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The Finkler Question

Written by Howard Jacobson

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THE FINKLER QUESTION

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To the memory of three dear friends, great givers of laughter

Terry Collits (1940–2009)

Tony Errington (1944–2009)

Graham Rees (1944–2009)

Who now will set the table on a roar?

PART ONE

ONE

1

He should have seen it coming.

His life had been one mishap after another. So he should have been prepared for this one.

He was a man who saw things coming. Not shadowy premonitions before and after sleep, but real and present dangers in the daylit world. Lamp posts and trees reared up at him, splintering his shins. Speeding cars lost control and rode on to the footpath leaving him lying in a pile of torn tissue and mangled bones. Sharp objects dropped from scaffolding and pierced his skull.

Women worst of all. When a woman of the sort Julian Treslove found beautiful crossed his path it wasn't his body that took the force but his mind. She shattered his calm.

True, he had no calm, but she shattered whatever calm there was to look forward to in the future. She *was* the future.

People who see what's coming have faulty chronology, that is all. Treslove's clocks were all wrong. He no sooner saw the woman than he saw the aftermath of her – his marriage proposal and her acceptance, the home they would set up together, the drawn rich silk curtains leaking purple light, the bed sheets billowing like clouds, the wisp of aromatic smoke winding from the chimney – only for every wrack of it – its lattice of crimson roof tiles, its gables and dormer windows, his happiness, his future – to come crashing down on him in the moment of her walking past.

She didn't leave him for another man, or tell him she was sick of him and of their life together, she passed away in a perfected dream of tragic love – consumptive, wet-eyelashed, and as often as not singing her goodbyes to him in phrases borrowed from popular Italian opera.

There was no child. Children spoilt the story.

Between the rearing lamp posts and the falling masonry he would sometimes catch himself rehearsing his last words to her – also as often as not borrowed from the popular Italian operas – as though time had concertinaed, his heart had smashed, and she was dying even before he had met her.

There was something exquisite to Treslove in the presentiment of a woman he loved expiring in his arms. On occasions he died in hers, but her dying in his was better. It was how he knew he was in love: no presentiment of her expiry, no proposal.

That was the poetry of his life. In reality it had all been women accusing him of stifling their creativity and walking out on him.

In reality there had even been children.

But beyond the reality something beckoned.

On a school holiday in Barcelona he paid a gypsy fortune-teller to read his hand.

'I see a woman,' she told him.

Treslove was excited. 'Is she beautiful?'

'To me, no,' the gypsy told him. 'But to you . . . maybe. I also see danger.'

Treslove was more excited still. 'How will I know when I have met her?'

'You will know.'

'Does she have a name?'

'As a rule, names are extra,' the gypsy said, bending back his thumb. 'But I will make an exception for you because you are young. I see a Juno – do you know a Juno?'

She pronounced it 'Huno'. But only when she remembered.

Treslove closed one eye. Juno? Did he know a Juno? Did *anyone* know a Juno? No, sorry, no, he didn't. But he knew a June.

'No, no, bigger than June.' She seemed annoyed with him for not being able to do bigger than June. 'Judy . . . Julie . . . Judith. Do you know a Judith?'

Hudith.

Treslove shook his head. But he liked the sound of it – Julian and Judith. Hulian and Hudith Treslove.

'Well, she's waiting for you, this Julie or Judith or Juno . . . I do still see a Juno.'

Treslove closed his other eye. Juno, Juno . . .

'How long will she wait?' he asked.

'As long as it takes you to find her.'

Treslove imagined himself looking, searching the seven seas. 'You said you see danger. How is she dangerous?'

He saw her rearing up at him, with a knife to his throat – *Addio, mio bello, addio.*

'I did not say it was she who was dangerous. Only that I saw danger. It might be you who is dangerous to her. Or some other person who is dangerous to both of you.'

'So should I avoid her?' Treslove asked.

She shuddered a fortune-teller's shudder. 'You cannot avoid her.'

She was beautiful herself. At least in Treslove's eyes. Emaciated and tragic with gold hooped earrings and a trace, he thought, of a West Midlands accent. But for the accent he would have been in love with her.

She didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. Someone, something, was in store for him.

Something of more moment than a mishap.

He was framed for calamity and sadness but was always somewhere else when either struck. Once, a tree fell and crushed a person walking just a half a yard behind him. Treslove heard the cry and wondered whether it was his own. He missed a berserk gunman on the London Underground by the length of a single carriage. He wasn't even interviewed by the police. And a girl he had loved with a schoolboy's hopeless longing – the daughter of one of his father's friends, an angel with skin as fine as late-summer rose petals and eyes that seemed forever wet – died of leukaemia in her fourteenth year while Treslove was in Barcelona having his fortune told. His family did not call him back for her final hours or even for the funeral. They did not want to spoil his holiday, they told him, but the truth was they did not trust his fortitude. People who knew Treslove thought twice about inviting him to a deathbed or a burial.

