slam of doors – the night had clearly gone wrong in ways even he couldn't imagine. He looked round to see that the

crawling man had nearly reached his gun and was stretching out an uncertain hand to grab it, as if his vision was defective in some crucial way and he could barely focus. The man keeled over and laboriously righted himself. Adam knew he had to make a decision now, in the next second or two, and with that knowledge came the unwelcome realisation that it would probably be one of the most important decisions of his life. Should he surrender himself to the police – or not? But some unspecified fear in him screamed – NO! NO! RUN! And he knew that his life was about to take a turning he could never reverse – he couldn't surrender himself, now, he *wouldn't* surrender himself: he needed some time. He was terrified, he realised, of how bad circumstances looked for him, terrified of what complicated, disastrous trouble the baleful, awful implications of the story he would tell – the true story – would land him in. So, time was key, time was his only possible friend and ally at this moment. If he had a little time then things could be sorted out in an orderly way. So he made his decision, one of the most important decisions in his life. It wasn't a question of whether he had chosen the right course of action or the wrong one. He simply had to follow his instincts – he had to be true to himself. He turned and ran away, at a steady pace, up the mews and into the anonymous streets of Pimlico.

What drew him back to Chelsea, he wondered? Was it the fig tree and his momentary dream of expensive riverside apartments that made him think that this attenuated triangle of waste ground by Chelsea Bridge would provide him with safe haven for twenty-four hours until this crazy night was over? He waited until there were no visible cars on the Embankment and climbed swiftly over the spear-railings and into the triangle. He pushed through the bushes and shrubs away from the bridge and its swooping beads of light outlining its suspension cables. He found a patch of ground between three dense bushes and spread his raincoat flat. He sat on it for a while, arms hugging his knees, emptying his mind,

and feeling an irresistible urge to sleep grow through him. He switched off his mobile and lay down, resting his head on his briefcase for a pillow and folded his arms around himself. He didn't think, for once, didn't try to analyse and understand, simply letting the images of his day and night flash through his head like a demented slide show. Rest, his body was saying, you're safe, you've bought yourself some precious time, but now you need rest – stop thinking. So he did and he fell asleep.