So life was still all his to lose. He was, at forty-nine, in good physical shape, had not suffered a bruise since falling against his mother's knee in infancy, and was yet to be made a widower. To his knowledge, not a woman he had loved or known sexually had died, few

having stayed long enough with him anyway for their dying to make a moving finale to anything that could be called a grand affair. It gave him a preternaturally youthful look – this unconsummated expectation of tragic event. The look which people born again into their faith sometimes acquire.

2

It was a warm late-summer's evening, the moon high and skittish. Treslove was returning from a melancholy dinner with a couple of old friends, one his own age, one much older, both recently made widowers. For all the hazards of the streets, he had decided to walk a little around a part of London he knew well, mulling over the sadness of the night in retrospect, before taking a cab home.

A cab, not a Tube, though he lived only a hundred yards from a Tube station. A man as fearful as Treslove of what might befall him above ground was hardly going to venture beneath it. Not after the close shave with the gunman.

'How unutterably sad,' he said, not quite aloud. He meant the death of his friends' wives and the death of women generally. But he was also thinking of the men who had been left alone, himself included. It is terrible to lose a woman you have loved, but it is no less a loss to have no woman to take into your arms and cradle before tragedy strikes . . .

'Without that, what am I for?' he asked himself, for he was a man who did not function well on his own.

He passed the BBC, an institution for which he had once worked and cherished idealistic hopes but which he now hated to an irrational degree. Had it been rational he would have taken steps not to pass the building as often as he did. Under his breath he cursed it feebly – 'Shitheap,' he said.

A nursery malediction.

That was exactly what he hated about the BBC: it had infantilised him. 'Auntie', the nation called the Corporation, fondly. But aunties are equivocal figures of affection, wicked and unreliable, pretending love only so long as they are short of love themselves, and then off. The BBC, Treslove believed, made addicts of those who listened to it, reducing them to a state of inane dependence. As it did those it

employed. Only worse in the case of those it employed – handcuffing them in promotions and conceit, disabling them from any other life. Treslove himself a case in point. Though not promoted, only disabled.

There were cranes up around the building, as high and unsteady as the moon. That would be a shapely fate, he thought: as in my beginning, so in my end – a BBC crane dashing my brains out. The *shitheap*. He could hear the tearing of his skull, like the earth's skin opening in a disaster movie. But then life was a disaster movie in which lovely women died, one after another. He quickened his pace. A tree reared up at him. Swerving, he almost walked into a fallen road mender's sign. DANGER. His shins ached with the imagined collision. Tonight even his soul shook with apprehension.

It's never where you look for it, he told himself. It always comes from somewhere else. Whereupon a dark shadow materialised from a doorway into an assailant, took him by the neck, pushed him face first against a shop window, told him not to shout or struggle, and relieved him of his watch, his wallet, his fountain pen and his mobile phone.

It was only when he had stopped shaking and was able to check his pockets and find them emptied that he could be certain that what had happened had happened in reality.

No wallet, no mobile phone.

In his jacket pocket no fountain pen.

On his wrist no watch.

And in himself no fight, no instinct for preservation, no *amour de soi*, no whatever the word is for the glue that holds a man together and teaches him to live in the present.

But then when had he ever had that?

He'd been a modular, bits-and-pieces man at university, not studying anything recognisable as a subject but fitting components of different arts-related disciplines, not to say indisciplines, together like Lego pieces. Archaeology, Concrete Poetry, Media and Communications, Festival and Theatre Administration, Comparative Religion, Stage Set and Design, the Russian Short Story, Politics and Gender. On finishing his studies – and it was never entirely clear when and whether he *had* finished his studies, on account of no one at the university being

certain how many modules made a totality – Treslove found himself with a degree so unspecific that all he could do with it was accept a graduate traineeship at the BBC. For its part – *her* part – all the BBC could do with Treslove when she got him was shunt him into producing late-night arts programmes for Radio 3.

He felt himself to be a stunted shrub in a rainforest of towering trees. All around him other trainees rose to startling eminence within weeks of their arriving. They shot up, because there was no other direction you could go but up, unless you were Treslove who stayed where he was because no one knew he was there. They became programme controllers, heads of stations, acquisitors, multi-platform executives, director generals even. No one ever left. No one was ever fired. The Corporation looked after its own with more fierce loyalty than a family of mafiosi. As a consequence everyone knew one another intimately – except Treslove who knew no one – and spoke the same language – except Treslove, who spoke a language of loss and sorrow nobody understood.

'Cheer up,' people would say to him in the canteen. But all that did was make him want to cry. Such a sad expression, 'Cheer up'. Not only did it concede the improbability that he ever would cheer up, it accepted that there could be nothing much to cheer up for if cheering up was all there was to look forward to.

He was reprimanded on an official letterhead by someone from the Creative Board – he didn't recognise the complainant's name – for addressing too many morbid issues and playing too much mournful music on his programme. 'That's the province of Radio 3,' the letter concluded. He wrote back saying his programme *was* on Radio 3. He received no reply.

After more than a dozen years roaming the ghostly corridors of Broadcasting House in the dead of night, knowing that no one was listening to anything he produced – for who, at three o'clock in the morning, wanted to hear live poets discussing dead poets, who might just as well have been dead poets discussing live poets? – he resigned. 'Would anyone notice if my programmes weren't aired?' he wrote in his letter of resignation. 'Would anyone be aware of my absence if I just stopped turning up?' Again he received no reply.

Auntie wasn't listening either.

He answered an advertisement in a newspaper for an assistant director of a newly launched arts festival on the south coast. 'Newly

launched' meant a school library which had no books in it, only computers, three visiting speakers and no audience. It reminded him of the BBC. The actual director rewrote all his letters in simpler English and did the same with his conversation. They fell out over the wording of a brochure.

'Why say exhilarating when you can say sexy?' she asked him.

'Because an arts festival isn't sexy.'

'And you want to know why that is? Because you insist on using words like exhilarating.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's indirect language.'

'There's nothing indirect about exhilaration.'

'There is the way you say it.'

'Could we try for a compromise with exuberance?' he asked, without any.

'Could we try for a compromise with you getting another job?'

They had been sleeping together. There was nothing else to do. They coupled on the gymnasium floor when no one turned up to their festival. She wore Birkenstocks even during lovemaking. He only realised he loved her when she sacked him.

Her name was Julie and he only noticed that when she sacked him, too.

Hulie.

Thereafter he gave up on a career in the arts and filled a succession of unsuitable vacancies and equally unsuitable women, falling in love whenever he took up a new job, and falling out of love – or more correctly being fallen out of love with – every time he moved on. He drove a removal van, falling in love with the first woman whose house he emptied, delivered milk in an electric float, falling in love with the cashier who paid him every Friday night, worked as an assistant to an Italian carpenter who replaced sash windows in Victorian houses and replaced Julian Treslove in the affections of the cashier, managed a shoe department in a famous London store, falling in love with the woman who managed soft furnishings on the floor above, finally finding semi-permanent and ill-paid occupation with a theatrical agency specialising in providing doubles of famous people for parties, conferences and corporate events. Treslove didn't look like anybody famous in particular, but looked like many famous

people in general, and so was in demand if not by virtue of verisimilitude, at least by virtue of versatility.

And the soft-furnishings woman? She left him when he became the double of no one in particular. 'I don't like not knowing who you're meant to be,' she told him. 'It reflects badly on us both.'

'You choose,' he said.

'I don't want to choose. I want to know. I crave certainty. I need to know you're going to be there through thick and thin. I work with fluff all day. When I come home I want something solid. It's a rock I need, not a chameleon.'

She had red hair and angry skin. She heated up so quickly Treslove had always been frightened to get too near to her.

'I am a rock,' he insisted, from a distance. 'I will be with you to the end.'

'Well, you're right about that at least,' she told him. 'This *is* the end. I'm leaving you.'

'Just because I'm in demand?'

'Because you're not in demand with me.'

'Please don't leave. If I wasn't a rock before, I'll be a rock from now on.'

'You won't. It isn't in your nature.'

'Don't I look after you when you're ill?'

'You do. You're marvellous to me when I'm ill. It's when I'm well that you're no use.'

He begged her not to go. Took his chance and threw his arms around her, weeping into her neck.

'Some rock,' she said.

Her name was June.

Demand is a relative concept. He wasn't so much in demand as a lookalike for everybody and nobody that there weren't many vacant hours in which to think about all that had befallen him, or rather all that hadn't, about women and the sadness he felt for them, about his loneliness, and about that absence in him for which he didn't have the word. His incompletion, his untogetherness, his beginning waiting for an end, or was it his end waiting for a beginning, his story waiting for a plot.

It was exactly 11.30 p.m. when the attack occurred. Treslove knew that because something had made him look at his watch the moment

before. Maybe the foreknowledge that he would never look at it again. But with the brightness of the street lamps and the number of commercial properties lit up – a hairdresser's was still open and a dim sum restaurant and a newsagent's having a refit – it could have been afternoon. The streets were not deserted. At least a dozen people might have come to Treslove's rescue, but none did. Perhaps the effrontery of the assault – just a hundred yards from Regent Street, almost within cursing distance of the BBC – perplexed whoever saw it. Perhaps they thought the participants were playing or had become embroiled in a domestic row on the way home from a restaurant or the theatre. They could – there was the strange part – have been taken for a couple.

That was what Treslove found most galling. Not the interruption to one of his luxuriating, vicariously widowed reveries. Not the shocking suddenness of the attack, a hand seizing him by the back of his neck and shoving him so hard into the window of Guivier's violin shop that the instruments twanged and vibrated behind the shattering pane, unless the music he heard was the sound of his nose breaking. And not even the theft of his watch, his wallet, his fountain pen and his mobile phone, sentimental as his attachment to the first of those was, and inconvenient as would be the loss of the second, third and fourth. No, what upset him beyond all these was the fact that the person who had robbed, assaulted and, yes, terrified him – a person against whom he put up not a whisper of a struggle – was . . . a woman.